

## Mech 3631

### *Chapter 3631 Expensive Real Estate*

Davute VII was an important planet to Ves and the Larkinson Clan. If their current plans yielded results, the Larkinsons would likely set up a presence on the planet.

The clan not only needed to buy a plot of land and build the headquarters for the trade consortium, but also had to set up a branch office to manage its own affairs.

The clan needed to spend a considerable amount of money and go through a lot of annoying bureaucratic procedures to get everything done.

The latter turned out to be a greater hassle than Ves expected. The governance of the Davute System was complicated and demand for territory on Davute VII was high.

A lot of ambitious pioneers and other enterprising individuals saw great promise in establishing a physical presence on a notable trade planet and did not mind spending more money to get their wish.

"Can you repeat that again, Benny?" Ves asked.

Gavin Neumann took a deep breath. "We just got back word from the real estate agent. The site we have picked out for the headquarters of our trade consortium is not cheap. If we want to have enough certainty to outbid other possible buyers, then we need to commit at least 4000 MTA credits."

"..."

4000 MTA credits might not sound much. He could buy around 33 copies of Gloriana's handbag with that much money.

However, that was not an indication that the plot of land was cheap. It was more of a sign that Gloriana's new pride and joy was too expensive!

The amount of money it cost for the Larkinson Clan to secure a rather modest plot of land in a prosperous district was enough to fund the acquisition of a modest capital ship back in the old galaxy!

Ves groaned and pressed his fingers against his forehead. "This is too much. We can purchase many other goodies with that much money."

"It is actually a reasonable price, all considered." Gavin answered as he used his comm to project a map of Kotor City, the capital planet of Davute VII. "The plot we've chosen is located in the periphery of the Financial District, which sits squarely in the center of the metropolis. Even though the Financial District is not completely built, everyone knows it

will become the top destination for the biggest companies and organizations that are operating in Krakatoa."

"I know." Ves nodded. "It would have been nice if we could set up a base of operations in Nova Street."

"Don't even dream about it, boss. Nova Street is the prime location for all of the big trans-galactic corporations and major pioneering alliances. From the start of its planning, the big players have already claimed their plots of land."

"Even if they only intend to build floating structures?"

"They don't want anyone living underneath." Gavin stated. "Besides, if those floating palaces and office buildings ever experience any problems that compromise their ability to remain in the air, they need sufficient space to land in an emergency."

"What about other threats? It's not safe on the frontier. What will happen in the event of an alien incursion?"

"According to the plans, a large and extensive underground tunnel system will be made underneath the wealthier districts. Many structures, whether on land or in the air, will be moved underground and be shielded from most attacks coming from orbit or on the surface. It's a complicated and expensive arrangement and partially explains why it is so expensive to build real estate in this district. The tunnel and security systems of the Financial District are the best."

Ves scoffed. "They can't allow the elites and the people in charge to come to any harm. I can definitely believe that the security measures of the Financial District are stellar compared to the rest of the city. This is also exactly why we need to set up a presence here. Even if our trade consortium can only squeeze in at the edge, it is still better than any other location in Kotor City. The Financial District conveys a lot of prestige to those who are able to secure a place in it. Our future business dealings with the locals will become much smoother as a result."

In that sense, the plot of land was absolutely more valuable than what was obvious on the surface. The people in charge of selling the land already took all of these elements into account.

"Does that mean you are willing to invest in this plot of land?" Gavin asked. "It's not that impressive, to be honest. It's located in Beckerdale Street which sort of sits in the shadows of many other structures. The plot also only gives us the right to build our headquarters at ground level. There is another plot located above it that is reserved for the construction of a floating building. The price of that air plot is at least twice as expensive, so it is an extremely costly endeavor to buy both."

Ves grimaced when he heard that. Air plots were more valuable than land plots. Who wanted to live and work underneath many tons of floating mass that might potentially malfunction and crash on top of their heads one day?

Even if there were thousands of safeguards and so on, just the symbolism of the matter was not pleasant!

Fortunately, Ves had no intentions of actually working and living in the new place. He could just shove all of the concerns to other people. Let them worry about this faint possibility.

Paying 4000 MTA credits was not unacceptable considering all of the intangible benefits that the clan would get in return.

The question now was whether the clan should pay for all of this out of its own pocket.

"We can make the acquisition more bearable if we split the cost between all of the members of the trade consortium." Gavin suggested. "Even if many of the smaller parties cannot draw out 100 or so MTA credits right away, we can give them loans that they will pay back in installments."

Ves leaned back against his office chair and thought for a moment.

"That's a viable solution, but money conveys ownership. If we split the cost evenly, that will subsequently suggest that everyone is an equal partner in the trade consortium. That is not what I have in mind. I don't want to lose control of it and turn into someone else's plaything."

"We can't be too tyrannical about it either, boss. Our trade consortium will not be able to attract many willing members if we are in control of everything. You need to strike a balance. Minister Shederin has already suggested that we should aim to secure at least 25 percent of the decision-making power of the trade consortium. We can claim primacy because we founded it and paid for much of its expenses, but we won't claim absolute control, thereby preventing the other members from feeling they are solely dancing to our tune. If they aren't content, they can easily apply to leave our trade consortium."

The Larkinsons couldn't have it both ways. Absolute control was unattainable while total equality was unacceptable. The best solution going forward was to find a middle ground where the Larkinson clan gained additional rights but could still be overruled by a majority of members.

Of course, the power balance wasn't so simple on the surface. If Ves truly employed a spiritual network for his trade consortium, then everyone would know that the support of the Larkinson Clan was absolutely essential for its continued functioning!

The rules were rather light and generous because the proposed spiritual network substituted the missing functions.

If the Larkinson Clan left the consortium, that might not be the case any longer.

This provided enough guarantees to Ves that the trade consortium would not suddenly act against the Larkinson Clan.

"Let's just buy this plot and be done with it." Ves eventually decided. "It won't be easy to come up with 4000 MTA credits, but we already owe around 90,000 MTA credits anyway. Our debt burden won't grow that much bigger."

"Uhm, boss, we owe a little bit more than that. Despite selling a portion of the harvest from the Titania, our expenses are still considerable. Aside from that, we will have to spend additional sums of money to actually construct the headquarters building. We can't be too frugal. Not only will we run afoul of local ordinances, we'll also be embarrassing ourselves."

Ves sighed. "Then go ahead and borrow more money. By the way, what does our income look like these days? Are we doing better or worse?"

"It has largely remained stagnant as of late, but there are faint signs of optimism. The LMC's business operations in the Yeina Star Cluster roughly generate more than 5000 MTA credits a month. Much of it comes from selling mechs, though we are also collecting an increasing amount of licensing fees. Our old third-class mechs such as the Desolate Soldier, the Doom Guard and the oldest version of the Ferocious Piranha are still solid cash cows, though that won't last forever. Their sales are slowly trending downwards. Even the rise of third-party variants can't stop that from happening."

The mech market was constantly evolving. Better mechs were being designed and published with each passing day and the competition certainly wouldn't allow the LMC to reign forever!

In the absence of any new commercial releases, the rest of the mech industry stepped in to meet demand. Although it was well-known by now that changing the designs of living mechs often destroyed their living qualities, numerous mech designers found ways to mitigate the damage.

Ves didn't particularly care about this development at this point. He no longer valued his third-class mechs so highly so it was fine if others wanted to mess around with them. Though the LMC received a much smaller share of profits from the sale of third-party variants, at least these enterprising mech designers were still bringing in money from sources that initially weren't his customers.

The LMC currently adopted two different approaches towards third-party manufacturers.

The company still favored doing business with authorized manufacturers. These were the ones who signed favorable contracts with the LMC. In exchange for lowering their fees, they had to abide by strict quality standards and other requirements. They also weren't allowed to modify the designs without permission.

The LMC couldn't do much against those who licensed its mech designs from the MTA's internal library. These third parties were free to do what they wanted with the designs of the Desolate Soldier and so on as long as they abided by the terms of the standard contract as well as the relevant laws of the MTA.

It was the latter phenomenon that became increasingly more prevalent in the Yeina Star Cluster. More and more mech designers figured out how to work with them. As long as they didn't make too many changes, the new variants were still adequate living mechs!

"Given our financial pressure, we should do something about this ourselves." Ves mused. "We shouldn't neglect the LMC's business operations in the old galaxy much longer. If everyone start to think that we only care about the Red Ocean now that we have migrated here, we won't be able to collect 5000 MTA credits a month so easily anymore!"

"Does that mean..."

"I can promise you that our Design Department will put its focus on commercial mech design projects in the next design round. Once the Larkinson Army has received a bunch of exclusive mech models, I'm not in a hurry to give them more. We should use this opportunity to refresh and expand our commercial offerings."

Gavin looked a lot more hopeful now that Ves was finally willing to pay attention to the business side of the Larkinson Clan again!

"Will you put your focus on our business operations in the old galaxy or the new frontier?"

"Both." Ves said. "We have eight Journeyman Mech Designers and hundreds of assistant mech designers. We have enough design resources to direct sufficient attention to both. If our trade consortium also gets off the ground, we can probably solve our current logistical problems as well, which will make it viable for us to produce more mechs in-house. However, let's not get ahead of ourselves. We still need to complete the current design round which will take at least a month."

"Understood."

### *Chapter 3632 The Case of the Missing Shares*

Ves knew that he had neglected the business operations of the Larkinson Clan a bit too long, but he did not regret his choices.

Given the clan's many assets and profitable cash cows, it was not a big deal to go further into debt. The Yem-Tar Trade and Commerce Bank had treated the Larkinson Clan rather generously so far and Ves did not expect that to change.

That didn't mean it was healthy to let this situation persist. According to the latest reports, the Living Mech Corporation's lack of activity slowly caused its brand to erode.

While its mechs were still useful to many different customers, they were no longer hot now that the novelty had long worn off. Many people found ways to deal or mitigate the impact of the glows of living mechs and the benefits of piloting living mechs in the long-term were not well-known.

Ves, Gloriana and Ketis spent millions of MTA merits to acquire and plant their psionic pylons in the Yeina Star Cluster. Much of that spending would go to waste if none of them took advantage of their PPs in the coming years!

As soon as Ves conveyed his willingness to revisit his business operations in the old galaxy, Gavin became a lot more enthusiastic. He had long tried to persuade his boss that the Larkinsons should pay attention to this matter, but there were always other matters getting in the way.

"It would help if you can tell us your strategy and direction in advance." Gavin said. "The LMC is not as small as before. There are many people and organizations who are directly or indirectly working for us. The sooner you convey your intentions, the smoother we can expand our operations."

Ves frowned. "It's too early to make those decisions. I'm not entirely up to date with the circumstances in both markets."

"Can you at least tell us whether you are willing to sell second-class mechs in the old galaxy? Although we are selling millions of third-class mechs at the moment, that doesn't translate into a lot of MTA credits. We can easily earn twice the amount if we start selling some of our second-class offerings. In fact, something like that is already beginning to happen as soon as we signed a deal with Zachren Bilitsa. In order for the Ferocious Piranha Mark I Version B Mod 1 to be sold to the public, it has to be validated by the MTA, which means its design has entered its licensing catalog."

"I'm aware of that. The Mod 1 edition is tailored to the Red Ocean, so it shouldn't be easy to make it suitable for the old galaxy again."

Although the latest revision performed similar to the original second-class Ferocious Piranhas, Ves had swapped a lot of materials and components. It would be extremely difficult for other mech designers to replace them again while still keeping the mech design alive.

This effectively meant that the initiative was still in his hands.

"It sounds as if you don't intend to sell any second-class mechs in the old galaxy."

"Not yet, at least." Ves said. "I don't want the Fridaymen to take advantage of my work. They can't do much with my third-class mechs but it's a different story when it comes to my second-class offerings."

"Don't you have ways to stop specific groups from piloting your mechs?"

"I do, but I don't think the MTA and the market will respond well to that, Benny. Customers need to have confidence that their mechs are reliable and that we can't arbitrarily neuter their functionality."

