

Mech 3661

Chapter 3661 Endless Knowledge

This was the first time that Ves revealed his companion spirit to someone this powerful.

This was also the first time that the Polymath encountered such a unique manifestation of power.

Her boundless curiosity and her research inclinations couldn't help but come forward at this time. She loosened the restraints on her immense strength and gradually began to reveal the majesty that a Star Designer possessed!

Ves turned still as he sensed the arrival of a presence that surpassed anything he had ever encountered!

Mrow! Mrow! Mrow!

Blinky helplessly squirmed and shook in place as the cat felt a piercing glance trying to scour through his intangible body. The poor purple spiritual cat never felt so exposed in his short existence!

As the Polymath continued to make observations of the companion spirit's intangible makeup in her own way, she apparently made headway because her expression increasingly betrayed her thirst for more!

Ves recognized that look on the Polymath's face. It was similar to his own whenever he came up with a brilliant new mech concept or spiritual invention!

Whenever he got into this mood, his caution and his morals melted away. Now, he sensed the same reaction from the Polymath as her obsession overpowered her previous stance!

Ves increasingly felt as if he was being dipped into a foreign ocean.

It was like the unfolding of a Saint Kingdom, but different.

He still recalled what it was like to enter the domain field generated by Saint Yila Mayorka and the Olympus Mons. The combination between ace pilot and ace mech was one of the most powerful manifestations he had ever experienced, even exceeding the strength and potency of the dark gods!

The only entity that he had confronted that was more powerful than that was the Temple Protector from the Five Scrolls Compact that he and his mother had once confronted.

The high-ranking cultist who came all the way from the Ruined Temple in the galactic center was truly the closest thing to an all-powerful being that he had ever had the pleasure of meeting.

However, now that the Polymath was slowly unveiling her own might, Ves had an inkling that the apparent holder of another fragment of the Metal Scroll may not be any weaker!

His spiritual senses became flooded with so much power that he had to dull them in order to avoid getting burned. It already took a lot of mental reinforcement for him to retain his wits in this situation.

"Fascinating. Truly fascinating." The Polymath commented as her eyes glowed in a blazing silver. "I have examined many powerful psionic manipulators and their horrid experiments, but your invention is completely different. Only the most confident or radical researchers would ever be willing to experiment on themselves. You should be dead or mentally damaged from what you have done, but somehow you have mitigated the damage that you have done to yourself."

How was she able to figure all of that out?! The more she deciphered Blinky's makeup, the more Ves realized that Star Designers were truly in another league. Her spiritual perception and understanding of spirituality turned out to be a lot better than Master Willix and any other Master Mech Designer that he had met.

The Polymath wasn't even finished. The more she wanted to learn, the more she began to expose her true self to Ves and Blinky.

The air around them began to distort! Even though the space around them wasn't subjected to any storms, Ves felt as if the Polymath's awe-inspiring spirituality was overriding reality just by existing!

The air around the table and the chairs glowed as silver flashes of light began to dance around them. The concentration of this phenomena was a lot higher around the Polymath's mind, making it seem she had turned into an enormous star!

As the pressure around her grew heavier, the dots of lights began to resolve into more elaborate constructs.

Symbols and formulas began to take shape. The formulas that described reality started out with simple ones such as $F = MA$. However, they grew more complicated as the length and complexity of the formulas quickly exceeded his own knowledge base!

More science and engineering-related phenomena appeared around the Polymath. Echoes of diagrams, theoretical models, mech designs, lab machines and even traditional books sprung from the Polymath's immensely powerful spirit!

In fact, to call it her spirit was a great disservice to its actual form! Her true nature was vastly more powerful than the pitiful design seed that he bore in his mind. It was like a blazing sun that was not only fully activated, but fully radiated its influence beyond this chamber and beyond the Davute System through unknown channels!

The Polymath was like a beacon in the dark, illuminating entire galaxies and perhaps beyond with her intellectual brilliance!

Knowledge was not only a means to an end to her. It was the basis of existence and the essence that sustained her existence!

Though Ves tried to remain calm and rational in front of the Star Designer, her presence was so high and mighty that he simply couldn't stop himself from getting affected.

As someone who valued knowledge highly and always sought to expand his own understanding of mechs, spirituality, life and other fields, much of what the Polymath centered around resonated with his consciousness!

He couldn't resist opening himself up to her domain or whatever it was called. Though he risked getting contaminated by her influence, he was quite confident in himself. He just wanted to take a peek.

As he slightly lowered his defenses, he purposefully allowed himself to get affected by the Polymath's vast domain.

"Ahhh!"

The pressure that the Polymath exerted on him was a lot higher!

He came into direct contact with both familiar and unfamiliar elements.

It only took an instant for him to recognize that the Polymath actually possessed an abundant amount of high-level metal spiritual energy!

Ever since he confronted Cassandra's true self, he speculated that one of the biggest hurdles that Star Designers had to overcome was to convert their mech spiritual attribute into metal spiritual energy.

Given how much the Polymath possessed this spiritual attribute in abundance, Ves gained a lot more support for this theory!

This wasn't all, though. Though the Polymath's spiritual domain was so strong that Ves could only tentatively identify its strongest attributes, he was still able to sense that it contained another powerful aspect.

"Knowledge."

No. Not quite. Perhaps the Polymath started out with obsessing over knowledge, but just like with her preoccupation for mechs, she had upgraded it into a higher-level spiritual attribute and principle.

Ves tried his best to parse and categorize the high-level spiritual energy that the Polymath possessed in abundance.

"Truth."

This was the best word to describe what he was currently sensing. It seemed fitting considering that it had become a lot more active around Blinky.

Through his connection with his own companion spirit, Ves was able to feel the Polymath's incredibly powerful domain piercing deeper and deeper into Blinky's own spiritual makeup.

Not even the spiritual cat's extremely complicated spiritual digestion and conversion mechanisms remained free from the scouring light of the Polymath's inexhaustible curiosity!

The formulas and symbols around the Polymath bloomed even further as she derived a lot of insights from studying Blinky.

It made Ves feel awfully exposed. Nobody wanted to be examined to such an invasive degree, but there was no way he could deny a Star Designer.

As Ves increasingly became exposed by the Polymath powerful domain, he began to get affected by it in a different way.

His mind began to revolve faster as he started figuring out new theories!

His eyes widened as numerous confusing matters suddenly didn't look so insurmountable to him anymore.

As the intangible symbols and formulas generated by the Polymath's domain passed through his head, he even began to comprehend theories that he had never studied before.

New, foreign and even forbidden knowledge that the Polymath had collected over the years began to pour through his mind.

He suddenly knew how to design an aquatic mech.

He gained so much insight about crystals that he could immediately start designing first-class luminar crystal rifles.

He learned the principles behind both warp drive technology and FTL drive technology.

He comprehended how teleportation technology worked and how to design his own teleportation device.

He even understood the secret behind expert mechs!

"So it's like that!"

He had led the design of several expert mech design projects and contributed to several more. From mechs like the Dark Zephyr to the upcoming Minerva Project, each of them possessed power far beyond what their parts were able to bestow.

Though Ves knew enough that expert pilots and their ability to resonate with expert mechs was responsible for generating a lot of extra power, he had no clue how this worked and how he could possibly design a mech that could resonate with any mech pilot.

Now he knew! The theory behind it was such a surprise that Ves tried his best to delve deeper into it while he still could. Moments like these were extremely rare and this might be his only opportunity to learn what expert mechs represented from the perspective of arguably the smartest and most knowledgeable mech designer in existence!

Yet even as he tried to pick and choose what he wanted to learn, the Polymath's domain grew even stronger, causing Ves to become flooded by a tsunami of knowledge.

"Ahhh! I lost it! Where did it go!?"

All of that interesting knowledge on crystals, superluminal travel and most importantly expert mechs made way for other pieces of scientific information.

There was so much of it that Ves could hardly hang onto one theoretical framework only for it to get pushed aside by a manual on how to treat brain damage. That subsequently made way for other valuable knowledge.

So much truth and understanding cycled through his mind that Ves almost couldn't take it any longer. He screamed and clutched his head as it started to get overloaded by knowledge and energy that he was not qualified to handle!

Suddenly, the pressure disappeared.

It faded so abruptly that it was as if the Polymath simply pressed the off switch.

As soon as she retracted her powerful domain, the remarkable phenomena around her person no longer dazzled the immediate area.

Everything returned to calm and the white mist continued to dominate the chamber.

Ves took a lot of deep breaths as he recovered from this unique and extraordinary experience.

His mind was worn out and his spirit became listless due to his exertions.

Much to his dismay, he recalled none of the pieces of knowledge that the Polymath radiated from her domain.

"It's gone. It's all gone."

He felt an enormous yearning in his heart to recapture all of that fantastic knowledge. If he was able to retain just two or three theories, he could easily advance his own design prowess by a huge margin!

"I have studied enough." The Polymath interrupted silence as she returned to her restrained persona. "Though your techniques are crude, the ingenuity and effectiveness of your methods are undeniable. You truly have a gift in this area."

She let go of Blinky, allowing the aggrieved companion spirit to zip back to Ves' mind.

Mrow!

Ves gazed at the Polymath with an expression that contained both awe and fear.

"What... was that, Your Excellency?"

She smiled as if she predicted that he would ask this question.

"That, Mr. Larkinson, is the culmination of my work." She answered. "The members of the Five Scrolls Compact worship mythical beings referred to as the immortal gods. The cultists believe in them because the gods must be immensely powerful in order to create the Sacred Scrolls."

"What are Star Designers, exactly?"

The Polymath smiled. "Many people have equated us as gods. Those who have gone through the same experience as yours have even begun to view me as the god of knowledge."

Ves really couldn't blame them. What the Polymath could do with her knowledge was far beyond anything he had ever seen from a mech designer! A part of him still felt the urge to prostrate before this supreme individual!

"All of these views are wrong." The Star Designer said. "As much as my capabilities seem beyond you, I am still a human. The difference between the vast majority of people in our society and myself is that I am a more complete human."

"A more complete human?"

The Polymath slowly nodded. "I am no longer defective."

Chapter 3662 The Deficiency of Humankind

Ves was not a religious person.

He abhorred any forms of superstition.

Yet at this moment, he came dangerously close to converting to a belief.

The part of him that derived the most satisfaction from experiencing the Polymath's incredibly exceptional domain was completely enchanted.

Compared to her powerful spirituality, all of the other spiritual entities he was acquainted with were wholly inferior!

The Unending One, the Superior Mother, Qilanxo and even Vulcan may be regarded as gods by certain groups, but to Ves they were merely pretenders to the real thing!

A real god ought to be a lot closer to the Polymath!

He would do anything to replicate even a fraction of this domain and the endless amount of knowledge it was able to bestow.

Once this meeting was over, he wanted to return to his personal workshop and build a shrine dedicated to the Polymath straight away!

He vigorously shook his head.

What the hell was he thinking?!

Even if the Polymath was truly the closest person to becoming a god of knowledge, it was completely out of the question for him to bow his head to any other entity.

He was his own man!

Ves desired to become a Star Designer himself one day. Though it might take a century or two, once he arrived at this height through his own efforts, he no longer had a reason to worship the Polymath as if she was a deity.

By that time, other people would mistake him as a god!

As he successfully managed to center himself, the Polymath gave him an acknowledging nod.

She made it seem as if he had passed another test.

Now that he thought about it, there was no need for the Polymath to unfold her domain in such a dramatic fashion. She exerted such fine control over her own prowess that she could have limited the effects to studying Blinky and nothing more.

Ves could only conclude that she deliberately made a show out of her power for ulterior motives.

Fortunately, the Polymath didn't keep him in suspense.

