

Mech 3771

Chapter 3771 - Finding a Key

Understanding his future direction was the greatest gift that he could obtain at this point in his career.

If Ves hadn't been thinking about creating spirit fruits, he wouldn't have thought about achieving similar results through mechs.

The impact of this idea on his approach to mech design could not be overstated!

So far, his design philosophy was defined by two major developments.

The first development was the decision to pursue living mechs.

Ves believed that making mechs alive would help mech pilots perform better than if they piloted a lifeless equivalent.

The theory was simple to him. If a portion of the burden of piloting and fighting against the enemy could be transferred to the living mech, then the combination of the two working together could potentially result in much better performance!

Over the years, Ves had made a lot of progress in turning living mechs into a defining advantage of his products.

His second-order living mechs had transcended the basic level of X-Factor and possessed enough personality to influence their mech pilots in many beneficial ways.

Of course, the downside of living mechs was that they weren't all that impressive at the start. They needed a lot of time and commitment to turn into formidable living entities such as the Quint and the Shield of Samar!

Even so, they had already yielded the results that Ves had hoped for. The only difficulty was that there weren't many ways for him to improve this application. The fact that they always started out weak was a severe disadvantage that made it difficult for them to show their full value to their users.

The lack of upfront power had ultimately led Ves to the second major development of his design philosophy.

By borrowing the strengths of external design spirits, his mechs immediately gained a boost in power and utility that was difficult to replicate by others!

A basic glow was one that could increase people's sense of duty like that of the Desolate Soldier model.

A more advanced glow was one that could unnoticeably mess up an enemy mech pilot's perception like that of the Stingripper!

The more he worked on this application, the more he refined it. He had steadily expanded his collection of design spirits over the years. Each of them were willing collaborators who possessed an abundance of self-interest to retain their connections to his mech designs.

While there was a possibility that his design spirits might turn away from him and release their influence from his mech designs, the probability was rather low. Many of them were his own spiritual products and he was nothing less than their father in their perspective!

As for other design spirits with different origins such as Zeigra and the Titania, Ves could fall back on the plain old solution of bribing them with what they wanted.

Spiritual feedback was hard to come by and there was no easier solution than to serve as the guardian angels of his mech designs!

In this way, he had successfully opened another brand-new path in mech design! He could not think of any other mech designer that was crazy and brilliant enough to think of empowering mechs by contracting different intangible life forms!

"I really went overboard with this application." Ves depreciating admitted to himself.

He had become so enamored and reliant on design spirits and their glows that he had not spent enough time on improving his foundation.

Living mechs had started him on the path to becoming a successful mech designer.

Living mechs would also form the ultimate vessel that could help him ascend to the rank of Master and beyond.

Now, his latest epiphany had finally provided him with a direction for him to bring his living mechs to the next level!

"The key is growth. The key has always been growth."

Growth was one of the traits that distinguished his mechs from other ones. Ves could hardly think of any mech designed by a competitor that had the potential to grow more valuable over time.

Usually, mechs started out strong and slowly went downhill without any active effort.

While it was possible to modify and upgrade existing mechs to perform better than before, all of this cost time and effort that not everyone was willing to spend.

Living mechs partially solved this problem by being able to improve without performing any costly upgrades!

Not only were living mechs capable of holding their value longer by growing stronger in different ways, they could also become powerful heirloom mechs if their owners were willing to upgrade them so that they remained relevant!

The Shield of Samar was the quintessential example of how the latter could yield an immensely more valuable mech.

If Ves and Gloriana had chosen to design and fabricate the Shield of Samar as an expert mech from scratch, then the end result would never be as powerful even if the fabricated mech turned out to be a masterwork!

There were still gaps between masterwork mechs! The older ones such as the Quint and the Shield of Samar possessed numerous advantages over the newer ones such as the Everchanger and the Minerva.

The accumulation of years could not be substituted.

"It's amazing how far I've come since I've embraced the concept of growth through my living mechs."

His old Novice self would become absolutely gobsmacked if he came across the work of his current self!

Yet for all of his attempts to leverage the concept of growth to his advantage in his own mech designs, he had not seriously thought about extending it to the other half of the man-machine connection.

By including mech pilots among his targets for growth, the value of any mechs that successfully applied this expanded concept would skyrocket in value!

Ves recalled his discussions with Master Willix and the Polymath.

Both of them contextualized the use of technology and mechs in particular as tools that facilitated the growth and evolution of mech pilots and ultimately humanity as a whole.

Although it sounded like a fantastic idea, the problem was that mechs didn't provide that much nurturing towards their mech pilots!

Mechs only opened up new possibilities. It was up to the mech pilot themselves to grope their way forward. A countless amount of mech pilots dedicated their entire lives to training and fighting with their mechs, but how many of them were actually able to advance to expert pilot in the end?

Of the many expert pilots that only possessed a limited window of opportunity to achieve their second breakthrough, how many of them were forced to end their struggle for growth because their efforts alone weren't good enough to bring them any further?

What Ves had come up with had the potential to change all of these missed opportunities and wasted potential.

It was already possible for him to design living mechs that could grow stronger through active use.

Now, he figured out that it was possible for him to accomplish the same to the mech pilots!

"This is true synergy!"

The initial meaning of man-machine symbiosis was to pool their strengths and cover for their weaknesses.

This way, the combination of the two became stronger than if they remained separate.

Ves had dedicated a lot of time and effort into this meaning in the last few years. There was nothing wrong with that, but it was only now that he learned that he could bring the meaning of symbiosis to a deeper level.

"The way to do this is to apply the concept of growth to this symbiotic relationship!"

No longer would Ves solely focus on enabling his mechs to grow stronger.

The growth of a mech mainly empowered the mech pilot, but did not specifically stimulate the latter's growth in a significant fashion.

That was because Ves had been ignorant of the possibilities.

Now, Ves envisioned a way to design a living mech that utilized the man-machine connection to actively nurture the strengths of the mech pilot!

From growing the mech pilot's spiritual potential to imparting him with elevated talent for swordsmanship or marksmanship, there were many possible applications that Ves could develop that could uniquely make all of his customers stronger in an undeniable fashion!

"The best part about this is that the growth and strengthening of the mech pilot will ultimately feed back into the mech!"

The stronger the mech, the stronger the mech pilot!

The stronger the mech pilot, the stronger the mech!

This was already the case with ordinary mechs, but it was especially true when it came to his own products!

Ves imagined a future where every mech behaved similarly to a spirit fruit.

As long as a mech pilot diligently piloted the mech in question, he would constantly progress his own strength until he finally broke through to the rank of expert candidate!

Once the user of a mech became an expert candidate, he could provide a lot more spiritual feedback to the mech, thereby accelerating the machine's growth and development!

"When the mech grows stronger due to this interaction, its ability to nurture its mech pilot becomes even stronger! This in turn will help the mech grow stronger because his battle partner is able to provide more spiritual feedback!"

This was a virtuous cycle! One strengthened the other and back again in an endless cycle.

Of course, it was a lot harder to sustain this cycle in practice. The mech pilot was able to 'upgrade' himself continuously, but the mechs needed to be upgraded to expert mechs or ace mechs if there was a desire for them to accompany their old partners!

Still, the fact that such a virtuous cycle was even possible gave Ves a lot of encouragement in pursuing this powerful new direction!

"Growth mechs are not the only possible evolution of living mechs, but they are definitely the ones that fit my goals and style the most!"

Ves no longer felt that the description of 'Spiritual Man-Machine Symbiosis' described his design philosophy the best.

"If I embrace this path, then my design philosophy should actually be called 'Mutual Growth!'"

Mutual Growth!

The new description only consisted of two words, but they encompassed everything that Ves was trying to achieve with his mech designs.

The words pointed out the essence of his design philosophy in a way that the previous combination fell short.

Mutual was a word that stood for reciprocity and cooperation.

"I scratch your back. You scratch mine."

This was what Ves initially set out to do with his living mechs and his design spirits. The inclusion of multiple different life forms and enabling them to partner with each other to create different synergies had indeed led to many improvements.

However, mutual was not a word that properly incorporated the other aspect of his work.

The addition of the word 'Growth' solved this problem by comprehensively upgrading the description of his design philosophy.

It expressly described the potential for every partner of the relationship to grow stronger!

They not only did so by nurturing their own growth, but also accomplished this by nurturing each other's growth!

"Even the design spirit can join the party!"

This way, many more growth-inducing relationships became possible.

The mech pilot facilitated the growth of the mech and the design spirit.

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The design spirit facilitated the growth of the mech and the mech pilot.

Each of these relationships already existed in one form or another, but by neglecting the growth of the mech pilot, Ves had not fully drawn out their potential up until this point!

"All of this will change for the better!"

Ves' eyes burned hotter than ever as he already thought about experimenting with this new direction during the next round of mech design projects!

There was no better way to confirm whether the concept of growth was truly his key to advancing to Senior and ultimately Master!

"Every living mech must become a training mech."

This was his new short-term goal.

It was also an easy way for him to help others understand what he was aiming for. What Ketis had accomplished with her Monster Slayer model was a precursor of what he would be attempting with his own upcoming mech designs!

"I shall master my own growth!"

Chapter 3772 Setting Targets

"Hihihih!"

Aurelia toddled forward on her own with her small and sturdy legs. She had already learned how to walk by now and used that to her advantage as she chased after one of the many cats that lounged in the park. Even the fact that she was wearing a thin protective suit did not hinder her from going forward.

"Kitty!"

Dozens of meows spread throughout the park as the cats ran and played with the numerous children that their parents had brought along.

Once Aurelia grew tired of chasing after a tabby cat, she moved over to a sandbox and sat down next to a pair of suited, blond-haired twins who were trying to make a mech out of sand.

Unfortunately, the humanoid figure they attempted to shape didn't look that accurate.

"Mek!"

"No."

"Mek!"

"No!"

Even though Aurelia was younger than the twins, she could still hold her own in this childish argument!

Her parents looked proud and content as they sat on a nearby bench and watched over their daughter.

Both of them wore protective gear as well. Although the fleet was not under acute threat, it was still wise to take precautions.

The Garimel System might be dangerous, but life still had to go on. Fortunately, the Larkinsons experienced so many crises since the founding of the clan that everyone had become used to the threat of danger hanging over their heads.

No member of the Golden Skull Alliance was a softhearted coward. Even the most timid among the Larkinsons experienced a lot of changes after getting caught up in large space battles and living among active duty soldiers.

The Larkinsons had grown as a whole.

Although there were many faults to Ves' strategy of going on an expedition while bringing his entire clan along, the sharing of wealth and woe had comprehensively developed the mentality and unity of his clansmen.

As Ves observed how well the other civilian and off-duty Larkinsons in the ship city of New Dorum coped with the current circumstances, he felt proud of what his people had become.

They weren't Brighters. They weren't Ylvainans. They weren't Hexers. They weren't Lifers.

They were none of those people anymore. Although their lives in their former states still marked them in many ways, the Larkinson Clan had successfully assimilated them. Becoming a Larkinson meant that they had gained a new identity at the cost of their old ones.

An identity that Ves had shaped to his liking.

Now, his daughter and his future children were bound to grow up in this environment.

The Larkinson Clan was the equivalent of a growth mech to his children. Both of them nurtured each other and had the potential to become stronger as a result.

Of course, much of that would take many years to come into fruition. For now, Aurelia was just a cute little kid who loved to chase after cats and babble with her parents.

"She grows up so fast." Gloriana sighed in a loving tone as she leaned against her husband's combat armor. "I already miss the time when she was smaller, but it's nice to see that she has grown. I can already see that she is going to grow up into a splendid woman."