Gavin could respect that decision even though he did not entirely agree with it. "The Komodo War will probably end in a year. The Hex Army has fought hard, but it has exhausted much of its resources and reserves. The Hexadric Hegemony's defensive strongholds are all toppling one by one, exposing vast areas of the state's interior to Fridayman incursions. With neighboring states sending 'mercenaries' to raid the under defended hinterland of the Hegemony, it doesn't look like the Hexers will be able to hold out much longer."

"It doesn't matter too much at this point. Gloriana already told me that more and more dynasties have packed up their bags and left for the Red Ocean. Even the Wodin Dynasty has abandoned its foundation in the Scimitar System in order to escape the war."

Ves was disappointed that the Hexers didn't put up a better fight. For all of their claims of superiority, the Fridaymen persistently beat the female supremacists, not through superior martial strength, but by relying on the power of friendship.

Numerous friendly states and powers in the region offered their support for the Fridaymen. As the Komodo War kept getting worse for the Hexadric Hegemony, more and more parties offered their aid to the winning side.

Naturally, there was no doubt that the Garleners and other foreigners held ulterior motives towards the Komodo Star Sector, but the Friday Coalition didn't mind. Getting rid of an existential threat was more important than avoiding hidden dangers!

"Let's shelve this question for later. Even if the Komodo War has ended, I won't relax my stance so easily."

"I seriously doubt it will matter. The Friday Coalition has banned the sale and use of our products anyway. The Fridaymen don't want to put more money in our pockets."

"Aren't they in control of some of the LMC's shares?" Ves frowned. "What happened to them, by the way? I haven't paid attention to this issue in a long while."

"Ah, about that..."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "What happened?"

"Well, as you know, a shell company of the Bright Republic originally owned a 7 percent stake in the LMC while a shell company of the Ylvaine Protectorate had a 9 percent stake."

"And?"

"The Friday Coalition intervened. From what we have managed to gather, numerous people and factions within the Coalition tried to claim those shares. It took a lot of time for this argument to be resolved, but eventually two different Master Mech Designers managed to come out on top. They had to cooperate with each other in order to overcome the opposition."

Ves grew uneasy when he heard the latest development concerning the shares that fell outside his control. "Who are the Masters that managed to get a hold of those shares?"

His personal assistant took a deep breath. "Master Carmin Olson obtained a 14 percent stake while Master Toqueman Huron got a hold of the remaining 2 percent. It's not official yet. They need to go through a lot of bureaucratic procedures in order to obtain the appropriate permissions and exemptions from their governments. After all, the mechs you've designed are responsible for the deaths of many Fridaymen soldiers. Once all of this is done, the two aforementioned Masters will officially own parts of the company."

"..."

To be honest, Ves was relieved that Master Olson obtained the bulk of the shares that were originally in the hands of the third-rate states that had betrayed his confidence. The Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate didn't deserve his generosity any longer. Not after what their duplicitous governments had done.

Yet letting 14 percent fall into the hands of his former Master did not sit well with him either. He still resented how quickly and decisively Master Olson got rid of him, all because a Hexer forcefully inserted herself in his life.

He still respected her, though. Master Olson was not only a talented Master Mech Designer, but also a consummate professional. Despite her allegiance, Ves never had the impression that she hated him personally.

"Will Master Olson keep that 14 percent or will they pass onto someone else's hands?" Ves curiously asked.

"I seriously can't tell you that, boss." Gavin shrugged. "I'm not privy to the internal deliberations of the Fridaymen. Maybe you should ask Calabast, though I doubt she can tell you anything more."

"What does your intuition tell you, Benny?"

"If you ask me, this situation stinks. There are lots of powerful people in the Friday Coalition who have plenty of reasons to take those shares. I would have expected them to split up the shares among themselves. For them to voluntarily give up the fight means that someone else has intervened. Master Olson and Master Huron may be notable figures in the Coalition, but there are plenty of others who should easily be able to override their demands."

Gavin's words echoed Ves' own concerns. The relatively smooth way in which the two Master Mech Designers claimed the shares was awfully suspicious. Who pushed for this result? What were the motives of this mystery party?

"I can reluctantly accept Master Olson as a fellow shareholder, but Master Huron is another matter. Why the hell does he want to gain partial ownership of a company controlled by the killer of one of his personal disciples?"

"Don't ask me, boss. I am just as perplexed as you. What I can tell you is that it is of little consequence. You still possess a controlling majority. Even if Master Olson and Master Huron enjoy a couple of minority rights, they cannot influence the decision-making of the company at all. They'll only be able to collect dividends with their shares."

"Ugh. That's still too cheap of them. Those shares are worth a lot more than before. Sometimes, I wish the MTA didn't exist. The Association's intervention is way too heavy-handed! We can't even issue new shares in order to dilute the ownership of those out-of-control shares."

"Uhm, do you think it is wise to voice those words?"

Ves shrugged. "The mechers won't care, Benny. Plenty of people talk bad about the MTA, but that doesn't change the fact that they are undisputedly in charge."

Nothing effectively changed as far as he was concerned. 16 percent of the ownership in the LMC was still in the hands of outsiders. He wondered whether the Masters would attempt to do more with them. Neither of them looked like they were willing to sit back and relax while collecting their dividends.

Now that they were discussing issues tied to the old galaxy, Ves grew curious at one of the other minority shareholders of the Living Mech Corporation.

"Is there any news from the Larkinson Family, Benny?"

"There have been few significant changes as of late. Your old relatives are still working for the Feneton Tribe. We did notice that they have become active as of late. They have begun to acquire more ships, mechs and even personnel."

"It sounds like they are finally doing more than coasting along their current trajectory. Good for them. Do you know more about their intentions?"

Gavin shook his head. "No. Most members of the Larkinson Family haven't received much clarification. All they know is that Patriarch Ark Larkinson is working harder than ever."

What was his uncle doing? Ves hoped that Ark didn't lead the Larkinson Family into danger.

"Well, try and inquire more about the Larkinson Family's movements. I might not be close to them anymore, but they are still my blood relatives. I have always felt less restrained when I know they are safe. If they do something different, I don't know how I should feel about that. I don't want the Larkinson lineage to end because the both of us have made considerable errors."

From what Ves knew about Ark, his uncle was trying his best to advance to ace pilot. This was an insanely difficult challenge and far too many powerful expert pilots failed to take a step forward.

Ves knew that continued frustration could push numerous expert pilots to their limits. Patriarch Reginald Cross had always been a bit unstable and he feared that Ark Larkinson might become obsessed as well!

"Alright. We've discussed enough for today. Let's focus more on our immediate priorities. I want to see quick progress in establishing our trade consortium. Get that plot of land in our hands and start the construction of a headquarters as fast as possible."

"Got it, boss."

### *Chapter 3633 Murphy & Sons*

The Larkinsons continued to make a lot of progress in establishing their new trade consortium.

Aside from having to spend a lot of money to secure a plot of land in the prized Financial District of Kotor City, everything else proceeded like a breeze.

As word about the unusual trade consortium continued to spread, more and more parties expressed serious interest in becoming a part of it. Different from the last few days, the latest batch included more serious and more respectable pioneering organizations.

No longer did the Larkinsons have to entertain so many whacky cults and devastated pioneers.

A collection of mech companies, industrial companies and even a small shipbuilding company showed up in the past few days.

These were prime parties that the Larkinsons truly wished to attract! Not only would their presence increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of the trade consortium, but they might also potentially provide the clan with preferential access to their goods and services!

"Are you serious?!" Ves asked as he held a data pad that contained a list of interested parties. "A shipbuilding company truly wants to join our trade consortium?"

Minister Shederin raised his hand. "Don't get too excited, sir. We are only talking about a small shipbuilding firm, and one that is in serious trouble. If not for that, Murphy & Sons would have comfortably been able to start their operations in a market where their products are in extreme demand."

Ves grew suspicious about this. There were a lot of hot markets in the Red Ocean at this time, but two sectors were especially profitable.

Anyone engaged in either resource extraction or shipbuilding were probably having the time of their lives during this period! While the former was rather risky due to the need to mine valuable resources in dangerous areas, the latter had it especially easy!

All the shipbuilding companies had to do was to bring over enough cargo to assemble a functioning shipyard and start staffing it with their trained personnel. Orders would flow in by the thousands and Ves doubted that such a company would have a hard time securing a contract with a resource supplier.

What could drive this particular shipbuilding company to such dire straits that it had no choice but to seek safety in numbers?

"Tell me about Murphy & Sons. What kind of company is it and how could it screw up its entry into the Red Ocean?"

"Murphy & Sons was originally an ordinary shipbuilding company in the galactic rim that has long operated a single shipyard. Its CEO and chairwoman chose to move the company to the Red Ocean shortly after the MTA's announcement, but as you can imagine it is not that effortless to move such a major operation to an entirely different location."

Shipyards were big. Really big. They had to be in order to provide an excellent construction environment for shipbuilders. There was no way to build proper starship without providing enough stability and shielding against many external variables.

They were also expensive and valuable as a result. The amount of tech and materials that went into shipyards was incredibly intricate.

"So what did the company do? Did they cut their own shipyard into pieces and try to ship it over?"

Shederin nodded. "That is exactly what they did. Much to Murphy & Sons misfortune, this transportation did not proceed without issue. The fleet that the company's vessels were traveling with fell victim to a raid. While the leadership and many of the ships carrying the enormous parts of the shipyard managed to survive the attack intact, a small number of transport ships fell into enemy hands."

"Oh. That sounds bad." Ves replied as he thought about the impact of those losses. "Let me guess. They are missing so many pieces of their shipyard that they don't have enough left to build ships, right?"

"Indeed. Murphy & Sons has fallen under great difficulties for this reason. The company has taken on an enormous debt in order to reach the Red Ocean. Now, it cannot meet its debt obligations because it cannot earn any revenue."

"That doesn't sound so bad. I mean, everyone here knows the value of a working shipyard. Isn't someone willing to give Murphy & Sons a hand and get their shipyard to work in exchange for priority on ship orders or something?"

Shederin coughed. "It's not that simple. In order for Murphy & Sons to restore their shipyard, they need to acquire a large amount of valuable resources that are difficult to obtain. They also require advanced technical assistance to perform specialist repairs. While there are companies that are able to meet their demands, they are actually withholding their aid at the moment."

"What?! Why?!"

"Isn't it obvious, sir? They are plotting against the shipbuilding company." The foreign minister answered. "Each of them smells weakness from their prey. Rather than trying to gain the favor of Murphy & Sons, it is much more preferable to buy it up entirely. Once a part or all of the company and its assets fall into the hands of a major player, they can easily restore and upgrade the incomplete shipyard so that it can begin to produce starships on their behalf. Do you understand?"

Oh, Ves understood this scheme quite well. He would probably do the same thing if he was in their place. Taking over a mostly-complete shipbuilding company was incredibly attractive in an environment where there were way too few hulls on the market!

"So the bunch of bastards at the top are colluding with each other to deny the help that Murphy & Sons need. Their goal is to outbid each other and take possession of the company's damaged shipyard, its highly-trained and experienced shipbuilding personnel

and whatever else is valuable. These are nearly all of the elements that can support a productive shipbuilding operation. How big is this shipyard, anyway? Is it capable of building capital ships?"

"You would have to ask Miss Tsai for greater details, but according to my sources, Murphy & Sons has never built a capital ship. When the company was still operating in the old galaxy, their peak production rate was 1 combat carrier or cruiser-sized logistical vessel per 20 days."

"That is quite impressive." Ves remarked. "Murphy & Sons can probably construct their ships even faster once it upgrades its shipyard systems with heartland-level technology. They might even be able to expand their shipyard and start constructing smaller capital ships as well in the future."

"Indeed. Yet as long as no one provides them with the help they need to fill in the missing pieces of their shipyard, Murphy & Sons will eventually be compelled to make a choice anyway."

"How dirty."

This kind of collusion was probably illegal in many states, but the new frontier was a lot looser with the rules.

Besides, even if the laws forbid this kind of conduct, the authorities needed to possess the will to enforce them, which wasn't always the case.

The point was that Murphy & Sons was in deep trouble. There were way too many greedy people at the top and they would never easily pass up the opportunity to snap a shipyard on the cheap!

"Why did you bring this case to my attention, Shederin? All of this sounds like trouble to me. While I admit that it would be nice if we can make connections with Murphy & Sons, I don't think it is a good idea to tread on territory that others have already claimed."