"With your knowledge, abilities and heritage, you will attract the attention of the Five Scrolls Compact sooner or later." She said in a calm tone of voice that was so much more restrained than when she was excited. "The cultists will try to capture you. If that does not work, they will attempt to tempt you instead. They will do so by promising to help you develop your powers and elevate you into a god. Do not accept these temptations. You are a mech designer, and our trajectory is no weaker than their own. Star Designers such as myself are powerful in ways that you cannot imagine. What I have demonstrated to you is only a glimpse of what I am capable of. I am not even the strongest among us. There are older Star Designers who have made many strides. There is no limit that can halt our progress."

Ves was already committed to pursuing the pinnacle of mech design, so he hardly needed the Polymath's reminder to stay true to himself.

Nevertheless, he appreciated the preview that she provided. He felt a lot more reassured that mech designers were not weak in the spiritual arena.

Though all of the knowledge that the Polymath's domain bestowed upon him had disappeared, Ves still retained the observations and insights that he made himself.

He could recall his overall impression of the Polymath's domain and deeply remembered its all-encompassing strength and spiritual properties.

This was incredibly useful knowledge in itself! He had a much more concrete idea of what he was working towards. Even if he would inevitably develop a different domain based on his own design philosophy and spiritual attributes, he could still derive a lot of lessons from his earlier experience!

This was the real gift from this little episode. Though it wouldn't be relevant for a long time, at least he was able to confirm a few theories and gain a clearer direction of what he was working towards.

As Ves gradually came down from that indescribable rush, he recalled another remark that the Polymath had made.

There was no way that someone as smart and powerful as her would make any thoughtless remarks. There had to be more behind her earlier assertion.

"Your Excellency, earlier you stated that you were a human, but you also said something about not being 'defective' anymore. Could you... clarify what you mean by that?"

The Polymath gave him an indulgent smile. "You are a mech designer, not a child. You should be able to deduce the implications behind my words yourself, especially if you have heard about the related theory before."

Ves quietly ran through his thoughts, which wasn't easy given all of the pressure he endured.

"The most immediate implication of your statement is that humans who are weaker than Star Designers are defective in a way." He began. "They have... a fault that makes them lesser than what they can be. Only by repairing their defects will they be able to attain strength akin to gods. Is that what you were trying to convey?"

"You have captured the most essential fact, Mr. Larkinson. This theory originated from the Five Scrolls Compact. If its members haven't already enlightened you to it, they will most certainly attempt to mesmerize you with it. While you generally should not believe any theories or beliefs espoused by this forbidden group, their description of humanity as a defective species is unfortunately correct."

That... was quite a frank admission. Ves felt tempted to clean his ears. Did the Polymath truly admit the Five Scrolls Compact was correct in one of its theories?

"I am surprised to hear that, Your Excellency."

"Why?"

"Because you mechers always try your best to stand up for humanity. Since I was young, my teachers and everyone around me constantly emphasized that we are strong and special in our own ways. You mechers also put a lot of effort into spreading these views. To hear you accept the view that most humans are defective is... disappointing."

How could he not? According to this theory, Ves was also a defective human!

"I do not begrudge your opinion." The Polymath replied. "Our society has indeed attempted to elevate humankind into a special race. However, if you know what is possible and become aware of truths that I cannot share today, you will find that we are... defective."

He did not think that the Polymath was lying. He just found it difficult to embrace the 'glass half empty' perspective that she adopted.

Instead of describing most of humanity as normal, she instead demoted ordinary people into defective products.

That made powerful transcendents such as herself merely 'normal' instead of special.

"So this is what mech designers and other people are trying to work towards?" Ves said with emotion in his voice. "We are all born weak and faulty, and the only way to fix it all is to progress up to your level."

Ves felt depressed at that. He wasn't worried about himself. If a fragment holder like the Polymath was able to reach Star Designer, then so could he. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to progress as fast, but he had numerous advantages that provided him with a lot of confidence.

What he was truly worried about was his loved ones. Gloriana would probably go bonkers if he told her that she was defective!

Even if he didn't, Ves was not sure that she could bridge the enormous gap that separated Masters from Star Designers.

His children were an even greater concern. He only had a daughter so far and he already loved her beyond anything else. How could he possibly accept that Aurelia would always remain lesser compared to himself? If she didn't become a mech pilot or a mech designer in the future, what pathway could she choose from that could help her repair her innate flaws step by step?

"You do not need to concern yourself too much about other people." The Polymath advised him. "What we mean by defective is mainly related to psionic power. Humans are normal in many other measures. The vast majority of humanity will not learn of this theory and shall never develop any discontent due to this matter. There is no need to enlighten the uninformed to their own faults."

After hearing all of this, Ves had a pretty good idea of what aspect of humanity was supposed to be defective.

The Five Scrolls Compact was obsessed with spiritual manipulation. However, most humans simply didn't have the qualifications to harness it because they lacked the spiritual potential needed to get started!

If 'true' humans were supposed to be a race that were all born with spiritual potential, then this version of humanity would be a lot less flawed!

In fact, this could go a step further. Perhaps only humans whose potential was fully activated and ready to be harnessed by mech pilots or mech designers were truly closer to the ideal state of humanity!

Ves even developed a few suspicions about himself. He started out weak but began to develop special spiritual abilities that were nonexistent in other people. The ability to perceive spiritual energy ought to be one of the keys that made humans more complete!

This was especially likely considering that the Polymath was able to perceive spiritual energy without a problem, something that had always eluded the Masters that he had met such as Master Willix.

He made a bold guess. Had his mother or the System had done something to him that repaired a part of his inherent flaws?

This possibility gave him a bit of hope. There may be other ways to make humans less flawed aside from hoping that they advanced to Star Designer!

"I think... I understand." He eventually said as he let out a deep sigh. "Due to my research interests, I have always been interested in how to facilitate breakthroughs. The insights you have given me today will help me refine my research on this topic."

The Polymath leaned forward. "Master Willix issued you a mission related to this matter. We have tracked your efforts and see that you have not dedicated as much time and effort into performing your obligations. I have studied your companion spirit, so I know you can do more. Do not procrastinate. You must deliver results."

Ves almost fainted. Why did the Polymath keep making demands?! She wasn't his mother!

"Breakthroughs are inherently unpredictable, and pushing too hard will often backfire." Ves hastily replied. "I truly want to succeed in this mission, but no one has ever succeeded in it. I have already tried to make progress by designing the Enlightened Warrior variant, but it will take a lot of time for pilots to derive enough benefits from my new mech."

"You are afraid of attracting too much attention." She stated.

"Uhm..."

"It is pointless for you to deny it. Ordinarily, we do not mind entertaining your delusions, but humanity is beset by adversities. I believe you have a viable method that can trigger the breakthroughs of the twenty of the MTA mech pilots that we have originally assigned

to your care. You should not hesitate to implement your ideas. Regardless of what happens, we will make certain to maintain your secret and suppress any news."

Ves wanted to wince. Did she know what she was asking?

"I... cannot promise you that I will succeed. It is also dangerous to tamper with people in this fashion. Earlier, you suggested that I should be more careful and thorough in my research. I will try my best to uphold this approach in relation to this project."

"You must strike a reasonable balance." The Polymath nodded.

The conversation was drawing to a close. Ves could already sense that the Star Designer had spoken about all of the topics that she intended to address.

Though he deeply wanted her to stay so that he could learn more insights and secrets that he couldn't obtain from any other source, the Polymath already indicated that she needed to return.

Chapter 3663 Different Evolution Directions

After their extensive and enlightening discussion, the Polymath rose up from her chair.

Ves stood up as well.

"You are an interesting mech designer, Mr. Larkinson." She said with a smile. "I have never held a discussion with a Journeyman of your particular background and talents. You have shown me a novelty in the form of your companion spirit that has broadened my perspective of what is possible. I shall keep paying attention to your work and exploits going forward."

Most mech designers would feel flattered when they heard that someone as powerful and accomplished as a Star Designer tracked their work!

Ves was not among them, though. He was horrified to hear that he couldn't get rid of the Polymath so easily!

For all of her knowledge and her help, Ves did not forget that he did not see eye to eye with the MTA in many matters.

These differences in deeds and opinions might land him in hot water with the MTA one day. If the Polymath kept snooping on his work, how was he supposed to make any progress in his more controversial research projects?

Even if the Simile Halifax finally separated from his expeditionary fleet, he would still have little confidence in his own privacy!

Of course, Ves did not dare to bring up this matter to the Polymath. She was still so far above him that she could get her way with or without his consent.

Ves meekly smiled. "I am honored by your interest. Much of my work is still rudimentary, though. I am afraid that you will be disappointed by my many fumbles and mistakes."

"It is of little concern." She dismissively said. "My fellow Star Designers and I have gone through this stage in our lives. Few of us succeeded in realizing every promising idea that we have invested ourselves in. We can learn just as much from our failures if we are clever about our research approach."

"I see. I shall take that into account."

The Polymath took one last look at Ves. "We shall not meet again for many years. My most trusted agents among the Survivalists will remain in contact with you and convey any words I might have. For now, it is best if we maintain our distance from each other. I have collected a fair share of enemies throughout my life, and the more reprehensible of them are more than willing to harm you if they perceive you can be of assistance to me. I shall seek you out once you have advanced to the rank of Master Mech Designer. We will have much to discuss once your design philosophy has achieved permanency. Goodbye, Mr. Larkinson. May humanity prosper."

"Er, goodbye, Your Excellency. May you succeed in your research!"

The Star Designer instantly shifted away. Whatever teleportation technology she utilized was much faster and quieter than the run-of-the-mill applications utilized by more plebian mechers.

Before he wondered how the hell he should make his way to the exit when the white mist obscured his vision, he suddenly felt he was being teleported himself!

Soon enough, he appeared inside a familiar white corridor that was just outside the chamber he was in. Though he personally felt it was an enormous waste of energy to use a teleporter when he could have just walked his way out, at least he wasn't the one paying the bill for this transit.

"Ves. I see you have held a fruitful discussion with him." Jovy greeted him as he woke up from his virtual exploration or something.

He still found this meeting to be surreal. Though he had gotten used to speaking with powerful individuals, he never truly expected that he could get in touch with one of the hundred known Star Designers alive today.

If the Polymath hadn't exposed him to her domain, he would have questioned whether he was meeting with the real deal!

"It was very fruitful indeed." Ves answered as he still tried to make sense of everything he had talked about with one of the top figures of human civilization! "I learned a lot from 'him'. 'He' was not what I had expected."

"No matter who we become, we are still humans." Jovy remarked with a smile. "Though there are people within our Association who believe otherwise, we Survivalists value our humanity and are still proud to call ourselves humans. From the moment we think of ourselves as more than the people we came from, it becomes harder for us to care about our fellow humans. History suggests that will always lead to bad outcomes."

The two steadily walked back the way they came.

"We talked about that." Ves said. "The CFA is indeed detached from general human society. Most average people only come into contact with the MTA. The CFA is usually nowhere to be seen. Heck, if I hadn't traveled beyond the borders of human space a few times, I wouldn't have met with the fleeters either."

"He talked about that, huh?" Jovy looked thoughtful. "If that is the case, then he intends for you to take a more active part in our society's development. He has good judgment, not that I have ever doubted him. Your living mech designs and your masterwork mechs show great potential. Even I am envious of what you have managed to accomplish."

Ves chuckled. "Hehe. You have access to much greater resources and repositories of knowledge than I. You are also able to design first-class mechs that can easily crush any of my machines. What's more, that design philosophy of yours is so reality-defying that your mechs will probably be a terror to fight against once you grow older!"

Both of them exchanged knowing glances. Neither of them thought they were weak. Though their backgrounds and circumstances were vastly different, Ves and Jovy roughly regarded each other as equals.

This made it much easier for the two Journeymen to develop a sincere friendship with each other. They would have never been able to speak to each other as freely as now if they were too far apart.

