

## Mech 4391

### Chapter 4391 Proud Customers

Ves initially reacted to Reynard's revelation with pleasant surprise.

It was a coincidence that the Larkinsons share a common root with the Clarkes, however distant and aged it may be. It explained why Ves did not feel as alienated among his hosts than he expected.

Though the shuttle ride did not give him a chance to be surrounded by the Clarkes, Ves did get a glimpse of what the Clarkes were like shortly after stepping foot onto the space station.

His impression of the local security officers and other personnel was that they held themselves in a manner that was not too different from the Larkinsons.

Though there were certainly differences between the two groups, Ves could still buy the theory that they were both off-shoots from the same parent organization.

However, it did not take long for Ves to sober up and realize that whatever the Larkinson Clan and the Clarke Clan had in common was too superficial to claim any kinship.

The New Rubarth Empire was a vast and enormous first-rate superstate that was home to more citizens than Ves could count.

It was well-known that Rubarth was not an easy state to live in. Competition was pervasive and many Rubarthans had to do their best to keep up with their peers in order to keep their heads above water.

Even the upper echelon of society could not relax for too long. Newer groups and factions constantly tried to chip away at the foundation of the more established organizations.

The general rule in this powerful state was that the strong should always supplant the weak!

While the New Rubarth Empire did offer enough unity and commission to keep everything together, it was unavoidable that a lot of losers among its citizens.

These people no longer found it viable to remain in their state for one reason or another and had little choice but to go into exile by moving to another state.

Terrans and Rubarthans almost never fled to the smaller first-rate states. This was because the latter actively rejected the exiles for fear of getting assimilated from within.

This left the Terrans and Rubarthans with little choice but to move to the lesser and much poorer states.

In general, the greater the trouble, the further they moved away.

Ves didn't know too much about the mythical Larkinson Ancestor who relied on his own strength to found the Larkinson Family, but it was not difficult to figure out that this historical figure had incurred a lot of heat.

There was no other compelling reason for the Larkinson Ancestor to run all the way to the border of human space!

The Clarke Clan had it much easier in comparison.

As Ves used his implant to get himself up to speed of its history, it turned out that whatever setbacks drove the Clarkes out of Rubarth over 3 centuries ago wasn't as serious. The Clarke Clan eventually settled down in the galactic heartland that was still close enough to humanity's core region.

This also meant that the Clarke Clan hadn't degenerated as badly as the Larkinsons and the other founders of the Bright Republic.

Exiles flowed out of the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire all the time. The outflow was just as enormous and the inflow if the sources were accurate.

The general rule upheld by both first-rate superstates was that any of their citizens that turned into a fugitive or exile no longer had the right to call themselves Terran or Rubarthan.

Neither the Larkinsons nor the Clarkes retained any official ties to the New Rubarth Empire! The powerful state already severed those ties as soon as the original exiles crossed the border!

Nothing was absolute, though. Ves had once heard that the Rubarthans still maintained secret networks of exiled groups in order to collect resources, gather intelligence and generally keep an eye on the other parts of human space.

The Larkinsons had nothing to do with that, so Ves never spared much thought towards the New Rubarth Empire.

"It's a coincidence that we are both connected to Rubarth, however distant our ties may be." Ves eventually replied. "I suppose it will certainly make it easier for us to understand each other, but that is all. A large number of groups based in second-rate states can all claim ancestry from the first-rate superstates."

"That is true, I suppose." Reynard admitted.

The tour from above continued for another twenty minutes before the tourist shuttle descended in the center of the public area of the Armidia.

Ves and his family stepped out in a vast indoor urban environment that shared a passing resemblance to Dawn City of the Vivacious Wal.

The overall premise of Armidia was the same as the brightest city of the Larkinson Clan. As Ves gazed at the pristine avenues beyond the landing zone, he observed many groups of well-dressed visitors.

A significant proportion of them had brought their children along, and that was for good reason because the Armidia offered a lot of kid-friendly destinations.

There were zoos, aquariums, mech museums, gaming centers and of course shopping malls that catered to all kinds of people.

There were frequent patrols of lightly-armed security officers who all bore the gray-and-sky blue colors of the Clarke Clan.

The amount of patrols were rather high, but their modest outfits and equipment easily allowed them to remain unobtrusive.

However, what truly attracted Ves' attention was not the venues nor the uniformed Clarkes on foot.

It was the small number of mechs that quietly patrolled the public spaces of Armidia.

Ves recognized their models. They all happened to be peacekeeper mechs from a highly familiar mech ecosystem.

"It turns out that your clan is my customer!"

Reynard Clarke chuckled. "That is true. We have come to depend greatly on the models of the LaVoi mech ecosystem and especially the Pacifier model to minimize disturbances within our common spaces. It is not just our Clarke Clan that have embraced your work. Our other coalition partners have sold their previous law enforcement mechs and switched over to the LaVoi mech ecosystem as soon as they became acquainted with the more superior line of mechs."

Though Ves was aware that the Larkinson Clan's collaboration with the Voiken Family resulted in a huge amount of sales, the Red Ocean was still a big market.

He did not expect to encounter his commercial products in use outside of the Davute region so soon, but on second thought it was not too strange to see Pacifiers in the wild.

The Pacifier was one of his breakout successes. Its capabilities were unmatched by any competitor, which meant that not a single competitor could match its impressive value proposition!

The result of having a product that was clearly more valuable than anything else in the market meant that demand for it was unlikely to fade unless the competition finally stepped up and presented a viable alternative.

Until then, the amount of Pacifier mechs in circulation would continue to grow until they showed up in pretty much every second-class population center!

As the group stepped onto an avenue and moved in the direction of a shopping mall, Ves curiously asked questions about the Clarke Clan's experiences with his products.

"How satisfied are you with the Pacifiers?"

"We are very satisfied with your work." Reynard did not hesitate to respond. "It is particularly handy that there are many variants available for sale. Policing a space station is different from policing a city on a planet, so we have particular demands for our internal units. Honestly speaking though, we would have bought your Pacifiers even if they only came in a single version. The glow that each of them bears is just too useful in our line of work."

"Have you employed the glow of the Pacifier model many times?"

"We did at the start. You have to know that we usually open ourselves up in locations that are frequented by a wide variety of people, many of which have built up a large amount of stress, frustration and more. These individuals are not always capable of demonstrating self-control. Outbursts are unavoidable in our line of work."

Ves nodded in understanding. "It is brave of you to welcome so many visitors to your space station. I can understand that the need for effective peacekeeping and pacification solutions is great."

"The Pacifier model was not as famous or common as today, so not many of our guests were aware of what it was capable of. What we fear the most is riots and unbridled violence within our own hull, but we are cognizant that if we are too heavy handed in our attempts to enforce our rules, we will drive too many visitors away from our hull."

"This is where the Pacifier comes in, right?"

"Correct." Reynard smiled. "Your mech possesses the unique ability to cool people's tempers and reduce the impulses that could lead them to commit violence. The glow of your Pacifier model hasn't always worked as well as we hoped, but we successfully used your mechs to prevent the majority of conflicts from escalating any further. That alone has saved us many MTA credits in physical damage and reputational damage."

"That is what my mechs are for. They exist to solve the problems of our customers. I am happy to hear that your adoption of our Pacifier mech line has contributed to your clan's prosperity. Since you are so happy with our Pacifiers, have you opted to purchase our other products as well?"

"We have yet to do so, patriarch." Reynard Clarke shook his head. "I can tell you that this matter is frequently brought up in our high-level meetings, but we are not in a hurry to adopt more of your work. We are already more than satisfied with our existing mechs, many of which are designed by our own team of mech designers. We don't want to put our own people out of business, and it is essential for them to receive the practice they need to further their skills."

"I can understand the need to prioritize your own mech designers. Only they know your circumstances and your needs the most. They are also essential to designing your own expert mechs and other specific machines. However, you should also have a sense of proportion. The mech industry outside of your small coalition is constantly pushing technology to greater heights. Many of your peers and rivals will not hesitate to embrace the latest trends so that they can get more work done with fewer mechs. If you are not careful enough, then your clan and coalition might find out that you have fallen behind in the most brutal fashion."

The relations manager of the Clarke Clan briefly shrugged. "Our elders and leaders all keep track of what is happening in the mech community. The battle that your alliance has recently fought in the Magair Middle Zone is just one of many cases that have shown us where mechs are heading towards. I am certain that our clan will make the necessary adjustments in time, though I cannot promise that we will be purchasing your other products."

As the two continued to talk, Ves gained a good understanding of the Clarke Clan as a customer.

The Clarkes definitely loved the Pacifier mechs for how extensively they made Pentahall Station safer, but they did not have any other urgent needs that necessitated the acquisition of other living mech models.

Since the Clarkes were also active in the mech industry, they would rather support the inferior works of their own mech designers than embrace superior mechs sold by competing mech companies!

The Clarke Clan therefore prioritized control over performance. This strategy worked as long as the gap between their own mech designers and external competitors wasn't too exaggerated.

Unfortunately for the Clarkes, Ves believed that it was inevitable for this gap to widen in the future.

He was constantly progressing his career and he felt it would not take much longer for him to grasp his next breakthrough opportunity!

### **Chapter 4392 Consumerism**

Lukewarm customers or not, Ves still owed the Clarke Clan and the rest of the Pentahull Coalition a lot of gratitude for embracing the Pacifier mech line.

He was more than happy to see his existing products serving their intended purposes. It always brought a smile to his face to see his own work getting used in the ways that he envisioned during the design process.

He did not come here for a meet-and-greet with his customers, though. He satisfied his curiosity concerning the Clarke Clan's use of the Pacifier mech line and proceeded to direct his attention back to what mattered the most to his family at the moment.

Shopping.

Everyone except Ves quickly turned into shopaholics as soon as they stepped inside an upscale mall that catered to the more monied clientele of Pentahall Station.

The entire place exuded both class and energy. Much of the architecture blended modern aesthetics including the use of bare metal panels with classical features such as columns and pediments.

It gave the impression that the mall was an exclusive bastion for the new aristocrats that rose to success after establishing themselves in the Red Ocean.

The amount of traffic in the mall was much lower than elsewhere on the Armidia because of one important reason.

The prices were too damn high!

"Papa. Papa. Papa." Aurelia tugged at her father's pants. "I want to buy a present for Clixie. Will you buy this cat bed for me? It's so cute!"

"Errr, let's not be too hasty, my dear. That cat bed costs 279 MTA credits. Do you know how much money that is? Our clan can produce nearly the same amount of Pacifier mechs for that money! If you compare the value of a small mech battalion and this fluffy pink bed for pets, which one do you think is worth more?"

"The pink cat bed!"

Ves wanted to palm his face.

"Wow! Mama, look at this!" Andraste excitedly ran in front of a toy store that featured a display where autonomous mech figures battled it out against each other on a miniature battlefield. "That's Cristine Oxton's Dark Witch mech from the latest episode! Can I buy it, please?"

Gloriana bent down and stared at the mech figurine that was clearly set up to be the protagonist of the mock battle taking place in the display area.

The mech figurines were all based on fictional mechs that featured prominently in a popular mech action franchise that was called the Hopewell Cinematic Universe.

The HCU was over 2000 years old and was created by an ancient clan of the Greater Terran United Confederation, which meant that it actually came into existence before mechs even existed on a wide scale!

While humanity had created many popular and successful media franchises over its long and storied history, few of them had the ability to maintain a degree of popularity and profitability that was as consistent as the HCU.

The owners of the HCU had always managed to keep their franchise alive by sticking to a tried-and-true formula of bringing out new shows, games and merchandise that revolved around the same kind of stories.