Ves nodded as he enjoyed the sight of his daughter having fun. "Growth. It is such a wonderful process. Even the smallest and cutest baby can grow up into a formidable existence. Aurelia more than anything has the potential for greatness."

Life wasn't fair and Ves was in a position to provide a lot of resources to nurture his daughter's growth.

While there were much wealthier parents who could shower their children with all kinds of advanced treatments and training, none of them should be capable of helping their offspring grow their extraordinary qualities.

This was the source of Ves' confidence. With the unique enhancements that only he could develop, his daughter and his future children one day be able to soar to the top of human society!

Gloriana pressed her suited hand on her stomach. "Ketis and I are halfway through the preparation phase. We'll be able to begin our pregnancies in one or two weeks if everything goes according to schedule."

"That's great news, honey! I would love to hold our ginger-haired baby in my arms one day."

Raising Aurelia already added to their stress at times, but neither parents wanted to stop so soon. The satisfaction and fulfillment they gained from raising their own flesh and blood was incomparable.

Not even designing a fantastic new mech brought them as much warmth as spending time with their cute little girl!

As the married couple chatted about their kids and other matters, Ves eventually brought up his recent epiphany.

He calmly explained his recent insights and his decision to commit his design philosophy to a direction that he instinctively felt drawn towards.

"Growth, huh?" Gloriana fell into thought. "That... indeed fits your work. It explains many of your choices, even the ones that are not directly related to our mech designs. Our clan, our fleet, our mech pilots, our proto-gods and even our relationships with outsiders are characterized with growth. You always have a tendency to invest into something small in the hopes that it could grow into something bigger one day."

"Huh. That's a clever analysis. I do have a tendency to make decisions based on long-term considerations, but I never contextualized it in my preference to pursue growth. It's not just a preference for me. It's a philosophy."

Just like how Gloriana constantly pursued perfection in every aspect of her life, Ves sought to encourage growth in everything he cared about. It was how they worked and how any mech designer approached their lives as they progressed their careers.

There were some mech designers that became more affected by their design inclinations than others. Ves figured that highly passionate mech designers such as himself and his wife were more badly affected by their design inclinations than other mech designers.

Perhaps rational mech designers exhibited the greatest degree of control over their impulses.

"I agree with you that this growth direction has great potential, if you can pull it off." Gloriana said as she imagined his future works. "Mechs will acquire a different meaning once you advance to Master. The entire mech community as a whole will no longer be able to walk around your design philosophy anymore. I know mech pilots quite well, and

I have never met one that is able to resist the desire to attain greater strength. The market appeal of such a machine that can fulfill this desire will become so enormous that your recognition and influence will surpass that of any Star Designer!"

She was not exaggerating. Ves seriously doubted that the best mech designers alive today could design a mech that had the potential to accelerate the growth of its pilot to an exaggerated degree!

Great legends in the mech industry such as Maximillian Zu, the Heart of Fire, and Rezel Dawson, the Lord of Atlantis, were able to design fantastic mechs that delivered much better performance than nearly anything else on the market, but even they possessed their limitations!

The Heart of Fire reigned supreme when it came to designing mechs with energy weapons.

No other Star Designer could surpass the Lord of Atlantis when it came to designing aquatic mechs.

Yet as much as they excelled in their chosen specialties, Ves did not believe they could maintain their advantage in other fields.

This was especially the case when the fields became more obscure and difficult to learn.

In that sense, not even the incredibly versatile and multi-disciplined Polymath should be able to exceed the works of Ves in his area of specialty!

As long as Ves was able to prove that he was able to execute his new concept of growth mechs, he would already attain an inestimable status in the mech industry!

"I have found my path to Senior and beyond." Ves confidently boasted to his wife. "Before, I spent much of my time developing many different applications of my specialty. Each of them are useful, but I already feel that it doesn't make much sense to diversify my solutions any further. My toolbox is large enough to deal with many different scenarios. I increasingly feel the need to develop a single advantage further so that I have the strength to compete against more powerful mech designers."

Gloriana's lips curled into a smirk. "You are feeling threatened by the competition, isn't that right? Ketis and Professor Benedict must have prodded you to work towards Senior more seriously. This is a good development. I don't want you to stagnate or waste too much time at your current level. We are far more talented mech designers than others. We managed to advance to Journeymen when we were young and I expect us both to continue our streak by becoming Seniors before we reach fifty."

Just because Ves had found his direction did not mean he was confident that he could break through within the next year.

Collaborating together with Professor Benedict allowed him to understand the qualitative difference between Journeyman and Seniors.

There were good reasons why the two were treated separately.

A Journeyman was just a mech designer who had just entered the world of high-level mech design.

A Senior was a mech designer that could aptly be described as a preparatory Master.

Although the gap between Senior and Master was enormous, the former was not just a Journeyman with greater skills.

Seniors possessed real powers that were much more concrete than that of Journeyman!

Now, Ves had set his sights on advancing to Senior. This was his goal for the upcoming years.

No matter how clear he was about his future direction, designing a lot of mechs was indispensable!

This was a process that could only be sped up to a limited degree. As much as he was impatient to break through to Senior, he himself knew that he possessed far too little design experience to advance in the next design round.

A part of him felt it was a pity. His knowledge accumulation probably satisfied the minimum threshold with the help of the System. His Spirituality had also grown a lot stronger thanks to the addition of Blinky.

His weakness was his lack of works that aligned with his chosen direction.

He not only had to apply the concept of growth mechs many times in order to prove that it was the right choice, he also had to develop it further so that they provided much greater value than his prior advantages!

"What sort of growth mech are you aiming to design in the near future?" Gloriana asked.

"I have several different ideas." Ves replied. "I can pursue an easy start by taking notes from Ketis' recent works. Her Monster Slayer design reminds me of the training mechs that I have designed in the past. The Chiron is the quintessential example of a mech model that can actively foster the growth of its users, but it is not the only one. Back in the day, my Young Blood and my Old Soul has trained a lot of young mech cadets.

They are the reason why Venerable Joshua has become so strong, and that is an impressive result considering I was just an Apprentice at the time!"

How many more Venerable Joshuas could he nurture if he designed more training mechs? Ves could scarcely imagine the wave of skilled mech pilots that might emerge as a result of his upcoming work!

"Is that what you are aiming for in the next design round? A commercial training mech?"

Ves tentatively nodded. "At least one of my new projects will revolve around such a mech. It is the simplest and most direct way to test the viability of growth mechs. The mech market already has an expectation that training mechs are designed to facilitate the growth of mech pilots. Mine will just be significantly more effective than usual if I succeed. It will be an evolution of our Chiron model!"

Chapter 3773 - Commercial Training Mech

Designing a training mech was a must. It fit the concept of growth mechs too well.

On top of that, the training mechs that Ves had designed in the past already showed that they were highly compatible with his design philosophy.

A training mech model that aligned with his new direction would definitely provide a lot of value to the market. Ves almost decided to keep it in the clan if not for its growing need for money!

However, just because Ves believed that his training mech had the potential to become a revolutionary new product didn't mean that it could achieve commercial success!

He had to overcome the inertia in the mech market in order to sell enough mechs.

"The market for training mechs is a lot harder to enter than others." Gloriana warned Ves. "There are many reasons for that. Training mechs are crucial machines that are used to train humanity's future mech pilots. They need to be extremely well-designed so that the dangers of using them are suppressed to a minimum. In other words, the soundness and optimization of their designs need to be extremely high."

She was right. Ves already understood a thing or two about training mechs. He already did a lot of research on the market for these special products back when he designed the Chiron.

"You cannot spend a few months on this project and think that it will become a bestseller." His wife continued. "Safety and reliability must be guaranteed first before other priorities come into consideration. If just a single accident occurs that can be traced back to a design flaw, the mech academies would rather pull your training mech

from the lineup than to risk an incident that could completely ruin their reputations. You have to realize that mech academies live and die by their public perception."

That was also true. Mech academies were rather unique customers in the mech market. They did not buy the toughest or the most lethal mechs. They did not pay that much attention to top performance at all. Since the mech academies mostly intended to put immature mech cadets in the cockpits, the training mechs had to provide a lot of safety assurances when they were handled poorly.

This demanded a lot of attention on the solidness and the stability of the mech frame.

It didn't matter whether a mech academy was just a rural school or an elite establishment. The teenagers and young adolescents that piloted them on a regular basis were bound to screw up sooner or later.

They might trip their mechs. They might collide them against each other. They might get hit by uncontrolled attacks.

So many different accidents took place in a lot of mech academies that training mechs had to possess an excellent tolerance for abuse!

"We already designed the Chiron." Ves stated. "I haven't paid much attention to its use after our Larkinson Mech Academy put our first training mech model into service, but I have heard it is a beloved machine among our mech cadets."

His wife nodded. "It is indeed a mech that has earned a lot of fans over at the Discentibus, but don't think that its track record will be enough to convince customers to buy your new commercial training mech. The Chiron works for us because it is alive, because it is an in-house design and because we have never given our mech academy much choice about adopting it. Those favorable conditions won't apply to other customers, especially when they have never come across this kind of product. If you want to get our foot in the door, you will need to make sure our training mech meets the prevailing market standard."

In other words, it had to meet extremely high standards in terms of technical design!

Although the training mech didn't necessarily have to be expensive and too high-end in terms of performance, it had to be as unflappable as possible.

The training mech must be able to stand up and fight if it tumbled off a cliff.

The training mech had to remain in adequate working condition after enduring a year's worth of regular usage.

The training mech needed to be easy to repair and maintain.

In addition, the training mech had to be affordable in order to make it economically viable! Not every mech academy enjoyed an unlimited budget.

Most mech academies were public institutions that relied on the support of a state in order to pay the bills. It was extremely expensive to buy and maintain a collection of training mechs.

Whatever tuition that normal families could afford to pay out of their own pockets would never cover the costs of running a mech academy!

For this reason, these public mech academies were often conservative when it came to their buying behavior.

They only bought training mechs if they had to. If possible, they were willing to hang on to their machines for multiple decades if possible!

The longevity of a mech was therefore an important selling point as they directly affected the bottom line of the institution.

Although many states understood the importance of directing sufficient funding in the training and education of mech cadets, the reality was that their public spending could only cover so many priorities.

It was not unusual to see mech academies, especially the ones servicing poorer and more rural areas, train their mech cadets by relying on second-hand or even third-hand training mechs!

This was why the majority of mech academies were also incredibly brand-loyal. They only bought from renowned companies that had been operating in the training mech market for decades if not centuries!

Only a long track record of safety and user satisfaction fell into their consideration.

This meant that even if the LMC published an extremely effective new training mech design, the vast majority of mech academies would probably adopt a wait-and-see attitude!

As the couple shared their perspectives on this special market, Ves made a decision.

"If these poorer and less well-off mech academies are so stingy about their selections, then we should forget about them. We should target the upper segments of the mech market instead. Those elite and prestigious mech academies may care more about their reputations, but they are also subject to a lot more competition. If they want to improve their reputation and popularity, they need to prove that they can deliver the best possible education. Being able to provide access to a far better training mech model than the alternatives is an excellent way for them to rise in the rankings!"

Many of his previous commercial mech models hadn't been cheap. Ves always felt more comfortable with designing mechs for those who appreciated quality and cared more about distinctive features than the price-performance ratio of a product.

Gloriana still didn't possess much confidence in his chances.

"The premium segment is even harder to capture than the budget segment, Ves. You're right that customers at this level pay less attention to the cost of a mech, but their obsession for quality means that they will value the pedigree and reputation of the mech company that is selling the training mechs even more! Our LMC possesses no advantages at all in this aspect."