Ves felt a lot closer to the mechers today. His meeting with the legendary Polymath was life-changing. Not only did he meet with one of the idols that he had always admired from a professional standpoint, he was also confident that he had gained her favor.

He developed a greater urge to cooperate with the Survivalists. Though he was still wary about getting too close with the MTA, the faction that he sided with was quite okay. They were probably the friendliest and most sincere members of the Association that he would ever interact with. When their goal was the survival and continuation of humanity, they were willing to go through great lengths to succeed.

After today, Ves also felt a greater responsibility for doing his part to safeguard humanity.

Naturally, he was also aware that it was not a coincidence that he started to think this way. The Polymath had steered the earlier conversation in a way that would definitely make Ves more receptive to her standpoints!

Ves didn't mind, though. The opportunity to meet with and learn from the Star Designer was worth the price of getting indoctrinated!

"The nature and the future direction of humanity is one of the great ongoing discussions within our circle." Jovy spoke. "We originally started out small and weak, but managed to develop a civilization that spans half of one galaxy and is getting close to conquering another galaxy, if only a shrunken one. We are still not strong enough to defend ourselves against the threats we face today and in the future. We need to strengthen ourselves further, but not all of us agree on the right way forward."

"Are you referring to the debate between mechs and warships?"

Jovy shook his head. "Not quite. It is related to what you have said. Has he told you about a certain ancient cult?"

"Yes." Ves replied.

He and the Polymath probably talked about a lot more than Jovy thought, but that wasn't important.

"That makes sense. Given your work, it would be irresponsible not to mention it." Jovy said. "In short, the MTA, the CFA and the 'cult' are the three most powerful human organizations in existence. The reason why we are split from each other is because we all pursue different ideas on how humanity should evolve."

"Evolve?"

"Yes. I deliberately used this word because that is exactly what they are fighting for. I believe that Master Willix should have already told you how the MTA and CFA differ from each other in this regard. What you may not know is that this picture is not complete unless you add in the cult."

Ves furrowed his brows as he thought about it. He soon figured out how it might all fit together.

"I see." He said. "If I am getting this right, the CFA and the 'cult' both sit on opposite ends. The fleeters value technology above all else and have relatively little faith in the strength of humans. They think they can defeat any threat as long as they construct

powerful battleships equipped with the most advanced systems. They don't do that much to develop themselves, though."

"And what about the cult?"

"The cultists don't seem to put a lot of emphasis on advanced technology, though that may also be because they are working in the dark. Anyway, from what little I know about the cult, they focus a lot on forcing the evolution of themselves and other humans. By specializing in biotechnology, they can truly make humans a lot more powerful than normal. All of this comes at a horrible price, though."

The price was usually their sanity or a lot of innocent human lives.

Jovy nodded. "Your impressions of the two great groups are a bit shallow, but they are accurate enough. In our opinion, neither of their visions are promising. You can argue that the CFA's strategy is the most orthodox of all. From the beginning of our civilization, we have always relied on developing better and more powerful technology to conquer our planet, star system and more. All of this is okay as long as we fight against regular threats. However, once we begin to struggle against more unfathomable enemies, the weakness of the humans crewing all of those powerful warships may prove to be the CFA's downfall."

"Isn't that why the CFA is so insistent about developing more powerful AIs? They can more easily compensate for the weaknesses of humanity if they succeed."

"That is true, but that is another discussion." Jovy waved aside the issue. "The cult holds the opposite stance. I do not know much about it myself, but I am aware that it seeks to empower themselves to the point where they can fight against mechs and warships with their own bodies and mind."

"It sounds ludicrous."

"I agree, Ves. This is why the MTA is treading a middle ground compared to these two groups. We do not pursue as many extremes and we make sure that we are hedging our bets. We still depend much on technology, but we do not entrust all of our survival on massive weapons and automated systems. We also embraced the best parts of the cult in order to make sure that the people controlling our weapons never grow too weak."

Though the MTA distinguished itself from its rivals by focusing on mechs, it indeed occupied the middle ground between the CFA and the cult.

Ves quite liked that. The mechers were less extreme and didn't have any glaring vulnerabilities that could easily be exploited one day.

"It must be hard to develop in this fashion." He said. "Mechs are still relatively new compared to the studies that the other two groups have conducted in their own fields of specialty. The rate of mech pilots and mech designers advancing to the higher levels are way too slim to call the MTA's current strategy a success."

Jovy sighed. "That is right, but we must still make an effort. If we do not... the CFA and the cult will both engineer our downfall."

Chapter 3664 Solid Project

When Ves finally returned to the Spirit of Bentheim, he still remained absent-minded.

He had just come off a meeting with one of the most powerful mech designers of human space.

In fact, the Polymath was powerful, period. Her influence among both mech insiders and outsiders was massive and even a casual innovation from her was enough to impact the lives of almost any human.

Ves was envious of her influence! She was such a great figure that she could complete a lot of initiatives without fearing as much pushback from other individuals and organizations.

In contrast, Ves had to pay attention to his moves and constantly make sure he did not catch too much attention.

"It would be really nice if I am sitting at the top of the hierarchy for a change."

"Meow?" Lucky raised his head when he noticed that Ves had teleported back.

"I don't mean the clan. I mean all of human civilization. We wouldn't be embroiled in as many mundane problems if I was an actual bigshot."

His gem cat sprung from the table and circled around while sniffing with his electronic nose. Lucky eventually became satisfied when he spotted that nothing was amiss aside from a slightly odd smell due to spending time in a different environment.

"Meow meow."

"That's good to hear. For a moment, I was afraid the MTA secretly implanted my body with a biological parasite that covertly tracks my thoughts and movements and discreetly transmits the collected data at certain intervals when there is lots of activity around me to disguise the outgoing signal. There's no way the mechers would stoop so low to keep track of an ordinary mech designer."

"Meowww..."

"Alright, enough joking around. What was I doing before I left?"

It was difficult for him to return to his routine duties after concluding a life-changing meeting with an actual Star Designer.

He not only had a lot to think about, but also had to resist the urge to share the news to his wife and his fellow Larkinsons.

It was pointless to tell them about his amazing meeting. Not only would they not believe in anything he claimed, he would also violate his promise to keep the meeting a secret!

He felt quite frustrated about this. Though the meeting with the Polymath did not go over a lot of topics, just being able to speak with her was an immense honor!

The Golden Skull Alliance did not sit still. The expeditionary fleet had finished loading all of the goods that could be bought on short notice and quickly lined up in front of the nearest Lagrange point to transition out of the star system.

Soon enough, the Larkinsons and their allies quietly left the Davute System in order to begin their true expedition through the new frontier.

They did not plan to venture anywhere exciting in the first few stops. Many of the star systems closest to Davute had already been settled by a variety of colonizing powers. Many of them banded their forces together in order to patrol their surroundings and repel any pirates or alien marauders that might threaten the flow of goods passing through their territories.

Human occupation became increasingly more scarce once the expeditionary fleet traveled beyond this range. This would be the point where the Golden Skull Alliance truly braved the dangers of the Krakatoa Middle Zone.

In the meantime, Ves finally pushed down his excitement and focused his attention on his more immediate duties.

A string of mech design projects reached completion in quick succession. Many mech pilots became excited once they learned that their mech legions had access to new options, though most of them would soon be disappointed when they heard the clan wouldn't be adding too many new machines to the mech roster.

It couldn't be helped. Resources were still fairly limited and the Larkinson vessels didn't have much spare capacity left to accommodate mechs. Without adding new hulls to the fleet, there was no realistic way for the Larkinson Army to begin fielding lots of Stingrippers and Rigid Spines.

Still, the Larkinsons would rather have the completed designs on hand than not. As soon as the Larkinsons fought an arduous battle and lost a bunch of older mechs, the clan could finally replenish the losses with the new models.

"So this is what you can do when you truly put your efforts towards defense." Ves commented as he viewed the mech that one of the new Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan had fabricated by herself. "When I contributed to your design, I had concerns about the lack of distinguishing features of your Solid Project, but now I think that it truly doesn't need anything more. Excelling at defense is already enough of a success."

The medium defensive space knight designed for the Living Sentinels might not carry the most inspiring codename, but it definitely delivered in terms of performance.

As a defense-oriented machine designed by the Larkinson Clan's first defensive specialist, the Solid Project embodied the look of a space knight a lot better than the Bright Warrior!

While the Bright Warrior in its heaviest and most substantial space knight configuration had long cemented itself as the backbone of the Larkinson Army, it did not change the fact that it was still full of compromises.

In order to make sure the Bright Warrior could also perform decently well in its offensive mech configurations, its base platform contained a lot of design elements that were not as robust as they could be. They had to be lighter in order to make the mech faster or more flexible.

That wasn't the case with the Solid Project. Sara Voiken, who led and designed much of the defensive space knight, did not make any compromises.

The mech was never meant to be a good duelist or attacker. It was so weighed down by armor and heavy materials that its mobility was almost dreadful.

When Ves looked at the machine that Sara Voiken had just fabricated, he saw that the flight system was not as large and powerful as it could have been. The lead designer opted to use a weaker flight system model because the mech could better utilize its capacity for other priorities.

As far as its defenses went, the Solid Project excelled in three forms of protection.

The most obvious one was its armor system. The Solid Project carried thick layers that were especially prominent in front. Its side and rear armor layers were less impressive, but they were still thick enough to fend off a fair amount of ranged attacks.

What was special about the Solid Project's armor system was that it was extremely well-designed. Sara Voiken was the defensive specialist that Ves valued more than the other three recently-joined Journeymen, and she did not disappoint in this aspect.

Not only did she design an armor scheme and layout that was flat out superior to anything that Ves or Gloriana could come up with, the armor system was also where Sara applied her design philosophy.

As a result, the Solid Project's resistance against kinetic attacks should be a lot higher!

Sara Voiken's specialty in physical negation not only allowed the defensive space knight to incur less damage when struck by solid weapons or projectiles, the mech also mitigated a part of the displacement force that typically tried to push it back.

While there were many implications to this useful effect, the most relevant one was that the enemy could not easily push the Solid Project out of position.

The Living Sentinels adopted defensive mech doctrines that did not call for a lot of movement. Their mechs merely had to stick to relative static coordinates and intercept whatever threats sought to destroy the vulnerable ships of the Larkinson fleet.

Sara's ability to weaken Newton's third law of motion was absolutely precious in the right circumstances.

Whether it was preventing attacking melee mechs from disrupting the battle line to further weakening the effective damage that physical projectiles dealt, any enemy that employed physical weapons of any sort would find the Solid Project mechs to be a lot more difficult to overcome!

"It's too bad your mech doesn't possess any enhanced defenses against heat and energy weapons." Ves remarked. "A lot of forces use energy weapons in space. They're much more effective at range and they don't require ships to reserve a lot of cargo space for ammunition."

Sara acknowledged his words. "My Solid Project still fares better against the vast majority of melee mechs. Even those that wield penetrating weapons will find it considerably more difficult to pierce through the armor of my space knights."

To be honest, the Solid Project's ability to resist energy attacks was not poor. The mech still possessed a lot of buffer on account of its thick armor and thick frame. Laser and positron weapons would need to fire repeatedly in order to burn through all of that matter!

Ves shifted his attention to the tower shield, which was the second defensive element of the Solid Project.

Tower shields were fairly simple in nature, but Sara Voiken refined it as best she could by adding additional elements. The shield contained extra components that stabilized and strengthened the mech's grip on it. The design of this equipment also contained a notch.

It was as if a large version of Lucky took a bite out of the side of the tower shield.