The tone of its main shows were always positive, humorous, optimistic and generally exciting without displaying an excessive amount of violence.

Of course, the HCU also received a lot of criticism due to its frequent habit of recycling plots, its heavy use of cliches and its unwillingness to enact any major permanent changes to its setting.

However, that commitment to stability was also the main reason why the HCU managed to remain one of the successful media franchises for 2000 straight years!

Children especially loved the HCU due to its focus on presenting plenty of cool and heroic characters.

Gloriana had also spent a lot of time admiring the most perfect characters and mechs of HCU when she was younger.

She fell off after she started to study mech design and work with mechs in reality, but she always retained a soft spot for the HCU.

It was not a coincidence that Andraste became a fan of Cristine Oxtin, the protagonist of an actively running kid's show called the Terra Guardians.

Cristine in the show came across as a sassy and wise-cracking mech champion who had a heart of gold. She was a typical example of a female lead of the HCU, and many critics faulted her for being too perfect.

That was just the way that Gloriana liked it. Even the protagonist's mechs were just a bit too powerful and beautiful compared to the mechs piloted by the other characters of the same show.

"Okay, pumpkin." The young mother said as she barely threw a glance at the projected price tag hovering above the active toy. "I will only allow you to buy a single toy from this store. Are you sure you want to buy this Dark Witch figurine?"

"This is enough!"

"Alright, then. Let us head inside so we can secure your little treat!"

Gloriana soon paid 9999 MTA credits to secure the overpriced Dark Witch Prestige Edition mech figurine!

Ves grew more and more exasperated with the exaggerated spending of his family. His wife and children wanted to buy luxury products that did not do anything to boost their capabilities or enhance the strength of the Larkinson Clan.

It was one thing if they spent thousands of MTA credits on a powerful new implant or secured an exclusive masterclass with one of the foremost experts in human space.

Yet instead of spending the clan's hard-earned money on productive goods and services, they instead splurged on unnecessary luxuries that only mildly enriched their lives!

Ves felt sick at the huge amount of money flowing out of his bank account. The Larkinson Clan's earning power might be a lot greater than in the past, but he still couldn't stomach how much the shops charged for all of these so-called exclusive and limited edition products!

They weren't even masterworks, but that didn't seem to matter to his spendthrift wife.

The few times Ves mustered up the courage to approach Gloriana and encourage her to rein in her impulses, she threw him a sour look.

"Do not interrupt my fun." She quietly hissed at him. "You were the one who insisted on dragging our family to Pentahull Station. The least you can do is compensate me for the enormous risks you have taken with your willful decisions!"

"Uhm, Gloriana—"

"—SHUT. UP."

"...Okay."

Their children took no notice of the tension between their parents and happily ran from one colorful store to another while getting immersed in all kinds of toys and gadgets.

The family proceeded to buy an increasing amount of expensive goods. An increasing amount of floating bags began to accompany them. Each of them contained carefully packaged toys, clothes, accessories and other knick knacks.

"Ves! Doesn't this smell great to you?" Gloriana grinned as she stood before a rack of women's perfumes. "I usually stick to the tried-and-true Hexer brands, but the scents from Selber have always received amazing reviews. I never knew how good they were because Selber is too small and exclusive of a company to expand in the regions where I have resided. I am not letting go of this opportunity to expand my perfume reserves! Now tell me which one attracts you the most."

Ves looked reluctant. "I already love the way you smell, honey. I don't see the need for you to buy more scents."

"You don't understand." Gloriana shook her head. "Let me do this, then."

She turned around and requested a number of samples from the smart display case.

Soon enough, she picked up a stick and waved it in front of her husband's face.

Ves immediately became entranced. His head couldn't help but chase after the cool and breezy scent.

His wife did not look too impressed, though. "Hmm. Not good enough. Let me try this other formula."

This time, she waved a stick that exuded a stronger scent that reminded Ves of a blooming flower bed that was frequented by insects looking for nectar.

"Now that is better. What do you think about this, Ves?"

The third stick almost excited him as the scent drifting to his nose stimulated his passion and desire! He imagined that he had turned into a barbarian that had just broken open the gates of a city that was already starting to burn!

Gloriana looked satisfied with the reaction induced by one of Selber's scents.

"This is it, then. Selber definitely deserves its reputation!"

That was another 3499 MTA credits down the drain.

It did not surprise Ves at all that his wife chose to end their shopping trip at her favorite type of store.

It was the store where renowned luxury brands sold their handbags among other products!

While the children made admiring noises as they browsed the luxury goods placed in the kids section, Gloriana headed straight towards the place where all women liked to be. The exclusive stands and displays showing off a small but highly exclusive collection of bags instantly captured her attention.

Gloriana soon began to chat with the saleswoman while also inspecting the numerous bags available at this store branch.

Ves, who stood forgotten at the side, felt increasingly more queasy at the escalating price tags of the bags that his wife was considering.

"Honey." He said as he gently tapped her arm. "There is a Hoenbach store next door that offers bags that look just as good as these ones. Why don't we go there instead so that I can treat you with a new addition to your collection?"

Both Gloriana and the saleswoman looked scandalized at him after they heard his request.

His wife quickly snorted in disgust. "I am already over Hoenbach. Don't mention this mediocre brand to me again. Hoenbach is too cheap for me these days. Now that our clan has grown wealthier, I need to step up my game and show that I am an even stronger woman of means. Pop Cult is my latest home now! Look at how cute this mini handbag looks! It only costs 14,999 MTA credits, so it's a bargain!"

Ves almost passed out after he heard how much the store charged for a bag that was smaller than his hand!

How could these bloodsucking companies have the courage to charge so much for a product that was not even practical enough to serve as an adequate container for items?!

He briefly recalled all of the handbags that Gloriana had bought over the past five years.

She started out her collection of high-end bags by purchasing the Hoenbach Hoenbach Hand-stitched Two-Toned Lavender-and-White Puelmer Leather Giarna Handbag for 'just' 120 MTA credits.

She came back to the mall in Davute the next year and treated herself to the Hoenbach Seamless Quilted Off-Black Carminae Leather Sutele Briefcase that sold for 999 MTA credits.

Ves had succeeded in restraining her for a couple of years, but last year he failed and allowed Gloriana to buy an exclusive First Issue of the Isolde Zhu Adagio Oiled Puelmer Leather Versailles Handbag for 4999 MTA credits!

Anyone who possessed a modicum of logic could clearly deduce the pattern of this brief history of purchases.

His wife kept spending more and more money to feed her bag addiction!

"Look, Ves. I've decided! This soft and velvety tote bag must be mine. I will not miss the opportunity to purchase the Founder Edition of this adorable bag. This is the only one this store has received. There are only three of them in the entire Krakatoa Middle Zone!"

Ves practically blanked out by the time that Gloriana confirmed the purchase of the Pop Cult Ten Star Radiance Nunser Suede Tote Bag.

His wallet shrunk by as much as 29,999 MTA credits at this time!

As the beast finally sated her desires, Ves was too afraid to look at his bank account.

Though his clan had enormous sums of money at its disposal, much of it was reserved for upkeep and infrastructural investments.

Ves did not have that much of a personal allowance that he could spend freely on whatever he wished!

"I hope it hasn't gone in the red..."

### **Chapter 4393 Good Parenting**

"It's sleepytime."

"Miaow..."

Clixie yawned as her slender body curled up on the new pink cat bed that Aurelia bought for the feline.

Though the bed looked a little whimsical, its quality and performance were the real deal. Clixie not only felt as if she was resting on a cloud, but the bed also pulsed in a rhythmic manner, making her feel as if she was resting in a pile of siblings.

However, the pink cat bed that the Larkinsons bought for 279 MTA credits did not completely satisfy all of her needs.

The designers of the product had taken a lot into account, but they did not know everything about cats, particularly ones as remarkable and special as Clixie.

"Miaow miaow..."

The cat grew increasingly less satisfied. After a few minutes, she rose from her bed and jumped onto the bedroom floor before making her way over to the much larger hotel bed.

Two little girls wearing adorable pajamas had already fallen into slumber. Clixie jumped onto the bed. She lovingly nuzzled Andraste's cheeks yet eventually settled her body next to Aurelia's sleeping form.

Even asleep, Aurelia unconsciously reached out and embraced Clixie against her chest. Love radiated from both of them, causing the girl and the cat to enjoy a much better rest than any bed could provide.

Inside another bedroom, Ves knelt down next to a smaller bed where Marvaine blissfully slept.

The father tenderly stroked his son's hair and recalled all of the fun they had throughout the day.

The tour through the Armidia would never have been as enjoyable and fulfilling to him if he visited alone.

Ves viewed Pentahull Station from a different perspective after getting infected by the curiosity and innocence of his children.

Their giggles and laughter caused him to take a closer look at subjects that he would have previously passed over. Their frequent questions also forced him to think deeper so that he could properly formulate his thoughts to his little munchkins.

Ves rarely felt more alive than he did today. He felt almost just as good as getting involved in battle or putting his life at risk.

"I guess parenting is also a struggle in a sense."

The responsibility to shape and guide his children's various views and opinions was a heavy one. Ves knew that each of the lessons that he taught to Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine would have a profound influence on how they behaved in the future.

Though it was impossible for Ves to completely control the growth of his children, he hoped that they would still hold onto the principles and values that he attempted to plant in their psyches.

"I love you, my son." He whispered as he leaned in to kiss his youngest child's forehead.

His brown-haired kid seemed to smile even as he was immersed in his dreams.

Ves quietly left the bedroom and entered the living room of his hotel suite.

He moved over to the reinforced windows which provided him with an impressive view of a portion of the public space of the Armidia and beyond. The bright and colorful lights of the expansive internal city conveyed a sense of vitality even when many activities had stopped.

The nightlife of the hull under the control of the Clarke Clan was not as wild and exuberant as in the other sections of Pentahull Station, but Ves enjoyed the peace and comfort.

He knew that many other Larkinsons on shore leave were undoubtedly having a good time at the moment.

His wife appeared a few minutes later and moved to his side. A hint of the expensive new scent wafted from her body and tickled his nose, causing him to feel warm and in need of companionship.

He reached out and embraced her, causing them to stand shoulder-to-shoulder as they both looked out into the peaceful city at rest.

"Pentahull Station was truly a marvel of engineering." Ves remarked. "Not only that, but the members of the Pentahull Coalition have done a great job at bringing everything to life. There were many times where I hardly noticed any differences between the public spaces of the Armidia and the city districts of Kotor City."

Gloriana leaned her head onto Ves, allowing him to enjoy a scent priced at c3499 MTA credits a bottle to a greater degree.

"You sound envious."

"I guess I am." Ves said. "Don't get me wrong. Our Vivacious Wal is also great and we have more than enough Larkinsons to fill her up, but the problem is that it has rarely opened her cities to the public. When I was walking through the streets down below earlier in the day, I became fascinated by how so many different people from so many different cultures and regions found ways to get along with each other. I won't claim that everything on this space station is done well, but I feel like our Larkinson Clan is not diverse enough to my taste."

Gloriana softly let out a snort. "You're just saying that because you enjoy novelty. Our clan hasn't added a new sub-culture since the Heavensworders came onboard, so a part of you must be feeling that nothing much has changed. The reality is much different. The Larkinsons have grown so much over the past five years that we are all better than we have ever been in the past. We consolidated our gains and we settled into our new stations of life. Each of us are already incredibly content in our lives. Just because we haven't made any gains in this area doesn't mean that there is a problem. We are all doing well for ourselves."

He sighed. "I suppose you're right. I'm happy that we have provided a great growing environment for our children. They don't lack for much. I would have loved to grow up under the same circumstances."