The old man gave Ves an intrigued smile. "That is true, but I believe there is sufficient opportunity here. While it is true that we will not make many people happy if we help the Murphy & Sons solve its crisis, as long as the company stays independent and wholly owned by the Murphy Family, there is still a chance that outsiders can acquire it. That should limit the heat we draw if we make a move."

"What kind of move can we even make? From what I hear, a lot needs to be done in order to get the company's shipyard operational, and that requires a large amount of resources."

"That is why our trade consortium can give Murphy & Sons a way out. It can obtain the resources and help it needs without directly doing business with those who are treating it as prey."

"What if bringing the shipbuilding company into the fold will only turn our trade consortium into a pariah instead?"

Minister Shederin looked grave. "That is indeed a possibility, but as long as our clan and all of the members of the consortium work together to achieve a breakthrough, we can still succeed. Not every major player is as eager to take over Murphy & Sons."

This was a difficult matter for Ves to decide upon. He could clearly see the potential of befriending and entering into a long-term cooperative relationship with a real shipbuilding company.

While it was true that the Larkinson Clan could build its own ships with the Diligent Ovenbird, her efficiency was way too low compared to a permanently anchored shipyard.

What the clan truly needed was to become a favored partner to a shipbuilding company that was capable of churning out a lot of combat carriers. In time, that company might be able to expand its operations and start constructing capital ships as well!

Ves keenly realized that this was probably the best opportunity for the Larkinson Clan to obtain the friendship and gratitude of a shipbuilding company in years.

If he passed on this opportunity because he was afraid of getting involved in the company's trouble, he would probably regret his cowardly decision for a long time afterwards.

He lowered his eyes. Shederin's stance was clear.

"Are you truly confident this will work out?"

"I am, sir." Shederin confidently answered. "This is an intricate diplomatic puzzle in my eyes. Let me do my job and handle this delicate matter. As long as we succeed, we will not only gain a reliable channel for starships, but also increase the weight of our trade consortium. Think of how many notable parties will want to join or conduct business with a collective that counts a shipbuilding company among its members."

That was another good point. Ves had mainly paid attention to the political and financial problems that Murphy & Sons would bring, but he hadn't looked at how their presence could beef up his trade consortium.

"Alright." Ves said as he made up his mind. "You can go work on this, but I want to meet with the Murphy Family in person. I need to get an impression of their CEO and other

notable figures before I am willing to work with them. Also get in touch with Vivian Tsai. We need her expertise to judge the potential of Murphy & Sons. This is a shipbuilding company from the galactic rim, after all. Its capabilities are not on par with those who originated from the more prosperous parts of the old galaxy."

Even so, it was better than nothing. Shipbuilding capabilities could always be upgraded over time.

This bet might not pay off in the first decade, but once Murphy & Sons truly got going, it could truly provide a lot of benefits to the Larkinson Clan going forward!

Shederin checked his comm. "My staff has just arranged a meeting with the Murphy Family on short notice. We can greet them in the afternoon. It appears that the Murphy leaders are under considerable time pressure. The longer it takes for them to resolve their issues, the more they are getting crushed under their financial obligations."

"How much do they owe, exactly?"

"We do not know."

"Then find out. Wait. I'll tell Calabast to look into this company. I don't believe Murphy & Sons is as simple as it sounds. There has to be a reason why it has long remained independent all of this time."

Although Ves had special reasons to remain independent, he was aware that he was the exception to the rule.

Most pioneers who were experiencing difficulties had no qualms about sheltering under the umbrella of a major player.

Murphy & Sons probably received enough offers to join a larger pioneering organization, so why was it willing to take a gamble on a new and untested trade consortium instead?

#### *Chapter 3634 Gelly Murphy*

Roping in Murphy & Sons was one of the most significant moves that the Larkinson Clan could make in Davute.

How often did the Larkinsons get the opportunity to befriend and cooperate with a genuine shipbuilding company without selling out entirely?

Every other shipbuilding company was essentially locked behind great alliances. What few ships they built went straight to the major players who were able to offer the greatest degree of protection and remuneration. This enabled the big alliances to grow even more formidable over time, thereby securing their hegemony over the Red Ocean and choking out smaller players like the Larkinson Clan!

After Ves and the rest of his clan recognized this trend, they knew that it was impossible to obtain new ships through regular or even slightly irregular channels.

This left them with two possible solutions.

First, the Larkinsons could place a greater emphasis on the Diligent Ovenbird.

Numerous notable clansmen suggested that the Larkinsons could take matters into their own hands and enter the shipbuilding industry themselves.

While the Diligent Ovenbird was not as large, efficient and well-equipped as a traditional orbital shipyard, the fleet repair and construction vessel was still a fully-functional shipbuilding platform!

This meant that if the clan wanted to, it could just park the capital ship in the Davute System for the long-term and just build one starship after another.

In any case, the Davute System was not only fairly well-secured, but was also a port system that attracted a significant amount of trade. Once the trade consortium achieved results, it shouldn't be an issue obtaining sufficient raw materials.

The Larkinson Clan could even take orders where they demanded the other party supply the necessary raw materials. The enormous disparity between supply and demand meant that there would still be customers willing to accept this lopsided deal!

As an armored shuttle bearing a number of high-ranked individuals of the Larkinson Clan flew to a rented compound situated in the Commercial District of Kotor City, Ves began to think about this proposal yet again.

"Miss Vivian."

"Yes, patriarch?"

"You've heard about the plan to turn the Diligent Ovenbird into a semi-permanent shipyard, right?"

Vivian Tsai had come a long way from her start as the inexperienced daughter of a notable senior shipwright from the Harmony Association.

As she assumed more and more responsibility over the years, she had to exercise more leadership and manage many vital issues concerning both the capital ships and the sub-capital ships of the Larkinson Clan.

In addition to that, she closely supervised the ongoing shipbuilding activities on the Diligent Ovenbird.

All of this not only meant that she was accruing a lot of hands-on experience, but also became one of the key figures of the clan.

So far, Ves was quite satisfied with her performance. Though she did not stand out, she did not screw anything up either. From what he heard from other sources, Vivian Tsai remained diligent and did not mess around, though that was mostly because her current workload was already heavy.

Now that the Larkinsons were trying to lure Murphy & Sons into their camp, Vivian Tsai's input would play an important role in the upcoming talks. No one in the Larkinson Clan knew more about shipbuilding and shipyards than someone who grew up in this industry!

"I did not come up with the plan myself, but someone in my department initially proposed it." Vivian answered his question. "I helped with studying the viability of this move and fleshing it out. As long as we can solve our logistical problems, it is possible to turn the Diligent Ovenbird into a shipyard."

"Do you recommend it, though?" Ves pointedly asked.

Vivian frowned. "That... is not an easy question to answer, sir. Since you possess a strong engineering background, I don't have to detail all of the technical disparities that make the Diligent Ovenbird worse. However, the huge demand in starships means that even if our 'shipyard' is less efficient, we can still earn a handsome profit, just not as much as our competitors."

Competition didn't matter too much at this point. Sure, the bigger and more advanced shipyards could easily earn ten times if not a hundred times more than the Diligent Ovenbird, but the Larkinson Clan would take what it could get at this point!

"You still haven't answered my question." Ves said. "Do you think we should do it or not? I can think of several reasons why we should. Not only will we be able to build starships more conveniently and at a faster pace, but we can also build up our influence in our trade consortium and other circles. Starships are strategic resources and they can help us gain a lot of favors if we use them well."

Vivian Tsai was keenly involved in the supply problem, so she knew how important it was for the Larkinson Clan to gain leverage over potential trading partners.

"I don't deny that we can obtain these benefits, but leaving the Diligent Ovenbird behind in Davute will deprive our fleet of a highly useful asset. We originally commissioned this vessel in order to repair and maintain our key starships. Given the dangers in the Red Ocean, none of us can guarantee that our capital ships and our growing collection of sub-capital ships will remain unscathed over the years. What if the Spirit of Bentheim got struck? What if the Vivacious Wal has lost her propulsion and her FTL drives? What if a dozen combat carriers weathered an astral storm and lost all power?"

Ves frowned. These occurrences could very well happen once the fleet resumed its expedition. The Krakatoa Middle Zone might not be the most dangerous region in the Red Ocean, but it was not a tranquil place either!

"You make a good point. Can the Spirit of Bentheim and our other logistical vessels make up for the absence of the Diligent Ovenbird?"

"Absolutely not, sir." Vivian answered in a decisive tone. "Sure, you can perform a lot of minor or even major repairs if you employ a lot of ingenuity, but it is like trying to carry a stone uphill. You have to overcome way too many unfavorable factors, from the lack of drydock environment to the absence of large-scale shipbuilding machinery. The only other way to fix our starships is to keep them together long enough to reach safe harbor, but those are much less prevalent in the Red Ocean. Keeping the Diligent Ovenbird in our fleet will massively boost our independence and make us less reliant on external service providers."

As soon as Vivian mentioned independence, Ves already made up his mind.

"The sovereignty and independence of our expeditionary fleet must never be reduced." He said, not only to Vivian but also the other clansmen in the shuttle. "It was foolish to think about turning the Diligent Ovenbird into a profit and influence-generating machine when doing so will compromise the security and survival of our core fleet. We will keep her as is and not consider this matter any further. Shipbuilding isn't our focus anyway. Our core business activities should always revolve around mechs."

That was the end of this little discussion.

The shuttle soon entered the Commercial District and was on approach to the modest compound where Murphy & Sons entertained its guests.

As Ves curiously took a peek of his surroundings, he could see that the structures and level of prosperity was considerably worse than in the Financial District.

This was where all of the more 'regular' businesses and people frequented. Only a minority of people and organizations in the Red Ocean were rich and powerful. The vast majority were closer to normal entities and were therefore content with staying in a less extravagant district where the price levels were much more reasonable.

When the shuttle landed on the ground, a number of guards and important figures stepped out. Ves, Calabast, Shederin and Vivian both formed the core visiting group this time.

Lucky came along as well. The cat had flown into Calabast's arms and basked in her embrace like a pampered baby.

"Meow~"

A couple of attendants from the Murphy Family received the Larkinsons and led them into the main mansion.

Soon enough, the visitors entered a large and stately-looking meeting hall where half-a-dozen members of the Murphy Family rose up from their couches and greeted the new arrivals.

"Patriarch Larkinson, thank you for coming to us today. We have a busy schedule so we cannot spare much time for our discussion."

Ves shook hands with a woman who was almost four times older than him. His first impression of Gelly Murphy, the CEO and chairwoman of the shipbuilding company, was of a leader who was trying her best to endure the pressure.

Ever since Murphy & Sons packed up its bags and migrated to the Red Ocean, the company encountered one difficulty after another. Nothing went right and Gelly Murphy bore the guilt and burden for leading her family-owned company into such dire states.

Nonetheless, Ves did not detect any measure of defeat or resignation from the old woman. Instead, he detected a lot of steel in her spine. This suggested that she was still confident in navigating her company out of its current crisis.

Her attitude in the face of these circumstances reminded Ves of himself. That meant that it might be trickier to deal with these Murphies than he thought.

He also shook hands with the other important members of the Murphy Family.

"Karina Murphy, chief shipwright and head of ship research and design."

"Malaia Murphy, chief shipbuilder and head of ship production."

Karina and Malaia were the left and right arms of Gelly Murphy. The 60-year old women also happened to be Gelly Murphy's daughters.

Of the remaining three executives, two of them also happened to be women. The only man was Gizzard Murphy, a relatively boring-looking man who was head of marketing.

"Seeing as how there are so many women on top, why haven't you renamed your company into 'Murphy & Daughters' yet?" Ves blurted out.

The Murphies all chuckled.

"It's tradition. Who knows whether our company will be led by our grandsons instead of our granddaughters."

"Ah."

Well, at least Ves confirmed that these Murphy women didn't possess any Hexer tendencies. It was just a coincidence that the number 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 positions were all occupied by females at this period in the company's timeline.

Once the initial meet and greet had passed, everyone sat down on the comfortable couches and began to talk about the possibility of extending Murphy & Sons an invitation to join the Larkinson Clan's trade consortium.