"I cooperated extensively with my brother Dulo to make sure his Rigid Spine mechs can seamlessly operate alongside my Solid Project mechs." Sara said as she saw that Ves was studying the notch. "The opening is situated at shoulder height to allow the spearman mechs to wield their weapons in an overhand grip. With the right handling, the Rigid Spines will be able to use the notch as a fulcrum to adjust the angle of attack. The notch is carefully designed to accommodate this usage."

"That will certainly be handy."

The result of all of this was that the Living Sentinels could form a simple two-layer line formation.

The Solid Projects in front could form a seamless wall with their thick and broad tower shields.

The Rigid Spines could hover close behind the space knights and attack at forward targets without exposing any excessive gaps in the defensive line.

Of course, this formation was a lot more effective on land than in space. The Living Sentinels needed to put a lot of thought on how to arrange its mechs in order to prevent enemy forces from trying to attack this rigid formation from above or below.

The capstone to the Solid Project's defensive capabilities was its shield generator.

A shield generator was an expensive piece of equipment, even for second-class mechs. It not only raised the cost of the Solid Project but also forced the design to accommodate a lot of energy cells. This came at the expense of additional armor or other useful modules.

It was worth it, though. What made the Solid Project's shield generator a bit special was that it could be projected just far enough to encompass a Rigid Spine mech that was positioned closely to the rear!

The Solid Project could therefore better shield the Rigid Spines against incidental and concentrated attacks!

What was even better was that Sara Voiken chose to integrate a shield generator that was more effective at blocking energy attacks than physical attacks. This provided the Solid Project with slightly better protection against the weapon type it was most vulnerable against.

With all of these superior defensive measures, the Solid Project outright blew the Bright Warrior out of the water when it came to withstanding attacks.

Naturally, the Solid Project was also significantly more expensive to fabricate, but the costs remained controllable.

After all, the Living Sentinels who would soon make use of the Solid Project were not elites. It was wasteful to provide them with more expensive machines when their mech pilots would incredibly find it more difficult to make the best use of their features.

For that reason, the Solid Project was designed to be simpler and easier to pilot than many of the other mechs utilized by the Larkinson Clan. Practically any mech pilot could make decent use of this defensive space knight!

Chapter 3665 No Space

"Have you come up with a final name for the Solid Project?" Ves asked.

Though Sara Voiken looked tired after expending much of her energy into making the first production copy of her new design, she already thought about this matter beforehand.

"Since I designed this mech to cooperate with my brother's Rigid Spine model, I wanted my mech to reflect this relation. I couldn't come up with anything better than Rigid Wall, though."

Ves scratched his head. "Rigid Wall sounds... simple. How many knight mechs have the word 'wall' in their name?"

"Too much." Sara mirthfully said. "I do think that calling it a wall is appropriate for this mech. It is designed to function as one, and it is particularly effective at its job when fielded in larger numbers."

He could easily imagine the sight. As long as more than a hundred Rigid Walls got together, they could block a lot of firepower or hinder the advance of an offensive unit.

Of course, space warfare made it far too easy for spaceborn mechs to maneuver around static mechs. The Rigid Walls therefore had to be employed and positioned in the right manner in order to leverage its defenses effectively.

That either meant that the mechs had to be positioned at choke points or parked extremely close to strategic mechs or starships.

The Rigid Walls should find a lot more use in landbound battles if the Larkinsons ever had a need to establish a presence on land. Ves didn't think those situations would happen too often, though.

As Sara Voiken admired the first mech design she completed on behalf of the Larkinson Clan, she could not get around the unique features that exemplified any Larkinson mech!

"What do you think about my contribution to your work?" Ves curiously asked.

"I would need to see it in action to be sure, but if I look at the results from testing the prototypes, you have definitely added extra dimensions to the Rigid Wall design."

"Indeed. The mech is alive, though that won't be as obvious at first. Our mech pilots will appreciate it, though. Those that have trained or fought with the Bright Warrior in its space knight configuration will be thankful for the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with a receptive mech."

"Its glow is also... different." Sara said. "When you added it to the design, I found that it has given me and its mech pilots all of the right feelings, but doesn't do much else. I thought that optimizing the mech design would make its advantages more apparent, but I haven't noticed much of a difference."

Ves turned to his fellow colleague. "What did you expect from its glow, then?"

"I thought it would give my Rigid Wall mechs a more concrete defensive boost by strengthening their shield generators for example." She responded. "Part of the inspiration for my Rigid Wall design is the Shield of Samar. The glow and living properties of that expert mech are much stronger and more potent. Venerable Jannzi personally explained to me how 'Qilanxo' can actively cooperate with her and her mech to form a stronger energy barrier."

"My design philosophy isn't that exaggerated, Sara. While it can do more with expert mechs, that is because they are built with special materials that react well to my methods such as Unending alloy. There is nothing special about the mech pilots or the construction of the Rigid Wall design, so there is no support for the more advanced applications of my design philosophy."

The female Journeyman looked disappointed. "Is there any way you can change that through a future update or modification?"

"Don't dream about it. That's not what my design philosophy is all about." He said. "I focus primarily on the relationship between the mech and the mech pilot. Glows are a tool that can help the mech pilot adopt the right mentality. As one of my older glow sources, Qilanxo has grown to be quite powerful, but even she would find it difficult to channel a significant portion of her prodigious strength through a standard mech like your Rigid Walls. The only way I can do more is to design a prime mech variant that is suited to be piloted by expert candidates and expert pilots that are still waiting to receive their expert mechs. I can't do that unless I get my hands on more prime materials."

"Prime resonance? Prime materials?"

Ah. Ves remembered that the second batch of Journeyman that joined the Larkinson Clan were still clueless about various secrets.

"They're not immediately relevant at this time. If you want to know more, you can look up the archival data on my prime mechs such as the Valkyrie Prime. We fought a couple of battles where they prominently showcased their capabilities. In truth, our expert mechs are also prime mechs if we go by their definitions. I usually leave the latter part out because hardly anyone notices."

It was also better if the enemy didn't pay attention to this detail either. The prime mech capabilities of his first six expert mechs made them considerably more powerful and effective in battle than anyone could reasonably expect!

Ves found it a pity that the soon-to-be-completed Minerva Project did not possess the qualifications of a prime mech.

He had run out of Unending alloy.

While he could shave off a few kilos from the Shield of Samar's tower shield to free up a bit of prime material, this was not an effective solution.

In order to turn the Minerva Project into a mech that was capable of utilizing prime resonance in battle, he would need to provide it with a lot more prime materials.

So far, Ves made no progress in this area. He already told his clan to be on the lookout for any Galenta Bone, an organic exotic grown by galenta whales, but there weren't any on the market in Vulit, Pellysa and Davute at the time.

If any human forces managed to stumble upon any wild galenta whales during this period, they either kept the spoils to themselves or sold them in more exclusive exchanges.

He placed his hand on Sara's shoulder. "If we can obtain a sufficient quantity of prime materials through exploration or trade, we may one day be able to develop a variant of your Rigid Wall model which possesses enhanced defenses. For now, you should be content with the ordinary benefits of my methods. Don't underestimate how well the Rigid Wall can reinforce the mental defenses of our mech pilots. This is a vital feature that can only firm up the morale of the Living Sentinel mech pilots, but also protect their minds against hostile mental influences."

This was not an important feature against ordinary opponents, but if the Larkinson Clan ever bumped into any dark gods or other strange opponents, the Rigid Wall would be a lot more useful than the Bright Warrior in this scenario!

Sara acknowledged his words. "The Rigid Wall's glow also compliments nicely with the glow of the Rigid Spine."

This was yet another form of synergy between the two mechs.

The spearman mech model was governed by the Solemn Guardian, whose glow provided just as much benefit to any nearby space knights. The mech pilots assigned to the Rigid Walls would become filled with a sense of duty and fight back harder against heavy opposition.

At the same time, Qilanxo was able to extend her mental protection to the Rigid Spines, allowing the spearman mech pilots to fight while enduring less pressure.

Ves already thought of a way to enhance this mental defense line. If he added a third mech model that carried Lufa's glow, then he could leverage its spiritual suppression capabilities to blunt any hostile spiritual attacks before they got close.

The Living Sentinels would truly be able to excel at defending against all manner of extraordinary threats!

Still, it might be better for him to reserve this capability for the Battle Criers. So far, the Living Sentinels were mainly designed to defend against mundane threats while the Battle Criers were supposed to become his weapon against spiritual threats.

He could think about that later.

"Let's test your new Rigid Wall."

The Living Sentinels enthusiastically tested their new defensive mech as soon as the expeditionary fleet dropped out of FTL travel.

The final version of the mech design had not changed all of that much compared to its prototypes, so everyone already knew what to expect.

The Rigid Wall model did not disappoint anyone's expectations. It did not exceed expectations either.

All in all, Sara Voiken's mostly-solo project was a relatively adequate if unexciting addition to the Larkinson Army.

When Ves, Sara Voiken, her brother Dulo Voiken as well Commander Casella Ingvar came together in order to discuss the disposition of the Rigid Wall model, the latter did not look all that happy.

When an expert pilot became unhappy, everyone around the person noticed. Their force of wills pretty much broadcasted their most predominant feelings.

"Why the look, commander?" Ves commented. "The Rigid Wall is a valuable addition to the Sentinel mech roster."

Casella frowned. "You are correct, but only if we can actually field it in large numbers. Just as with the Rigid Spine, it will likely take years before we add enough capacity to field at least several hundred copies of the new mechs. Do you know how frustrating it is to dangle two new useful mech models in front of my troops only to tell them that we don't have the space to accommodate any new units? Just this single Rigid Wall that you've been testing is not enough to make a difference."

Everyone else frowned as well. The Larkinson fleet was still horribly short of combat carriers. While the Diligent Ovenbird had already begun to produce cheap and fragile light carriers, they only added space for 20 or so mechs per hull, which was woefully inadequate!

"We can't do anything about it, commander." Ves tiredly replied. "All of our other mech legions are suffering from the same problem as well. Roping in Murphy & Sons should help, but we will only obtain a single oversized combat carrier for the foreseeable time."

"What if we preemptively scrap our oldest mechs whose performance have fallen below standards? During my tour through the mech legions, I've noticed dozens of machines that are still being used even though they have already had their best years behind them. We can replace them with newer mechs." Dulo suggested.

That was a good suggestion, but Ves shook his head.

"Unless the damage has reached a concerning threshold, it doesn't matter if the mechs perform a bit worse. Our standards are relatively high. When we crossed over into the Red Ocean, we made sure to scrap all of the excess mechs that were already performing worse than normal. Those that we kept don't have as many problems. All of our mech technicians are well-trained and properly supervised. I'm confident that they can keep our more worn mechs in a relatively good state for quite a few years. It's not worth it to scrap them right away."

In the end, Commander Casella Ingvar had no choice but to go back to her Living Sentinels and tell them that their mech legion would not employ the Rigid Walls in large numbers.

The same applied to the other mech designs that reached completion in around the same time.

Of course, this unfortunate outcome did not apply to the remaining two custom mechs that Gloriana designed for Commander Melkor and Imon Ingvar.

She completed and fabricated the two custom mechs at around the same time.

When Ves visited her personal workshop to view her latest work, the clients for the custom mechs were already present.

Both Melkor and Imon looked impressed at the mechs that were designed just for them. The rifleman mech and swordsman mech both possessed a lot of common elements that Ves had already observed from Vincent Ricklin's B-Man custom mech.

Chapter 3666 Two Custom Mechs

Different from standard mechs, custom mechs were all unique. They had to be in order to better fit the piloting styles of their intended users.

As someone who specialized in this aspect, Gloriana did an extremely good job in making her two mechs fit their users.

The Gold Beacon, formerly known as the Super Avatar Project, was Gloriana's attempt to create both a lesser and different version of the Minerva Project.

She took a lot of cues from the ongoing Minerva Project but also put her own personal spin on the command mech concept.