"If you think that is the case, why are you trying to move away from that?" His wife began to frown. "We had a great life in Davute. Instead of extending that, you put a stop to it by dragging us all into your Trailblazer Expedition. We will soon be knee-deep into lawless territory where hostile pioneers and awful aliens will seek to threaten the lives of our children at every step of the way. That does not sound like good parenting."

Ves let go of his wife and sighed. "I have already explained myself plenty of times. I would have loved nothing more than to allow our children to grow up in a pampered environment where they would not lack for anything, but the outcome of that would be to raise a bunch of spoiled and pampered brats who don't know anything about how to survive in this harsh and unforgiving cosmos."

"I don't agree with that, Ves. You grew up in a peaceful rural planet for the most part, but you have taken to the new frontier like a fish to water. Our children will be put in an even better position as long as you teach them what

you know about navigating the cosmos as you see it. We can also hire other tutors to supplement their learning."

"It's not enough, Gloriana. Being told how the cosmos works is not as good as experiencing it yourself. I have always believed that the environment we grow up in shapes the way we behave in the future. Children who have grown up in peaceful and orderly societies are best suited to operate in those kinds of environments. I am not confident that our kids will be in the best position to attain success in human space, particularly in a wild and turbulent place as the Red Ocean."

"Is that your justification to expose our children to dangerous situations?"

Ves slightly shook his head. "You only see the risks but not the rewards. A decade ago, I shed my naivety in the most brutal fashion after getting thrown head-long into the ugly side of humanity by getting drafted into the military. Though I still resent how I had no choice in the matter, I learned a huge amount of lessons during those turbulent years that were vital to my subsequent success. Even if I possessed other advantages at the time, I would have never been able to lead my clan to the point where we could threaten colonies like Pima Prime in so little time."

Gloriana furrowed her brows. "I cannot believe that I am saying this, but you are being too hard on our babies. They are too young and vulnerable to handle the pressures that you are about to incur with your new expedition. Instead of letting them enjoy their childhoods to the fullest, you are planning to accelerate their maturation process and have them learn hard and brutal lessons that you only became exposed to when you were already an adult. Doesn't that sound unfair?"

Ves didn't see it that way.

"No. What I consider unfair is that I only got in touch with the truth of how our society and the rest of our cosmos worked far too late in my life. I could have avoided so many detours if I had the wisdom of today back then. I don't want our children to repeat my mistakes. Although it sounds cruel, I think it is better to introduce our children to the harsher realities of our society first-hand. That way, I can be assured that they will always be able to do well once they have grown up and are ready to make their own way in life."

Had he made the right choice? That remained to be seen. He had looked at the society he lived in and did not see much hope of peace.

In fact, the future trend looked bleak. More and more tensions and wars were on the horizon. He wanted his children to be ready to operate in an environment where the rules of the jungle prevailed.

Ves and his family continued on his tour the next day.

They visited several different hulls this time. Though there was nothing wrong with the Armidia, it was only a slice of what Pentahull Station had to offer to its visitors.

Gloriana carried her new tote bag in her arm despite not needing to do so in the first place.

She drew plenty of admiring stares from knowledgeable women along the streets. Some of the bolder ones even attempted to approach and chat with the owner of the Radiance Tote Bag, only for one of the honor guards to step in the way and move the random fan aside.

Ves became surprised by how much reaction the remarkable looking bag evoked among women. Personally, he knew nothing about the brand, it appeared that Pop Cult was an especially famous and prestigious brand among the fashion conscious individuals.

"Pop Cult is trendy at the moment." Gloriana explained to him. "Many fashion brands have entered the Red Ocean market, but not all of them are able to succeed. One of the main criteria that determines their popularity is how well they can get their hands on exotic leather hides. The most exclusive ones come from the major alien races that are exceedingly difficult to defeat in battle. The Big Two doesn't care about preserving their bodies at all, so it is mostly up to the private sector to hunt them down. That is difficult because the puelmer race and the nunser race are both powerful enough to challenge first-raters when they are at their best. This is why my current bag is so expensive."

Ves felt conflicted by this news.

He didn't think there was anything wrong with fighting against two different sentient alien races.

Whether humanity was in the right or in the wrong, the war between their civilizations centered around territory, resources and dominance. Both humans and aliens waged war against each other for those reasons since the beginning of time.

However, to hear that people purposely sought to hunt these powerful aliens down just so that they could skin their prey and sell the hides to well-paying fashion houses was absurd!

#### **Chapter 4394 Discreet**

Each of the hulls that made up Pentahall Station possessed their own charm.

The Silverbore operated by the Travis Group was a commercial and entertainment paradise. The shops and storefronts were much louder while the abundance of casinos provided guests with plenty of ways to indulge themselves.

Of course, Ves and Gloriana did not stick too long on this hull because Silverbore was also infamous for its more grown-up entertainment offerings.

The Otus Reconstructor managed by TCQ Incorporated matched their tastes a lot better. The hull hosted a lot of companies engaged in tech and industry. There were so many more business-to-business activities taking place in this part of Pentahull Station that Ves decided to stick around a bit longer.

Ves contacted TCQ Incorporated and managed to start a process where the LMC would be negotiating with the coalition partner to open up a large mech store.

Aside from that, Ves also visited numerous different material stores and bazaars in order to look for spiritually reactive materials and interesting resources.

Though he did not encounter any of the former, he did pick up a lot of different samples of exotics that might play a useful role in his future projects.

In contrast to the commercial atmospheres of the Silverbore and the Otus Reconstructor, the Samir Ohansa presented a completely different environment.

The architecture was a lot more archaic and traditional. The dress of the people of the Vhunan-Royce Family was a lot more elaborate and ceremonial, almost to the point of drowning out their bodies.

Their extravagant dress code reflects the family's royal roots. There was profligacy and excess in every direction, but it was all dressed up in an aristocratic shell that gave visitors the illusion that they had entered a kingdom that was still stuck in the past.

The prices of most goods and services were ridiculous, but that did not stop people from paying a visit just so they could enjoy a day where they got to pretend to be royalty.

Personally, Ves found the Samir Ohansa to be a completely pretentious place. The Vhunan-Royce Family made little attempts to preserve its dignity. Instead, it commercialized its once-noble background and cheapened its heritage by turning it into a theme park.

Aurelia adored the activities, though!

She had so much fun when she got to dress up as a princess and sit on an oversized throne while being flanked by Clixie and Lucky.

"I decree that every family should have a cat!"

"Miaow!"

"Meow!"

Ves and Gloriana let their kids have their moments of fun, but they left before the representatives of the Vhunan-Royce Family could lobby them any further.

The final hull they visited was the most different of them all. The ReVez II owned by the Bonsai Company was the only one where biotechnology was prevalent.

A part of Ves felt as if he had traveled back to the time where he visited the Life Research Association.

Though the organic architecture, the biomechs and all of the other organic products were substantially different in style, the overall sentiment of the Bonsai Company was still familiar.

Just like the LRA, the Bonsai Company endeavored to popularize biotechnology and present it as a viable alternative to conventional technology.

The ReVez II therefore served as a massive showcase to the value and wonders of bioproducts.

Though Ves had already witnessed similar sights before, the children were completely blown away by the novelty and weirdness of all of the organic tech.

"What is that, papa?"

"That's a beetle that is responsible for manicuring the lawn, Aurelia."

"It looks so funny. Why doesn't the beetle do anything else?"

"It's not an animal, Aurelia. It's a bioproduct. It is bioengineered to do a specific job, so the beetle doesn't have much thoughts aside from executing the instructions that have been bioprogrammed into its genes. The creature is essentially a bot that is made out of organic matter instead of metal. You shouldn't strictly treat it as if it is alive."

His daughter found it difficult to process those words. "I thought life should be respected. Isn't that what you told me, papa?"

"I did, and I still mean it. What I am telling you is that creatures like this that are born and made to serve a specific purpose are already content with their lives. You don't need to show any more regard to them because you will be taking away the reason for their existence."

His girl wasn't as ignorant as the other girls of her age. Her brain started to churn as she deciphered her father's underlying message.

"So I should treat living mechs the same way?"

"Not exactly." Ves slightly shook his head. "There is a difference between these lawn beetles and the living mechs of our clan. The former may be organic, but they have been altered to reduce their autonomy and self-thinking processes as much as possible. It makes little sense to treat them with compassion as they are incapable of appreciating such conduct. Living mechs are different in that they are made for a purpose, but possess enough reasoning and self-awareness to become more than that. They are life forms

with just as much potential as humans, so you must treat them with more respect."

"Oh..."

Perhaps his daughter might not fully understand his meaning right now, but it was enough for him to get her to think. Aurelia needed to be able to form her own opinions on different issues. It didn't matter to Ves whether her daughter agreed or disagreed with him so long as her attitude reflected her own thinking.

Ves and his family encountered a lot of interesting sights, but he did not take the initiative to approach the Bonsai Company in order to conclude any deals.

Director Ranya Wodin and the Larkinson Biotech Institute were already on the job. It was best to leave this matter to the professionals.

Ves heard that many other Larkinsons also had a fruitful time on Pentahull Station.

Ketis and the Swordmaidens spent most of their time challenging foreign warriors in the many arenas of the Silverbore.

Director Samandra Avikon took the initiative to set up a new branch office of the Creation Association among the workshops and factories of the Otus Reconstructor.

Director Calabast and the Black Cats had spread her agents all over Pentahull Station and were no doubt spreading their tentacles in every direction.

Reynard Clarke who continued to lead the tour also presented opportunities to cooperate with the Clarke Clan.

The only problem was that Ves wasn't sure about its angle. The Larkinson Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance did not have any compelling reasons to cooperate. They didn't have any obvious conflicts of interests either.

Though Reynard Clarke brought up the Rubarthan roots of both of their clans, Ves found it ridiculous to rely on this tenuous connection to form the basis of a bond of trust.

It wasn't until the time for departure drew close that Reynard finally spoke more directly to the leader of the Larkinson Clan.

"We have sources that tell us that you and your clan enjoy a close relationship with the MTA." The relations manager spoke in a casual tone.

Ves and his family had returned to the Armidia at this time. The Clarke Clan invited them over to a theater to attend a play centered around the darker days of the Age of Conquest.

"There are more planets in the galaxy than we could ever settle upon. What is the harm in destroying a thousand of them? I will not have our soldiers fight and die on the streets when we can solve our enemy in a much more expedient manner!"

"We are locked in a war of annihilation. Surrender is not an option anymore. From the moment they nuked one of our planets, we can no longer live alongside our enemies in peace. From the moment our first city died, we have entered a race that will not end until the Rubarthans have become relics of the past!"

"Why must you perpetuate this slaughter?! Haven't you killed enough people?! You have slain more humans than any hostile alien race! It turns out that the Seven Apex Races have never been our true opponents. The only enemy that can drive humanity to extinction is humanity itself!"

The show was indeed worth seeing. The actors did an excellent job at portraying the irrational outbursts of emotions that drove many infamous fleet admirals to wipe out billions if not trillions of innocent civilians during the darkest days of the Age of Conquest.

Though Ves and Gloriana were already familiar with the history of this time, their children possessed a much more limited perspective on the Age of Conquest.

The only ways they could learn about the glories and the atrocities of this period was by watching the numerous children shows that took place in this age.

Of course, there weren't that many shows about the Age of Conquest because starships served as the main combat platform for humanity at the time.

The prevailing leaders of human civilization did not wish to glorify warships and tempt more people into obtaining them. It was best to keep them out of sight and put the spotlight on mechs so that the vast majority of humans shifted their obsession to a much smaller and more limited combat platform instead.

This was also why the children found the current theater show so novel. The fantastic actors brought this distant period of human history to life in a much more tangible fashion than what any documentary or book could accomplish.