"Hmmm..." Ves lowered his head for a moment.

These were troubling observations. Though he didn't want to hear them, he knew that Gloriana was only helping him out by playing devil's advocate this time.

"I'm not giving up on designing a commercial training mech, Gloriana. We will just have to conduct a different marketing campaign if that's the case. The key is to approach a few institutions in the Red Ocean and earn their trust. If we can convince them to pioneer the use of our radical new training mechs, we can use their success as positive examples of how much the effectiveness of their training has improved!"

His wife crossed her arms. "Really? You think that will work? How are we able to get any education institution to take us seriously? We might be the most impressive pair of Journeymen in the Red Ocean, but that doesn't change the fact that we will still be seen as relatively young and inexperienced mech designers! It will be extremely hard to earn a mech academy's trust just by that alone!"

"That is why we should look for any opportunities to go through the back door instead of the front entrance." Ves retorted. "We have cultivated a few relationships in the Red Ocean that may help in giving us the chance we need. One of the helpers I have in mind is the Wild Fighter Association. This group pays a lot of attention to the training and welfare of mech pilots, so an excellent training mech should be of much greater interest."

Gloriana thought about it for a few seconds.

"That is a good idea... as long as the Wild Fighter Association is happy about our cooperation. Ketis only completed her Monster Slayer design a short time ago, so nobody knows whether it will become a popular seller. If it does, I admit that you may be able to convince the Wild Fighters to cooperate with us once again. It helps that the Monster Slayer already functions as a training mech of sorts, though it is mostly targeted towards graduated mech pilots."

Ketis may have designed her Monster Slayer to be relatively easy to pick up, but that assumed the mech pilot already mastered the basics!

The Monster Slayer was emphatically not a training mech targeted towards mech cadets!

Their large, sharp greatswords were much more difficult to handle at first and had a much higher chance of producing serious injuries if mishandled!

In addition to that, the Monster Slayer also failed to meet many other standards that customers sought in a good training mech.

Even so, the Monster Slayer's potential success could serve as a fantastic opening for his upcoming proposal.

There were just a few concerns.

"The teaching mechanism of the Monster Slayer will be different from mine." Ves predicted. "Ketis has her way of designing mechs and I have my way of designing mechs. Unless we collaborate on designing a training mech that excels in swordfighting, the training mech that I have in mind will probably guide and strengthen its mech pilot in different ways."

"How so?"

A few seconds passed as Ves sorted out his thoughts.

"For one, it has to be a more comprehensive tutor. I will try and transfer the skills of an excellent mech pilot into my new training mech. I have used this approach in the past when I designed my Old Soul and Young Blood. Back then, my design philosophy was much less developed, yet this pair of virtual mech designs were already effective to an extent. Now that I have become a much more powerful Journeyman, I expect that this approach will be a lot more effective than before!"

"That is not enough." Gloriana judged. "The elite second-class mech academies you are targeting already possess training mechs that can provide adaptive, personalized training to their mech cadets. While these competing products mostly rely on pedagogic AIs to do the job, don't underestimate this solution. The mech companies that have been in the business of selling training mechs have spent many years on expanding and perfecting their teaching AIs! This is what you will have to go up against. Are you certain that your own spin on a teaching mech will be able to provide superior instruction?"

This was indeed a thorny problem. Training mechs that came with AIs that provided automated instruction would become direct competitors to his own spin on this mech type.

He had to offer more benefits if wanted his living training mech to stand out from the competition.

"I need to think about this." He said. "I have several more ideas on how to add more value to my training mech design, but it will be a lot harder to implement them since I have never worked on them before."

That did not deter Ves from performing the necessary research. He wanted to make a statement this time, and to do that he needed to present a revolutionary new product!

Chapter 3774 - Revisiting Old Lines

If Ves wanted to design a truly effective growth-oriented training mech, then he had to bestow it with an additional advantage.

The benefits he had in mind were the same as the ones he envisioned for his spirit fruits.

For example, piloting his training mech could slowly activate and draw out a mech cadet's spiritual potential. Piloting his training mech could also increase a mech cadet's talent in a specific fighting skill.

These were benefits that were unique and incomparable to any other product on the market! No other mech designer should be able to impart their mech designs with these fantastic features or else the mech market would have already been dominated by these innovations!

The difficulty of implementing them was much higher as a consequence. Ves had no idea where to begin and he might need to spend a lot more time in order to develop the essential mechanisms.

All of that could still wait as Ves wasn't in a hurry to begin the actual design process. It was already enough for him to come up with the mech concepts and determine whether they were worth pursuing.

Ves and Gloriana eventually picked up their daughter after she had her fun playing in the park. They returned to their grand stateroom together with Lucky and Clixie and enjoyed a private meal before they continued their discussion on the next design round.

"Meow~"

Lucky squinted his eyes in pleasure as Ves scratched the cat's head.

"Miaow miaow."

Clixie cuddling with Aurelia as usual. The cat and little girl looked exceptionally cute as they laid together on a couch.

"Kixie!"

"Miaow!"

"In addition to designing a training mech, I am thinking about designing a second-class version of one of my old products." Ves told his wife.

"Hm?" Gloriana frowned a bit as she paused in brushing the leather of her expensive handbag. "Which ones do you have in mind?"

"I am not certain yet. I have several viable choices, though the Desolate Soldier is the most obvious choice."

"I don't necessarily think that is the most optimal choice, Ves."

"Why not?"

"First, let me ask you this. Where will you sell the new mech? The Yeina Star Cluster or the Red Ocean? You can't sell this product to both markets without putting in additional effort because the production circumstances are much different."

The materials available for producing mechs were always different from region to region. This was especially the case when the regions were separated by hundreds of thousands of light-years!

On top of that, the production standards and the production equipment could vary in different regions.

This was why each mech design had to be customized to the region they were produced and sold at. If not, producing the same mech in a different location might multiply the production cost by two or three times!

While it was possible for mech designers like Ves to quickly design a localized variant of an existing mech design, it wasn't enough to make a hasty attempt this time.

They had to design a mech for a specific region from the ground up if they wanted to enter the second-class mech markets in a proper fashion. That meant they needed to decide where to market their upcoming mech designs right from the beginning!

Ves thought about it for a moment and decided that the added design burden was worth the effort.

"We can't ignore either mech market, Gloriana. I have been receiving regular reports that our business operations in the Yeina Star Cluster have steadily stagnated since we left the place. While our third-class mechs are still useful to the customer base, the lack of excitement and momentum will severely damage the continuation of the LMC if this goes on. We need to revive our third-class mechs as well as tap the second-class mech market in our former home region."

He revealed several new ambitions to his wife. Gloriana did not miss the crucial points of his answer.

"Designing third-class mechs costs time. Designing second-class mechs costs time as well. If we split up our design time even further, it will take years to get anything done. Are you sure it is worthwhile to stay involved in the third-class mech market? The LMC still sells millions of Desolate Soldiers and Ferocious Piranhas a month, but how much profit do we earn for all of that effort?"

"Around 5000 MTA credits a month last I heard." Ves recalled. "I know it doesn't sound like a lot due to the extremely low earnings per sale, but the competition in the third-class mech market is much less threatening towards us, so it is an extremely reliable source of revenue. In addition to that, our current monthly sales volume is hardly the limit that we can reach. Our success in the old galaxy is almost entirely propped up by two third-class mech models. One of them is a spaceborn rifleman mech while the other is a spaceborn light skirmisher. That only covers two of a dozen essential archetypes! If we complete our catalog of third-class mech designs with additional products such as a space knight, a swordsman mech and an artillery mech, we can easily multiply our current earnings figures!"

The Living Mech Corporation hardly participated in the third-class mech market at all at the moment! The mech company was missing far too many opportunities over the years because its lead designers were too preoccupied with designing clan-exclusive mechs all this time!

Ves vowed to rectify that by designing as many commercial mechs as possible in the design round.

Gloriana still didn't agree with his decision. "Even if designing additional third-class mechs is profitable, think about the opportunity costs. We will have to commit a lot of time and effort on designing these third-class mechs. There is hardly any benefit to working them anymore considering that we have largely moved on to designing second-class mechs. Whatever lessons that we learn from designing lesser mechs will not provide that much help in the projects that actually matter to our clan. Aside from that, second-class mechs are much more profitable in general. The price levels are too far apart and the profit of selling a single second-class mech easily exceeds that of many third-class mechs!"

"You're not thinking about the complete picture, Gloriana. First, you are right that our third-class projects will draw time away from our second-class projects, but we can mitigate this as much as possible by handing over much of the work to our design teams. We employ hundreds of assistants. Why not make use of them? While it is a bit questionable for them to take up responsibility for our second-class mech designs, they are more than qualified to design decent third-class mechs. We just have to supervise their work and design a couple of key elements to make sure the work properly reflects our design philosophies."

Gloriana thought about the competences of their large number of assistants and reluctantly agreed that they were up to the task.

Of course, much of that was because she didn't care about third-class mech designs anymore.

She stopped caring about them when Ves finally moved on to designing mechs at her level.

"Okay, I'll give you that. A few of our assistants are talented and promising enough to do a good job with this. Handing over a large amount of responsibilities to them will also help their development. None of them have advanced to Journeymen all of these years, and that is rather shameful. Given the probabilities and our recruitment standards, one or two of them should have advanced to Journeyman by now. Perhaps giving them more room to design a meaningful mech that can potentially affect the lives of many people will give them the impetus they need to become a high-ranking mech designer."

He agreed with her. Although the Larkinson Clan could always hire external Journeymen whenever possible, it was not a good idea to rely so heavily on outside talents all of the time.

The Apprentices who already pledged their loyalty to the Larkinson Clan were much more loyal and dependable.

In addition to that, Ves didn't think it would be good for their Design Department if not a single assistant mech designer was able to leap into the ranks of lead designers. The morale of the Apprentice Mech Designers would take a blow as they all lost confidence in the Larkinson Clan's ability and commitment to support their development.

As a growth-oriented mech designer, Ves found this to be intolerable!

After a bit of discussion, Ves and Gloriana tentatively agreed that it would be worthwhile to design third-class mechs even if the potential earnings per mech model was low.

As long as it didn't require much of their personal effort to complete these easy projects, the benefits outweighed the costs.

"Do you want to design third-class mechs for the Red Ocean as well?"

Ves frowned. "I'm... not so sure about that. We can't sell them in Krakatoa since this is a middle zone. We will have to market them in the lower zones, none of which we are familiar with. We also can't do it ourselves since we don't have any foundation over there. We will have to partner up with third-party manufacturers and hope for the best."

"Why bother, then? I can understand why you want to continue the LMC's success in the Yeina Star Cluster, but it is much harder to get started in the Red Ocean due to the difficult market circumstances here. The third-class mech market in this dwarf galaxy is a lot more troublesome to enter."

"Maybe you're right, but we should still try at least once. If it works, then great. If it doesn't work, then we can skip this course of action next time. It doesn't really matter since we can still offload much of the workload to our assistants."

"Not if we burden them with too many mech design projects. Our assistants will need to spend at least 50 percent more time to design two different localized versions of a single mech."

"Then we will just start off with fewer third-class products than before. We don't need to offer up a complete collection of mech models right at the start."

The two talked about what sort of third-class mech designs they wished to introduce to both mech markets.

"We should design more modern editions of the Desolate Soldier, the Ferocious Piranha, the Doom Guard and the Aurora Titan. I intend to reimagine them all so that they can offer comprehensively better value than before."

His wife understood the desire to refresh the first three mech models. Each of them enjoyed a lot of commercial success and updating their designs would definitely invigorate the LMC's flagging sales!

However, Gloriana did not quite agree with all of his choices.