Neither Ves nor Gelly Murphy spoke at this time. Minister Shederin and Disil Murphy, the younger sister of the CEO, conducted the initial talks.

They shared diplomatic platitudes and cautiously brought up various points of cooperation.

Nonetheless, the Murphies didn't have the time to dance around all day. Gelly Murphy eventually raised her hand to take charge of the talks in person.

"We will not hide the extent of our difficulties from you." Gelly said as her face grew stern. "We are deep in the red and owe a debt to the tune of tens of thousands of MTA credits. We have drained much of our liquid funds in order to get this far but our cash is running out. If we cannot meet our upcoming interest payment, we will be in serious trouble."

Ves and several other Larkinsons blinked. Calabast had already figured out a few details about the extent of the shipbuilding company's difficulties, but none of them expected that its leader would just come out and reveal this problem.

Admitting this painted Murphy & Sons in a more desperate light, thereby weakening its bargaining position. Why would Gelly Murphy say such a remark? She should have been smart and experienced enough to know the effect of her words.

Her statement suddenly made sense when she made her next revelation.

"We have recently been in contact with multiple parties. Unlike the ones we have dealt with before, our newer conversation parties have offered more generous terms of cooperation."

"Oh. That... is nice to hear."

The Larkinson Clan had inadvertently entered a bidding war.

#### *Chapter 3635 Negotiation Tool*

After Gelly Murphy made her explosive revelation, she generously gave her guests the time to process the implications.

The Larkinsons in the meeting chamber were completely caught off-guard. They thought that they held the upper hand and that the Murphy Family had little choice but to join a new and unproven trade consortium if they wanted to retain their control over their own company.

The reality appeared to be quite different. Either the intelligence on Murphy & Sons was outdated or the shrewd Murphies had deliberately kept the Larkinsons in the dark up until this point.

No matter what, the previous plans formed by Shederin had to be thrown out of the window. The involvement of other competitors completely changed the negotiation landscape. The Larkinsons were so stumped that they had practically lost all of the initiative.

Ves threw a pointed glance at Calabast.

The woman noticed his stare but didn't do anything aside from vigorously rubbing Lucky's head.

"Meow meow..."

The cat squinted as his head motioned from side to side from the intense massage.

Ves took that to mean that Calabast was basically saying that she and her agents hadn't been able to catch this development.

"Ugh." He grunted under his breath. It would have been incredibly handy to know about this news in advance. It appeared that he needed to have a good talk with Calabast about the effectiveness of the Black Cats as an intelligence-gathering agency.

Seeing that the talks between the Larkinsons and Murphies had entered into a completely different dimension due to Gelly Murphy's statement, Minister Shederin quickly took over from Ves and tried to inquire more details.

"We were under the impression that you were only considering our trade consortium. May we ask who else has expressed an interest in forming a cooperative agreement with your company?"

"Ah, it would not be convenient for us to tell you that." Disil Murphy smoothly replied. "Not all of our discussions with these parties have led to substantial results. We are still exploring our options, hence why we have decided to set this day aside for meetings. Your delegation isn't the only one that we will be entertaining for today. Another one is due to arrive within an hour, hence why we cannot talk for long."

"I see. Then let us dispense with the pleasantries and discuss in greater detail on how we can be of service to each other."

The foreign minister of the Larkinson Clan and the head of relations of Murphy & Sons talked more substantially with each other.

Right now, the Larkinsons needed to understand the actual situation of Murphy & Sons while the Muphies were more interested in how much they could get out of this potential cooperation.

The talks sometimes veered into technical topics. Chief Shipwright Karina Murphy and Chief Shipbuilder Melaia Murphy corresponded directly with Vivian Tsai when that happened.

"...When we disassembled our shipyard, we first discarded a large amount of mass that was not as vital to its operation. We discarded a large proportion of bulky hull and structural plating as they can easily be replaced in another location. That also meant that the shipyard components loaded onto our ships are all relatively sophisticated and vital. When the raiders struck our vessels, the loss of some of them left our shipyard in dire straits. While we have accounted for the cost of rebuilding all of the structural components that we initially left behind, we did not expect a raid to inflict so many losses. While we are lucky enough to retain the vast majority of our trained and experienced worker base, we lost a considerable amount of specialized equipment that cannot easily be replaced."

"Which of your shipyard systems are impaired or inoperable?" Vivian asked. "With our fabrication capabilities, we can readily supply many replacement parts."

From what Ves was able to gather from these talks, Murphy & Sons needed to procure replacement parts worth around 20,000 MTA credits to get back into operation.

Under ordinary circumstances, it shouldn't be difficult for a shipbuilding company of its size to borrow this sum, but the company already possessed existing debt obligations.

While it was still possible to borrow a bit of money, the terms were too onerous.

This was why Murphy & Sons sought alternatives.

"Some of the other parties that we have made contact with have expressed a willingness to cover our acute financial or material needs." Disil Murphy mentioned. "We have not heard comparable offers from your clan."

Shederin Purnesse maintained an impassive expression.

"This is because our correspondence up until this meeting solely centered around your shipbuilding company's possible entry into our future trade consortium. You did not reveal the extent of your problems and ask for our assistance. We were under the impression that your Murphy Family wished to retain complete control over Murphy & Sons. Aid is never given freely. It always comes with strings attached. We Larkinsons

have always prized our independence, so we would never presume to encroach on your bottom line by tying you down with even further debt."

This was a high-minded argument, but it did not hide the Larkinson Clan's lack of enthusiasm in trying to 'outbid' other possible competitors.

Ves had already sent a silent signal to Shederin that he did not want to entertain the Murphy Family's attempt to solicit a bribe.

Bidding war or not, the Larkinson Clan should not be trifled with. Ves also didn't think it was wise to go even deeper into debt especially when he had just secured an expensive piece of land.

Once the Murphies understood that the Larkinsons weren't willing to play ball, the talks noticeably grew cooler. The smiles grew fewer while the conversation grew more stilted.

Ves watched Gelly Murphy closely and judged that the old and wiley CEO had become a lot less enthusiastic about joining his proposed trade consortium.

Yet despite not extracting the concessions that she wished, Gelly Murphy did not make any moves to end this round of talks.

The Larkinson Clan was still in contention, but it had likely dropped to the bottom of the list.

The awkward discussion finally concluded at the end of the hour. Everyone stood up and shook each other's hands once again while they promised to look over the details they shared.

When the Larkinsons boarded the shuttle yet again, Ves first turned to Calabast who had never spoken any substantial words during the meeting.

"Well?"

"Well, what, Ves?" She responded while she continued to pamper Lucky.

"Look, I won't go over the fact that you missed such a big development. This isn't our territory and everything happened on short notice. What I want is your impression of the Murphies. What do you think about their attitudes and what kind of scheme do you think they are hatching?"

"It's not that complicated, actually." The spymaster said. "Gelly Murphy is a tough one to read, but her daughters and other relatives are not as adept at hiding their tells. I've managed to glean lots of clues by observing their body language. From what I can tell, I don't think they are being truthful when they claimed that they only recently received numerous attractive offers. They must have been in talks with other parties for at least a

week given the way most of the Murphies acted as if they had already attended numerous meetings like this. We are latecomers."

Ves frowned deeper. The Murphy Family was not as desperate and sincere as he thought. It turned out that his initial impression was too good to be true.

Minister Shederin shared his own views. "I agree with Madame Calabast. The Murphy Family's plot is quite clear now that we have gathered enough clues. Although Murphy & Sons have expressed some genuine interest in becoming a part of our trade consortium, their main goal in opening talks with us is to use our clan as a way to drive up the bidding war among other, more attractive parties. Unfortunately, our refusal to 'match' the bids of other interested parties has partially spoiled this particular scheme. That explains why their attitudes had noticeably dipped."

Ves sighed and pressed his fingers against his forehead. He hated this nonsense. Couldn't the Murphies be more straightforward and stay away from the Larkinson Clan if they weren't that interested in joining his trade consortium?

"So what are our chances? Is it still worth holding talks with Murphy & Sons?"

"I would advise you not to act too hastily, sir. This is only a single face-to-face meeting where our counterparts have employed a specific scheme against us. We cannot completely trust our initial judgment of the Murphies. As long as they are willing to continue negotiation, there is always a chance that we can somehow come to an agreement. I am not as confident as before, however."

Silence ensued as the Larkinsons tried to wrap their minds around the current challenge.

"Lucky." Ves addressed his cat. "I told you to keep an eye out for any details. Did you catch anything that is useful for me to know?"

The gem cat rolled in Calabast's embrace so that he could throw a lazy glance at Ves.

"Meow."

"Is that so?"

"Meow meow."

"Understood."

"What did Lucky say?"

"He told me that the meeting room we are in contained a few well-hidden bugs. Before you ask, they don't belong to the MTA. The mechers use different and much more advanced gear. Did you detect anything of the sort, Calabast?"

She shook her head. "No. I do carry detection gear on my person, but they are built to be as discreet as possible. It doesn't surprise me at all that neither myself nor the Murphies are able to detect those bugs."

"What do you think this signifies?"

"Others are still harboring a considerable interest in acquiring Murphy & Sons. The effectiveness of their spying equipment can be used as a rough indicator of how large and powerful they are. I'm afraid that Murphy & Sons will not easily be able to shake off its status as prey."

Ves shrugged at this speculation. "Well, it's none of our business as long as we don't have much of a chance of acquiring the company ourselves. I don't like getting screwed and the Murphies have been doing exactly that to us. One of the most essential conditions for me to trust potential business partners is to see whether they display sufficient goodwill to us. The Murphy Family's stance leaves much to be desired."

"I advise you not to burn our bridges prematurely." Minister Shederin emphatically advised. "Let me continue to lead our talks with Murphy & Sons. We might not be willing to offer what they want, but we can provide other conditions that may lead to a breakthrough."

The old man was right. Though Ves personally felt irked, there were a lot of interests at stake. He needed to be patient for the good of his clan and his greater aspirations.

He just felt pissed that the Murphies thought to play with him. His emotions urged him to take another course of action.

Perhaps it was better for him to step back from this matter and allow his people to do the heavy lifting.

"Okay. Go do what you want, but the formation of our trade consortium must proceed on schedule. If the Murphies keep stringing us along, then we don't need to waste any further time with them. Let them work with other partners if they are so eager for a bailout.

When the shuttle returned to the Larkinson Clan's temporary base of operations, the talks continued.

While Murphy & Sons played a few tricks, there was little doubt that it was in a hurry. Its looming financial obligations meant that the shipbuilding company could not take its time to fire up the bidding war.

The Murphies eventually decided to bring the 'auction' to a conclusion by inviting every party back to their rented compound in order to make their final cases.

#### *Chapter 3636 Fellow Bidders*

Aside from the Larkinson Clan, Murphy & Sons also invited two other parties.

While the shipbuilding company undoubtedly held talks with a couple of more interested organizations, the Murphies evidently did not like their bids.

The final consideration came down to three different choices.

As the same Larkinson delegation arrived at the Murphy Family's rented compound yet again, Ves noticed the presence of several other shuttles in the same landing zone.

Calabast helpfully provided him with information. "Those red shuttles belong to Redfield Security, a relatively large and well-funded mercenary company that originated from the galactic heartland of the old galaxy. Unlike many other entrants to the Red Ocean, Redfield Security has not suffered significant damage so far. Their assets and combat potential is fully intact."

"How strong is Redfield Security?" Ves asked.

"It is difficult to give you a precise answer, but from what we have gathered, Redfield Security is capable of fielding at least a mech legion in space and two mech regiments on land."

Redfield was able to deploy more mechs in space than the Larkinson Clan, but could not match up against the entire Golden Skull Alliance.

Of course, this shallow comparison left out numerous variables such as the strengths and qualities of the mechs in use and the number and attributes of expert mechs.

Since Redfield Security originated from the galactic heartland, then its mechs were certainly not pushovers. The mercenary company's ability to survive and thrive in the Red Ocean up to now was a testament to its strength.

"Why would these mercenaries want to partner up with Murphy & Sons?" Ves frowned.