Aurelia became especially fascinated with the diverse, colorful and extreme personalities of the various leaders depicted in the play.

Ves found it rather odd that Reynard Clarke chose this particular time and place to engage in a more direct conversation.

As the fleet admirals continued to slide into madness with each planet they bombarded into ruin, Ves turned towards the relations manager.

"Our clan does have connections with the MTA. The Living Mech Corporation is our primary source of income. Since our company is deeply involved with mechs, it is only prudent for us to develop friendly ties with our supervisor."

"It is not that remarkable for you to be able to develop closer ties with Survivalist Faction given the mechers that you have met over the years." Reynard said. "However, it is rather puzzling to us that the Transhumanist Faction also decided to turn you into its associate."

"That's not strictly true. I am officially in bed with the Survivalists. The Transhumanists merely see me as an honorary associate." Ves corrected.

"Be that as it may, it is apparent that your R&D activities have aroused their interest."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. His regard for Reynard and the Clarke Clan subtly dropped.

"We don't make a habit of publicizing all of our research, development and design activities. I don't know what you have heard from your sources, but you should be careful about what sort of information you are dealing with. If your clan isn't careful enough, the Transhumanists might pay a visit in order to rectify your situation."

Reynard remained calm despite the warning. "You do not need to worry about us, patriarch. We know how to be discreet. Our Clarke Clan wouldn't have been able to survive up to this day if that wasn't the case."

Ves didn't know what information the Clarke Clan obtained, but it had to be fairly serious for Reynard to talk this way.

Did the Clarke Clan learn about the transcendence glow?

That would be an indication that something had gone horribly wrong! The Transhumanist Faction was supposed to keep it as secret as possible.

Leaking it out was not only bad for Ves, but also the Transhumanists who thought that humanity simply wasn't ready to make use of this enormous invention!

He urgently needed to figure out what the Clarke Clan knew about the Larkinson Clan's many secret projects.

Ves hoped that the situation wasn't as bad as he feared, but if it turned out that a secret as big as the transcendence glow had quietly leaked out to the wider community, then that would cause the biggest upheaval of his life! Everything would change!

### **Chapter 4395 Distant Relations**

What Reynard said put Ves on guard.

He quickly recalled what he knew about the Clarke Clan in order to determine how powerful it was and how much of a threat it posed to the Larkinson Clan.

Ves wasn't too impressed by the Clarke Clan. Though it was earning a lot of income by being a part of the Pentahull Coalition, operating an enormous space station also incurred a huge amount of expenses.

The Clarke Clan's mech forces were all strong and well-equipped, but their quantity and quality did not quite match up to the Larkinson Army.

Ves also estimated that the entire Pentahull Coalition wouldn't be able to match up against the Golden Skull Alliance.

This was because their economic strength was too far apart.

Though the Pentahull Coalition boasted more partners, none of them were particularly big or wealthy. The income they received from exploiting Pentahull Station could only support so much military expansion.

In contrast, the Golden Skull Alliance had managed to earn a huge windfall shortly after entering the Red Ocean.

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers subsequently spent much of their enormous gains on many structural investments that vastly strengthened their economic foundations.

In other words, the Golden Skull Alliance was able to acquire more carrier vessels, field more combat mechs and increase the performance of their hardware!

What was also important to note was that the soldiers of the Golden Skull Alliance also gained crucial combat experience. The Purgatory Campaign along with Operation Saturday Market massively boosted the combat readiness of the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers.

As far as Ves knew, the Pentahull Coalition had never fought a major battle from the moment of its founding.

Its mech pilots mostly fought scuffled against unruly visitors and gangs that sought to extort the coalition, but they had never fought a pitched battle outside of simulations.

The only variable that Ves wasn't sure of was whether Patriarch Reginald Cross could defeat the ace pilot of the Clarke Clan in a duel.

If the latter gained the upper hand, then none of the aforementioned strengths would be of any use anymore!

This was why Ves did not blindly look down at the Clarke Clan even if it was probably weaker on every other front.

Ves would have liked to have Calabast at his side at this time so that he could properly communicate with Reynard Clarke, but he was pretty much on his own at the moment.

He threw a brief glance towards his wife, but she seemed to be completely taken in by the tragedy playing out on the theater stage.

Well, he would just have to rely on himself, just like old times.

As he scrambled to formulate a strategy for this conversation, Ves tried his best to revive his paranoid and Devil Tongue tendencies.

He had admittedly grown rather rusty over the years. He rarely handled these matters in person as he became more and more successful.

Hardly anyone had any reason to call him the Devil Tongue during the time he spent on Davute.

Though Ves initially felt a bit overtaken by the Clarke Clan's abrupt approach, he soon found his cool as he utilized his formidable Spirituality to construct a mask that would allow him to control his expressions.

Reynard most certainly noticed the shift in demeanor. He wouldn't be a good relations manager if he was ignorant of this dynamic.

Right now, Ves and the Clarke Clan were both in a position where they suffered from information asymmetry.

Ves was unsure how many secrets the Clarke Clan had learned. The Clarke Clan in turn may have only obtained scraps of information that didn't reveal too much.

However, even if the Clarkes only received hints of greater news, they could still use their logic to make a lot of guesses and inferences.

It was rather clear that the Transhumanists did not cozy up to a young and relatively weak associate of the Survivalist Faction without a reason!

Ves and Reynard exchanged a few inconsequential words to each other before the latter spoke more seriously again.

"Our relationship with the MTA is not as close as yours, but we are acquainted with a small but powerful subset of mechers." Reynard eventually revealed.

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Would you care to share that with me? I have been trying to guess which MTA faction is close to your Clarke Clan."

"We are acquainted with the Rubarthan Faction of the MTA." Reynard finally revealed. "Do not misunderstand me. Our Clarke Clan no longer has the right

to call itself Rubarthan, but that does not mean we are willing to forget our roots. Getting demoted to second-raters is a great shame to the Clarkes and we are not reconciled with living out the rest of our lives in mediocrity."

His voice became more emotional and passionate as he expressed the regret of his clan.

Ves could easily believe that Reynard truly believed in what he said, but it was also likely that the man was deliberately overemphasizing this aspect.

Still, the revelation that the Clarke Clan maintained at least some ties to at least one group of Rubarthans was already shocking enough!

Ves didn't think that the Clarkes were particularly important to the Rubarthans, but even a shallow relationship was enough for him to reevaluate his judgment of the Clarke Clan.

"Your goals are your business." Ves eventually spoke. "I wish you the best of luck in your attempts to allow your clan to make an honorable return to the New Rubarth Empire, but if you think the Larkinsons are the same, then I am afraid that I have to disappoint you. My clan and I have different goals in mind. None of them have anything to do aligning myself to the Rubarthans. If I wanted to get closer to them, our Larkinson Clan would have been a part of the Rubarthan Pact as opposed to the Red Ocean Union. In fact, why is your Clarke Clan not a part of this pact yourself? Isn't it better for you to operate in their zones?"

Reynard ruefully smiled. "The Rubarthans only value ability and results. Joining the Rubarthan Pact is counterproductive if we cannot be of use to Rubarth. There are multiple ways to get back into its good graces, and our Clarke Clan can do more outside of the territories occupied by the Rubarthan Pact. That is why we are here. Besides, the rest of the Pentahull Coalition is

not particularly interested in our goals. They lack a connection to the New Rubarth Empire so we do not blame their decisions."

Ves was surprised that Reynard was willing to reveal this much about the Clarke Clan. He then figured out that this was likely not a big secret.

From what Ves had learned during his tour through the space station, the Clarkes were obvious admirers of the Rubarthans. They mentioned their heritage a lot of times and they did not really hide their desire to rejoin the powerful empire.

Ves just dismissed all of that talk as fantasy in the past, but now he understood that the Clarkes were a lot more serious than he thought.

"All of that is interesting for me to hear, but as I have said earlier, this is your business, not ours." Ves insisted.

"Are you certain about that, patriarch?"

"Let me make this clear, Reynard. I am a mech designer, and I am completely engaged in my own work. It is completely logical for me to maintain closer ties with the Mech Trade Association. I recall that the MTA isn't exactly on good terms with the first-rate superstates, so I am afraid that I have no room to befriend the Rubarthans."

Reynard looked down at the stage where the play was beginning to reach its climax.

"That is not entirely true, Patriarch Larkinson." He said. "I have stated earlier that the Rubarthans only value ability and results. Everyone in human space who hasn't lived under a rock recognizes this truth. If you happen to have engaged in research that has produced results that are shocking enough to win over the Transhumanist Faction, then I can assure you that you will definitely win the appreciation of the Rubarthans."

Ves finally understood what this conversation was all about. This was a solicitation.

Reynard might be trying to lure the Larkinson Clan over to Rubarth in order to earn a 'referral fee'.

It could also be that the Clarke Clan had received an instruction from the Rubarthans to make a recruitment attempt.

Ves crossed his arms. "I have already formed agreements with both the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction. Turning to the Rubarthans would not only constitute a betrayal, but also doesn't allow me to gain anything. The Big Two are the hegemony of human civilization these days. The New Rubarth Empire may still be powerful to an extent, but it has already degenerated, just like our ancestors."

"That may not always be the case." Reynard Clarke spoke. "Besides, even if the MTA is larger and more powerful, it is impossible for an outsider such as you to earn its complete trust. You will always be treated as an outsider by the mech designers no matter how much you contribute to the Association. Many mech designers such as you have slaved their entire lives to earn the recognition of the MTA, only for them to pass away while realizing far too late that they could have accumulated much more wealth, power and influence if they did not give so much away."

Ouch. Reynard's words definitely hit a sore spot. Ves was well aware of how much the MTA exploited indigenous mech designers and engaged in unequal transactions. He only played along because there were no viable alternatives.

That didn't mean he was happy about the MTA coming in to steal his work and impose demands on him. The mech designers simply got more while he gained relatively little in return.

"I have no complaints about my relationship with the MTA." Ves lied. "I do not see why turning to Rubarth would be any better."

"Then you are not taking my words seriously enough, patriarch. Do you remember what I said? The Rubarthans only value ability and results. If you have invented any new tech that can produce a noticeable difference in combat effectiveness of first-class multipurpose mechs, then the Rubarth will welcome you back with open arms."

Ves blinked. He didn't expect to hear this answer, but it made a lot of sense now that he thought about it. He never thought that this custom would apply to him in particular until Reynard explicitly mentioned this possibility.

The New Rubarth Empire was explicitly founded as a meritocracy. It existed as a rejection of the nepotism and other deplorable excesses of the Terrans. This meant that capable and successful individuals would always earn the recognition that they deserved!

"Our Larkinson lineage hasn't been Rubarthan for over four centuries." Ves pointed out.

"It is fine even if your line has no clear relations with the New Rubarth Empire, but it is even better if you have an existing relationship however faint it may be." Reynard reassured him. "You will make your ancestors proud by returning to the empire that they used to be a part of and restore the honor of their name. There may even be an established group in the empire that has distant ties to your ancestors. If such a connection exists, then you will easily be able to win over a strong patron with the ability and the results that you have shown."

This argument would have great appeal to Ves if actually cared about his ancestors.

Unfortunately for the Clarke Clan, Ves did not have any affection towards his distant ancestors. They lived so long ago that he dismissed them as ancient history.

Ves cared much more about his grandparents and parents. Those were the people he knew in person and grew up with. None of them expressed any love or nostalgia for the New Rubarth Empire, though, so that was no reason for him to cozy up to the Rubarthans.