"Are you certain about the Aurora Titan? It has never achieved much success. Its total sales are negligible compared to our bestsellers."

"That's because I made too many abnormal decisions while not offering enough value. I intend to change the concept of the Aurora Titan so that it adopts a more familiar configuration. If we design it as a more conventional heavy knight, it will probably receive a lot more appreciation."

This was still a risky decision because the current Aurora Titan model had never achieved critical success. Ves and the LMC needed to generate demand for the updated edition from scratch!

"I recall you also have the Crystal Lord. Do you want to design a Mark III version of this third-class mech model?"

Ves shook his head. "No. Not yet at least. I don't think I am ready yet. The Crystal Lord makes use of third-class luminar technology, which I have become a lot more familiar with over the years. That said, there are too many limitations to mechs at this performance level and I am not confident I can deliver a significantly stronger design than the current Crystal Lord Mark II."

He still intended to revisit this mech line, but not before he updated his other lines.

Chapter 3775 - Naming Rights

After a cautious journey, the Flagrant Vandal combat carrier that scouted the way ahead finally reached Garimel II.

The gas giant provided a rare oasis of calm in the Garimel System. Due to its solid core and humongous mass, it generated a magnetic shield that essentially acted like a sunscreen in space.

The magnetosphere did nothing to stop the passage of asteroids and other substantial objects, but it just happened to be effective at bouncing away harmful solar particles from the blue supergiant star and deadly rays from every direction.

Entering it would allow the expeditionary fleet to halt its slow and steady degradation!

Nonetheless, the protection they offered was not absolute. Particularly powerful solar flares generated by Garimel's extremely powerful star occasionally burst through the magnetic shield and bombarded the gas giant and its many moons with deadly particles and energy.

No one figured out how frequently this occurred and when it would happen again. The astrophysicists and other scientists in the Larkinson Clan who engaged in these studies still lacked a lot of data to construct accurate models.

This was why the scout unit's activities were so important. The combat carrier utilized the upgraded and hardened sensor arrays on her exterior to the fullest in order to obtain much more detailed readings of the gas giant and its sixteen moons.

In addition to that, twenty mechs deployed in quick succession. They split up into four different teams and cautiously approached the nearby moons in order to survey their mineral composition up close.

Numerous new Light Hunter models were among these teams, which delighted the Vandals. Their sensor systems were much more effective than the ones installed on the Ferocious Piranha.

As a Light Hunter escorted by a couple of Ferocious Piranha and a Stingripper approached a small moon, it immediately demonstrated its information gathering superiority in various different ways.

The new scout mech was not only able to gather richer data on the nearby moon terrain, but was also able to capture data at a significantly greater maximum range than its escorts!

Surveying the surface of the moon therefore became a much less cumbersome assignment as the mech teams needed to perform less sweeps in order to map out the entire surface.

Of course, the mech teams started surveying the smaller moons first, notwithstanding the tiny rocks that were basically asteroids that got caught in Garimel II's orbits.

These smaller moons provided the Flagrant Vandals with a good opportunity to test the observation capabilities of the Light Hunter outside of combat conditions.

The mech technicians and mech designers assigned to the mech legion even modified the numerous sensor systems to perform more effectively in the Garimel System.

The workers hardened the more sensitive sensor parts while also installing additional components that excelled at gathering geological data.

One of the main objectives of the current expedition was to mine a lot of valuable exotic materials, after all. Searching for phasewater and other valuable exotics was indispensable!

The mech pilots assigned to pilot the scout mechs quickly became more proficient in handling the numerous sensor systems. Each of these components were dedicated to scout mechs and therefore provided a lot more advanced controls to their users.

These features weren't necessarily desirable for mechs as ordinary mech pilots didn't want to fumble around with their sensor systems in the middle of a pitched battle!

While the Light Hunter's sensor and analysis modules still worked better than usual when left to their own devices, they truly shined when scout mech specialists selectively tweaked the settings.

One of the most effective ways for the Light Hunter to penetrate through thick surfaces and capture the richest details was to employ its most powerful active scanning module.

Juliet Stameross had carefully selected the Samasel Orb Directional Scanning Module for its excellent deep scanning performance.

Sure, its range was rather short and its energy consumption went through the roof, but both of these shortcomings were manageable outside of combat situations.

The Light Hunters descended closer to the surface of the modest-sized moons to reduce the burden on its sensor systems.

They did not activate their active scanners unless they discovered an area of interest. Even then, they only utilized their Samasel Orbs at half-power in order to extend their uptime.

Ves sat on the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim as the Light Hunters performed their initial sweeps. He carefully studied the performance metrics of the new mech and paid considerable attention to the quality of data its sensors managed to gather from Garimel II's moons.

He was quite satisfied with the differences in performance. While it was a shame the Light Hunters weren't specialized in searching for minerals, they were at least better at this job than any other mech in the clan!

The only mech that could give them a run for their money was the new Signal Bearer of the Penitent Sisters Mech Legion, but its range and energy consumption was not as optimal to conduct lengthy exploration missions.

All in all, the Light Hunter performed its current task well enough to fulfill the Larkinson Clan's demand for scout mechs.

"We should still try and procure scout mechs that excel at searching for minerals and traces of civilizations, but that can wait for a few years." Ves judged.

Once the Larkinson Clan grew older, bigger and more comprehensive, the demand for specialized capabilities would increase.

The Larkinsons needed to add all kinds of specialized mechs to their mech roster in order to run everything smoothly.

For example, the clan needed non-lethal law enforcement mechs in order to handle internal incidents.

The demand for different auxiliary mechs such as those that generated area shields and those that provided energy recharges in the field would also rise.

"We should also start with fielding landbound mechs when our clan has grown large enough."

At that point in time, the Larkinson Clan would probably possess sufficient self-protection capabilities in space.

While Ves and his fellow designers had designed every spaceborn mech with the potential to operate in a planetary environment, their effective performance would never be as good as machines that were specially designed to operate in these environments.

The performance gap could be as wide as 20 percent or more depending on the environment!

The greater the gravity, the greater the disparity!

One of the general rules in the cosmos was that heavier satellites generally had a higher chance of possessing valuable resource deposits.

This was why fielding landbound mechs could make a significant impact on the outcome of various surface-related missions.

A lot of skirmishes related to taking possession of phasewater deposits were fought with landbound mechs!

"Sir, we have just completed our initial sweeps of one of the moons. Our Light Hunters have not detected any valuable or noteworthy materials on the surface. The scouts will perform additional sweeps at closer range to the more hopeful areas, but we do not expect any surprises. The moon is too small and ordinary to hold anything good."

"Understood. Stick to the plan and be on the lookout for potential danger or signs of previous visitors."

The initial exploration of Garimel II's orbital region did not yield any explosive surprises, but this was just the start.

Five decent-sized moons orbited the gas giant. Each of their diameters surpassed 1000 kilometers.

While that didn't make them impressive at all, their relatively larger sizes caused them to resemble actual planets instead of oversized asteroids.

What interested the Larkinsons the most was that their size also made them more susceptible to 'catching' a portion of the solar emissions from the blue supergiant.

If any powerful solar flare ejected a stream of heavy metals for any reason, there was a faint chance that some of those rare materials might land on those larger moons!

This also made the surfaces of those larger moons a bit more difficult to investigate from afar.

Unless the Blinding Banshee came close or unless the Larkinsons dispatched more survey teams, it was still unclear what goodies they contained.

"Would you like to go on a field trip in order to help search for valuable exotics, Lucky?" Ves asked the cat that was lounging on the side.

"Meow? Meow!"

"I wasn't asking. There has to be something interesting on one of those moons and I'm not sure whether our new scout mechs can make any useful discoveries. None of my mechs can beat you when it comes to searching for valuable metals!"

"Meow meow!"

"Don't tell me that you have grown full as of late." Ves narrowed his eyes on his cat. "I've noticed that you haven't visited the toilet for a long time. The last time you did your business was before we passed through the beyonder gate! What have you been doing all this time?"

"Meow meow meow!"

The intervals between gem deliveries became longer and longer. Ves was already accustomed to that, but the continued absence in any bowel movements from his cat became increasingly more concerning.

Was this related to the System's extended absence? Ves could not help but correlate its 'vacation' to Lucky's nonexistent output.

The gem cat still maintained the same eating pattern as before. He gobbled up one valuable mineral after another, yet nothing seemed to happen after Lucky swallowed all of these valuable materials.

In order to make sure that Lucky produced quality gems, Ves purchased a good reserve of medium-grade exotics in order to serve as cat food for the rest of the year!

The cost of all of those materials exceeded the price of Gloriana's handbag!

Ves narrowed his eyes at Lucky. He didn't know whether his cat was accumulating all of the materials it ingested in order to generate better gems in his body.

Lucky could easily divert the input to upgrade his body and various systems.

While that made the gem cat stronger in many ways, the gems he produced wouldn't be as dazzling!

"You better present me with an excellent 'gift' once your systems are active again." Ves warned his cat. "Until then, you can earn back the money that I have spent on your diet plan by joining the survey teams. You have to work for your privileges!"

"Meeeeooooow!"

Though Lucky put up a rebellious act, Ves didn't get fooled. As soon as the Flagrant Vandals discovered traces of more valuable minerals on one of the moons, Lucky would be first to board a shuttle!

As Ves returned to studying the sensor readings, he received an interesting report from the Flagrant Vandals.

The combat carrier had performed distance scans on Garimel II-F, the second-largest moon orbiting the gas giant.

With a diameter of roughly 4000 kilometers, its gravity was fairly heavier than was typical to its size.

The reason for that was because it contained a lot more metals than usual!

Another interesting feature about Garimel II-F was its volcanic activity. The heat generated by the distant blue supergiant star along with the tidal forces generated by the movements of the planet and the moons all caused it to act like a giant squeeze toy.

All of these activities meant that a lot of heavy materials that were ordinarily locked underneath came up to the surface due to volcanic eruptions.

The initial scans were fairly promising. The combat carrier hadn't confirmed whether there were any valuable metallic exotics in the cooled volcanic matter, but their sensors detected enough energetic reactions to warrant closer study!

If nothing better came by, this would probably be the moon where the Andrenidae would set up shop. The gravity of this satellite was low enough that mining mechs and mining vehicles could easily head up and down in space without expending a lot of effort.

"There is something else you should know, patriarch."

"What is it?" Ves asked.

"Since no human has ever surveyed this star system before, we have the right to name the satellites. If you wish, you can name this moon yourself. Would you like to do so, sir?"

Ah, Ves forgot about that. Naming different stuff was one of the perks of exploring new star systems!

"Let's call it Gatecrasher, then. This moon reminds me of the dwarven expert mech piloted by Venerable Orthox de Massie. Hopefully it also contains enough minerals to make a dwarf salivate!"

Chapter 3776 - Winding Backwards

There was no uniform standard to bestowing localized names to planets, moons, asteroids, comets and other phenomena in space.

Different states and organizations might agree to one of the many standards supported by different scientific associations, but the Larkinson Clan didn't sign up to any of them. There were no legal constraints that limited the names that it could bestow to newly-encountered planets and moons.

Although the right to name satellites sounded like an impressive way to make a mark in humanity's history, the truth was that there were far too many star systems in the Milky Way and the Red Ocean.

The sheer abundance of satellites to be named reduced the value of bestowing them with artificial labels.

The only instances where naming planets and moons were valuable was when the star system had all of the signs of becoming an attractive destination.

Even then, a lot of people never bothered to pay attention to the local names of the satellites. They continued to adhere to the universal standard of distinguishing them by referring to their distance from a star or planet.

This was why Ves did not pay much attention when he named the various moons and planets in the Garimel System.