The mech immediately stood out for its gold coating and the prominent bust of the Golden Cat featured on its chest. Gloriana deliberately designed the custom mech to resemble an avatar of the Avatar of Myth's favorite design spirit.

The basic configuration of the Gold Beacon was roughly similar to the Minerva Project. Melkor's custom mech was primarily a command mech that possessed additional processors, analytic engines and other related modules that could help the Avatar Commander gain a better overview of what was happening on the battlefield.

Even if he was cut off from the command center aboard one of the capital ships of the Larkinson Clan, he could still do an adequate job of coordinating his troops and passing on orders by himself!

In order to make sure that the Gold Beacon could stay in contact with Avatar mechs even during the most challenging battle circumstances, the mech also incorporated a decent amount of premium communication modules.

The most distinctive of them was a powerful transceiver that was mounted on the rear of the Gold Beacon.

Two large telescoping antennas could poke all the way up until they extended up to twice the length of the custom mech!

This was the origin of its name. When its communication functions were working at full strength, the Gold Beacon essentially turned into a powerful semi-mobile communication node!

"How well do these oversized transceivers work?" Commander Melkor asked.

"They are much more reliable and able to push through jamming than any of our existing mechs." Gloriana proudly explained.

Though she was exhausted due to working so many days in a row, her passion could not be denied!

Naturally, Gloriana did not need to state that the Gold Beacon was still inferior to the Minerva Project in terms of communication capabilities. An expert mech would always be able to do the job better, not just because the design budget was a lot higher, but also because it obtained the support of an expert pilot.

Aside from this command focus, the performance of the Gold Beacon did not actually stand out too much.

If Melkor wanted to, he could truly pilot the Gold Beacon like a typical rifleman mech. The mobility of the command mech wasn't great due to all of its extra modules, but it was not horrible either.

The mech also boasted a superior armor system that Gloriana had specifically chosen to control the Gold Beacon's mass. While the command mech wasn't supposed to excel at defense, it could at least survive a decapitation strike if it was caught in the open.

Of course, it was always best to rely on other mechs to defend the Gold Beacon. Melkor's custom mech wasn't designed with an excessive amount of fault tolerance like Vincent Ricklin's new B-Man custom mech.

"How well can the Gold Beacon fight against hostile mechs when it doesn't have any backup to rely upon?" Imon Ingvar asked.

"Better than a Bright Warrior, but don't expect any miracles." Gloriana answered the expert candidate. "There is only so much I can do to make it battle worthy when it also has to command the Avatars of Myth. Some of the less important auxiliary modules are also relatively vulnerable due to their placements, so it is best not to duel any mechs if you can help it, Melkor."

The Avatar Commander nodded. "I understand, but we don't always get to choose our battles. I've been in enough battles to know that every additional fighting machine counts. If I want to command my Avatars from the rear, I would have chosen to retire from piloting mechs and command my troops from the Gorgoneion. The Gold Beacon is my way of always maintaining a close connection to my subordinates."

Although there were many theorists who questioned the wisdom of having the commanders of mech units fight alongside the troops, this was still the preferred standard in the mech community.

Melkor knew he wasn't a great legion commander. Compared to Casella Ingvar who continually reinvigorated the Living Sentinels, he was merely average in comparison.

Risking his life in battle and showing that he braved the same dangers and rigors of ordinary mech pilots was one of the best ways for him to maintain the respect of his men!

Ves still harbored a few concerns for his blood-related cousin, though.

Melkor was no longer young and his many responsibilities increasingly prevented him from practicing his piloting skills as much as before.

Though Casella was able to develop both of her command and combat skills without too much setbacks, that was because she had received systematic training for this due to her former noble background.

Aside from that, advancing to expert candidate and subsequently expert pilot earlier also helped a lot. The current Sentinel Commander had already left Melkor far behind.

Though Melkor was still an excellent mech pilot and a good commander by the standards of the old Bright Republic, the Larkinson Clan had advanced far past that point.

Ves already knew through the intelligence reports that he received that Melkor relied increasingly more on delegation to run his mech legion.

While it was normal for any leader to delegate work, it was clear that Melkor was increasingly doing so not because he was short on time, but because he could not perform his duties himself.

If he was unable to perform the job himself, how would he be able to understand all of the work being done by his subordinates? His control over the Avatars would inevitably deteriorate because of the increased distance between himself and the actual situation among the rank-and-file.

Piloting mechs was therefore one of the best but also the riskiest ways to compensate for this effect.

Was it the right choice, though?

A part of Ves even thought that it might be better to pressure Melkor into stepping back and letting a more talented and capable mech commander lead the Avatars of Myth.

That would probably crush Melkor, though. Leading the Avatars had turned into his life's work, and he had not yet transformed the mech legion into a form that was anywhere near the state he envisioned!

Ves eventually decided to withhold his concerns. Melkor had made his choices and perhaps the Gold Beacon might be able to resolve his long-standing problems.

He certainly did look happy with what Gloriana made for him. Different from the New Man Project, Ves had contributed a bit of his time to design a custom luminar crystal rifle for the custom mech.

It was nothing too fancy, but it still performed better than the more ordinary rifles utilized by other standard mechs.

"The Gold Beacon is optimized for large-scale group combat. It performs best when it fights alongside a large number of friendly mechs. Your mech is the opposite, Imon. Your Blade Chaser custom mech excels at duels."

The Blade Chaser used to be known as the Champion Project for a reason. Gloriana understood Imon's desire to defeat strong individual opponents and dedicated her time and attention to design a custom swordsman mech that excelled in duels.

Though she was no Ketis, Gloriana was still confident that she could Imon a swordsman mech that did not perform worse, just differently.

While the Blade Chaser was lacking in a lot of areas where Ketis could frankly do better due to her excellent knowledge of how swordsmen fought, Gloriana was much better when it came to optimizing and refining different mech systems.

The result was a custom mech that not only possessed excellent fundamentals, but also fit Imon's current piloting style in an excellent way.

Though it would have been better if both Gloriana and Ketis put an equal amount of effort into the Blade Chaser design, the schedule didn't allow for it. Ketis already had to invest most of her time in the two swordsman mech projects she was leading.

Besides, Gloriana could be very territorial when it came to her custom mech design projects. She only brought in Ketis to design the Blade Chaser's sharp and excellent twin one-handed swords and nothing more.

As the group of Larkinsons looked up at the blue-and-gold coated swordsman mech, they all noticed that it possessed a glow that had only recently received a minor resurgence in the Larkinson Clan.

"I still can't believe you really went for Bravo." Commander Melkor commented. "Is Vincent truly the example that you should strive for, Imon?"

Imon shrugged. "I've tried out all of the mechs with those other glows and none of them particularly speak to me. The B-Man's glow is the first one that I can truly get along with. I know that not everyone has a good opinion of Vincent and his mech, but there is more to it than being manly."

"Bravo also stands for victory and competitiveness." Ves agreed. "I think it is a fine pairing with your Blade Chaser mech."

As the brother to Commander Casella Ingvar, Imon not only felt left out, but also inferior to his much more accomplished sister.

Over time, this could turn into a real problem. This was also why Gloriana agreed to prioritize the design of a custom mech for Imon. He truly needed a change in order to regain his confidence in his own abilities.

The Blade Chaser did that by giving Imon a powerful dueling-oriented swordsman mech that could fight ferociously against many powerful mechs.

The mech was essentially designed to excel in one-on-one engagements. Its sharp twin swords along with its excellent mobility and maneuvering characteristics allowed a skilled expert candidate such as Imon to leverage clever movements to obtain a decisive advantage against other mechs piloted by expert candidates.

It would have been better if Juliet was able to contribute to the mobility of the Blade Chaser, but again Gloriana was confident that she could do no worse.

She had taken a decent amount of inspiration from Juliet's work on other design projects and provided the Blade Chaser design with a flight system that was highly suited for high-budget, high-quality machines.

In any case, even if her work fell short in a few areas, the expensive materials and sub-components would ensure that her custom mech would not perform too awfully in terms of mobility!

"With this mech, I hope to challenge myself." Imon said as he became increasingly more impatient to try his new custom mech. "It's not the Quint, but maybe that's for the best. The Blade Chaser is its own mech."

Once Melkor and Imon fully acquainted themselves with their new custom mechs, they both put their new machines to the test.

In this regard, neither mechs exhibited any surprises. Both worked smoothly with much less deviations than normal. Gloriana done a thorough job in designing the two mechs and eliminated as many unstable variables as possible.

Though that made the Gold Beacon and the Blade Chaser less exciting, they subsequently ranked high in stability and reliability.

If neither of their mech pilots broke through, then they would be able to rely on the current configurations of the two custom mechs for many years without any significant changes.

Of course, it would still be nice to upgrade them if the Larkinson Clan got its hands on new technology or managed to improve its overall design level.

Right now, Ves judged that the Gold Beacon's command systems and the Blade Chaser's flight system still had a lot of room for improvement.

If the Design Department could upgrade these parts, the two custom mechs could achieve a significantly higher impact on the battlefield!

"All in due time." Ves shook his head. "Their current strengths are enough to meet their needs."

Chapter 3667 Inviolable

Ves was quite content at this time. The Design Department already completed around half of the design projects of the current round. The other half were also close to completion.

The biggest regret he had was that his fleet did not possess enough materials and mech capacity to fabricate and accommodate thousands of new mechs.

The frustration grew so much that certain Larkinsons grew pretty desperate. They submitted proposals that expand the mech capacity of the Larkinson fleet in an emergency. They ranged from converting civilian vessels such as the Vivacious Wal and the Dragon's Den into temporary fleet carriers to installing external storage compartments on the hulls of every ship.

Though each of these ideas were viable, there were plenty of reasons to reject them. The non-combat vessels all excelled in different roles and added a lot of extra capabilities to the Larkinson Clan.

Ships such as the Discentibus could definitely be converted into a fleet carrier if Ves gave the word. However, the price was not worth it in the end. As an academy ship, the vessel did an excellent job training the next generation of Larkinson mech pilots.

From the periodic reports that Ves received, the abundant amount of support provided to the Larkinson Mech Academy combined with the excellent qualities of the Chiron model had elevated the skills of the older mech cadets to an impressive level!

Once the first proper batch of mech cadets graduated into full mech pilots, they could probably blow the more average mech pilots in the Larkinson Army straight out of the water!

"If only I had enough ships to accommodate the extra mechs!"

After welcoming a couple of new mass production mech models and anticipating the completion of several more, Ves increasingly felt this situation was unsustainable.

There were no easy ways to break this bottleneck. Options such as allowing the Larkinson Army to suffer major losses or magically getting his hands on additional carrier vessels were simply not desirable or attainable.

The other leaders in the Larkinson Clan experienced this frustration as well. The Larkinson Army had over 20,000 mech pilots among its ranks but less than half of them were able to deploy at any time.

The mech legions did its best to maintain everyone's readiness by rotating the pilots of different mechs. This was a pretty normal solution in many other mech forces with an excess amount of pilots, but it was not ideal in this case.

Living mechs were supposed to attune themselves to single mech pilots. As the machines grew older, they complimented their designated pilots a lot better. This could easily improve the effective performance of long-standing pairs by 10, 20 or even 30 percent!

Ves had already studied the mechs that were frequently being shared by two or three different mech pilots. While the machines in question still grew over time, they did not develop the same degree of fit and individualization that he saw in mechs such as the Shield of Samar.

Though he was still certain that these living mechs would still be able to contribute more in battle, Ves ultimately figured that their potential were being squandered if they had to keep catering to several different pilots.

As someone who dedicated his life to improving the synergy between mech and mech pilot, how could he tolerate all of these half-baked relationships?

The Larkinson Clan needed to make more substantial changes in order to do its mechs and mech pilots justice.