"Why not? Redfield is just as desperate to obtain new starships as us. The mercenary business is dangerous and the chances of suffering losses are always considerable. While it is not that difficult to buy new mechs, it is a lot harder to replace lost starships. If this goes on, Redfield will lose its ability to perform its primary business. That will spell the company's end in its current form. Therefore, it is well worth investing in a troubled shipbuilding company in order to secure priority access to newly-built vessels. Partnering with Murphy & Sons will not only allow Redfield to replenish its losses, but

also expand its combat fleet, thereby enabling them to take out greater mercenary contracts."

Ves nodded in understanding. "That makes sense, but Redfield must have deep pockets if it is able to reach the final phase of this bidding war."

The dynamic that threatened Redfield Security's long-term applied to many other pioneering organizations as well. The Larkinson Clan was no exception as it was still awfully short of combat carriers. There were still too many mech pilots who needed to share time in order to pilot the same mechs!

This was why Ves had forcefully suppressed his indignation at how the Murphy Family had treated the Larkinson Clan so far. After thinking about this situation a bit more, he realized that it was just business.

He would have made the same moves if he was in Gelly Murphy's heels. As the leader in charge, she had an indisputable responsibility to find the best possible solution for Murphy & Sons.

If she had to pit competitors against each other in order to drive up the offers she received, then that was clearly the most rational course of action that she could take!

It still felt bad, though.

"Given what's at stake, Redfield will definitely put up a serious fight to win over Murphy & Sons." Minister Shederin Purnesse spoke. "If Redfield cannot secure this deal, then it will have little choice but to surrender at least a portion of its autonomy so that it can take shelter under a larger group."

The next meeting certainly wouldn't be pleasant.

"What about those guys?" Ves gestured at the white shuttles that were parked on the other side of the landing zone.

"Those vehicles belong to ZZR Manufacturing." Calabast stated as she once again cradled Lucky in her arms. "As you can guess, it is an industrial company that is mainly involved in the production of heavy industrial goods. While the company isn't that big, its products are in extreme demand. All of the colonies that are popping up in the region all require the use of heavy vehicles and heavy equipment to tame the local environment and build up their settlements."

Colony building equipment was almost just as hot as starships in the Red Ocean. The more machines a pioneering organization received, the faster it could build up its settlement into a major colony.

Even if the price of raw materials was relatively high, ZZR Manufacturing was probably able to earn an insane profit with its current business operations!

"ZZR Manufacturing has managed to build a sizable plant on Davute V, which has cemented it as one of the established companies of the local economy." Shederin said. "ZZR Manufacturing might not possess a lot of military might, but it is able to offer benefits that Redfield cannot match. Foremost among them are access to resources, the ability to repair the broken shipyard and a willingness to supply fabricated ship parts."

Ves immediately understood ZZR's calculus.

"I see. ZZR seeks to form an integrated supply chain with Murphy & Sons!"

The starship market was considerably more profitable and long-lasting than the colony equipment market.

This was because there were a lot more companies that could enter the latter than the former. Any decent industrial firm could set up a manufacturing plant and start with producing ordinary goods such as mining drones, construction machines and prefab structural components.

While supply currently exceeded demand, as time went by, the industries of major planets would quickly rise to a level where excessive competition depressed prices.

Though the scarcity of raw materials ensured that the price levels would still remain high for times to come, the overall profit margins in this sector would surely drop to a minimal level!

Given this foreseeable market development, ZZR Manufacturing was making a clever move by trying to form an alliance with a shipbuilding company.

If the two were able to partner up, then ZRR Manufacturing would be able to get involved in the shipbuilding industry, which was much harder to enter. The industrial company's ultimate goal was to diversify its income sources!

"What a clever business." Ves remarked as he and his fellow Larkinsons stepped inside the familiar compound. "It's best if the two companies merge with each other, but settling for a long-term alliance is the next-best option. If the two of them band together, they can earn more profit than ever while also sharing various industrial goods and resources with each other."

It was a highly synergistic business arrangement that sounded so attractive that he bet that this was the Murphy Family's most favored choice.

Perhaps the only reason why the Murphies were also considering Redfield Security was because they were traumatized by their earlier failure to defend against the raid that put them in trouble.

Military force was a lot more important in the Red Ocean.

"Now that you are familiar with the two other bidders, I believe you should understand our own position a bit better." Shederin told Ves.

"Yeah..."

The Larkinson Clan didn't offer as many benefits. However, joining the trade consortium meant that Murphy & Sons wouldn't be tied down to any single party for the long-term.

There was no way that Redfield or ZZR were willing to transfer so much money and other concessions to Murphy & Sons without getting a payoff for a considerable amount of time.

Making long-term agreements that remained valid for several decades was the norm in the Red Ocean. If the shipbuilding company truly chose to go for the obvious options, then it lost at least some freedom of movement.

The offer made by the Larkinsons did not come with this expectation. From the beginning, the clan had always emphasized that there were few strings attached. Anyone who found better opportunities could easily cut these feeble strings and go elsewhere in a matter of months.

This effectively allowed Murphy & Sons to retain its freedom. If it stayed in the trade consortium, it would be by choice, not because it was tied down by contractual obligations.

This would hopefully be a sufficient benefit to lure the shipbuilding company over to the Larkinsons.

After a short wait, the Larkinson delegation entered a familiar meeting chamber.

There were more seats this time as well as additional guests.

It was clear to see who the other people belonged to. The men and women wearing red uniforms were obviously from the mercenary organization while the people wearing business suits hailed from the industrial company.

None of the competitors showed any friendliness towards the new arrivals. They were well aware that only one of them could leave this place with a prize in hand. The rest would have to leave empty-handed.

"Greetings, Larkinsons. You are the last ones to arrive. We shall give you a moment to acquaint yourselves with each other. You can make your final cases in fifteen minutes."

They might as well talk to each other, then.

The Larkinsons had barely started moving before the Redfields already came up to them. Both sides stared at each other for a moment before the leader of mercenaries extended his hand.

"Horace Redfield. CEO of Redfield Security."

Ves responded with a polite smile as he shook the leader's hands. "Ves Larkinson. Patriarch of the Larkinson Clan."

Now that they came close to each other, Ves gained a more detailed impression of the Redfields.

They didn't give out the vibe of craven, opportunistic bastards that characterized typical bottom-feeders. These were real professionals. Not only that, they gave out an ex-military vibe that Ves was quite familiar with seeing as his own mech pilots often possessed military backgrounds as well.

"You've been in the business a long time, haven't you?" Ves casually asked as the other Larkinsons and Redfields chatted with each other.

"Over forty years." Horace Redfield gruffly responded. "I took this outfit over from my father and made it great."

"That's impressive. It isn't easy to achieve success in the mercenary business."

"It's a challenge, alright, but we managed to come out on top. The Red Ocean is where I will truly sink my teeth in. Mark my words. Redfield Security will become one of the premier mercenary organizations in Davute."

Well, Horace Redfield certainly didn't lack ambition.

After the Larkinsons got their fill of the Redfields, they went over to the ZZR delegation.

A relatively young woman greeted Ves directly before he could even extend a hand in greeting.

"Patriarch Larkinson, let me be straight. Don't waste your time here. Your oddball clan has no chance of convincing the Murphy Family. You have no idea how difficult it is to gain entry into the true resource and industrial markets. Your trade coalition is doomed from the beginning as no resource supplier will ever have a reason to conduct business with a random collection of ants."

"A hive of ants is much more formidable than you think, Miss Tyana Delcrost." Minister Shederin said, saving Ves from making a lame reply.

The young CEO of ZZR Industries glanced despondently at the old man. "Ants can easily be stepped upon no matter whether they are alone or together. If Murphy & Sons joins your trade coalition, it will only be able to become another ant. With us, the Murphies can rise up the market hierarchy and become a true economic pillar of Davute. That is something that a band of homeless vagabonds such as you can never achieve."

Ves grew annoyed. This woman was being way too snooty for her own good. Just because she carried herself like an elite didn't give her the right to demean the Larkinson Clan!

Tyana Delcrost turned back to Ves. "As much as I think your chances of surviving the Red Ocean are low, I am willing to reward you if you step out of what comes next. ZZR Industries is willing to enter into a contract with you to supply your clan with both unprocessed and processed goods. Our company can solve your supply problems in a single day if you are willing to cooperate."

That sounded more interesting to Ves. He immediately forgot about all of the insults that Tyana flung in his way.

#### *Chapter 3637 More Than Business*

Ves seriously considered Tyana Delcrost's offer.

He did not allow his emotions and impulses to dictate his decisions. The stakes were too high for that today. This was why he ignored the barbs and condescension from the CEO of ZZR Industries and seriously thought about the pros and cons of accepting this offer.

ZZR offered to solve the Larkinson Clan's greatest problem, which was its inability to purchase the raw materials and other goods needed to keep a fleet numbering 10 capital ships and dozens of sub-capital ships in working condition.

The entire point of setting up a trade consortium and trying to lure Murphy & Sons to his camp was to solve this problem.

Compared to trying to outbid his other two competitors and trying to work something out after that, it was a lot easier and more direct to simply accept ZZR's naked bribe and be done with the entire issue.

Was it a big deal to abort his previous plans so that he could take the easy way out? Not really. A prideful person might say different but a rational person would have no

qualms accepting the most beneficial course of action even if it meant that the Larkinsons would have to admit defeat.

Though Ves cared about reputation, he cared about practicality more. He only needed to say a single word to cement the deal and resolve the clan's supply problem.

He did not speak up, though. A decision like this should not be made in the heat of the moment. He glanced towards the advisors that he brought today.

Vivian Tsai clearly opposed the deal for obvious reasons. She was delighted with the possibility of developing a relationship with a genuine shipbuilding company. As long as Murphy & Sons joined the trade consortium, she could slowly begin to realize her new ship classes that were expressly designed to complement the Larkinson fleet.

Minister Shederin subtly shook his head. He clearly had problems with Tyana Delcrost's offer. If this wily old fox detected something amiss, then Ves had to take his judgment seriously!

As for Calabast, her expression said it all. She adopted the same expression that she used whenever she thought that Ves was engaged in another form of stupidity.

Even Lucky, who was basking in her arms, looked down on Ves.

"Meow."

Their unspoken responses all prompted Ves to judge Tyana Delcrost's offer from a more critical perspective.

Of course, the women didn't miss this silent development. She attempted to put a fire under the Larkinson Patriarch's feet.

"Decide quickly, Larkinson. I have little patience for doubters. ZZR Industries will not extend its generosity twice. This is a chance of a lifetime to your clan. We are prepared to provide generous treatment to you as long as you step aside and allow us to secure an alliance with Murphy & Sons. We will even allow you to place a handful of priority orders with our new shipbuilding partner. This way, you will obtain everything that your clan requires in this delicate early period of the conquest of the Red Ocean, allowing your Larkinsons to focus on achieving your true ambitions without any further concern about problems in your rear."

He had to admit that Tyana Delcrost certainly put out a good argument. The Larkinson Clan never wanted to get embroiled in logistical problems. What Ves really wanted to do is to turn around and face forward again.

Goals such as exploring the diversity of the Red Ocean, designing new commercial mechs and growing his clan into a much larger organization were all ways for Ves to further his ambitions.

He never asked to get embroiled in tedious and frustrating matters such as convincing potential business partners and begging for material suppliers to work with his clan. These were problems that his staff should have been able to solve in the background so that he could place his full attention on his greater plans.

Ves suddenly looked sharply at Delcrost. The woman had done her research and knew exactly which soft spots she needed to hit in order to pull him into her narrative.

As someone who was becoming increasingly more accustomed to persuading other people, he could sense he was being played with. Usually, those who did such a thing rarely had good intentions in mind.

"How long will this agreement hold?" He pressed. "Thirty years? Fifty years?"

"Don't get too excited." Tyana quickly replied. "Ten years should be enough for a start. We can reassess our relationship at that point. If our cooperation has proceeded well enough, there shouldn't be a problem to extend it further."

Ten years was enough for Ves. Though it wasn't as long as he liked, anything could change during this period. If everything went well and the Larkinson Clan became a lot bigger and stronger after a decade, then it should be much easier to gain the cooperation of other suppliers.

However, the begrudging way that Tyana answered his question did not inspire much confidence in Ves.

Her attitude towards him and his clan wasn't good, and that triggered alarms in his mind.