He eventually shook his head. "I am sorry, Reynard, but my clan and I have no interest in earning Rubarth's approval. I believe in what you have said, but my interests are simply too far apart. I do not have a desire to become a mecher, a Rubarthan or a member of any other state or organization. I am a Larkinson. I have only ever wanted to become a Larkinson. To me, the Larkinson Clan is a much better home than the Mech Trade Association or the New Rubarth Empire. I am already exactly where I belong."

"...I am glad to hear that you are comfortable in your own clan. Autonomy must be important to you." Reynard said as he showed signs of retreating. "However, let me give you a warning as one descendant of Rubarth to another. Change is coming. It does not take a genius to tell that many conflicts will break out. Once the fighting starts, smaller clans such as ours can easily be trampled under the feet of larger powers. The only way to escape the fate of getting crushed is to take shelter under one of those larger powers that is willing to treat you as its own. Our Clarke Clan has already picked a side. What about your clan, Patriarch Larkinson?"

#### **Chapter 4396 The Merits Of First-Rate Superstates**

Ves waited until he and his family boarded the shuttle that would bring them out of Pentahull Station that he addressed what happened with his wife.

"Thanks for the backup." He said in a partially resentful tone.

Gloriana didn't even look at him as she held Marvaine in her lap and treated him like a baby.

"You are the patriarch of our clan, my dear. Haven't you insisted time and time again that you should be the man in charge? I have done nothing else but abide by your wish. I did not wish to counteract your strategy as you seem to have the situation well in hand. From the moment that Reynard Clarke made his offer, I already predicted your response."

Well, at least she got that right. The last thing that Ves needed was to have his own wife mess up his response.

"What is your viewpoint on this issue?" He asked. "Do you think it is worthwhile to join the Rubarth if we have the opportunity?"

His wife paused for a moment before a disapproving expression appeared on her face.

"No. I do not think that is the wisest decision that we can make. The New Rubarth Empire is strong, but it is led by a tyrannical emperor who has utterly debased the concept of family and love. He treats women like single-use toys and he has spawned so many children that no one has an accurate count of them. The values that he holds and the example that he sets for his subjects are so deplorable that I would never want our offspring to grow in such a culture. Although I do not approve of everything you do in your clan, you at least value the concept of family."

As Ves listened to his wife, he briefly glanced over at his daughters who were in the process of playing with the new toys and mech figures that they had bought during the shopping trip.

He tried to imagine how his children would become affected if they suddenly turned into Rubarthan citizens.

Their lives wouldn't be as pleasant, but they would probably succeed. Ves has invested a lot of money and resources into setting them up for success. From starting their lives as designer babies to imparting them with remarkable companion spirits that supercharged their mental development, they would doubtlessly be able to stand out in a society that rewarded brilliance and talent!

However, there were always better people in this vast and mighty empire. Ves had heard of vast groups aligned with powerful Rubarthan princes that invested enormous sums into researching human augmentation.

After centuries of accumulation, each of these groups mastered unique and propriety forms of augmentation that gave their descendants unparalleled strength in specific occupations!

This was the basis on which powerful lineages retained their dominance in Rubarthan society in the long term. Newer entrants either had to join these established influences or get crushed by the ruthless competition.

This was one of the reasons why Rubarth produced so many exiles! The cake had already been divided a long time ago, so the only way for new powers to rise was to defeat an established rival!

Sometimes, these challenges succeeded, but more often than not the gambles ended in failure.

Ves did not think that he and his children would do any better. Their heritage and accumulation was simply no match against that of a powerful Rubarthan principality.

Of course, the Larkinsons could easily avoid these problems by formally surrendering themselves to one of those very same Rubarthan principalities, but that was unacceptable!

"After getting let down by one superior after another, I vowed that I would never pledge my loyalty to another higher authority again." Ves spoke with determination in my voice. "It doesn't matter whether the Rubarthan Emperor steps away from his throne in the heart of his empire and travels all the way to the Red Ocean in order to vassalize me in person. I will never put my life in the hands of another leader again. Our clan may be an ant in front of a mighty first-rate superstate, but at least it is mine."

His wife grinned in approval. "Well said, Ves. The clan is completely ours."

That ended any further thought on Reynard Clarke's offer.

Ves was already happy with his current situation. The MTA appreciated his work and potential but always maintained a certain degree of distance due to its policies.

This might not sound great to many people, but it was exactly what he wanted. He had too many secrets and entanglements and did not want the mechers to figure them all out. Only trouble would arise once they stumbled upon a secret as shocking as the Mech Designer System.

Besides, the MTA was much more powerful and influential to a legacy state that had been forced to bow down in front of the Big Two. There was no compelling reason why Ves should trade away all of the goodwill and relationships he built up with the mechers just so he could mingle with the weaker Rubarthans.

Ves already knew how the MTA worked and understood what he must do in order to increase his importance in their eyes. The two factions he was associated with possessed clear ideologies and ambitions that he could satisfy by continuing to progress in his current trajectory.

He would have to throw all of that away if he decided to become a Rubarthan!

"To be honest, I would have felt a lot more tempted if we had the opportunity to join the Greater Terran United Confederation instead." Gloriana unexpectedly revealed.

"Huh?" Ves threw a questioning glance at her. "The Terrans are worse than the Rubarthans. At least the latter rewards actual ability. I'm not so certain that the former will do the same."

"The Terrans prize family much more than the Rubarthans. It is the heart of their power structure. The ancient clans that reign over the confederation prize bloodline, lineage and inheritance above everything else. As long as our clan can join their ranks, we will also be able to ensure that our children and our grandchildren will receive the greatest of privileges."

Ves looked contemptuous when he heard that. The ancient clans were responsible for much of what was wrong with the decadent first-rate superstate. The only reason the Terran Confederation still managed to keep up with Rubarth was because the former could still rely on the immense amount of accumulation and heritage of its enormous history.

Still, even that didn't help the Terrans fend off the powerful upstarts known as the Big Two.

"If I was forced to choose between the two first-rate superstates, I would definitely cast my lot with the Rubarthans." Ves stated.

"You wouldn't say that if you understand the advantages of being a Terran. It is true that their society is weighed down by the sheer depth and breadth of their legacy, but the sheer amount of ancient clans that have carved their own territories in the superstate means that none of them are ever able to rise on top of the others."

"And that matters because...?"

"Let me finish, Ves. The state is a confederation in the truest sense of the word in that it is run as a union of many different groups. Every ancient clan under its umbrella enjoys a great amount of autonomy and control over its own citizens and certain laws. The Terran clans only cooperate in areas where collective power is essential such as external defense and foreign relations."

"This is the main reason why the Terran Confederation has remained stagnant all this time." Ves retorted as he crossed his arms. "The lack of a single clear authority figure makes it hard to implement changes that are necessary to revitalize the state. With all of these fractured power bases opposing each other, the organizational inertia is so great that the Terrans can barely get anything done!"

Gloriana didn't see anything wrong with that. "What you are describing is a state that is governed by consensus. This means that the outcome that you have always feared should never happen to us as long as we are a part of the decision makers. Don't you see, Ves? There is no overpowering emperor or sovereign who can dictate what the clans should do! If our Larkinson Clan can earn the status of a Terran ancient clan, we will be able to have it both ways! You can retain your control over your own fief but also enjoy all of the protection and benefits that a first-rate superstate has to offer!"

Ves had to admit that Gloriana did not speak as much nonsense as usual this time. Her descriptions of the virtues of the Terran Confederation were accurate as far as he knew.

It was too bad that all of it was just as absurd as putting lipstick on a pig. The few good points of the first-rate superstate did not outweigh its many ailments!

"It doesn't matter, Gloriana. The Terran Confederation's power base is completely solidified. Every existing ancient clan has already carved out all its

available territories. There is no way to defeat these entrenched insiders given that they have so much history and accumulation on their side."

"That may be true in the past, but have you forgotten about the Red Ocean Promise already?" Gloriana reminded her husband. "The Terran Confederation has made a commitment to promote the top 5 pioneers of the Terran Alliance into ancient clans. Previously, you never took this offer seriously because you did not have faith that our Larkinson Clan would have a realistic chance of making it that far. Now that over five years have passed, do you still think that is the case?"

Ves fell into thought. The speed in which his clan had grown and the enormous implications of his recent innovations were astounding. This made him feel that he and his clan may have a realistic shot to become one of the winners of the Red Ocean Promise!

He quickly shook his head. So what if this was the case? He and his clan would still have to enter a shark tank and try to fend off countless ruthless predators in order to make it to the top.

There was no way a second-class organization like the Larkinson Clan would be able hold its ground against the many first-class organizations that sought to grasp this exceedingly rare but rewarding chance to become a Terran ancient clan!

He looked disapprovingly at his wife. "Don't be stupid, honey. Entertaining these fantasies will only get you killed. There is no shortcut to power. Those that promise to protect us are only interested in exploiting us. They will discard us as soon as we have outlived our usefulness. It has happened in the past and it will definitely happen in the future. The only way we can make it through is if we rely and build up our own strength."

Neither the Terrans nor the Rubarthans were any good in his opinion. Ves recognized that they were still powerful in a sense, but there were good reasons why they had been relegated to the background after the beginning of the Age of Mechs.

Even if the Big Two might possibly decline in the future, Ves believed that the next leading powers of human civilization would have no relations with the existing powers.

The trend of human history always favors upstarts for various reasons. Losers that had been deposed in the past never regained their former glory because they never went far enough in confronting the root causes of their failure.

Heritage, legacy and history were all handicaps that prevented the former rulers from rising again.

The human race always progressed forward. It never regressed backwards. Ves believed it was the height of folly to throw his lot in with a relic of the past when it was so obviously outdated!

"I don't know what the future holds, but there is one thing I know for certain."

"And what is that, Ves?"

"It is the power of adaptation rather than strength that will determine the winners."

### **Chapter 4397 Backup Friends**

When Ves and his family finally returned to the Spirit of Bentheim, the Golden Skull Alliance's visit to Pentahull Station had come to an end.

The Larkinson Clan and its allies made productive use of their time in the Norbit System.

Ves received many reports on what his Larkinsons managed to get done during the days they spent on the space station, but he mainly directed his attention towards intelligence.

Information was more valuable than anything else at the moment, especially in light of Reynard Clarke's unexpected solicitation.

This was why he called over Calabast to his office in person so that he could discuss the latest developments in complete confidence.

"Hello again, Lucky."

"Meow~"

Lucky jumped from the desk and floated over to Calabast so that he could snuggle in her arms.

The cat comfortably purred from the moment that the spymaster began to rub and massage his metal head.

Ves was still in the process of putting the finishing touches on the experimental project that he had put on pause.

His recent visit to Pentahull Station had given him plenty of time for him to reconsider his existing ideas. He also gained a bit more inspiration as he witnessed different mechs, cultures and circumstances.

This was why he pushed back the completion of the new luminar crystal cannon for the Amaranto in order to update and tweak its design.

Though the result wouldn't be much different, Ves still believed it was worthwhile to ensure the weapon was fully equipped to handle the challenges in the future.

Calabast wasn't patient enough to let Ves finish his current design task.

"Ahem. You called, kid?"

Ves frowned as Calabast pulled him out of the zone. He let out a deep breath before he waved his hand to shut off the design interface.

"We need to talk. First off, tell me about the Clarke Clan. Have you sniffed out any information that can tell me more about how much the Rubarthans are backing the Clarkes?"

Calabast did not look worried as she continued to snuggle Lucky in her arms. "You don't need to be too concerned. The intelligence community is already aware that the New Rubarth Empire has a habit of taking advantage of outside groups that have shallow ties to the state. The Clarke Clan is merely one of many convenient cat's paws."

"What do you mean by that, exactly?"