It was for this reason that he scheduled a meeting with General Verle.

Before the meeting commenced, he was looking after his daughter, who sat on his lap while hugging a mech plushy.

"Guuuaaaa... buuuuubuuu..." The baby babbled as she chewed on the soft head of her toy.

"Come on. You're smarter and brighter than most girls your age. You can do it, Aurelia. Just say papa. Pa. Pa. Paaaaapa."

Aurelia innocently looked up at her father's eyes and blinked.

"Wuuuoww..."

Ves wanted to palm his face.

"Miaow."

Clixie, who was lounging at the side, looked embarrassed as well!

"Blinky, can you go out and lend a hand?"

Mrow.

His companion spirit made an appearance, which immediately made Aurelia more excited!

"Wwaaaaaaa! Hihihih!"

Mana quickly emerged from Aurelia's head and flew over to Blinky in order to cuddle and play with the larger spiritual cat.

Miew!... Miew!...

Mrow~

Blinky licked Mana's intangible white fur, but did not forget about the job he was supposed to do. The cat concentrated for a moment before extending a spiritual connection to Aurelia.

However, just as the bond reached Aurelia's mind, it bounced away.

Mrow?

The cat pumped extra power in the spiritual bond before driving it forward with greater strength, only to behave as if it collided against the hull of a CFA battleship!

"That's odd!"

"Wuuuuuuuu...?" Aurelia grew more curious as Blinky failed to penetrate her mind.

Ves frowned. He never expected this to happen. He had studied Aurelia's mind once before, but these were relatively harmless sweeps that did not do anything.

The last time he truly did something to Aurelia was feeding her bits of spiritual energy in order to nurture her own spiritual development.

Though Ves was able to peer into his daughter's spirituality without much issue, it was a different story when he tried to extend a more substantial influence in her mind.

Her external defenses didn't seem impressive, but whenever Ves tried to get in, her skin, flesh and skull prevented him from gaining any purchase!

"What the hell?!"

This was abnormal! Even though Aurelia acted as if Ves had caressed her head with his hand, he originally intended to do much more!

In the next few minutes, he repeatedly tried to intrude into her mind. Though his daughter was much stronger on a spiritual level than any average human, she should not be strong enough to repel his invasion.

Yet not only did she do so with ease, she also thought Ves was tickling her at the moment!

"Hihihihhi! Hihihihhi!"

Aurelia cutely squirmed her body as she continued to gaze at Ves with pure adoration. She looked up at him with so much love that he couldn't bring himself to persist any further.

If he continued with his actions, he was liable to hurt his daughter, and that was absolutely taboo as far as he was concerned!

"Is this why your mother hasn't been able to get you to say mama?" He questioned.

"Waaaa....wuuuuu..."

Both he and his wife were competing on Aurelia's first word. Given Gloriana's compulsion to be the best, she was working hard to encourage their daughter to say 'mama' before 'papa'.

He didn't put it past his wife to employ Alexandria's design network to teach Aurelia how to say mama more directly.

In fact, that was exactly why he attempted to connect to Aurelia's spirit as well. He was afraid that Gloriana had already started her dastardly plan. If he didn't keep up, how could he still have a chance in this contest?

Apparently, his fears turned out to be overblown. As Ves lifted up his daughter and used his spiritual senses to examine her entire body, he discovered something amazing.

Her entire body had become inviolable.

Passive observation worked fine, but as soon as he tried to intrude into any point of her body, her smooth baby skin turned into an impenetrable shield!

"This... is actually amazing."

It took a lot of probing and theorizing for him to gain an answer on why his daughter became so good at defending against spiritual intrusions.

"It's my mother!"

He recalled the instance where the Superior Mother descended and channeled a portion of her prodigious strength in her 'granddaughter'. Ves had always wondered what Cynthia's incarnation had actually done, and now he finally learned what she truly had in mind.

Aurelia's flesh and blood had become infused with so much spiritual energy that they had become a lot more extraordinary than normal. Ves had never seen this in any other human and had long grown both hopeful and concerned about these unfamiliar changes.

Now, he knew. The Superior Mother somehow blessed Aurelia in a way that made the baby girl strong in a special way.

"You're quite amazing, you know that?"

"Hihihih!"

In fact, during his probing, Ves discovered an additional defensive measure. When he probed her head instead of any other part of her body, he found that his spiritual projections weakened by a considerable margin.

The reason why this happened was not due to Aurelia's spiritually-enhanced flesh, but her remarkably strong spirituality!

"Miew...! Miew...!"

To be more precise, it was a product of one of the seed abilities that he had bestowed on her companion spirit.

Ves picked up Mana and studied the intangible Persian kitty. Compared to before, he found the cat to be even more innocent and pure than usual.

"You... you activated one of your seed abilities already?!"

"Miew!..."

Mana innocently mewled while she wagged her short tail back and forth.

When Ves originally designed a companion spirit for Aurelia, he had to take her extremely weak mind and spirit into account. Back then, she was still a fetus inside Gloriana's belly, so how could she possibly accommodate a companion spirit as powerful as Blinky?

Ves therefore created a highly-reduced companion spirit that was supposed to rely on growth to get up to strength.

In order to ensure that the companion spirit gave Aurelia plenty of choice on how to develop herself in the future, Ves did not bestow it with a single strong spiritual ability like he did with other companion spirits.

Instead, he inserted six different ability seeds into Mana so that any of them could activate and grow according to Aurelia's needs and desires.

According to his original expectations, the seeds should quietly accumulate strength and germinate a few years later.

They weren't supposed to activate when Aurelia wasn't even able to speak a coherent word yet! This growth rate was way too fast!

"And how come you activated your purification ability seed at this time?"

The six ability seeds that Ves had inserted into Mana were derived from the spiritual fragments of different sources.

Life, which corresponded to the heart, came from Ves himself.

Family, which corresponded to the tail, came from the Golden Cat.

Purification, which corresponded to the brain, came from Lufa.

Protection, which corresponded to the front paws, came from Qilanxo.

Light, which corresponded to the eyes, came from the Illustrious One.

Duty, which corresponded to the abdomen, came from the Solemn Guardian.

Ves had high hopes for Mana for this reason. She was a completely new sort of companion spirit from Sharpie, Blinky, Respa, Alexandria and so on. Aurelia was the first human to have a broader choice in how to develop her other self.

He expected her to grow up into an energetic little girl who came up with big dreams about her future.

He expected his daughter to come to him so that she could receive his guidance on what kind of career path she should try to pursue.

He expected her to make up her mind and consciously work together with Mana to stimulate one of the six ability seeds that aligned best with her future ambitions.

Instead of all of that happening, Aurelia activated one prematurely.

Though there was no rule that stated that Mana could only ever unlock the potential of one ability seed, the first one was undoubtedly the most important one that would define how Aurelia lived her life!

"How did this happen?"

There could only be one viable explanation. Someone tried to intrude in her mind. Aurelia or Mana sensed this was wrong and tried to evoke whatever means they had to defend against it.

This inadvertently caused Mana to activate her Purification seed ability so that she could provide Aurelia with an added insurance against spiritual or mental intrusions!

A part of Ves was quite happy to see this. If Aurelia retained the protection of her inviolable body and purified mind, it would be impossible for her to get brainwashed or indoctrinated!

Powerful spiritual entities wouldn't be able to mess with her either!

That didn't mean he was okay with this, though. He could only think of one culprit who might be responsible.

"Gloriana!"

"Miaow?!" Clixie grew alarmed.

"I need to have a good talk with my wife!"

Chapter 3668 Special Child

"I told you a hundred times, I did not tamper with our daughter!"

Gloriana grew irate as Ves threw a false accusation at her. She completely lost her mood to continue her work on optimizing the Minerva Project's nearly-complete design.

"Then how the hell did Mana feel the need to activate a mental protection ability in advance?! What did Alexandria do to our girl when you tried to pull her into your design network?!"

"I did nothing! I love her as much as you do, if not more! She's too young and fragile to bear my thoughts. I would never take as many risks as you and try to overwhelm her with so many complicated thoughts and emotions. She deserves to enjoy her childhood!"

Aurelia sat on the floor of the design room and looked up at her parents who were arguing once again. Drool trickled down the corner of her mouth as she remained completely unaffected by the heated words exchanged by her mother and father.

"Guuuu..."

"Miaow miaow~"

Clixie nudged the little girl with her head. There were better things to do than watch Ves and Gloriana bicker like an old married couple.

"Waaaaa..."

Soon enough, Aurelia began to crawl after Clixie in an attempt to grab her tail!

Several minutes later, the couple fell silent after Gloriana took the initiative to form a design network with Ves.

It was pretty much impossible for her to lie when Ves obtained a direct connection to her mind, so when she said that she did not mess with their daughter's mind, he believed her this time.

"Okay." Ves sighed. "I was wrong. I shouldn't have come up to you and accused you like this. You did nothing wrong."

Maow!...

Alexandria hissed at Ves. The intangible red cat was offended by his mistrust. The Queen Cat shut down her spiritual network and floated over to Aurelia in order to keep an eye on the energetic baby.

Gloriana voiced her own theory. "I think the answer to what has happened is not that complicated. Think about all of the places where we brought our daughter. How many times did we bring her close to our mechs? She must have experienced the glows of every living mech in our fleet!"

Ves froze when he heard her words. "This..."

"The glows of ordinary mechs like the Bright Warriors and the Valkyrie Redeemers are already fairly noticeable. Then there are the more powerful glows of mechs like the Quint, the Shield of Samar and our other expert mechs. Do you really think that bathing our daughter in all of these influences will not produce a reaction?"

He recalled all of the times that he and his wife brought Aurelia close to all of those mechs. Though he didn't keep count, it must have happened at least a couple of hundred times!

Ever since she was born, Ves and Gloriana made sure that their baby was always with one of them at all times. They did not feel reassured with entrusting their only child to a nanny. Only by keeping her close would they feel at ease with the health and safety of their little girl.

Since Ves and Gloriana were both mech designers and leaders in their own right, they frequently got close to various mechs whenever they passed by the hangar bays or workshops.

Ves soon began to frown. "There's one problem with your theory. The glows of all of our mechs are benign. While they might influence our daughter in certain ways, they are all harmless towards our fellow Larkinsons. Other children have come close to our mechs as well and nothing bad has happened to them. It is rather strange that Aurelia has made a response that is akin to an allergic reaction towards something as harmless as glows."

"Then what else can explain what has happened to our daughter?" Gloriana frowned. "Look, it's fine now. I don't see this as a demerit. Just look at how happy and healthy she is. As far as I'm concerned, I feel much more reassured that no god or deity can tamper with her mind and body anymore. She has developed her own divinity and is growing up to be more than a simple human!"

She had a point. Each of the six seed abilities that Ves had implanted in Mana were supposed to be useful. No matter which one Aurelia woke up first, she would undoubtedly become stronger than before.

"I'm not disagreeing with you, but I am still concerned it happened at a point where Aurelia isn't able to think about her future yet. She's too young and already Mana's first evolution is already exerting a profound influence on her future development."

"I do not think it is as bad as you say." Gloriana said. "Our daughter is safer than ever and her ability doesn't even narrow her options that much. In fact, if she wants to become the next leader of the Larkinson Clan, then having a pure and inviolable mind is a great advantage! She won't be unduly affected by anyone and can hold her ground against both expert pilots and proto-gods. In addition, since this enhancement is centered around her brain, I think this will be a lot of help towards her mental development. She will grow smarter and wiser than any girl of her age! Maybe she can even become as smart as the Polymath!"

Ves couldn't stand it any longer. Gloriana's expectations for Aurelia were becoming way too exaggerated! Did she even know what she was talking about by equating her own daughter to the smartest mech designer in human space!?

"Okay, stop, I get it. Let's rethink how we raise our daughter and make sure she doesn't get stimulated by any excessive external influences."