He could call them silly names such as 'Party Planet' or 'Gloriana's Treasure Chest' without any issue.

Of course, that didn't necessarily mean that organizations such as the MTA were willing to adopt the names and register them in its database. People eventually learned the Association's limits and made sure their suggestions weren't too vulgar or humorous in order to get their names recognized.

Ves didn't know why, but he found himself in the mood to name the more significant satellites in the Garimel System after the mechs and starships that he encountered throughout his life.

Garimel I gained the name of Auralis after Ves named the heavy terrestrial planet after a Fridayman fleet carrier that the Larkinsons managed to capture.

Garimel II acquired the name of Lemogo Distat which Ves had derived from a fleet carrier of the 34th Slug Ranger Mech Division of the Ferril Provincial Army.

Garimel II-B, the largest moon in the neighborhood, became known as Iron Crusher, which used to be one of heavy hammer-wielding mechs fielded by the Forgehammer Mech Regiment of the 7th Molten Hammer Mech Division.

Iron Crusher happened to be another potentially lucrative mining site.

The difference between Iron Crusher and Gatecrasher was that the latter exhibited a lot more tectonic activity than the former.

The frequent volcanic activity caused Gatecrasher to push a lot of underground matter to the surface.

Iron Crusher was a significantly calmer moon. Its surface, which featured substantially more craters due to asteroid impacts, was generally lighter and less remarkable.

If the Larkinsons wanted to mine for goodies on this moon, then they would probably have to dig underground in order to reach the more profitable veins. All of this required a lot of effort. Just finding these valuable mineral deposits was a lot of work!

As the rest of the expeditionary fleet arrived in the neighborhood, the ships all settled into a high orbit around the gas giant.

Calabast made an infrequent visit to the Spirit of Bentheim in order to report on the Larkinson Clan's findings of the Garimel System.

Ves looked up from his desk terminal the moment her suited form entered his office.

"Long time no see."

"You're the same as always, Calabast. Is it really necessary to dress for an infiltration mission?"

"I could say the same to you, Ves. Your combat armor is packed with more protection than you ever need these days. It's not as if you are fighting on the frontlines anymore."

He shrugged. "Who knows. Anyway, please take a seat and tell me about all of the interesting details that you have found about the Garimel System."

"I may have to disappoint you today, Ves, because we have yet to discover too many facts that you may probably find interesting."

Calabast activated a projection and began to present information that she thought that Ves needed to know about their current environment.

Details such as the predicted solar activity of the blue supergiant star to the probability of discovering minerals worth mining in the nearby moons were all important to the expeditionary fleet.

"The Vandal survey teams have already discovered numerous small to medium-value mineral deposits on the surface of Gatecrasher." Calabast said as she referred to Garimel II-F by its new pet name. "The scout mechs are far from done with exploring the moon, so it is only a matter of time before they find more valuable resource concentrations based on extrapolations of its known distribution of surface deposits."

Ves took a good look at the incomplete survey map of Gatecrasher. The deposits found so far were not that valuable in the greater scheme of things.

Even in a dwarf galaxy where resources were in short supply, the expeditionary fleet could earn a few dozen to a few hundred MTA credits from mining these sites.

While this made the mineral deposits far more valuable than anything else discovered so far, it still wasn't enough to make this expedition worthwhile considering how much time and effort it took to scrape all of these smaller deposits!

"Do you have any clues about what kind of valuable exotic materials that we can find on any of the moons?" Ves asked.

"We have discovered that the blue supergiant star is prone to ejecting a substance known as Ferite-8. It is an iron-like exotic that is often used to produce the alloys found in first-class mechs and starships."

Ves looked shocked!

"Are you saying that we've found a first-class exotic in this star system?!"

"Don't get excited too quickly, Ves. It's a lower-grade exotic among first-class materials. Ferite-8 may have applications in first-class mech and starship production, but it is only valuable if we are able to accumulate tons of this exotic. So far, we have only found trace amounts of it across the surface of the calmer moons. Compared to Gatecrasher, the moon that you have aptly named Iron Crusher should be especially rich with Ferite-8, but we are still talking about the equivalent of collecting a lot of dust."

Iron Crusher essentially acted like a neglected couch in an abandoned room. The couch became covered by an increasing amount of dust after many years of inactivity!

While it was fairly easy to collect the dust from a couch, it was a lot harder to collect all of the dispersed particles of Ferite-8 from the surface of an entire moon!

"Do we have the mining equipment to efficiently collect Ferite-8 from the surface of those moons?" Ves critically asked.

Calabast shook her head. "Nope. The mining assets on the Andrenidae are mostly geared towards traditional mining activities. They're good at extracting materials from ore veins but they are not capable of absorbing specific substances over an enormous surface area. The survey teams are currently in the process of finding more concentrated deposits of Ferite-8. There is a small chance that a past solar flare has ejected a particularly larger amount of this substance into space."

That didn't necessarily mean that this mountain of Ferite-8 landed on the moons of Lemogo Distat.

If such a bounty ever strayed in the right direction, the chances were great that the gas giant pulled it directly onto its solid core!

"Keep looking, then. We might get lucky. This rogue planet has been captured by the Garimel System for millions of years. That's enough to collect a lot of dust and 'rat droppings'."

It was fine even if the search for significant concentrations of Ferite-8 turned into a bust. The moons had to contain other valuable mineral deposits. They just had to perform enough carpet searches.

Once Calabast finished this part of her presentation, she moved away from prospecting and presented her findings on the only possible sign of unusual activity in the star system.

"Remember that space rock that looked like it got cut in half?"

"I do."

"We haven't managed to find another rock that shows similar signs. Believe me, we tried. Our Blinding Banshee's sensor arrays have scoured through a lot of space and failed to identify any rock that looks as if it was tampered with in any fashion."

"That... is probably the expected outcome." Ves sighed. "This star system is so huge that it is extremely rare to find two or more similar abnormalities in quick succession. This is especially the case when we stumbled upon the cut space rock so far from the center of the star system. It must have drifted for a long time."

Calabast smiled at him. "An absence of findings tells its own story, Ves. In some cases, we can make inferences from what isn't happening. For example, the chances are greater that a passing alien or human fleet has cut the rock. That said, we have traced back the trajectory of this space rock. This wasn't easy as we needed to construct a gravity model of all of the planets, moons and other objects moving in this star system. Once our scientists managed to complete this model, we ran a simulation and came up with a result that you should view."

Calabast projected a plot of the Garimel System. A green light appeared at the place where the Larkinsons originally stumbled upon the space rock.

Time then proceeded to go backwards. The planets and moons all spun and orbited in the wrong direction. Many years went by as the space rock followed a fairly wobbly arcing trajectory as its trajectory became influenced for various reasons.

The model also became a little bit uncertain about the space rock's coordinates the further the simulation went back into the past.

However, the suspected origin zone of the space rock was close to where Garimel I, now named Auralis, was situated in the distant past!

"Are you saying that someone or something close to Auralis cut this space rock as it tumbled away?"

"Correct, and it likely happened hundreds of years ago, far before humanity ever set foot in this dwarf galaxy." Calabast answered. "There are many theories that we can think of that might explain what has happened. The most likely one is that an alien ship or fleet used to visit the Garimel System and approached Auralis for whatever reason."

"I see. What are the chances that we'll find any aliens on that hot planet?"

"It is extremely unlikely that we will find any aliens or traces of their visit. The visitors likely went through the trouble of approaching Auralia all of those years ago in order to mine a specific material or conduct studies on the planet. It should not have any further merit as it is located dangerously close to a blue supergiant star. The big blue ball only needs to burp loudly in order to wipe out whatever base or settlement the aliens have built on the surface."

Auralis was anything but livable to the vast majority of races. Even those that have evolved to like all of the heat and radiation would not choose to live next to such a humongously powerful and relatively less stable star!

Still, if there was one lesson that Ves had learned throughout his career, it was that exceptions always existed!

He looked towards his spymaster. "I hope that we don't leave it at this assumption and actually investigate that Auralis is empty."

"We are already in the process of setting up a deep exploration mission. The combat carrier that we have chosen to travel deeper into the star system is currently undergoing refitting at the Diligent Ovenbird. Once we have increased her resistance against heat and other environmental hazards, we plan to send her on a quick trip to Auralis. We will be able to get a better look of what is going on on that planet. If nothing else, it should hold a significant amount of Ferite-8. It is one of the reasons why we cannot gather

detailed data from this distance. The high-grade exotic and all of the other energetic materials on the planet are generating a lot of interference."

"I see. Have you tried to send a few drones at first?" Ves asked.

"We have already done so shortly after we entered this star system, but there is a decent chance that we will lose contact with them. Let us hope that doesn't happen."

Chapter 3777 - Training Cats

The gist of Calabast's presentation was actually fairly simple.

There were enough signs of valuable resource deposits on the moons of Lemogo Distat.

There were also signs of past alien activity at Auralis.

Ves was fairly happy with the first piece of news.

He felt a lot more ambivalent about the second piece of news.

The first proper planet from the blue supergiant star was not situated close enough that nearby starships would melt from all of the heat.

It was still awfully close to the giant heat source, though. Any starship would not find it pleasant to linger in orbit of Auralis for extended periods of time!

While brief visits were fairly harmless, it became increasingly more difficult to keep the starship's vital systems in healthy condition after weeks of constant exposure!

Even if the starships of the Larkinson Clan could handle the environmental conditions, Ves would still be reluctant to send a ship to the planet at all. Just the thought of moving any closer to that humongously big, bright and powerful star was scary!

It was like standing on the edge of a cliff. It did not matter if your footing was solid. The idea that only a single accident could cause you to fall made it extremely unpalatable to stand so close to certain death!

Fortunately for Ves, it wouldn't be him that would be approaching the edge of the cliff. He was a patriarch nowadays. That meant he had lots of minions that could brave this risk on his behalf!

After they completed their discussion on how they should explore Auralis, Calabast spoke a few more words about her thoughts on the Garimel System.

"We have not found any definite signs of recent alien arrivals in this star system. That does not mean that it will stay this way. Garimel is not too far away from the former alien star nations that were recently swept by the Big Two. Only a few years have passed, and while pioneers such as ourselves have taken down a lot of remnants, there is still a chance that another remnant fleet like that of the pakklavons may stumble here for whatever reason."

"We face this risk in any star system we visit. This should be nothing new to us, Calabast." Ves retorted. "Besides, Garimel shouldn't be a worthwhile location for refugees to visit. It's too dangerous and troublesome to mine valuable materials."

"Who knows if the aliens get desperate."

"If they are truly desperate, then they shouldn't be stupid enough to travel so deep into human-occupied territory." Ves contemptuously said. "Most of them have fled towards the regions of the Red Ocean that are far away from the space that humanity has conquered. I'm sure there are stupid or irrational aliens that have gone in the other direction, but these are outliers."

"Have you forgotten about the destination the pakklavon refugee fleet was trying to reach?"

Ves nodded after he recalled this detail. "I am aware of this supposed Ancient Refuge that is supposed to harbor a paradise that keeps aliens outside of the reach of humanity. Have you and your people actually discovered where this place is located?"

Calabast shook her head in disappointment. "I am afraid not. Only a select group of high-ranking pakklavon officers memorized the star coordinates of their fleet's ultimate destination. Of all of the bird aliens stationed on the ships that we have managed to capture during the last battle, every single officer that knew this information has died without exception. They either committed suicide or threw themselves onto the voribugs. They made sure not to leave bodies that were intact enough for us to extract the information from their brains."

"Did none of the aliens store the star coordinates in any of their electronic systems?"