"The Rubarthans don't value the Clarkes at all." The woman bluntly said. "I am confident in this assessment. Our Black Cats have collected an extensive amount of data inside Pentahull Station. They have infiltrated both the public and not-so-public spaces of the various hulls. Nothing we have gathered indicates that there is a solid connection between the Clarke Clan and the New Rubarth Empire."

"What if you are wrong? What if the Clarkes and the Rubarthans are much more competent in hiding their connections than you think?"

Calabast frowned. "You have no evidence for that, Ves. It is dangerous to speculate too much in my line of work. You will lose your mind in conspiracy theories before you know it. There is nothing wrong with applying Occam's Razor. The Clarke Clan is too small, weak and incapable to earn the appreciation of the Rubarthans. It does not have any powerful connections nor does it have any talented people in its ranks. Use your logic, Ves. The Clarkes don't even register in the minds of the first-raters."

Ves scratched his head. "If that is the case, then why did Reynard Clarke try to solicit me into defecting to the Rubarthans?"

The spymaster gently dropped Lucky onto the desk, much to the cat's complaint, so that she could cross her arms.

"The situation is quite clear to me. It is not the Clarkes that have taken the initiative, but the Rubarthans. Reynard Clarke is merely the spokesperson that at least one Rubarthan power has tapped to convey a request on its behalf."

That sounded a lot more serious than Ves initially thought! He straightened his back as his expression grew ugly.

"Are you saying that the Rubarthans have taken notice of me?" He asked.

"This is almost certainly the case based on the claims that Mr. Reynard Clarke has voiced during your talk. The Transhumanists are to blame for this. No matter how careful they are in keeping their secrets, it is impossible to maintain complete confidentiality in a large and divided super organization."

"Those damn mechers." Ves quietly cursed under his breath.

They were too unreliable! Master Dervidian had explicitly promised to him that he and his fellow Transhumanists would prevent Ves from getting noticed by other powerful groups.

"You can't control what has happened, Ves. The only way to handle this situation is to think about our options going forward. Right now, it is a fact that the Rubarthans, or at least a group of them, have noticed that the Transhumanist Faction are interested in your work. It is not certain yet whether the Rubarthans know about what you have been doing, but I think it is safe to assume that they do not know the details. The mechers should at least be able to protect you to this extent. However, a hint is already enough to arouse the interest of the Rubarthans."

Ves pressed his fingers against his forehead. All of this stuff was starting to drive him crazy.

"Damnit. Can we expect a visit from the Rubarthans soon?"

"You don't need to worry about that just yet." Calabast confidently replied.

"There are rules in the Red Ocean that the Rubarthans need to abide by. We are currently operating in the territory of the Red Ocean Union. Not only that, we are still located within the borders of a middle zone. Rubarth has no excuse to send out one of its ships to this neighborhood. This is where the Clarke Clan comes into play. Since the Rubarthans can't contact us directly, they have decided to make use of this exiled clan to act as their proxy. Do you understand the full picture now, Ves?"

"I do."

Much of the situation became clear to Ves now that Calabast gave her analysis. Though she did not have solid proof for most of her assertions, the chain of logic along with the evidence gathered by the Black Cats all supported her interpretation.

Calabast tapped her fingernail against the desktop. "There is a massive difference between receiving a referral from a bunch of nobodies and receiving an indirect invitation from Rubarth itself. Has my analysis changed your stance in any way?"

"Nope. Not at all. My own logic hasn't fundamentally changed. I told my wife that I would still stick to my guns even if the Star Emperor himself deigned to visit me in person. I don't like to surrender control to anyone. There is no way I will ever change my mind!"

He expected his spymaster to agree with him, but she instead opted to slam her palm against the desk!

"Meow!"

"Stupid!" Calabast growled! "You are being just as obstinate as the expert pilots that you frequently malign for their inflexibility. The future is always in flux, Ves! No one can predict with total certainty what will happen in the future. Sure, you have managed to earn the favor of the Survivalists and the Transhumanists, but what if an event takes place that causes your relationship with the MTA to crumble? You will be all alone with no powerful patron to protect you. The mechers that you have previously depended upon may even turn against you! Have you ever thought about this possibility?"

Ves looked troubled. "I did, but... maybe I didn't think it through. It is difficult for me to imagine a way forward if the MTA itself turns against me. There is no way to beat one of the Big Two."

"That may be true, but you can still fend off the mechers if you take shelter in one of the first-rate superstates. This is what I have been trying to steer you towards, Ves. You need to get rid of your irrational disgust and contempt towards Terra and Rubarth and start treating them as potential escape routes. Neither of them are perfect and neither will satisfy all of your desires, but that is not the point. Their greatest value to you is that they will be willing to shelter you as long as you exchange enough benefits."

She made a good point. Ves truly believed that neither of the first-rate superstates were any good. Their flaws were too many to count and it would be incredibly difficult for a newcomer like the Larkinson Clan to be able to gain their footing in their incredibly messy and tangled societies.

However, Ves would rather deal with all of these problems than lose his life or freedom!

Every other alternative was better than those awful outcomes!

His mindset shifted after Calabast had wisened him up. The reality of life was that no one always got what they wanted. Not even the most powerful humans

such as the Star Emperor or god pilots could satisfy all of their desires and fulfill all of their ambitions!

Since that was the case, how could Ves be any better?

Now that his mentality had become a little more open towards the Terrans and the Rubarthans, he struggled to figure out which camp he should lean towards if he was ever in need of shelter.

"If the MTA can no longer give us the protection that we need, I would prefer to knock on the doors of a group that is willing to respect our autonomy as much as possible." Ves spoke. "As much as I appreciate the Rubarthans for giving me an invitation, I would probably side with the Terrans if they promise to leave my clan alone. They shouldn't be interested in meddling in our affairs."

Calabast snorted. "Turning to the Terran Confederation is a serious mistake. I wouldn't join it unless we have exhausted every other option. The power of the ancient clans, the majority of which have a history that goes back millenia, are too deeply rooted in the fabric of Terran society. You would think that a society that is led by highly augmented humans would have its own house in order, but that is not the case. The incompetence, decadence and hedonism that has plagued the Terrans since the Age of Conquest are still as prevalent as ever."

Ves directed a deep glance towards his spymaster. "It sounds as if you are in favor of defecting to the Rubarthans first."

"I make no secret of my preference for the Rubarthans." She replied. "The culture of our clan already shares a resemblance to Rubarthan culture. The politics and intrigue of Rubarth should not be underestimated, but I can assure you that it is a lot more straightforward than the snake pit that is Terra. The best way to get accepted in Rubarthan society is to be successful in

something. You just happened to excel at this. That means that you will not have any problems with integrating into the Rubarthan power structure."

Though Ves agreed with her assessment, he took her earlier words under account and did not immediately dismiss the merits of the Greater Terran United Confederation.

He eventually waved his arm. "There is no need to discuss this contingency in such exhausting detail. The two first-rate superstates are so goddamn huge that we can talk all day about which one suits us better."

"If that is what you wish."

This was only a remote consideration in the end. Ves was still as thick as thieves with the MTA and there was no reason for the mechers to turn him into an abandoned son.

"There is one more thing that you should take note of." Calabast said before she left. "The Rubarthans have approached us first. The question I have is whether the Terrans will follow suit. Their actions or lack thereof will tell us how extensively the secret has spread."

"Hm, you're right. Please pay attention to this matter and contact me the instant the Terrans or anyone tied to them has passed on a message."

#### **Chapter 4398 Learning From His Parents**

Though Ves held a lot of concerns about attracting the attention of the mighty Rubarthans, there wasn't much he could do about this situation.

Once he entered their radar, it was difficult to fool these incredibly powerful and clever first-raters.

It would be even worse if the Terrans took note of him as well.

He sighed. From the moment he came up with a variation of Lufa's glow that could help people overcome their bottlenecks, he already thought that something like this would happen.

His miscalculation was that he thought he would only be confronted with this situation a century or later in the future.

This was because he originally intended to keep this massive invention under wraps until he gained sufficient strength.

He thought that he would have to deal with this kind of issue when he became a Master Mech Designer or Star Designer.

There was no way he would be able to negotiate with the Terrans or the Rubarthans on a fair basis when he was still a Journeyman Mech Designer!

"I need to close the gap as much as possible." Ves concluded.

His urgency to become a Senior Mech Designer had never been greater!

Becoming a Senior certainly wouldn't solve his problem, but it would help a lot with encouraging others to take him more seriously.

Mech designers that had advanced to this rank already produced enough results. Each Senior was a visionary that was competent enough to lead design teams and handle expert mech design projects.

Naturally, Seniors weren't as impressive as Masters, but there were a lot more of the former!

There was a huge reserve of Seniors who had been in the business for over a century and built up a lot of accomplishments during that time.

These were the mech designers that forcibly raised the reputation of Seniors and ensured that most people treated them as adults.

This was why Ves badly wanted to advance to Senior himself!

His work and accomplishments already exceeded that of a typical Journeyman to a massive extent, but the fact that his design seed had yet to evolve still allowed many people to talk down on him. They all treated him as if he had enormous potential but did not come close to realizing his true value.

Even if his wife treated him like a kid sometimes!

"I need to finish this project as soon as possible so I can get back to working on the Dullahan Project."

Ves sped up his design work and finalized the weapon design project.

Once he had reached the point where he did not see the point of iterating any further on the design, he moved to begin the fabrication run as soon as possible.

His wife had already arrived at the private workshop by the time that he arrived. She had opted to leave Aurelia and Andraste in the care of Shannon Maris and only brought Marvaine this time.

The little boy looked both curious and eager to see his parents at work. He ran around the workshop like an imp that had gotten loose and poked every large production machine that caught his interest.

While Ves allowed his son to touch the surface of the AP-VEX Superfab and other devices, he made sure to lock them down so that they wouldn't activate out of the blue.

"Mama! Papa! It's so big!"

"What does this button do?"

"Can I make a mech with this thing?"

Both Ves and Gloriana indulged in their son for a while even though it ate into their schedule.

They only went back to business once Marvaine had exhausted most of his energy. The child laid on a couch where he could play and fiddle with all of the new toys that his parents had bought for him back in Pentahull Station.

Gloriana studied the projection of the completed design schematic. She took note of the expensive materials needed to realize this powerful mech cannon.

"It will be difficult to integrate 650 grams of phasewater in this weapon." She said. "The volume of the cannon is generous enough, but much of the phasewater is intended for the crucial attack phase crystals. Even if you spread out of the phasewater over three of these crystals, it will still be dangerous to synthesize them with the hardware that we have available."

Ves did not look too concerned. "I know, but I have worked with phasewater enough times to know what I am doing. Even if I screw up, I can throw away the junk and start anew. We have enough surplus materials on hand."

The two proceeded to go over other production processes that might pose a challenge to them. Since the luminar crystal cannon pushed the limits of what was possible with the technology that they had mastered, they needed work extra carefully at certain points.

This was also why Ves and Gloriana decided to take their time and avoid rushing the fabrication run.

Fortunately, it wouldn't take days for them to finish their work. They were only fabricating a single mech cannon as opposed to an entire mech. Luminar crystal technology was also known for requiring fewer components than usual because many of its existing ones were usually capable of serving multiple purposes.

The only problem was that the weapon design made so much use of luminar crystals that Ves would have to do most of the work himself.

Though Gloriana had learned enough about luminar crystal technology that she was able to synthesize the crystals themselves, her affinity and familiarity with them was not as good as that of her husband.

Ves also insisted on synthesizing the crystals himself because he believed that there was an important spiritual component to the crystals.

This left Gloriana with a lighter workload, but this also granted her with much more time to inspect the components and start the assembly process in advance.