He narrowed his eyes. "I just thought of something. ZZR Industries only owns a single plant on Davute V, correct?"

"Yes. Our flagship manufacturing plant is capable of outputting a large amount of products."

"How much of your plant's capacity are you willing to allocate to our clan?" Ves sharply asked. "You still need to supply enough colony equipment to your existing clientele in order to maintain friendly relations with them. You also need to allocate production to facilitate the shipbuilding needs of Murphy & Sons in the event you secured a partnership with them. Given these obligations, how much production capacity is left? Can you still supply a sufficient amount of replacement parts and other essential equipment to our fleet?"

"We can specify those details in a contract. We can start drafting the terms tomorrow morning."

Ves shook his head. "It will be too late by then. Who knows whether you are willing to stick to your end of the bargain. If I make a decision now, I will forfeit the chance to cooperate with Murphy & Sons in exchange for a vague, non-binding promise from your company. Does that sound like a good deal to you? And before you offer to make a binding contract on the spot, I have more problems with this arrangement."

"What are your concerns?" Tyana asked in a neutral tone.

She became a lot more guarded now that Ves proved he wasn't a pushover. She began to see him as a more serious challenge.

Though her change in attitude was admirable, it was too bad that Ves already picked up numerous clues from her earlier demeanor.

Ves crossed his arms. "Contracts can never be the sole basis of a good cooperation. A CEO such as yourself should not be ignorant of this rule. There are too many ways that partners can screw each other over if they are unwilling to work together. I can think of dozens of ways that ZZR Industries can abide by the letter of a contract but not its spirit. You can supply sub-standard components. You can delay your shipments. You can claim your other obligations cannot be put aside. You can fail to procure the raw materials that we urgently need."

"We wouldn't do that."

"Says who? You? I want to believe, Miss Delcrost, but I have not sensed an inkling of sincerity and goodwill from you. The sole reason why you are making this offer to us is to get rid of a competitor. That may be sufficient for you, but it falls short of our standards. Our clan doesn't want to settle for just business. We value relationships as well. If there is no sincerity in any long-term partnership from your company, then why would our clan take anything about your offer seriously?"

His response did not meet Tyana's expectations. Her expression grew more severe as she took a step forward.

"Is this your decision, Patriarch Larkinson? Will you truly throw my peace offering aside because of your trust issues? Despite what you may think, ZZR Industries has always conducted honest business. Look into our record if you want."

Ves dismissively shrugged. "I don't need to look up sanitized records when I can clearly observe the disdain and lack of respect from you and your lackeys. Not once did you show any indication that you regard us as equals or at least valued customers. If that kind posture characterizes our cooperation going forward, then I would rather have nothing to do with your company. I mean, if you truly want to obtain our agreement, then

the least you can do is to show actual earnesty towards us. The fact that you were too stuck-up to do that shows that you don't value our cooperation at all. I think we are done here. I wish you good luck on your upcoming attempt to win over the Murphies. You'll need it seeing as how you clearly have trouble respecting your business partners."

He spoke his words loud enough for the other people in the room to hear his condemnation of Tyana Delcros.

The Redfields sniggered while the Murphies listened quietly without giving their true thoughts away.

"You can keep your luck, Patriarch Larkinson." Tyana said with undisguised acid. "You will need it more considering how little your clan can actually come up with. Fanciful dreams and ambitions will not get you anywhere in the Red Ocean. Plenty of pioneers have come while possessing an abundance of them, but look where that got them. Many have already died without achieving anything. Others had no choice but to get absorbed by larger groups. Given the similarities between them and you, your clan is heading in the exact same direction."

Her counterattack was good, but the damage to her own position was undeniable.

The two groups eventually separated from each other.

A few minutes later, the Murphy Family stopped stalling. Their leader stepped forward.

Gelly Murphy gazed at each of the delegations as they took their seats. "Redfields. ZZRs. Larkinsons. Murphy & Sons appreciates what each of you can offer. Each of you have been informed that we cannot bring our shipbuilding operation in the Red Ocean online without external aid. Since our creditors will be expecting us to pay our next installment in time, we cannot take the time to weigh our options over weeks or months. This is why I shall allow you to plead your case one last time so that we can make progress as soon as possible."

Although Gelly Murphy continually exposed the frailty of Murphy & Sons, it played in her favor this time. The more desperate she sounded, the more she compelled the bidders to drive up their offers in order to help solve the shipbuilding company's problems.

In any case, the bidders were competing against each other rather than Murphy & Sons.

Any attempt at bargaining from the Redfields and so on would only lower the attractiveness of their offer, thereby giving their competitors a handsome advantage!

Ves understood this quite well. His clan needed to show a lot of sincerity in order to remain competitive, but the problem was that his means were relatively limited.

As he thought about how far he needed to go, Gelly Murphy brought up an important issue.

"Each of you will only have one opportunity to make your case. We have not yet decided on the speaking order."

This was an important matter. Those who spoke first risked getting supplanted by the subsequent speakers. The one who spoke last enjoyed a significant boost.

This was not only because the last speech would be the freshest on the minds of the Murphies, but also because the speaker could retort the arguments put forth by the previous ones!

Seeing that none of the bidders wanted to surrender the option of speaking last, the Murphy leader proceeded in her own way.

"In order to remain fair, we shall determine it by drawing lots."

Gizzard Murphy stepped forward. He held a small bowl that contained three identical gray balls.

This was a simple, low-tech means of determining the speaking order. Ves already knew without pulling out his scanner that these dense metal balls were made of advanced materials that could block virtually any form of scanning.

"Fair enough."

#### *Chapter 3638 Security or Prosperity*

As Horace Redfield, Tyana Delcrost and Ves stepped forward, the latter briefly turned around so that he faced his own delegation.

Ves pointedly stared towards his cat.

As shipbuilders, the Murphies should easily be able to make a ball that frustrated any attempt at trying to peer what was inside.

It was too bad that Murphy & Sons was originally a second-class shipbuilding company from the galactic rim. The company's grasp on technology was far from excellent.

This was why Ves specifically insisted that Lucky had to be present in the meetings with Murphy & Sons. His cat was one of the best and most covert spying tools at his disposal.

"Meow." Lucky rolled his eyes at Ves before flicking his tail upwards and to the left.

Ves nonchalantly turned forward again and sped his pace a bit. Before Tyana's delicate hand could grab onto the ball that was situated to the left and forward side of the bowl, his own arm rudely knocked it aside and claimed it for himself!

The woman glared at him, not that it mattered. He would never let go even if she tried to pry his fingers from the ball he was gripping. He even took the time to give her a toothy grin.

"Please open your balls."

There was a small button on the object. When pressed, the balls automatically parted in half, revealing the numbers marked on the insides.

The number 3 was clearly painted on Ves' ball.

"The order is set. Redfield Security shall go first. ZZR Manufacturing shall speak next. The Larkinson Clan shall have the honor of going last."

Ves smirked even as the others briefly sent odd glances in his direction.

It didn't matter if the Murphies and the others suspected foul play.

In fact, he guessed that there was a distinct reason why the Murphies decided to draw lots by using such a specific method.

If the shipbuilders really wanted to determine an order, then they could have just used a virtual dice rolling program on a comm.

Why should they go out of their way to design and fabricate balls made of expensive sensor-blocking materials and technology?

The only answer that made sense was that the Murphies wanted to test the responses of the bidders.

Being able to detect and claim the winning ball was a sign of competence. It was also a sign that the Larkinsons were willing to cross certain lines in order to attain their goals.

Whether this was good or bad in the eyes of the Murphy Family, Ves wasn't sure. Gelly Murphy and her fellow family members all looked as if they were judges in a talent contest. Everything was under their control and their decisions today could change the futures of several organizations.

Now that the speaking order became clear, Horace Redfield stepped towards the center.

Even though he had lost out the most this time, the mercenary leader still swaggered forward with an abundance of confidence.

As a mech officer who experienced plenty of combat, he faced plenty of adversity and difficulties throughout his career. A single setback wasn't enough to affect his optimism. So long as he still had a fighting chance, there was always a way to achieve victory!

The 80-year old retired mech pilot stood with an impeccably straight back as he faced the leaders of the Murphy Family.

"How many of you will remain alive in ten years?" He asked.

That threw everyone off-guard a bit. His opening statement was anything but normal.

"I am being serious. Think about it. How many members of the Murphy Family will still be there after a decade? Don't think that there is no way for your lives to be at risk so long as you hole up in the Davute System. None of the major alien races of the Red Ocean are easy to deal with. Each of them require a lot of effort from the Big Two's warfleet in order to push back. What if one of their errant warships sneaks past the frontlines and launches a devastating assault on this star system? The nunsers and puelmers don't care about our rules. They will bring their warships right on top of Davute V and Davute VII and proceed to use their warship-grade weapons to wreak devastation."

An attack like this was unthinkable in the Milky Way, but it had already happened numerous times in the Red Ocean. Even if the ships that launched suicidal attacks on human settlements rarely got away with their actions, that didn't provide much consolation to the people who invested their lives and assets in the places that got hit!

"While it is true that Redfield Security cannot match against the alien warships, that may change once we grow stronger. In the meantime, out of all of us here, only my troops can offer the greatest degree of protection to your people and assets. You have already suffered losses due to neglecting security in the past. I urge you not to make the same mistake twice. The Red Ocean is still a shark tank. If you continue to focus on expanding your business operations while showing little concern about the need to protect your prosperity, you will only fatten yourself up. As long as even a single organization breaks the rules that you use as your shield, you will have no other recourse but to offer yourselves up as prey."

Horace Redfield's speech precisely targeted the weakest part of Murphy & Sons. As a pure commercial enterprise, the company never invested too much in its own security operations.

This was not a big deal if it remained in a stable, well-run state where the government could be trusted upon to defend its industries.

However, the CEO of Redfield Security gave the Murphies a clear reminder that they should no longer maintain the same delusions they once held in the old galaxy.

"The basis of human supremacy has always rested on our civilization's superiority in waging war. The same goes for individual human states. Do you think the Terran Confederation and the Rubarth Empire are both respected for their advanced technology and their impressive cultures? Force of arms is the number one guarantee for survival. As long as you have weapons and soldiers, you will always be more secure than those without either of them. Make the right decision. Let us become your shield and we shall put our lives on the line to keep Murphy & Sons intact. Redfield Security is willing to commit to an alliance for a hundred years or more. That way, you will never have to concern yourself about securing your lives and property again."

His message was simple and clear, but his words truly struck a chord with the Murphy Family. Their previous suffering made them a lot more sensitive to guarantees of safety. Redfield Security played into that by promising that the Murphies would never have to experience these traumas and difficulties again.

Horace Redfield continued to speak for a couple of minutes more. He promised to transfer 20,000 MTA credits to Murphy & Sons as a gift as soon as they made their contract official.

Gelly Murphy and a couple of other family members looked especially keen when they heard this last concession. They could do a lot with that money! The fact that it came with no expectations of paying the sum back was an enormous boon!

Once Horace Redfield retreated and returned to his seat, the time had come for the second speaker to make her case.

Tyana Delcrost still maintained her confidence, but she had softened her arrogant demeanor. She bowed in front of the panel of Murphies.

"Mr. Horace Redfield here has made a compelling case, but no matter how much he dresses up his own people, it does not change the fact that they are mercenaries. If you want to obtain protection, there is no need to sign a long-term agreement with ruffians. Think about what will happen after that. Your shipyard and your people will all be surrounded by armed mechs and guards. This is fine if they answer to you, but a latent danger if they answer to someone else! If there comes a day where you ever make a decision that goes against the interests of Redfield Security, will you truly remain safe?"

This was an insidious insinuation!

Horace Redfield stood up in order to make an objection, but no sound escaped from his mouth. It turned out that the Murphies had configured the meeting chamber to dampen anyone else's voice except for the designated speaker.

Tyana Delcrost smirked at the irate mercenary leader. "Dogs should know their place, not try to supplant their masters. One mercenary company is the same as another mercenary company. Davute isn't short of muscle heads who fight for fortune. If you want to bolster your defenses, then you can pick from one of many available outfits that are looking for employment in this star system. There is no good reason to value the protection that Redfield can offer over that of any other mercenary company."