"Just because they're aliens doesn't mean they're stupid. Their information security is good. From the beginning of their flight from their collapsing star nation, the leaders of the alien fleet decided not to record any information about the Ancient Refuge on their storage devices. The reason why they took so many precautions is because they want to make certain that not a single human is able to reach the star system. Pioneers like us may not necessarily be able to get into the Ancient Refuge, but we can blockade the entrance and prevent any other refugee fleet from reaching their promised land."

"Damn. I guess we've come to a dead end in the investigation." Ves sighed.

While he was aware that there were over 40,000 pakklavons aboard the Dragon's Den, the aliens probably wouldn't have been sloppy enough to leak the coordinates to the survivors.

From what he heard, many of the aliens in captivity consisted of civilians, juveniles and low-ranking crew members. An ordinary grunt or sensor operator wouldn't know any high-level secrets.

"Forget about the Ancient Refuge." She told her. "Even if we find it, I don't think we have the strength and capabilities to touch this place. It should already be enough for us to explore this star system."

"You're right I guess."

Calabast stood up from her chair and began to explore Ves' office. She studied the trinkets that he had collected over the years such as his blooming Prosperity Tree and the masterwork figure based on the Valkyrie Redeemer model.

"How have you been as of late?" She asked.

Seeing that the spymaster turned this meeting into a more personal direction, Ves shrugged as best he could.

"I'm happy. While we are not yet in a comfortable place, many of the endeavors that I have started are already experiencing sufficient growth. They won't yield any harvest in the short term, but we will be in a much better position a few years from now. By then, we'll become a lot more established in the Red Ocean. Our armed forces will have grown stronger while our business operations allow us to spend a lot more lavishly than before."

As Ves shared his optimism, Calabast stopped in front of a projection that he had put up as of late. It showed a simple snapshot of Ves, his wife and their daughter.

"Your life is picking up." She observed. "I heard that you also experienced a breakthrough in your work."

"Yes. I realized that I should be focusing on realizing the concept of growth mechs in my work. It's an advantage that only I can pursue to the fullest. You should already be able to judge its value should I succeed."

"I can understand the implications, yes. You do realize that you'll become an extremely hot commodity if you succeed, right? You will need to pay a lot more attention to your movements if that is the case."

Ves grimaced when he heard that. He fully understood the implications of her words.

"That should only happen once I become a Senior, I think. Journeymen like myself are not taken seriously enough in the mech community. This is especially the case in the Red Ocean where a disproportionate amount of highly-renowned Seniors and Masters have moved over. Compared to mech designers that have already proven their worth to varying degrees, I still need to make my ideas work. I anticipate that it will probably take years if not decades for me to achieve a critical breakthrough in my research. Once that happens, my mechs should be advanced enough to produce dramatic results. By that time, my wanderlust should have lessened, I think."

Part about being a Journeyman and a fairly young one at that was the need to explore and find new sources of inspiration.

Once Ves gained enough inspiration and became more certain about his future trajectory, he wouldn't be as desperate to find new stimuli anymore.

While he would never wish to settle down on a planet, he might instruct his fleet to linger in the safer parts of the Red Ocean. He could leave the exploration to the younger generation of the Larkinson Clan.

As Calabast observed his expressions, she understood what he was thinking about. She smiled.

"It is good if you think about our future. We are a young clan that needs to take bold action in order to carve out a place in the Red Ocean. Once the growth that you have envisioned has come to fruition, we will need to reevaluate our strategies. It doesn't hurt to slow down and consolidate all of the gains we have made up to that point. If you want the Larkinson Clan to turn from a flash in the pan to an enduring star, you need to introduce a lot more stability. We shouldn't bring our core fleet to unexplored star systems where a single unfortunate incident can wipe out our entire clan."

She was right. Though Ves would not have agreed with her sentiment if he was younger, now that he had become a parent, he began to worry about how his decisions affected his daughter.

He had changed.

"I guess this is part of the growth process as well, huh?" Ves idly chuckled. "I still have a lot to go before I am ready to stop my explorations. I'm still a Journeyman and I can still obtain a lot of new ideas if I encounter anything new. A part of me actually wants to travel to Auralis in person. There has to be something funny going on over there if it attracted an alien fleet in the past."

Calabast glowered at him. "I hope you have wisely set aside this foolish idea."

"Relax. I have no desire to get any closer to the giant blue ball. Enough about me. What about you? I haven't checked up on you for a while. How is your dating life?"

"It's been slow going." She admitted. "We have too many responsibilities to spare any time for social engagements. I can keep track of Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse by remote, so I have no pressing need to meet with him. We are stationed on different ships most of the time so it is inconvenient to transit to each other."

"Are you still serious about pursuing this relationship?"

Calabast smirked at Ves. "Who can tell? We'll just have to see where we go. I am not in a hurry and neither is Novilon."

"How are your Black Cats doing as of late?"

"They're doing good. I have invested a lot into training my people. Their spycraft is improving with each passing day. Other than that, I have spent a considerable portion of our budget in expanding our intelligence network in the Krakatoa Middle Zone. You shouldn't expect too much from the shallow contacts that I have cultivated, but once we are ready to dispatch the agents that I am training, we can do a lot more in this region."

He thought about what all of those operatives of hers would be doing in Davute and other star systems.

"I'm not quite comfortable with sending out clansmen to all of these locations. They will be away from our family most of the time."

"That is what it means to be a Black Cat, Ves. We do jobs that other people cannot do. We do them because it will better the rest of our clan. I have made sure to prepare them for their long-term assignments as much as possible. Besides, these job assignments are hardly permanent. Once they have spent enough time in the field, we will pull them back and assign them to different departments."

"What are you training them for, exactly?" Ves asked. "I only have a vague idea of what you have in mind."

"It's just the usual. Spying, catching spies, spreading misinformation, committing sabotage, conducting assassinations, laying the blame on others and inducing gullible parties into performing the aforementioned activities are the skills I expect my agents to master."

"...That sounds like you are readying our clan for war."

"It's better to be prepared, Ves." She spoke in a serious tone. "You may be right in thinking that all of these preparations are overblown, but if we find ourselves in a precarious situation once again, I will make sure we have enough intelligence support this time."

She had been burned by his decisions far too many times! Now that she had the time to prepare, she wanted to make sure that her Black Cats would never fall short again!

Chapter 3778 -Upgrade Proposals

The Golden Skull Alliance organized a small scouting mission to Auralis, the first planet in the Garimel System.

Such an exploration task ordinarily shouldn't have attracted a lot of attention. Auralis was presumably filled with heavy metals, but its orbit was a bit too close to the blue supergiant star to make the trip pleasant.

However, once the Larkinsons figured out that the abnormal space rock may have originated from this heavy terrestrial planet, Ves developed a greater need to explore this former rogue planet.

The difficult part was to pick who should perform this mission.

The Flagrant Vandals bravely took up this task and dispatched a modified combat carrier to Auralis. They weren't going alone as small mech detachments from the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan transferred to the vessel as well.

"Whatever secrets you Larkinsons stumble upon, we want in on it as well. Don't think of keeping all of the good stuff to yourself."

The departure of the combat carrier put a heavy weight on Ves.

If the ship and personnel suffered an accident at Auralis, then he would definitely be responsible for sending his people to their deaths.

On the other hand, it was their job to brave these kinds of risks. Auralis needed to be explored and the automated drones in the hands of the Golden Skull Alliance didn't cut it. Sending in an old-fashioned ship was the only realistic way to explore the planet that was being obscured in an abundance of radiation and interference that generated large concentrations of exotic materials.

As Ves watched the reinforced combat carrier depart from the main fleet, he wondered if he had made the right choice. He could have resisted the urge to explore this unknown planet and make everyone keep their distance.

If the exploration mission inadvertently triggered a dangerous response, then not just the combat carrier, but also the rest of the expeditionary fleet might come under threat!

"You made a decision that made sense to you given the information you have available to you." Calabast quietly spoke as she stood at his side. "There is little point in

obsessing over what-ifs. Whether the outcome is good or bad, you need to roll with it and continue to do what you think is best."

She was right. Leadership was never easy. Hard choices couldn't be avoided and mistakes were always possible.

"We need to remain alert and be ready to move or defend ourselves." Ves sighed. "Our stay in this star system will only grow tense."

"We can endure the hardships and inconveniences. The clan you've built is not weak anymore." Calabast spoke with genuine pride.

As one of the founding members of the Larkinson Clan, she played a major role in shaping it into its current form.

The only issue was that her influence wasn't as noticeable as that of the patriarch due to the nature of her responsibilities.

Where there was light, there was darkness.

Calabast was the shadow of the Larkinson Clan.

Her role was essential in a clan that consisted of a lot of upright soldiers and warriors. Ves was not short of Larkinsons who excelled in fighting and winning battles against powerful mech forces or alien fleets.

What the Larkinsons were not good at was the kind of subterfuge and shadow wars that every organization participated in when it reached a certain scale.

Peace was a lie. Groups constantly struggled against each other even if they acted politely towards each other in public. Ves was vaguely aware that competition for territory, influence, market share and wealth constantly took place behind closed doors.

Ves already understood that the Larkinson Clan was already beginning to reach a point where its continued growth would threaten the interests of competing organizations.

The rise of the Open Consortium had already ruffled the feathers of competitors in the Davute Star System such as ZZR Heavy Manufacturing.

p???? ???? From the periodic reports he received from Chairwoman Calsie Doornbos, the Open Consortium was facing increasing difficulties in securing trade deals due to the pushback generated by a number of new and old enemies.

A particularly prominent obstacle was the increasingly more aggressive posture of ZZR Heavy Manufacturing. The industrial company led by that insufferable Tyana Delcrost

banded together with other allied companies in order to check the growth of their competitors.

Since the Open Consortium mostly consisted of companies that weren't strong enough to stand on their own, it could not shrug off this threat.

If the Black Cats expanded their presence in Davute, then the Open Consortium would have a much better chance at resisting both veiled and open attacks.

The Larkinsons might even choose to strike back themselves!

Given that the Larkinson Clan would have to rely on the Black Cats even more, Ves did not immediately dismiss Calabast after she had reported to him in person.

He grew curious about the current state of the Black Cats. He hadn't visited them in a while and did not have a clear impression about where they stood at this point in time.

Hearing about them from Calabast was only one way of gathering information. Since Ves had a more relaxed schedule after ending the last design round, he could afford to make a trip to the Blinding Banshee.

He shuttled over to the unusually narrow capital ship. Her large and abundant sensor arrays, which had all been modified to prevent themselves from getting blinded by overly powerful signal sources, were continuing to map out the star system while trying to detect as many abnormalities as possible in the space surrounding Lemogo Distat.

The gas giant was not that interesting in itself, but its larger moons were roughly the size of smaller planets. Satellites of that size were bound to contain a larger variety of materials and possibly other interesting properties.

While the Larkinson Clan's new scout mechs surveyed the moons close to the surface, the Blinding Banshee did her own part by performing large-scale distance scanning.

Aside from investigating the moons, the Blinding Banshee also kept a close eye on the surrounding space environment. Every threat that entered the perimeter of the expeditionary fleet had to be detected before it could inflict any damage!

"Are you satisfied with the Blinding Banshee?" Ves inquired.

"She has served us well so far, but... her sensor arrays and analytical systems are already showing their age." Calabast seriously answered. "Their performance would be adequate if we remained in the galactic rim, but now that we have entered a bigger and more dangerous playground, we need to upgrade her main systems so that she can keep up with our growing demands. Not only will we be able to detect or deter the approach of more advanced stealth vehicles, we will also be able to gather more detailed and accurate observation data."