One of her more interesting responsibilities was the need to process the resonating materials for the luminar crystal cannon. She needed to pay close attention to them in order to avoid wasting these rare and valuable substances.

Before they started the fabrication run, Gloriana first went through her little ritual.

"Not this again." Ves muttered and rolled his eyes.

He was too used to the antics of his wife to argue any further with her. He quickly turned around and approached the AP-VEX Superfab in order to check its settings for the umpteenth time.

Marvaine interrupted his playtime with his toys when he saw that his mother was kneeling in front of a strange, six-sided altar.

He hopped out of the couch and curiously came closer.

"What are you doing, mama?"

Gloriana did not display any annoyance for the interruption. She effortlessly paused her ongoing prayer and embraced her little boy.

"I am praying to the Superior Mother for her blessing in my endeavor. Do you remember what I told you about her, Marvaine?"

"I do! The Superior Mother is my granny!"

"She is! She is the mother of your father, which means she is undeniably family to you. Know that the Superior Mother always watches over her children and grandchildren. If you are ever in trouble or in need of help, you can pray to her for protection. Let me show you how to do that. Just follow my instructions."

The obedient little boy did what his mother asked and collapsed his hands together before he began to say a prayer to the altar of the Superior Mother.

Power soon began to exude from the object. Gloriana opened her eyes with delight as an enormous hand that was larger than her body materialized in the air!

"Look, Marvaine! Your grandmother has answered your prayers!"

"Woooooow." The boy forgot about anything else and jumped to his feet.

His eyes grew wide as he stared at the giant feminine hand that was hovering above his head. Marvaine subsequently jumped and attempted to reach out to the spiritual limb with his arm.

Though he did not come close to touching his grandmother, the giant hand reached down and extended a finger so that Marvaine could finally make contact with his 'relative'!

"Hihihi! You're so powerful, Granny!"

The Superior Mother gently touched her 'grandson' and 'daughter-in-law' a few more times before her giant hand faded away.

Gloriana led her son back to the couch before she was finally ready to begin the fabrication run.

She brought out Alexandria which deftly extended a spiritual bond to Ves.

"Let us begin."

"Alright."

Husband and wife connected their minds together in a design network. Both of them had done this so many times that they immediately got used to thinking alongside someone else in their minds.

They soon split up and began to perform their respective tasks.

Both of them possessed an abundant amount of workshop experience, so even if they hadn't practiced the full run in a simulated workshop in advance, they still knew how to handle themselves.

Marvaine occasionally paid attention to his parents and looked admiringly at them. Both Ves and Gloriana looked like they were completely in their element as they focused on their main tasks.

The boy practically had stars in his eyes as his father and mother looked more impressive than they had ever appeared in his life!

"I want to make a mech too..."

It was too bad that he was far too young to follow in the footsteps of his parents. He hadn't even formally started school as of yet, so how could he possibly contribute to a design project?

The only way he could do anything comparable to this work was by playing with the toy sets that his father and mother had prepared for him. He had an entire collection in his bedroom!

Though simplified, younger children could already experience what it was like to be a mech designer by fitting together different toy mech parts in different combinations.

It wasn't real, though. The small and childproof toys were nowhere near as cool as the huge mechs and mech components that his parents handled on a frequent basis!

As Ves and Gloriana continued to fabricate one part after another, it was as if their son was completely left out of the party.

Marvaine was anything but bored, though. A large part of him felt as if he had entered paradise as his parents made more and more progress in their project.

The increasing amount of large and shiny crystals along with the cool metal parts stimulated his imagination and caused his little mind to conjure up all kinds of fantastical mechs.

It didn't matter that he knew little to nothing about the science and mechanics of mechs. The machines generated by the limitless imagination of a child were all as viable as the products of the LMC to the little boy!

As his parents continued to impress him, Marvaine underwent a subtle change.

Denny, his companion spirit, eventually emerged from his head.

Meuw! Meuw!

The blond Maine Coon glowed with excitement due to Marvaine's excitement.

Though the majority of the glow initially came from Denny's heart, the total and utter adoration from Marvaine caused the spiritual cat to activate another part of his body!

For a brief moment of time, a giant finger materialized above Marvaine's body again and briefly poked Denny's energetic body.

MEUW!

A burst of energy concentrated into his front paws, causing the companion spirit to deepen its concentration of life energy!

Marvaine let out a strong gasp before he slumped back onto the couch.

Denny also returned to where he belonged.

The boy fell into slumber as his spirituality continued to evolve at a relatively impressive rate.

The residual energies radiated by his father and mother as they put their total focus onto their work also affected their son in various ways.

In the end, Marvaine smoothly completed a transition that he wasn't even aware of. He became completely engrossed in a dream where he was surrounded by mechs of every kind.

#### **Chapter 4399 A New Instrument**

The new luminar crystal cannon was complete.

Maow.

As a slightly tired-looking Alexandria retracted her design network and dove back into Gloriana's head, the entire workshop fell into silence.

The two mech designers already shut off all of the production machines and the assembly system had also returned to its dormant state.

The work that they had created over the course of a day rested majestically on a reinforced horizontal weapon rack that they had especially designed to accommodate the new creation.

The new luminar crystal cannon certainly needed it because it was both big and heavy.

"Wow." Gloriana uttered. "It is not a masterwork weapon, but... it possesses its own brilliance despite its imperfections. It is certainly the most beautiful weapon that I have ever helped to develop."

It was rather odd for her to forgo her complaints about falling short of making another masterwork mech or product, but she wasn't too concerned about that. Her god body application should ensure that the weapon should slowly be able to absorb enough worship to upgrade its physical qualities over time.

This way, time and energy would complete the work that she had failed to do during this design run.

It was an approach that Gloriana stole from— er, that is, gained inspiration from her husband.

In any case, if she wanted her new weapon to evolve into a masterwork over time, then it needed to acquire fame and earn the admiration of many different people.

This would require the Larkinson Clan to put conscious effort into making exciting recordings of the AMaranto in battle. The Larkinsons then needed to edit and propagate the footage in a way that put plenty of emphasis on the Amaranto's new ship-killing cannon.

Gloriana smirked. She knew that it wouldn't be as difficult to accomplish this goal as it sounded.

This was because she and her husband had already taken this need into account and designed the weapon accordingly!

Not only was the weapon meant to output powerful piercing energy beams, it had to look fantastic while fulfilling its primary purpose!

Ves had especially let his creative juices flow when he worked the luminar crystal exterior to make it as imposing and symbolic as possible.

First, its size and dimensions already conveyed a lot of threat and power by itself.

Every human and alien could instinctively sense the danger posed by weapons, and it was undoubtedly a certainty that a weapon that looked as if a small warship cannon had gotten loose was capable of generating plenty of vigilance!

Second, he added in a lot of light sources that would allow the crystal weapon to shine in different colors along different points.

Though they weren't doing anything when the cannon wasn't being used, Ves knew that they would generate quite the lightshow once the Amaranto made use of the new weapon.

Third, Ves had added a lot of decorative elements to the weapon, causing it to look as if he had recreated a part of the Phase King in a crystalline form!

The torpedo-shaped muzzle of the giant cannon especially evoked the impression of a powerful phasewater-manipulating beast.

This was because Ves had worked hard to shape it into an exquisite reproduction of the head of the Phase King!

To be more precise, the crystal muzzle looked as if the powerful fish-whale king had opened its maw in order to release a powerful energy blast.

Though only the Cerebral King demonstrated this particular ability, Ves didn't quibble too much over it. The visual design he came up with was the only way to make the luminar crystal cannon look incredibly cool while also increasing its compatibility with the Phase King.

"It's a work of art." Ves praised his own work. "Blessed weapons such as the Gray Lotus and now this new luminar crystal cannon should always have a clear association with the source of their special power. If nothing goes wrong, this design approach will probably be the new standard for high-quality weapons in our clan."

Gloriana turned towards her husband. "That reminds me, you have yet to bestow a name on our latest work. Are you waiting for Venerable Stark to come and name her new weapon herself or will you provide it with your own label?"

He smirked at her. "We connected our minds to each other during the entire fabrication run. You should already know my decision."

"You have a shortlist of names in mind, though you haven't been able to make the final decision. You intended to wait until you completed the run and utilize the emotions that you are feeling at the moment to drive your final choice. What does your heart tell you, Ves?"

"My heart... is urging me to kiss you right now!"

"Wait, what?!"

Ves dove in and surprised his wife by capturing her lips with his own!

As the pair briefly exchanged their affection, Ves finally pulled back with a smile.

"Okay, that's enough. You have had your fun now. What is the name that you have settled upon?"

The mischievous husband grinned as he turned back towards his imposing whale-themed energy cannon.

"The Amaranto's first weapon is called the Instrument of Vengeance." He spoke. "It makes sense if Venerable Stark's second option follows an established pattern. Aside from that, the name should also reflect the cannon's relation to the Phase King. Given these requirements, I have settled on calling it the Instrument of Doom."

His wife contemplated the name and found that the luminar crystal cannon certainly looked the part.

Just a single full-powered shot from this massive weapon ought to be enough to convey the meaning of doom!

"Why did you choose to use the word doom in the name?" Gloriana asked.

"When I peeked into your mind, I saw that you thought about using other words instead such as freedom, liberation, dissociation, separation and so on. Why did you settle for a grimmer choice instead?"

Ves waved his arm at the dormant but eager cannon. "Because this weapon is meant to herald doom. It is meant to inspire fear in enemies and deter rivals from trying anything against us. Our luminar crystal cannon is designed for the express purpose to fell the largest enemies that we may face. Warships, astral beasts and phase whales are usually accustomed to dominating the battlefield due to their immense size and power, but the Instrument of Doom will make them experience the threat of destruction by striking their literal or metaphorical hearts!"

The new weapon was meant to strike and cripple a large enemy target with a single overpowering attack.

Ves truly believed that the Instrument of Doom would be able to bypass a lot of hull plating and damage vital components buried deep inside the interior of a warship.

He had performed a lot of data analysis on the test results of smaller blessed weapons and gained a preliminary understanding how the Phase King amplified the spatial effects of phasewater technology.

He extrapolated the data and roughly estimated to what extent an energy beam attack could penetrate through solid alloy when launched by a weapon as large as the Instrument of Doom.

The results he received firmly indicated that he should be able to witness a weapon that would break the mech industry if it showed off its prowess to the public!

"The next testing session will be crucial for us." Ves reminded his wife. "While our new Instrument of Doom must definitely accumulate a lot of fame in order to fuel its physical transformation, for now we should keep its specifications as secret as possible. We need to retain it as a trump card in order to take a potential enemy by surprise."

His wife didn't like this decision. "God bodies aren't meant to remain obscure. They deserve to be known and worshiped by all who admire excessive firepower. Don't forget that it is a living weapon that has just come into existence. How will it grow if you starve it from the energy it needs to properly support its god body?"

She made a good point. Ves hadn't thought about this when he should have. Every living product was alive in a sense, which meant that they deserved to be treated with the respect of a living entity.

Ves recalled how the growth of a number of his living products had become warped due to the lack of care they received during their earlier and more formative years of their life.

Just as how children could easily grow up into awful delinquents, mechs and other living products could also end up growing up the wrong way if they were treated badly!

However, Ves wasn't too concerned about this issue.

"I will allow our clan and our allies to witness the upcoming testing session." He told her. "There are around half a million of Larkinsons spread throughout our ships. All of them will provide enough spiritual feedback and other energies to give the Instrument of Doom a starter course."

"I am not certain whether that is enough, Ves. I developed the god body with the intention that each of them enjoy the worship of trillions of people at the very least. What we have falls far short of that. It will take forever for the Instrument of Doom to climb up to the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder at this rate."