Ves almost winced when Tyana undermined the position of the Redfields. She directly attacked Horace Redfield's attempt to paint his mercenary company in a better light. By pulling the Redfields down to the level of other mercenaries, much of the argument for partnering up with them went up in smoke.

"I also understand the other choice that you are contemplating." Tyana said as she gestured towards the Larkinson delegation. "Joining a trade consortium and forming tentative cooperations with its members may sound attractive if you want to maintain your independence and freedom of movement, but how much help can this rabble truly provide? No one in this trade consortium is large and powerful enough to speak to the major companies operating in Davute on an equal level. There are no guarantees whether a trade consortium with no history and no reputation will be able to open any new doors either. Be realistic. Don't let yourselves be mesmerized by the wild and overblown promises that they can never deliver upon."

Ves frowned. Though her attack against the Larkinsons was a bit less sharp, it weakened one of the arguments he intended to rely upon to make his case.

Now that Tyana addressed her competitors, it was time for her to show why her offer was different.

"Compared to the other organizations that have attended this meeting, ZZR Industries is the only one that is already rooted in the local economy and supply structure. We have already forged strong ties with several suppliers that can provide enough raw materials to sustain our industrial production and more. We can immediately introduce you to them once we partner with each other, thereby circumventing any blocks and difficulties that have prevented you from approaching them beforehand. We are also ready to provide you with enough money needed to procure the goods needed to repair your shipyard."

This was a much more practical solution. Tyana's offer provided the Murphies with the most direct solution to its immediate problems. ZZR Industries did not just offer money, but also direct access to material suppliers which the other bidders simply couldn't match!

Other concerns such as security were much less acute at the moment. The chances of enemy aliens attacking Davute in the coming weeks was fairly low, so there was little reason for Murphy & Sons to prioritize security right away.

"Each of you are engaged in a business, so it should be clear to you all that joining forces with an industrial company like ours can be incredibly lucrative." Tyana stated. "ZZR Industries will always treat Murphy & Sons as its highest customer. We will do our best to produce the ship parts that meet your people's exact demands and we will even seek to implement specific upgrades so that we can produce stronger and more complex technological components that you demand. This is different from an ordinary relationship with a parts supplier. Without a long-term partnership, a manufacturer will invest so many funds to upgrade its production capabilities just to meet your individual needs. We are different. As long as we become your exclusive supplier, we shall always attune our production to your own shipbuilding activities."

This was a highly practical and lucrative concession from ZZR Industries. Murphy's shipbuilding crews would have a much easier time constructing their ships if they could readily obtain high-quality ship parts that precisely met their requirements!

#### *Chapter 3639 Great Respect*

When Tyana Delcrost finally finished her speech and returned to her seat in a triumphant gait, Ves and Horace Redfield both looked troubled.

Despite going second, Tyana Delcrost certainly put up a strong showing. She simultaneously poked holes in the arguments of her competitors while also playing into Murphy & Sons greatest needs.

ZZR Industries therefore provided the greatest assurances in solving the shipbuilding company's most acute problems.

As long as it received enough help to stave off its creditors and bring its imported shipyard to an operational state, then Murphy & Sons would no longer be so close to bankruptcy!

Its situation would be massively improved and could immediately start producing starships with the help of the suppliers that ZZR promised to introduce.

Even if Tyana Delcrost offered no further significant aid, it wouldn't matter too much at that point. Murphy & Sons would be back in business and could begin to solve its own problems.

However, Tyana went a step further and addressed future considerations as well with her commitment to tailor her industrial plant's production to the specialized needs of Murphy's shipyard operations.

As a mech designer who occasionally supervised the production operations of the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves understood how attractive this offer sounded.

While mech production was quite different from ship production, Ves still possessed a shallow impression on how ships were typically built.

While shipyards were capable of producing large and technically-advanced ship parts in-house, it was much more convenient if they could outsource these activities to more specialized manufacturers.

If ZZR Industries took over this role entirely, then Murphy & Sons would have to waste less effort on making parts and have a lot more time and personnel to spare for assembling the massive hulls.

Opportunities like this didn't come easy. The way that Gelly Murphy directed a notable amount of interest towards Tyana Delcrost indicated that she was already leaning towards the industrial company.

Ves took a deep breath before he stood up. He looked at Vivian, Shederin, Calabast and Lucky one last time before he strode forward.

Though his patriarch uniform wasn't designed and tailored by a famed designer house or anything, it was nonetheless sufficient to enhance the confidence and stature that he had developed after successfully leading his clan through numerous crises.

At first glance, his demeanor formed a cross between that of Horance Redfield and Tyana Delcrost.

He possessed the confident swagger that came from leading an organization with strong martial strength.

At the same time, he also possessed the slickness that characterized individuals that had persuaded many people in the past and was confident that he could do it again.

As he faced the panel of Murphy dignitaries, he directed most of his attention to Gelly Murphy.

He knew that the outcome of this bidding war largely depended on whether he could persuade the CEO of Murphy & Sons. Her grip on the company and the Murphy Family was strong and her daughters all deferred to their mother in important matters.

It was too bad that the intelligence collected by Calabast indicated that Gelly Murphy was a rather shrewd and conservative leader.

Aside from her risky decision to relocate her shipbuilding company to the Red Ocean for whatever reasons, the general trend of her decisions tended to be risk averse.

That made life a lot more difficult for Ves. It also explained why Gelly Murphy currently showed a lot of favor towards the offer from ZZR Industries.

In order to overcome this bias, Ves had to perform above and beyond in order to succeed.

"My peers have each laid out attractive arguments why you should cooperate with them. No matter whether you prioritize security or prosperity, both of them offer a path forward for your shipbuilding company. Yet... do you really wish to go in this direction?"

His opening might not be strong, but he was just starting at the moment.

"Think deeper about what Redfield Security and ZZR Industries actually want from you. They do not merely want to join hands with you. They also want to pull you to their sides. This means that once you sign a contract with them, you will form an open alliance with another entity that can easily drag you into its own problems. Have you ever considered whether you are willing to allow another party to dictate your friends and enemies?"

The Murphies began to look a bit more troubled when Ves brought up this sensitive issue. It was one he worried about a lot in his free time.

"While I do not presume to know the reasons why Murphy & Sons decided to pack up its bags and leave for this dwarf galaxy, part of my guess is that you seek to become your own master. That is understandable. My clan and I share the same goal. Starting anew in a region of space where there are no existing states provides us with a new start, one where we can establish ourselves without binding ourselves to whims of tyrants, governors or overbearing 'allies'."

Ves briefly swept his gaze towards the Redfields and the ZZRs.

"If you have kept up with the regional news, then you should be aware that consolidation is the current trend at the moment. Larger groups seek to absorb smaller groups. Smaller groups are banding together to seek safety in numbers. Developing long-term partnerships with supposedly equal partners sounds like a good way to combine forces while maintaining sufficient independence, but is that truly the case? Let me tell you that the problem of one alliance partner quickly becomes the problem of every alliance partner. The alliance my clan is a part of has experienced several of such cases."

Much to the detriment of his other two alliance partners, but Ves didn't mention that specific detail.

"What our clan can offer to Murphy & Sons is a form of cooperation that conveys the greatest respect to you. We won't seek to bind you in shackles. We won't expect you to back us up whenever we get into trouble. We won't demand you to dance to our tune. As long as you become a member of our soon-to-be-founded trade consortium, we will treat you as a business partner, nothing more, nothing less."

Ves took a deep breath. His clan couldn't provide everything, and it was better to voice them now so that he could control the narrative.

"While we are willing to extend favorable treatment to Murphy & Sons, our clan will not give you a free handout. Instead, we will give you the opportunity to solve your problems on your own terms. We have confidence that a shipbuilding company such as yours can easily collect payment or amass loans from the many members in our trade consortium. I think that many of them are willing to extend generous terms to you in order to secure a promise to produce a starship in a timely manner."

The Murphies actually looked interested in this offer. While it wasn't as convenient as receiving 20,000 MTA credits right away, there was no stigma attached to this alternative course of action.

Their pride and honor as shipbuilders made it difficult for them to accept the fact that they had sunk low enough that they needed to rely on other people to render aid.

Perhaps it might be a greater burden for the Murphies to borrow money and accept a lot of pre-payments for the delivery of future products, but it was also a more honest and guilt-free way of paying their debts!

In contrast, the supposedly 'free' money that the Redfields and ZZRs were willing to give would always hang over the Murphy Family's head like an invisible axe!

Unless the Murphies were truly shameless and cared nothing about its business reputation, they would surely torment themselves in their attempt to repay the huge amount of generosity they received in their hour of need!

Instead of making the Murphies deal with quandary, Ves provided them with an alternative that neatly avoided this invisible trap.

Ves smiled when he saw that his argument took effect.

"Don't fall for the polite facades of Redfield Security and ZZR Industries. Deep underneath, they are burning with greed and ambition. While these elements are common in everyone in the Red Ocean, the difference between our Larkinson Clan and them is that we are the only ones who are showing actual sincerity and goodwill towards you. We genuinely wish that Murphy & Sons becomes successful again, because that will benefit anyone who is a part of our trade consortium. The others might not have the same ideas as you. The greater the trouble you are in, the more leverage they have over you. The balance of power between your alliance might get more and more skewed if you are not careful."

Although it sounded a bit preposterous, the scenario presented by Ves sounded realistic enough to make the Murphies suspicious towards the Redfields and the ZZRs.

This also tied in with what Ves had previously said about lacking sincerity. How could Murphy & Sons truly feel secure about partnering up with a duplicitous company that has a greater interest in taking over the foundation of the Murphy Family!

Ves began to close his case.

"You do not have to harbor these concerns if you maintain your independence. Our trade consortium is not a political or military alliance, so your obligations to its members are not great. If you regret joining it, then you can just leave. We won't try to keep you because we can't. The rules are clearly and unambiguously composed to make companies like you feel as free as possible. If you accept our offer, then you will retain the greatest degree of autonomy to make your own choices. Make the right choice and do not trade away your freedom for short-term gains."

Ves felt quite good about his performance when he rejoined his own delegation. While he could have added more weight to his speech by employing more passion or pulling off one of his many glow tricks, he judged that the Murphies would not take well to them. It was better to make his case the old-fashioned way.

The Murphies privately deliberated among themselves behind a privacy screen. This went on for several minutes, making everyone else nervous.

Ves couldn't see or hear the members of Murphy Family as they argued with each other, but he could vaguely sense their emotional fluctuations from this distance.

Excitement, caution, fear, hope and several other emotions kept fluctuating between the Murphies. Each of them responded differently to the three bids.

One of them remained remarkably stable, however. Gelly Murphy was akin to a rock as she maintained tight control over her own emotions.

Once the Murphies finished their discussion, the privacy screen dropped, allowing the leader of Murphy & Sons to reveal their decision.

"Mr. Horace Redfield, I thank you for your effort. Your mercenary company is truly strong and professional, but we do not particularly require your protection. The Davute System is highly-guarded and is already defended by those who have far greater stakes in the local economy."

The Redfield CEO knew that he had no more chances today. He stood up and bowed gracefully towards the Murphies.

"We understand. We hope we can maintain friendly relations with each other. You can always call upon our services if you ever need more guards."

"We shall remember that." Gelly Murphy said before she turned to the Larkinsons. "Patriarch Ves Larkinson, you have indeed shown great sincerity in your offer towards us. It is true that I do not want to see Murphy & Sons falling into the hands of others. Yet we can do that without entering into a new and uncertain collective such as the one you are proposing. Murphy & Sons has dealt with more than enough uncertainties in the last number of years. Our personnel are stressed and our tolerance for risks has reached a limit. Certainty is the last thing that you can offer to us, so I am afraid I will have to decline your invitation."

The verdict was clear. Neither Redfield Security nor the Larkinson Clan had managed to win the Murphies over. That meant that there was only one party left!

Tyana Delcrost smiled as if she was the cat that got the canary. Murphy & Sons could not afford to go alone at this junction so there was no other choice but to get in bed with the only contender that was left!

"Miss Tyana Delcrost." Gelly Murphy said towards the much younger woman. "While your proposal is not perfect, it is simple, direct and certain enough to meet our needs. Congratulations. If the contract between us reflects the concessions that you have made, then our company is immediately ready to work with yours on a long-term basis."