"Hm? Why?"

"Because I don't want her growth to be distorted any further!"

Gloriana directed a familiar look at Ves. She adopted the expression that she always used when she thought that Ves was being an idiot.

"I think we should do the opposite."

"What?!"

"I told you that I don't see this development as a disaster. Instead, it's an opportunity! The more we expose her to different glows, the more we exercise her mental defenses. The greater her mental defenses, the more she is able withstand strong pressure! Attacks will bounce off her mind and she will laugh in the face of hostile gods! This is a great way for our daughter to remain safe in the future!"

Gloriana was right. Ves might be making a fuss about nothing. No matter how Aurelia's companion spirit developed, Mana was always supposed to be her constant companion, assistant and protector.

It did not sound like a bad idea to have her excel in keeping her mind pure.

As long as Aurelia and Mana grew more powerful in the future, they could develop the original ability seed into a much more expansive set of abilities.

Ves only needed to look at his Four Aspects of Lufa to recall how versatile the concept of purification could be. His daughter could become an absolutely remarkable woman once she fully developed her companion spirit's main strength!

Eventually, they decided not to change the way they raised their daughter. In a way, her growth process was actually quite natural. Shielding her from the Larkinson Clan's current environment would be a disservice to her because they would only be skewing her future growth as a result.

There was no good reason for Ves and the Gloriana to do so when Aurelia's current growth path was clearly the most appropriate one for her at this time.

As Ves and Gloriana finally reconciled their differences, Aurelia hardly took any notice of this. She had crawled to the corner of the design room and finally managed to catch Clixie after a vigorous chase!

"Miaow~!"

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat rolled onto her belly and allowed the baby to savor in her victory.

"Guuuwaabuuguuu..."

Clixie's shiny golden necklace soon caught Aurelia's attention again. The gem set in the center of the ornate collar especially attracted the little girl!

The baby climbed over and patted the surface of the necklace with her tiny hands.

Of course, before Aurelia could try to chew on the gem, Clixie gently kept the eager little girl at bay with her paws.

At this time, the lustrous gem glinted a bit brighter before an invisible energy surge emerged out of it. The subtle wave of energy sought to enter into Aurelia's mind, only to get rebuffed by her defenses!

Miew!...

As the apparently hostile energy wave stagnated, a cute white kitten appeared from Aurelia's mind. Mana quickly flew forward and sucked in the loose energy with a practiced motion!

Unfortunately, the immature spiritual cat couldn't digest the energy. The most she could do was purify it, but aside from that she did not possess the digestion organs that Blinky had inherited from the Unending One.

After the swallowed spiritual energy circulated inside Mana for a while, the bloated companion spirit subsequently vomited it towards the nearest friendly cat, who happened to be Clixie!

Instead of returning to its original sender, the purified energy instead entered Clixie's body without her notice or awareness. Her body briefly grew brighter for an instant, but nothing else happened.

"Miaow~"

At this time, Clixie's only concern was acting as a pillow for Aurelia. The baby had grown tired after the chase and dozed off into peaceful slumber.

Pure love and devotion welled up in Clixie's eyes as the cat developed an even stronger bond with Aurelia. Her fluffy tail flipped from side to side as she began to purr like a motor.

As for Ves, once his concerns for his daughter subsided, he returned to his original schedule. After leaving Aurelia behind in the care of his wife, he returned to his office where he accepted General Verle's call.

The middle-aged mech officer's projection soon arrived and saluted the patriarch.

"What did you call me for, sir?"

"I want to bounce an idea off you." Ves said. "I already told you that I'm concerned about the continued lack of space for enough mechs in our fleet."

Verle did not look surprised. "You are not the only one who is concerned about that problem. We are grappling with it daily. There are too few advantages to our current state. Between mechs and mech pilots, the former will always always have a higher casualty rate than the latter. It makes more sense to carry a surplus of mechs so that we always have spare machines on hand when ejected mech pilots quickly need to get back into the fight."

The situation the Larkinson Clan had landed in was highly unusual. If not for shedding most of their ships while letting go of none of their personnel, an odd situation like this would have never happened.

"I've been thinking on how to handle this problem in the medium term." Ves said. "In the short term, I doubt we'll suffer too many problems, but if this goes on for a few years, I'm afraid our mech pilots will grow frustrated. Not only that, we won't be able to employ all of the new mech models that we are finishing in the coming weeks."

"We all understand that, sir. The fundamental issue that is responsible for this is our lack of mech capacity. Unless we can find additional carriers, this state will continue to persist with little change over time."

"We don't have to look at ships."

"Pardon?"

Ves smiled at Verle's projection. "There are more spaces where we can park additional mechs. Planets have lots of room, for example. It's a lot cheaper and easier to build extra mech hangers on land. Space stations are also a viable alternative if we want to keep our mech units away from any planetary environments."

"This..."

General Verle looked shocked. Ever since Ves came up with his grand expedition, he always insisted that the clan should keep everything together in a single fleet.

This was why the Larkinsons never thought about founding a colony like so many other pioneers!

Had Ves suddenly changed his mind? Was he ready to plant his flag on one of the many unclaimed star systems in the Krakatoa Middle Zone?

Chapter 3669 A New Hall

"It's not what you think, general. I'm not starting a new colony."

"Oh. I thought..."

"I still mean it when I say that I don't want our clan to become anchored to a fixed location." Ves said. "Our main strength must always remain with the fleet in order to protect our core. What I am actually suggesting is giving our excess mech pilots something better to do by sending them out to different locations so that they can contribute to our clan in a more meaningful way. This can range from guarding a temporary mining operation to accepting low-risk guard missions from various parties."

General Verle quickly understood what Ves was trying to accomplish.

"As long as we have the means to produce enough mechs, this is an excellent way to relieve the pressure in the Larkinson Army! If we only send out our excess mech pilots on deployment, the maximum combat strength of our fleet will not be adversely affected. The only real disadvantage that we will incur is weakening our ability to bounce back after a heavy battle. It will become harder for us to replenish any lost mech pilots if we no longer have any reserves on hand."

This was a major downside that could severely affect the Larkinson Clan's chances of survival if it was ever forced to fight successive battles.

With the Spirit of Bentheim, it was relatively easy for the clan to replenish its lost mechs, especially if the Larkinsons were able to salvage their broken mechs from the battlefield.

It was a lot more difficult to replace any lost mech pilots, though. The Larkinson Mech Academy was far from operating at full capacity, so it would take a considerable time to reinforce the various mech legions with thousands of new recruits.

"We don't have to send away all of our spare mech pilots at once." Ves stated. "If we retain a level of around 20 percent or something, we will have sufficient depth should we ever enter a situation where we need to dip into our reserves. We can always recall any nearby Larkinson mech pilots on deployment if we need to replenish our losses more urgently."

Although all of this sounded viable, there were many different issues concerning this comprehensive change in strategy.

While General Verle obviously supported this change, he knew that it was not without its risks.

"The Red Ocean is dangerous. Though there are voices that have always opposed your plan to keep us all together, I can't deny that it has always kept us all safe. Are you truly willing to allow our clansmen on deployment to brave the dangers of the new frontier without the protection of our main fleet?"

"This is why we need to plan out this arrangement carefully." Ves replied. "For example, we should never allow our units to travel to different destinations by themselves. Their carrier vessels will just become easy prey to pioneers that eagerly want to get their hands on additional starships. We can either have them travel in larger convoys or merely drop them off at their destination directly from the main fleet."

"What of the risks to our smaller expeditionary forces, sir? Are you willing to allow them to brave dangers without the support of our expert mechs and our main forces?"

"That is why we need to think about their deployments carefully. The most obvious option is to build a base somewhere in a relatively safe port system like Davute and have them guard a manufacturing plant or something."

"That... is a decent option." General Verle said. "Guard duty will not provide much enrichment to our troops, though. The sort of mech pilots that we have recruited and trained are generally more ambitious and eager for battle than normal. Security duty is one of the most boring assignments a mech pilot can undertake. Guarding a relatively safe facility where the chances of getting attacked are low will definitely lead to an even greater degree of frustration than if we kept the mech pilots in our main fleet."

Ves sighed. The general was right. The Larkinson Clan's recruitment policies had brought in a lot of mech pilots that were quite suitable for his current strategy.

He just never envisioned the need to offload his spare mech pilots by sending them out on different assignments. Their inherent personalities, the way they were raised along

with how the Larkinson martial culture emphasized proactivity meant that these Larkinson mech pilots needed to perform meaningful duties in order to feel fulfilled.

After all, ordinary mech pilots usually entered into active service for a number of decades. After that, the onset of age and accumulated injuries usually made it unviable for them to continue piloting mechs. Most of them had little choice but to give up the profession that they dedicated their lives to and retire.

All of this meant that mech pilots only had a limited window of time to make their legacies. They were unlike mech designers who were usually able to practice their profession until old age if they were accomplished enough.

There were a lot of mech pilots who did not wish to enter into different battlefields. To them, it was more than enough to guard facilities all day.

However, those kinds of risk-averse mech pilots were in short supply in the Larkinson Clan!

Even the Living Sentinels, who were the least enthusiastic about performing risky missions, wanted to fulfill more meaningful jobs in their lives.

"There should be numerous suitable assignments that our mech pilots can do in more exciting circumstances." Ves said. "One of the more obvious examples is helping pioneering organizations protect their initial colony settlements. The earliest periods of building a colony are always the most precarious ones. There are no base defenses and few resources and facilities on hand to defend it against attacks. This is where mercenaries come in. It is usually worth it to employ a mercenary outfit that can add hundreds if not thousands of additional mechs to the defense force."

General Verle frowned. "That is indeed true, but the mercenaries must choose their clients carefully. Some are more reckless than others and attract greater enemies. If the colony is ever attacked by an overwhelming threat, our lack of carrier vessels will mean that most of the mechs we have stationed at the colony will have to be abandoned. At most, our personnel will be able to evacuate on a lone passenger ship, but without any substantial mech escorts, the vessel will be extremely vulnerable to raids."

The leader of Larkinson Army raised these points not because he objected to Ves' plan, but because he wanted to make sure that the patriarch knew what he was getting into. From the moment the clan split up its troops, everyone had to take into account that not all of the outgoing clansmen would be returning home alive.

Ves frowned and thought about it. "It can't be helped. The most we can do is to select our assignments carefully. We should only accept missions from reputable parties. I'm sure the Mercenary Association has already set up branches in the Red Ocean. We can also accept missions from the MTA colonization board. Aside from that, we need to

make sure that this is a voluntary choice. No one should be forced to go on an assignment that might subject them to dangers for months if not years."

This was a decent enough arrangement. General Verle relaxed.

"Those are good ideas, sir. If we want to ensure that there will be enough volunteers, we can promise additional rewards to them. If we do this right, we will not only be able to expand our presence in the new frontier, but also provide our mech pilots with more experiences. Right now, many of our pilots have little to no experience of fighting in a planetary environment."

The two discussed and fleshed out the tentative plan further. This was a major initiative, so it could not be implemented in a day. Ves merely wanted to convey a outline to Verle so that he could flesh it out and turn it into a reality with the help of his own staff.

General Verle's projection eventually stood up. "We need to make a lot of changes in order to get this 'Expedition Hall' up and running. We also need to produce all of the mechs that are meant to go on these smaller expedition missions. None of that can be accomplished in the short term. It will take at least half a year to get this operation off the ground."

"I understand. I am not in a hurry, general. Just work out the plan and make all of the necessary preparations. In a year or two, I want our Expedition Hall to give thousands of idle mech pilots something better to do. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Ves dreamed of erecting an Expedition Hall that would manage and facilitate all outgoing missions. It would operate similar to a mercenary bureau where bored clansmen could look for excitement outside of the expeditionary fleet by accepting exotic new assignments.