Ves shook his head. "Don't forget what our expeditionary fleet is doing right now. We have just entered a turbulent border region where hundreds if not thousands of pioneering fleets are bumping into each other. There are also alien warships and planets occupied by indigenous alien races. Each of them will present us with a possible opportunity to debut the Instrument of Doom in battle for the first time. It won't take long before we can introduce our powerful new whale-themed weapon to the public for the first time."

That was enough to resolve Gloriana's concerns. Though she hadn't contributed too much to this product, it still incorporated her greatest design solution up until this date. She wanted the Instrument of Doom to do well so that she could gather a lot of specific data about the weapon's gradual changes.

She needed this data to speed up her attempts to advance to the rank of Senior Mech Designer!

"I cannot believe that I am saying this, but I hope that you will be able to find and provoke an enemy as soon as possible." Gloriana said in a bewildered tone. "The Instrument of Doom doesn't deserve to be buried in our fleet. It must capture the imagination of the public."

Her urgency on this matter reflected the downside of the god body solution. Much of the additional work and effort in a design would go to waste if nobody took advantage of its possibilities.

Not every mech or piece of equipment was worthy enough to become a god body.

In fact, it might even be detrimental if too many god bodies were concentrated in a single mech force.

Humans ultimately possessed a limited amount of strength. Each potential worshiper could only transfer a small quantity of energy to god bodies.

The more god bodies that vied for the admiration of the public, the more the energies from that group would be divided among many different recipients.

Ultimately, everything would slow down.

This was why Gloriana started to think on how she should be more selective about applying this design solution to different projects.

It was out of the question for her to turn mass production mechs into god bodies!

The machines and their pilots frankly didn't earn the power of a god body.

"When will I be able to commence this test?"

Ves referenced the time. "We should drop out of FTL travel in 14 hours. Let us retire and conduct the test the next day."

"Very well."

Both of them held high hopes for the next day.

This would be the time where Ves could prove that his latest invention had the power to break the established rules concerning the limitations on the firepower of mechs!

#### **Chapter 4400 High Base Power**

The day had arrived faster than Ves expected.

Time flew by as Ves and his wife returned to their grand stateroom and took care of their children.

Neither of them spent any time thinking about their latest work or the preparations they needed to make for the upcoming testing session.

Their work might be their passion, but their children were their legacy!

"I missed you, mama!"

"Look at what I learned in school, papa!"

A quiet evening passed.

As Ves and Gloriana readied themselves for the next day, they inspected the new Instrument of Doom while supervising the preparation work for the upcoming testing session.

The two did not plan to conduct an exhaustive demonstration this time because the Phase King needed to lend his strength to amplify every full-powered attack.

It was fine if the Amaranto only fired its new weapon a couple of times, but the Phase King would definitely have to dip into its reserves if the Instrument of Doom kept spitting one energy beam after another!

The Phase King needed to save up his resources for future battles where every shot counted.

Once the expeditionary fleet dropped out of FTL travel and ended up in a quiet and empty star system, the Golden Skull Alliance performed its usual routine.

Their current objective was to find Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik or any clues related to him, so the Golden Skullers needed to make a serious effort into their search.

Numerous speedy combat carriers split away from the combined fleet and headed to the inner system in order to scan the local planets and moons for any crash sites or other artificial traces.

The chance of encountering anything of note was slim to none, but Ves didn't really care about that. He could have told everyone that there was no need to perform such an exhaustive and time-consuming search when good ol' Ylvaine could act as their compass.

Ves had yet to ask Ylvaine for the precise coordinates of the missing first-class lordling. The distance between the expeditionary fleet and the man that everyone was searching for was still a bit too large at this time.

The only solid piece of news that Ylvaine provided was that the man was still alive. That was enough for the Golden Skull Alliance to stick to its current plan.

If nothing went wrong, the expeditionary fleet would gradually meander closer and closer to Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik's location.

Once Ves thought that his clan had stuck around long enough, he intended to obtain a definite answer from Ylvaine and retrieve the mission objective as soon as possible!

Waiting until the expeditionary fleet came a lot closer to the scion of the Yorul-Tavik would make it a lot less costly for Ylvaine to obtain the man's precise coordinates!

In fact, Ylvaine was already capable of helping the expeditionary fleet approach the man's location without expending a lot of energy.

Knowing how much energy and effort it took to divine Lord Pearian's whereabouts made it possible to utilize a hot-and-cold approach to triangulate his position.

Ves had already tasked the Black Cats to keep track of this data in the hopes that they could infer the direction and distance between the expeditionary fleet and their target.

Hopefully, Lord Pearian had ended up on the Krakatoa side of the border.

If the man crashed on the Zelmar side of the border instead, then the risks of retrieving him were vastly greater.

This was because the chance of encountering a first-class pioneering fleet was too great!

"I hope we won't end up wasting our time."

Right now, he was more interested in testing his new weapon.

As soon as it became clear that it was unlikely that there were other human forces in the star system, the expeditionary fleet approached an asteroid belt that provided plenty of cheap targets for the Amaranto.

Larkinsons set up the testing session by completing various tasks.

They deployed sensor arrays that could record the power and effects of the upcoming attacks.

They deployed jamming devices around the testing site that could prevent any third-party listening devices from capturing any useful data.

They also performed deep scans on all of the asteroids marked for destruction in order to understand their density and material composition.

Figuring this out was crucial to gaining a more thorough understanding of how extensively the Instrument of Doom was able to threaten large targets!

"Alright, Venerable Stark. We have set everything up. It's time for your mech to get into place. Please launch the Amaranto and move to the supplied coordinates."

"Understood."

Venerable Stark closed her eyes and felt out her expert mech.

The powerful third order living mech might not be as talkative as the others of its kind, but it had a deep and trusting relationship with its pilot.

Both Davia and the Amaranto were eager to learn how extensively the new weapon could change the equation.

Their performance during the Battle of Pima Prime had disappointed them both. They should have suppressed the Sundered Phalanx with their firepower, but instead ended up in a mutual suppression battle against a powerful high-tier expert mech.

Though the pilot and mech had played their part in preventing the Star of Liberation from threatening their comrades, they weren't exactly happy with being relegated to the background.

Venerable Davia clenched her hand into a fist. "If I want to enact retribution, then I need to do more. I only have less than a century left to acquire the strength I need to fulfill my remaining life's purpose."

Her burning motivation and conviction drove her to perform the best she could for this initial testing session.

The Instrument of Doom cannon was a gift and an investment from the Larkinson Clan.

If Venerable Davia couldn't harness the power of this powerful new blessed weapon, then she would not be able to receive as many upgrades and other goodies from the patriarch!

She knew quite well that she maintained a transactional relationship with the Larkinson Clan. Everything would remain fine as long as she was stronger and more effective in battle than any Larkinson expert pilot.

Not even the emergence of more and more Larkinson expert pilots could change this as the importance of high-tier expert pilots and ace pilots was far greater than a bunch of low-tier expert pilots!

The fear and apprehension of getting overtaken drove Venerable Stark into doing her best to grow and adapt to difficult circumstances.

Venerable Stark had already spent a lot of time familiarizing herself with many different energy cannon models within the MSTs. She also read numerous textbooks on this weapon type to quickly allow her to catch up to the pilots who specialized in the use of energy cannons for multiple decades.

From the moment the Amaranto deployed with a hefty and oversized luminar crystal cannon in its grasp, Davia already felt rewarded for her efforts.

Though the Amaranto clearly had to put a lot more effort into overcoming inertia due to the significantly greater mass of the Instrument of Doom, the expert mech did not lose its balance or deviate from its flight trajectory.

Venerable Stark didn't even have to think about keeping her expert mech stable in space while performing complicated maneuvers with her Amaranto.

This wasn't the case anymore. The cannon that looked as if it was at least a third as large as the machine that wielded it significantly.

All of the crystals, the energy cells, the buffer materials and so on added so much encumbrance that the Amaranto would have never been able to handle the weapon with so much relative ease if it didn't enjoy all of the advantages of an expert mech!

It took a bit of time for the slower Amaranto to reach its destination. The disappointing mobility demonstrated by the expert mech made it clear that it should never be sent away from the fleet or a defensive stronghold during an engagement!

Ves did not mind this too much. He already took this shortcoming into account.

In fact, the more the Amaranto suffered, the more he held out hope that the Instrument of Doom would pay off in the end!

"The Amaranto is in place." Gloriana reported. "Shall we begin?"

"Let's go, then. Venerable Stark, please rouse the Instrument of Doom to life!"

"I was waiting for that order."

For now, the weapon already looked impressive in its current state. Its mostly transparent crystal construction made it seem as if the Amaranto had just raided an art museum.

Though the newly built weapon clearly possessed elements that identified it as a weapon, most laymen thought it was far too pretty and ornamental to serve as a weapon!

What happened next only reinforced this impression because the weapon soon began to shine and shimmer in blue!

Many different components began to channel energy and perform all kinds of essential tasks.

Once the Instrument of Doom was ready to fire, the whale head-shaped muzzle began to glow a bit brighter and more ominously than the rest of the weapon.

Ves and Gloriana double-checked the telemetry to ensure that everything was within tolerance.

The weapon was so powerful that any catastrophic malfunction could damage the Amaranto and harm Venerable Stark!

This was why the two mech designers did not allow the Amaranto to proceed until they were absolutely certain that the luminar crystal cannon was in order!

Ves exchanged a brief glance with Gloriana before he transmitted the next order.

"You may proceed with the first test shot, Venerable Stark. Don't try to resonate with the weapon or request the Phase King to amplify the attack. Before we do anything fancy, we need establish a baseline of its performance."

"Understood. I will try my best not to resonate with the weapon, but this is difficult since it was made for this purpose."

When the Amaranto fired its new weapon for the first time, many onlookers who had access to a live feed looked considerably impressed at the result.

The Instrument of Doom's whale head had flashed with power as it unleashed the powerful laser beam!

A third of the body of a mech-like target dummy became engulfed by the overpowering laser beam. Whatever materials it was made of only resisted the powerful attack for a brief moment before succumbing entirely!

The powerful laser beam continued on with hardly any reduction in power before it dug into an asteroid located behind the vaporized target dummy.

The beam drilled a deep hole into the fairly weak asteroid. By the time the Instrument of Doom stopped firing the laser beam, everyone tried to understand how much power the Amaranto could exert with its new weapon.

"Wow... it went so deep..."

"None of our other ranged expert mechs can drill so deep with a single attack."

"Heh. This is child's play for the Amaranto."

After firing a couple of identical shots against different targets, Venerable Davia received the order to resonate with the weapon.

The attack that followed after this change was drastically different!

Not only did the Amaranto and its Instrument of Doom begin to glow brighter and more energetically than before, but the beam that spat out of the beautiful muzzle was stronger, thicker and brighter than any typical attack launched by the Instrument of Vengeance!

The resonance-empowered laser beam attack not only punched through multiple target dummies, but it also managed to drill from one side of an asteroid to the other side!

"That's too powerful!"

"The Amaranto hasn't even activated the transphasic function of the new weapon."

"No mid-tier expert mech will be able to block too many of these attacks. The absolute firepower of the Instrument of Doom will be a nightmare to our future opponents!"

Ves smirked as he imagined the reactions from other onlookers.

"This isn't even close to its maximum power."

Venerable Stark still had three more options to amplify the firepower of the Instrument of Doom even further.

One of them was to tap into the resonating exotics that were specifically selected to amplify the energy cannon's damage potential.

Another was to activate the transphasic function so that the energy beam would penetrate much deeper into its target.

The last one was to activate the Phase King's blessing and borrow its formidable abilities to enhance the attack even further.