The CEO of ZZR Industries happily rose to her feet. "We are grateful that you have valued our offer the most. My company is ready to render aid to Murphy & Sons even before we finalized our contract. We should start rectifying your company's problems right away. The sooner your shipyard becomes operational, the sooner we can work towards common prosperity."

As the two women chatted amiably with each other, the Larkinsons looked pretty devastated.

Minister Shederin placed his hand on a glum-looking Ves. "You presented your case well, sir. You did nothing wrong. Our clan merely isn't able to offer the benefits that Gelly Murphy values more."

Calabast nodded.

"You tried your best, Ves. That old woman is simply too afraid of ruining her legacy and the future of her heirs. You could never beat the certainty and guarantees that ZZR Industries is able to provide."

Their words hardly made Ves feel better. He felt this failure was a personal defeat on his part. If he tried harder to appeal to Gelly Murphy's personal sensibilities, perhaps he might have been able to tip the scales in his favor.

During this time, Tyana Delcrost and Gelly Murphy finished their initial exchange of pleasantries.

While the Murphies began to wrap up this session, the CEO of ZZR Industries couldn't help but wander over to the Larkinson Clan with a smug expression.

"Nice try, Patriarch Larkinson, but you never stood a chance against us. You jumped-up third-raters are far too poor and simple to be of use to the Murphies. Now get out and return to your shabby fleet. Vagabonds like you will only dirty the air purity of this settlement."

Ves looked up at Tyana and only saw pure arrogance and condescension towards his people.

While he tried his best to stay calm, he could already feel his control slipping away. He was tired of getting talked down by this insufferable CEO.

Why should he continue to suppress his emotions and let Tyana get away with insulting the Larkinson Clan? It wasn't worth it for him to maintain his restraint anymore. Clearly, his approach hadn't worked this time. Perhaps it was time to go for another tack!

Besides, there was still plan B.

"Enough!" Ves boomed as he abruptly stood up! "You need a lesson in manners, girl!"

Everyone else abruptly stopped and stared at Ves as he completely lost his composure!

#### *Chapter 3640 A Second Pitch*

Tyana Delcrost was not an average woman.

She carried herself as an elite and did not hide her contempt and disdain towards the Larkinson Clan who she regarded as inferior in every way.

The Larkinsons started out as an offshoot of a third-class clan. While Ves had led his clan on an amazing upwards trajectory, there was no doubt that he started out from a much lower starting point than most of the people he interacted with today.

While Ves explicitly absorbed the Purnesse Family so that he could put a more sophisticated facade on his clan, his own speech, body language and other behavioral patterns were clearly not up to standard.

People like Gloriana and Calabast were much more adept at interacting with people at this level!

Though he was aware of his own deficiencies, Ves never thought about undergoing rigorous training. He was comfortable in his own skin and did not want to turn his outside persona into a false image of himself.

Eccentricity and non-conforming behavior was part of his personality. Even if he exaggerated it a bit sometimes, his conduct still reflected pieces of his true self.

In this meeting today, Ves tempered this side of himself. Prior research into the Murphy Family showed that Gelly Murphy and her people had little patience for nonsense. They conducted themselves in a conservative manner and had no tolerance for flamboyance.

This was why Ves suppressed his wilder emotions and only put up a polite facade.

Perhaps that had been a mistake.

Tyana Delcrost was able to play this game much better. Not only that, ZZR Industries was able to offer a solid package of benefits that was much more solid than the vague promises that the Larkinson Clan could offer.

Maybe Ves should have stayed true to his true self.

When Tyana's sneers and insults towards his clan finally caused him to trigger, he no longer held himself back!

This woman had been talking down on him far too many times!

However, even as he let his wilder side out, he did not completely lose his attention on his goal. He discreetly transmitted a message through his implant even as he thought about how he could spin this uncontrolled moment to his advantage.

His eyes may be focused on a scandalized-looking Tyana, but his true audience was the Murphies!

Sure, what he was planning to do might not conform to rules, but Ves was already accustomed to breaking them whenever it suited him. At this point, there was no downside to acting out. Instead, his extreme behavior along with the plan B that he had prepared as eventuality might allow him to reverse this situation!

"Patriarch Larkinson! Behave yourself!" Tyana responded as soon as she recovered from his initial outburst. "I knew you were a dog. You uncivilized vagabond should have stayed on the edge of the galactic rim where you belong. If you think your stupid little clan—"

"SHUT UP!" Ves boomed as he took another powerful step forward while also channeling a bit of Zeigra through his mind!

Though Ves wanted to smack Tyana on her face quite badly, he was still cognizant enough to know that was an enormously bad idea.

This was why he resorted to one of his older tricks, which he was able to execute much more effortlessly than in the past!

As soon as Ves began to exude the aggressive glow of a feline apex predator, no one in the meeting chamber was able to disregard his presence!

The sheer ferocity and magnitude of his borrowed glow was so formidable that someone completely unaccustomed to the phenomenon would definitely not remain calm!

As a result, Tyana continually backpedaled as if Ves continually smacked her in the face.

He had done all of this without physically touching the CEO!

This was a shocking sight. The symbolism was unmistakable. Ves had woken up and exhibited complete dominance towards an arrogant woman who thought she was a dragon only to reveal her true colors as a gecko.

The Larkinson delegation standing nearby endured the glow a lot better.

As members of the Larkinson Clan, they couldn't count the number of times they came in the vicinity of living mechs.

"I have continually treated you and others with respect, yet all you do is open your mouth and denigrate people for no good reason. You accuse us Larkinsons of being uncivilized, but I think your childishness and your lack of restraint is an even greater sign of incompetence! Everything you have told us so far shows that no matter what titles you hold, you are still a child pretending to be an adult!"

"I—"

"The adults are speaking at the moment!" Ves ruthlessly cut her off! "I cannot possibly fathom why you think it is okay to talk carelessly and allow yourself to make more enemies. A good businesswoman would never land herself and the company she represents in a bad light. The fact that you think it is okay to call us losers in front of the Murphies is disturbing and shows that you are completely messed up as a business partner!"

He turned and faced the Murphy delegation even as he gestured towards Tyana.

"Take a good look at the executive that ZZR Industries has accepted as its CEO. They say that the character of the leader often mirrors the hierarchy of a company and vice versa. How many spoiled and arrogant brats like Tyana are part of ZZR's leadership? With someone like her in charge, how many executives and managers possess any integrity? Do you think that this company will show any sincerity and honesty towards

Murphy & Sons once you are bound to it? I very much doubt it! If I were you, I would watch my back lest this stain of a company stab you in the back!"

His aggressive posture and his fiery words had an effect on his audience.

The Redfields looked a lot more intrigued at the moment. The mercenaries didn't have a stake in this meeting anymore, so they effectively turned into bystanders.

The Murphies on the other hand exhibited mixed reactions. They looked as if they rarely if ever dealt with outbursts of this kind. They were both fascinated and apalled.

Gelly Murphy was absolutely livid, however. She was the organizer of this meeting and had expected it to proceed in a manner that befitted her expectations. Ves' severe breach in decorum reflected badly on her as a host! This was why she looked as if she was close to calling security to put an end to this disruption.

Her reaction to his outburst fell within his expectations. Gelly Murphy was over 120 years old and had passed the stage where she was more open and flexible to unexpected developments.

As a mother and a long-standing leader of a shipbuilding company, Gelly Murphy's greatest goal was to ensure her children remained alive and well enough to inherit her legacy without any issues.

Her ambition and her drive for greatness had long been extinguished.

This meant that whatever Ves wanted to say would probably fall on deaf ears as far as Gelly Murphy was concerned.

It was fortunate that Ves had no intentions of trying to persuade the old woman this time. He had encountered his fair share of stubborn and intractable women and knew that his chances of getting them to change his mind was too low.

If Ves wanted to get through the thick skulls of the Murphies, then he needed to direct his words towards the younger generation of the family.

He explicitly met the eyes of the number 2 and number 3 executives of Muphy & Sons.

Out of everyone in the shipbuilding company, Chief Ship Designer Karina Murphy and Chief Shipbuilder Melaia Murphy were the actual heads of the company's business operations.

While they did not concern themselves as much on high-level decisions as their mother Gelly, Karina and Melaia definitely played vital roles in the key activities that sustained the shipbuilding company!

The pair of sisters were also the future of Murphy & Sons. Ves was banking on that as he tried to appeal to them directly.

"Madame Karina. Madame Melaia. Your company is at an important juncture at the moment. I believe you realize that as well, or else your family wouldn't have held this meeting. You have listened to the pitches of a soldier and a businesswoman today. Each of them have presented different trajectories for your company, but mine is different. Do you know why? Because I'm a creator, just like you. We both share something in common for that reason."

Ves transitioned from channeling his anger towards channeling his passion. He consciously tried to pull himself in the same group as Murphy's ship designer and shipbuilder.

"Neither of the two other leaders understand what it is like to be in your shoes." He continued. "We dedicate our lives to become better at designing and making products. No matter whether we are in the business of selling mechs or ships, we all hope that we can reach critical acclaim in our respective industries. It is not enough to settle for selling generic starships. If you truly want to excel in your field, you need to go further and become better at your respective jobs."

"Patriarch Larkinson." Gelly Murphy spoke in a rebuking tone. "I must ask you and your fellow Larkinsons to leave. You have already had your chance. You will not get another. Please make your way out this instant."

"I'm not talking to you! I'm talking to the heart of your shipbuilding company. Karina, Melaia, forgive me for addressing you directly, but think about your own futures. Cooperating with ZZR Industries, an industrial company that has only ever focused on efficiency, profits and standardization will not do your shipbuilding company any good. Partnering up with this company will only make Murphy & Sons resemble it more, especially with a self-absorbed leader like Tyana Delcrost in charge."

"And you profess to be different?" Karina Murphy asked in a skeptical tone.

"I'm a mech designer." He said. "You must have studied my record and my work. My products are not only innovative, but also sell well as a result. I can help you follow a similar path. As a fellow creator, I can make sure that my clan and I will facilitate your more creative ventures. You must have developed more unusual ship designs over the course of your career. How many of them were you forced to shelve because your mother Gelly and the rest of the top management do not want to take any risks?"

The difficult expressions on Karina and Melaia Murphy's faces already revealed the answer.

"For once in your life, take charge and overrule your mother's overcautious decision." Ves pleaded towards the two middle-aged women. "Cooperating with ZZR Industries

might offer more financial security, but it will likely stifle whatever creative ambitions that you hold. You won't have to do that if you cooperate with our clan. You can make Murphy & Sons stand out from the competition by designing and making ships that are more brilliant, innovative and excellent than usual!"

His passionate speech was getting to the two female executives. He had succeeded in rousing their creative impulses, which had long laid dormant since the company relocated to the Red Ocean.

"Sheer folly!" Gelly Murphy sneered. "I have not heard anything concrete from you, Patriarch Larkinson. Your claims are as empty as your trade consortium. There is no possible way for you to augment the creativity of our shipwrights."

"You're wrong. Let me prove it to you, madame."

Ves spread his arms and issued a roar.

"DO IT, JOSHUA! SHOW THESE MURPHIES WHAT TRUE CRAFTSMANSHIP IS LIKE!"

Far outside of the rented compound, the Everchanger finally came into action.

The masterwork expert mech originally wasn't supposed to be here, but Ves had called it over moments before.

In truth, he had already kept the mech and its mech pilot on standby, not as a security precaution, but to play the pivotal roles in plan B.

Joshua began to perform two different actions.

First, he commanded the Everchanger to change its design spirit to Vulcan. Though he was relatively new to this entity, he had no trouble embracing the crafting-orienting entity's glow.

Second, he worked together with the Everchanger to activate the resonating ability associated with Iridescent Mercury.

As soon as they did so, the Everchanger's glow massively increased in range!

Numerous streets and many different structures filled with people became disrupted as Vulcan's glow enveloped tens of thousands of people!

The people in Murphy's rented compound were no different!

Both Karina and Melaia Murphy widened their eyes as Vulcan's vastly-amplified glow specifically tried to attune with their minds!

"What is this?!"