As someone who briefly contributed to the Light Hunter and Signal Bearer designs, Ves understood the differences between basic and more advanced sensor systems.

The Blinding Banshee was a second-hand capital ship to begin with that had already been in service for numerous years.

Ever since the Larkinson Clan took possession of her, she did not receive any comprehensive upgrades. Much of her hardware still consisted of effective but aging rim-level technology.

Ves looked at the needle-shaped capital ship and tried to estimate the cost and time of refitting the entire hull.

If the clan undertook this major step, then he did not want to start a half-hearted upgrade program. The capital ship would be out of action for several months at the very least, so he might as well invest big while the Blinding Banshee was out of action.

Calabast had apparently anticipated the direction of his thoughts because she soon transmitted a document to his comm.

"What's this?" Ves asked as he projected the new file in front of his face.

"I consulted with Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai on how we can realistically upgrade the Blinding Banshee. While she is technically classified as a capital ship, her exceptionally narrow hull makes it easier for shipbuilding companies to upgrade her systems. We can even perform many of them on our own if we are willing to leave the Diligent Ovenbird in Davute."

Ves quickly skimmed through the report. It outlined several different proposals on how to upgrade the Blinding Banshee.

"The most basic proposal is budgeted at around 5000 MTA credits." Calabast explained. "While this is a fairly hefty sum to spend on a single auxiliary capital ship, we can replace many of our aging rim-level ship parts with more modern heartland-level equivalents. The prices are high but the performance of all of the new systems will ensure that they will be able to keep up with our demands for the remainder of the current generation."

That was quite an impressive boast, especially when Ves noted from the report that the proposal did not seek to buy the top-of-the-shelf ship components.

Ves was quite satisfied with the cost-effectiveness of this plan. "This is quite a bargain. Sensor systems, scanning systems, ECM systems, ECCM systems, analytical engines and many other systems will all perform around 50 percent better on average. What about the more expensive proposals?"

"They're meant to keep the Blinding Banshee relevant and up to date for up to half a century if our standards haven't grown since then." Calabast grinned. "With 30,000 to 40,000 MTA credits, we can not only buy the more premium ship components, but also upgrade the hull and structural integrity of our espionage ship. Making her tougher will not only help with increasing her survivability in battle, but it will also allow her to enter more hazardous areas where her excellent detection capabilities can play an essential role."

The scouting mission to Auralis was a typical example of that. Ves had thought about sending in the Blinding Banshee, but had no choice but to dismiss this option as her hull offered insufficient protection against the heat and energies released by the blue supergiant star!

Although Ves was attracted by the prospect of rebirthing one of his older and weaker capital ships, the price tags of the more expensive proposals gave him a lot of pain.

"Our spending capacity isn't great at the moment." He slowly said. "Personally, I think it is worthwhile for us to invest 30,000 MTA credits into upgrading your mobile headquarters. Capital ships are extremely hard to obtain in the Red Ocean and a ship that excels in reconnaissance and espionage-related functions rarely enters the civilian ship market."

The Blinding Banshee might not be the best or the most up to date of her kind, but these were shortcomings that could always be addressed with enough upgrades. The Larkinsons just needed to be willing to spend enough time and money to make everything happen.

"Our clan's financial situation will probably see a massive improvement once you have released your next batch of commercial mechs." Calabast stated. "Given your track record and the excellent value of your products, I have little doubt you will find a way to increase our income by an order of magnitude."

"Whoa, there, Calabast. Let's not get too excited here. Increasing our monthly income by a factor of ten is not a given considering all of the competition we face. The Red Ocean's mech market will be especially difficult to enter due to how much it is dominated by larger and much more established mech companies."

There was much less room at the bottom in the new frontier because of all of the powerful pioneering organizations that have passed through the beyonder gate. They all held high standards towards their mechs and were much less reluctant to settle for rougher products designed by younger mech designers.

The LMC would have to fight tooth and nail if it wanted to establish its brand and build a loyal customer base in the Krakatoa Middle Zone and possibly beyond!

"You won't be alone in this." Calabast told him. "My Black Cats and I will support your business endeavors as much as we can. Helping you grow your sales will bring us closer to upgrading our Blinding Banshee, after all. We will not miss this opportunity to obtain a more powerful espionage ship!"

Chapter 3779 - Master Parian Hao

Given that Calabast had just sent Ves a series of proposals on how to upgrade the Blinding Banshee, he decided to go on a little tour.

Calabast guided him to different departments and went into a bit more detail on the performance of the various systems.

"The strongest aspect of the Blinding Banshee is not her observation capabilities, but her ECM capabilities." She explained to Ves. "That is what she is named for. Her ability to scramble and disrupt enemy sensor and targeting systems across a wider area is good. Our ECM systems can severely degrade the coordination and observation capabilities of inferior enemies, causing them to lose up to 30 percent of their battle effectiveness depending on the circumstances."

That was quite a huge difference! It could easily double or triple the winning chances of the expeditionary fleet!

"The effect shouldn't be as exaggerated in most cases I imagine."

"Most modern military ships and mechs are equipped with measures that can mitigate our efforts. Biological creatures are also less affected by our solutions." Calabast admitted. "Power, distance and tech disparity are the major factors that determine the effectiveness of our ECM capabilities. We cannot control for distance, but we can still upgrade the power supply and other tech in order to bridge the various gaps. As long as we are able to close the technological gap, we will be able to save hundreds if not thousands of lives in a future battle."

This was not an empty boast. Ves recalled that the Blinding Banshee's sudden hacking and ECM measures had played a key role in tipping the balance in the Golden Skull Alliance's favor during the Battle of Fordilla Zentra.

The various dwarven capital ships and mech units lost contact with each other while their ability to keep track of developments across the battlefield diminished.

Although the Blinding Banshee's sabotage had become a lot more effective than usual due to smuggling Secret Agent Lucky aboard the enemy flagship, the vessel still managed to prove her value in a battle!

Thinking about how extensively the Blinding Banshee was able to toy with enemy forces at the time suddenly gave Ves a burst of inspiration.

He halted as he thought about starting a substantially different mech design project than his previous works.

ECM mechs were one of the more common auxiliary mechs in larger battles. They could play a variety of useful roles such as cutting off the communications of nearby mech units and preventing ranged mechs from gaining accurate targeting data.

While the Blinding Banshee reduced the demand for such mechs, the former was just a single vessel. She was too fragile for the Larkinsons to bring her closer to the frontlines of any engagement.

In these kinds of situations, a mech closer to the combat units could provide a lot of utility. It was the same kind of argument that justified the addition of the Light Hunter and Signal Bearer models to the Larkinson Army.

"You're thinking about designing a new mech, aren't you? Learning about our ECM capabilities must have set you off." Calabast observantly remarked.

He gave her a rueful smile in response. "You know me too well. Since you're the expert in this field, let me ask you this. What is a good ECM mech?"

"That depends." She replied as she crossed her arms. "There is no single ECM mech configuration that excels in any situation. There are models that perform decently well in a variety of functions. There are models that specialize in blocking communication signals. There are models that can scramble many short-ranged sensor systems. There are even mechs that are best suited to negate the enemy's ECM measures. Before you decide what your ECM mech design should excel at, you should first define its purpose and role on the battlefield."

Ves had been rather sudden about his intentions to design an ECM mech. Starting a new mech design project was a process in itself. Before the Design Department seriously committed to starting a new project, the mech designers had to make sure they did all of their homework!

Trying to come up with a new mech concept related to a specialty that Ves hadn't seriously played around with was quite premature!

"I may know about mechs, but I haven't studied this specialized mech type in depth." He plainly admitted to Calabast. "Help me out here. Give me suggestions. Since our upcoming design round revolves around commercial mech designs, I want to come up with a good ECM mech concept that can achieve a high sales volume."

"That is going to be a challenge." The spymaster said as she led Ves to one of her offices aboard the espionage ship.

Once they entered a private compartment where they could discuss matters behind closed doors, Calabast activated her desk terminal and projected a few examples of existing ECM mech models.

"This is a selection of second-class mech models that are commonly sold in Davute and other markets. As far as I know, each of them are popular because they offer the highest performance at acceptable prices. They're not the most-efficient mech models, but customers can count on them to do their jobs without fail. Specific models also come with highly desirable advantages granted by their mech designers, who are often teams of Masters."

Calabast presented a handful of mainstream mech models that had recently been released in the Red Ocean. Not only were they designed with local materials and production limitations in mind, they also benefited from the specialties of two to five collaboration Master Mech Designers!

Such amazing mechs comprise the dominant products in any mech market, not just the one for ECM mechs.

Under ordinary circumstances, Ves didn't need to think about competing with these huge sellers directly. Master Mech Designers never completely crowded out the mech market. They often priced their mechs higher in order to reflect their value and effectiveness, so mechs that offered inferior performance still had a place as long as they weren't overpriced.

However, the Red Ocean's mech market was anything but normal right now. The concentration of elite mech designers, the difficulty in procuring resources and the lack of stability in most regions led to abnormal conditions that made it much more difficult for younger mech designers to start their own businesses in the new frontier!

Just the fact that most independent mech designers simply weren't able to buy the majority of resources needed to produce mechs had stifled the ecosystem at the bottom of the mech industry!

Ambitious Apprentices and Journeymen had little choice but to join a larger organization in order to practice their craft. Without any connections and backing, it was far too difficult for them to get started!

Ves had already taken these challenges into account when he planned out his commercial mech design projects. He was confident that his design philosophy and the promise of actively fostering the growth of mech pilots might be enough to get his foot in the door.

However, the market for ECM mechs was not as easy to enter compared to the market for ordinary combat mechs.

For one, Ves wasn't specialized in this field. None of the lead designers in the Design Department excelled in ECM systems either!

While Ves recalled that a few assistant mech designers had chosen to excel in this area, he wasn't sure about involving them to a significant degree.

At the very least, he and his fellow Journeymen needed to do the heavy lifting.

Ves and Calabast spent a bit of time on swapping their opinions on the mainstream mech models that were popular in the Red Ocean.

Calabast brought a particular line of ECM mechs to his attention.

"The Xaxu Specter line sold by Tiamon Dynamics is often used as the reference that all ECM mechs should be measured against in Krakatoa. It's a collection of highly similar mechs sold by a large mech company called Tiamon Dynamics."

Ves already utilized his implant to call up basic information on the mech company and its lead designer.

Tiamon Dynamics was led by a single Master Mech Designer called Parian Hao.

Interestingly enough, Parian Hao was not a man or a woman anymore. Their exact gender was unclear, but that did not change the fact that they excelled at designing certain types of mechs!

Though Ves had never heard of them, Master Hao had already developed a notable reputation in the old galaxy and was quickly making a name for themselves in the new frontier.

Having sold off all of their assets in the old galaxy, Master Hao decisively moved their entire mech company and as many willing personnel as they could gather over to the Karlach System in the Red Ocean.

The Karlach System was a port system that was located in a different part of the Krakatoa Middle Zone. It was founded by a different group of pioneering organizations and directly competed against the Davute System.

According to their record, Master Parian Hao specialty was Signal Fidelity Amplification.

Ves wasn't sure what that exactly meant. From the brief description he read, he found out that Master Hao's best products were their communication mechs.

The communication mechs sold by Tiamon Dynamics were so good at communication that they were able to keep their channels online even if they were deployed on highly active and confusing planets!

They were essential products for any mech force that sought to explore dangerous planets and hazardous star fields.

While there were starships that could do better in this regard, it was quite impressive for small and compact communication mechs to be able to keep talking to each other under a variety of difficult circumstances.

Calabast did not highlight these particular offerings of Tiamon Dynamics, though.

She instead directed his attention to the Xaxu Specter line of ECM mechs.