Of course, the concept of this Expedition Hall made a lot more sense when the Larkinson Clan had grown larger and more expansive. Right now, it sounded a bit too extravagant, but Ves still found it worthwhile to start it up early.

As Ves thought about how the introduction of the Expeditionary Hall would change the Larkinson Clan, an alert suddenly interrupted his thoughts.

General Verle's projection quickly reappeared again. This time, he looked a lot more serious!

"What's the matter?" Ves questioned as he grew vigilant.

An alarm didn't activate without a good reason. Each one inevitably heralded a threat or an unforeseen situation.

"Our long-ranged sensors have just detected that numerous alien warships have entered this star system!"

"What!?" Ves almost jumped out of his seat! "How strong is this alien fleet?!"

"We are still determining that. The alien fleet is several light-hours away from our position, so it is difficult to obtain too many details in the first minutes. For now, we can say for certain that the ships are alien in nature. No human ship conforms to what we have detected on our long-ranged scanners. We can also rule out the possibility that they belong to the major alien races such as the nunsers and the puelmers. Given the initial energy emissions and other preliminary readings that we have made, it is highly likely that the unknown alien fleet hails from one of many minor alien races that are based in this approximate region."

Ves relaxed for a bit. The major alien races that had dominated the Red Ocean for so long were all the equivalent of first-raters at their best.

The minor races were much less fearsome in comparison. The Big Two already encountered thousands of them and there were undoubtedly many more that humanity had yet to encounter.

Even then, the overall strength levels of these minor races was incredibly diverse. Ves did not know whether the arriving alien fleet was stronger or weaker than his own fleet.

Ves grew uncertain. "What do you recommend?"

"We should raise our alert level and deploy extra patrols." The general immediately said. "Usually, the appearance of a hostile fleet that is several light-hours away should not pose an immediate threat to us, but alien superluminal travel technology works by different principles."

"Damn! Alien warp drives aren't constrained by gravity!" Ves realized. "They can close the distance to us even if they have to travel through the inner system. These alien ships may be warping to us while we are looking at outdated sensor readings!"

The expeditionary fleet quickly entered into a more active battle stance. A multitude of mechs poured out of the carriers while other workers prepared the various vessels for battle.

Even though the chance of getting attacked in the next few minutes was extremely low, the Golden Skull Alliance still had to put up its guard!

Chapter 3670 Expense of Procreation

"So this is what it's like to get married." Joshua commented.

"Mmmhmmm."

Ever since Joshua and Ketis bound their lives to each other, they tried to spend more time with each other.

It wasn't easy to make time for each other due to their heavy responsibilities, but the clan was quite accommodating towards its top figures.

At this stage, the Larkinson Clan was only a few years old. Its structure was still flexible and there weren't too many protocols.

As long as Ketis worked hard and made sure to stay on schedule, it did not matter that much if she left her shift an hour early.

She and her newly-wedded husband had decided to take a break in the forward observation chamber on the first deck of the Spirit of Bentheim.

The expansive garden and observatory compartment had not changed much since it initially came into existence. Over the years, the caretakers planted new trees and plants and also introduced a few new interesting species.

However, the place remained a favorite gathering spot for pets of all kinds.

Cat meows could be heard from every direction as hundreds of cats gathered into different cliques.

Whenever their human companions left their cabins in order to go to school or perform their work duties, the cats did not stay behind and stare at bulkheads all day.

They roamed the ship and regularly gathered in places like these.

The other animals weren't left behind either. Dogs ran around while chasing each other's tails and birds soared through the air before landing on various tree branches.

The presence of all of these pets caused the forward observation chamber to become a favored paradise for busy officers looking to enjoy a moment of peace.

As Ketis and Joshua cuddled against each other against a tree trunk, they quietly gazed at the animals enjoying their moments.

A few pets even took the initiative to approach the couple. A pair of black-furred cats who were obviously related to each other jumped on Joshua's lap and began to purr.

The expert pilot cracked a smile and gently stroked the felines by the ears.

"Mawaow..."

"Prr...."

Ketis watched on with evident mirth on her expression.

"I think we should get a pet." She stated.

Joshua frowned. "Are you sure? We talked about this. Both of us are so busy most of the time that we don't have much time to spare for any pets."

"I can bring my pet to work. Ves and Gloriana bring along Lucky and Clixie all the time. Why shouldn't we be able to do the same?"

"Hmmm..."

"Besides, I think it would be nice if our children can grow up alongside a pet. Just look at how Aurelia and Clixie have become so close to each other. I want our child to develop a similar bond with a pet."

Venerable Joshua became a lot more receptive to the idea after that. He also began to entertain unusual thoughts when his wife mentioned the issue of children.

He placed his hand on her athletic, muscled stomach.

"About our first child..."

"I want to have one soon." Ketis said. "I don't want to wait too long. I don't like Gloriana, but whenever I see her glowing when she is carrying her daughter, I feel like I'm missing out. If not now, then when?"

"Our clan is currently in a rather precarious state, dear."

"That hasn't stopped Ves and Gloriana from proceeding with raising their first child. I heard that they are already thinking about conceiving their second child. If we conceive ours at the same time, the two can grow up alongside each other. Doesn't that sound great?"

Though Joshua initially felt overrun after Ketis brought up such an important topic without warning, he quickly adjusted his mentality.

One of the reasons why he married Ketis was to advance their relationship to the next stage. Having children was definitely in his plans.

He just had to accept that Ketis would be bearing and raising their first child when the expeditionary fleet was heading into dangerous territory.

Though Joshua wasn't privy to all of the detailed plans of the patriarch, he knew that the Larkinson Clan would be spending a lot of time in true frontier space.

They could come across any possible threat while exploring the Red Ocean. The thought of their son or daughter becoming a victim of an incident made Joshua incredibly concerned about this course of action.

However, Joshua also became more determined than ever to do his best to defend the clan!

Out of every Larkinson, he was one of the expert pilots of the clan. That meant something here. With the support of the Everchanger, he possessed an unprecedented degree of agency on the battlefield.

If any hostile human or alien fleet threatened to harm even a single hair of his child with Ketis, he would definitely squeeze the limits of his potential to prevent that from happening!

His protective impulse caused his force of will to quicken. His desire to protect his wife and children had grown so strong that it had honed his willpower to a new height!

Joshua wasn't the only protector of their family, though.

A sharp burst of will pressed against his own. Ketis' attitude grew sharp as she grasped her sheathed greatsword.

She pulled out Bloodsinger from its scabbard just enough to expose its hungry blade.

"My sword hasn't tasted for many months. I don't mind staining it with alien blood if any get past your guard. This future mother isn't a harmless little damsel!"

Since that day, the two held a few more talks before they settled on their choice.

Natural conception was out of the question since Ketis underwent way too many gene treatments. She was in a similar state to Ves in that regard.

The couple made an appointment with Director Ranya Wodin and shuttled over the Dragon's Den at the first possible opportunity.

The head of the Larkinson Biotech Institute received the golden couple of the Larkinson Clan with a smile.

"I was wondering when the two of you would visit my ship. We've welcomed many couples as of late. It was only a matter of time before you got your turn. Please, take a seat."

Once the guests made themselves comfortable, the green-haired woman activated a projection and called up a few files.

"Let me begin by stating that it will take a lot of effort to design a baby that can safely grow inside your body, Ketis." The biotech expert and director stated. "The augmentations that you have received in the past are not only extensive, but also extreme. What's worse is that they're mostly geared towards increasing your physical strength and combat capabilities. Your blood and tissue has substances that can seriously threaten the health of a fetus."

Both Joshua and Ketis grew concerned.

"Does that mean we have to resort to an artificial womb?"

"It's the most convenient choice." Ranya admitted. "Artificial womb technology is highly mature. The chances of complications are minimal because the gestation environment is completely controlled. The Lifer geneticists and other specialists under our command are highly proficient in operating them, and we recently purchased a batch of modern heartland-grade models. If you want to bring a child into this reality in the safest possible circumstances, an artificial womb is the best choice."

Neither Joshua nor Ketis were enthused about the idea.

Joshua found the idea of raising their child in a glorified test tube was too clinical and impersonal. It did not conform to his own values and he felt he would do his child a disservice if he agreed with this plan.

His wife also wasn't enthused about the idea.

"That's not an option unless we truly have no other choice. There is something special about bearing a child yourself. I've seen it from Gloriana." She stated. "Ranya, is there a viable way I can still undergo pregnancy?"

The doctor responded with a reassuring smile. "There is always a solution. It's just going to cost you. We have an existing relationship with Witshaw & Yeneca on account of being one of the famed genetics company's customers. When I transferred your genetic and other physiological data to its biotech experts, they told me that it is possible for them to solve your problems as long as they put effort into developing a new designer baby. You will have to pay a hefty amount of money to get that level of service from this company, though."

Joshua had never cared about money since he entered the clan. Everyone else made arrangements on his behalf.

Ketis handled money more often due to her work, but she too did not pay too much attention to it despite receiving a share of revenue of the LMC.

"How much money do we have to spend at minimum to get Witshaw & Yeneca's help?" She asked.

"At least 1000 MTA credits if you want a guaranteed outcome." Ranya directly replied. "You can spend less, but then the company won't try as hard. I cannot recommend going cheaper because the loss you will experience if anything goes wrong is not worth the potential savings."

The couple winced. Though it was not unaffordable to the Larkinson Clan, the problem was that Joshua and Ketis were only two individual clansmen. They did not have the right to arbitrarily pull out so much money from the clan's treasury.

"How much did it cost to develop Aurelia?"

"4000 MTA credits. It's a lot of money for a single child. If Ves isn't the leader of our clan and the source of most of our revenue, there is no way to justify this expenditure."

Designer babies were expensive! While there were even more expensive and extravagant options, they were mostly subject to diminishing returns. Joshua and Ketis saw no need to spend more money than the Miracle Couple.

"What do you think, Ketis?" Joshua asked.

As the mech designer and someone who performed a lot of calculations at work, Ketis was pretty much in charge of all of their finances when they came together.

"I can get us 4000 MTA credits." She claimed.

"Whoa! Are you sure?" Joshua questioned. "I'm not accustomed to thinking in MTA credits yet, but even I know that 4000 MTA credits is a great sum."

Ketis still looked confident, though. "I've almost completed my Monster Slayer Project. Once I hand over my design to the Wild Fighters, they will soon produce and sell my new mech throughout the zones where they are active. As long as my new landbound swordsman mech gains popularity, the Wild Fighter Association will definitely funnel a lot of money to our clan. Once that happens, I can go up to Ves and ask him to earn my share of the earnings for the next few years in advance. He won't make life difficult for us, especially if he hears what it is for. Allowing us to raise a strong and healthy designer baby will benefit him as well."

"Does that matter?"

Both Ketis and Ranya snorted.

"Of course it does, Joshua. Ves is always more amenable to ideas if there are profits or benefits attached to them. If he sees the 4000 MTA credits as an investment instead of a money sink, he'll pass on the money in an instant."

Though the expert pilot wasn't sure whether this would happen, he was willing to give his wife the benefit of the doubt. She interacted and worked alongside Ves much more often than him. She knew the patriarch a lot better.

After making a tentative decision to commission Withsaw & Yeneca to develop a fairly high-quality designer baby, Ranya soon guided the couple through the basic decisions that they needed to make at the start in order to determine the overall direction of their possible child.

"Designer babies are configured with specialized genes, substances and follow-up treatments that define what they will be good at in the future. The two of you need to make a choice on what your baby should excel at. Do you want to raise your child as a mech pilot, a leader, a swordsman or a mech designer? It's your choice. Just keep in mind that genetics will never determine everything about someone's life. At best, they can nudge the specialty of your designer baby in specific directions."