The reading material on these mechs was surprisingly large.

"The Xaxu Specter models designed in collaboration with Master Parian Hao and Master Rievan Miller come in over fifty different current variants." Calabast revealed. "They all revolve around the same idea of an ECM mech that is good at maintaining friendly communications while simultaneously interfering with enemy communications. The variants just appeal to customers with slightly different needs."

That was an understatement. Ves was completely dazzled by the sheer amount of variants that Master Hao and Master Miller published around a single base model!

There were variants that specialized in different functions. One excelled in jamming at short range. Another excelled breaking enemy stealth systems.

There were also variants that differed by the environment they were meant to operate. There were Xaxu Specter variants that were optimized for spaceborn, aerial and landbound deployment. The pair of Masters had even released variants that operated best on heavy gravity planets and in amphibian environments!

If that wasn't enough, each of these specialized variants were further differentiated by their price categories. There were models that were priced for the mid-ranged market, the premium market and the super-luxury premier market!

The latter category was special as customers could directly approach Tiamon Dynamics to design customized variants of their ultra luxury purchases!

Stars practically spun in front of his eyes as Ves briefly became overwhelmed by Tiamon Dynamic's expansive market approach.

The mech company did not care at all about the fact that it sold fifty different versions of the same base model!

Its manufacturing complexes could easily switch from producing one variant to another variant. The different Xaxu Specter variants were mostly the same anyway. The Masters had taken great care in keeping as many components identical as possible.

The way that Tiamon Dynamics conducted business was a noteworthy example to Ves. While he wasn't sure if he wanted his Living Mech Corporation to adopt a similar business model, he could certainly recognize the merits to offering so many choices to a customer base.

Once Ves got over the sheer amount of variants developed by Hao, Miller and their humongous design teams, he studied the most normal and balanced Xaxu Specter variant in greater detail.

Chapter 3780 - Disgusting Market Behavior

Ves gained a few insights as he studied the most generic mid-range spaceborn Xaxu Specter variant.

It was not without reason that it happened to be the most popular variant of its line according to the public sales figures.

Calabast provided Ves with her own understanding of this mech model. "No matter the version, the Xaxu Specters are designed to be a one-stop solution for any mech force that is looking to supplement their units with a communication mech and an ECM mech. The variant you are studying right now is an all-rounder that might not perform a specific function as well as the other variants, but can always be counted upon to do a good job in all of the expected roles."

In other words, a mech force could never go wrong with buying a Xaxu Specter. The performance of the balanced variants were not quite industry leading but came close enough that the shortcomings could be forgiven.

Any leader could plug them into any given mech company and be confident that the troops could count on the additional services.

Picky customers did not have to settle for the default choices. If they wanted a Xaxu Specter that performed better, they could opt to buy the premium or the premier variants that were targeted towards Tiamon Dynamics' more discerning customer base.

"These variants are a big reason why the Xaxu Specter line is so dominant in the market for ECM mechs." Ves figured out. "They are directly taking away market share that could have been claimed by ECM mech models that excel in different areas!"

There were plenty of mech designers who put ECM mech models in their product catalogs.

That didn't mean they sold well.

Marketing, reputation, access, pricing and many other factors determined whether they became successful.

The annoying part about the Xaxu Specter line was that it covered so many different niches that alternative mech models had to fight an uphill battle in order to get noticed!

Ves glanced up and stared into Calabast's eyes.

It wasn't a coincidence that she had brought out the Xaxu Specters as an example. She had directly introduced him to his biggest and most formidable competitor.

If he still went through with his intention to design a commercial ECM mech, then he could not get around this massive market behemoth!

Although Tiamon Dynamics market presence wasn't as strong in the other middle zones, diverting his business to those places was no good solution.

The dominant market players based in the other zones weren't complacent. Just like Master Parian Hao, they also published their own fantastic works and carved out a place in their respective regions.

No matter where the LMC sold his products, they would always have to overcome a mech similar to the Xaxu Specter!

Given this circumstance, Ves might as well measure his work against this mainstream mech model.

When he pulled up the spec sheets and examined their performance, his confidence soon deflated to an extent.

"Tiamon Dynamics is too entrenched in the local economy." Ves remarked. "The mech company's production costs are lower than many lesser market players. It has to be part of a larger alliance or interest group. Otherwise, I can hardly imagine how it is able to sell mechs that perform so well at rates that are highly affordable."

Even if Masters such as Parian Hao adhered to the industry standard of pricing their products fairly, the problem was that the current mech market was anything but normal in the Red Ocean.

The constrained supply of resources meant that many companies had to buy them at inflated prices, if they could obtain the necessary materials at all. This in turn meant that they could not earn a profit unless they priced their mechs 30 percent, 40 percent or even 100 percent higher than normal!

This meant that companies like Tiamon Dynamics that had developed good relationships with resource suppliers could earn a profit by selling superior mech models at disgustingly cheap prices!

The best part about it was that the most successful mech companies didn't break the unwritten rules of the mech industry while they were at it! They weren't selling their products at a loss so the MTA could not easily interfere with their market behavior.

"This isn't fair!"

Ves' face grew ugly as he figured out the actual strategies of the biggest players in the mech market.

"The Red Ocean's mech market has only been established for a few years. The regional mech markets in the newer zones are even younger. This means that every brand has to start from scratch and that no mech designer or mech line has achieved an unshakeable status in any of the markets as of yet. As long as these players move quickly to become as dominant as possible in the early years, they can successfully translate their early leads into near-permanent monopolies or oligopolies!"

It was a simple scheme, but Ves could see how it could ensure that mech designers such as Master Hao maintained an enduring advantage in their chosen markets!

In fact, Tiamon Dynamics was already halfway towards becoming the overlord when it came to selling the definitive ECM mechs in the Krakatoa Middle Zone.

While the sales volumes weren't that impressive at the moment, all of this would certainly change once the region became more developed and when a lot more colonies rose up. The increase in population base and industrial activity would definitely spark a lot more conflict, the demand for ECM mechs would certainly skyrocket!

Which model would these new customers proceed to buy? The chances were great that they would look at what sold best in their particular region and proceed to follow the crowd!

The majority couldn't be wrong. If the Xaxu Specter line happened to be the highest-selling ECM mech in Krakatoa, then they would definitely be good purchases!

In order to make sure that companies such as Tiamon Dynamics solidified its dominant market position, they did not hesitate to play dirty in order to grab as much market share as possible!

They did not even let off the lower end of the market where Apprentices and Journeymen ordinarily provided their services!

"Master Hao shouldn't be the only ambitious market player who is trying to build a kingdom in the mech market."

Ves looked up a few databases and confirmed that this pattern was pretty much universal in every settled zone of the Red Ocean.

The mech market was too primitive and underdeveloped, which made them vulnerable to abusive competitive behavior.

The market dynamics would probably smooth out in a decade or two. By then, the dominant players became sure in their own kingdoms and no longer needed to fight for every percentage of market share.

"I can't wait that long."

The Larkinson Clan was constantly short of money and needed to make a lot of big investments in the future in order to sustain its growth.

Upgrading the Blinding Banshee to a more ideal state cost upwards of 30,000 MTA credits.

Selling mechs in the Yeina Star Cluster could help with earning the necessary money needed to pay for this investment, but the Blinding Banshee was hardly the only capital ship that was starting to show her age!

Ves thought about all of the other upgrades he wanted to implement throughout his fleet.

"The Spirit of Bentheim needs to renew her production lines and obtain a superfab. The Gorgoneion needs better power reactors and shield generators. The Graveyard needs to replace her complete salvage operation. The Andrenidae needs better and more diverse mining mechs. The Dragon's Den needs high-end lab machines. The Vivacious Wal and the Discentibus both need stronger hull plating. The Diligent Ovenbird needs to upgrade both of her ovens."

The only ship in the Larkinson fleet that didn't urgently require upgrades was the Wild Torch!

The fleet carrier that Ves and Ketis managed to win in a past contest still performed well even if her former owners stripped a few valuable ship systems before handing her over.

That still left Ves with nine whole capital ships that all required money in order to fund their refits!

The cost of upgrading all of those hulls heavily varied depending on what Ves was willing to put on the shopping list.

However, if Ves was willing to spend 30,000 MTA credits per capital ship, then Ves had to get his hands on at least 270,000 MTA credits in order to pay for all of the overhauls!

"This sum still isn't enough to bring our fleet up to standard!"

An acceptable superfab in his eyes cost at least 40,000 MTA credits. Perhaps he might get a cheaper machine if he was willing to buy second-hand, but even then it would not be cheap!

Was Ves willing to settle for just one of them? Probably not! He would probably want to buy multiple ones to make it easier to produce a lot of high-quality mechs.

That in turn required the clan to pay for other upgrades. At the very least, the Spirit of Bentheim needed to acquire much more expensive power reactors in order to keep the superfabs running!

Those weren't cheap either!

"I can't forget about the combat carriers as well..."

While the sub-capital ships were not as important to the clan, it was still essential to make sure they did not fall behind. Perhaps the cost of upgrading a single one of them was not as much, but their numbers were bound to balloon in the future!

Calabast had been observing him for a while now and clearly noticed his distress.

"You can do it, Ves. The Xaxu Specter is a formidable ECM mech, but it is not an insurmountable obstacle."

"Do you know what you're saying?!" Ves replied in a frustrated tone. "We're talking about pushing back against over fifty different variants designed by a pair of Masters who excel in this field! Master Hao and Master Miller have gained such a crushing advantage in this market that my offering will basically become transparent."

"I am not so certain about that, Ves. Have you forgotten about the pair of communication mechs that you have designed?"

Calabast switched the active projection to a few snapshots that displayed his old Cherub and his new Signal Bearer models.

"If you want to compete against a pair of Master Mech Designers, you might as well go big. Master Hao specializes in designing excellent communication mechs. Still, even their best works cannot maintain their communication channels under the most punishing environments. In addition, they are not capable of maintaining instant communication across light-minutes or light-hours because the cost would be too prohibitive if that is the case. Compared to all of the money and effort that this esteemed Master has to make in order to ensure good communications, you can design much cheaper mechs that can offer superior long-ranged communications that are impossible to crack, intercept or jam!"

Ves widened his eyes. He initially thought that Calabast only intended to give him a bit of advice. Now it seemed that she was doing nothing less than ending the career of a vaunted Master Mech Designer!

"You're crazy, you know that? People usually accuse me of being crazy, but this suggestion of yours is something else. If we do this... we will not only piss off a couple of powerful Master Mech Designer, but also piss off the interest groups behind them! We can't fight against so many powerful organizations!"

"We can and we will." Calabast firmly said. "You're not taking advantage of the opportunities of the Red Ocean. Why bother with entering this dwarf galaxy so early if you don't grasp this chance to achieve a dominant market position? Out of all of the possible commercial products that you enjoy an overwhelming advantage, the humble communication mech is your home ground! Think of the profits you will make. Earning a million MTA credits or 10 million MTA credits a month is not a fantasy anymore. As for offending Tiamon Dynamics and its partners, that's business. If you are truly concerned about this problem, then allocate a portion of that money we are earning to expand our own network of business partners. "

Ves looked at Calabast as if she was speaking an alien language.

She had become completely obsessed with earning as much money as possible!

The reason for pushing him to compete more directly against the dominant market players was clearly evident. Perhaps she had planned out much more extensive upgrades to the Blinding Banshee. The only reason why she left them out was because she was afraid of shocking Ves with the exorbitant price tags.

The only way to pay for all of those luxurious improvements was to earn more money than the Larkinsons had ever earned before!

Upgrading the Blinding Banshee was Calabast's version of Gloriana's handbag!