

Mech 4411

Chapter 4411 Disapproval

After the Golden Skull Alliance and the Gemini Family managed to hit it off to an extent, the former agreed to travel to the location of the latter.

Fortunately, the distance was manageable and it would only take around a week to arrive in the same star system.

Other groups that had expressed enough interest in working together with the Gemini Family were on their way as well. The representative of the Geminis had already informed the Larkinsons that at least four other pioneering fleets had answered the call.

More may join the party as well, but it became increasingly less likely that the Geminis would accept any further invitations after enough time had passed.

The family that started this initiative did not wish to stall for too long. The more time passed by, the greater the chances that third parties might come and interfere. The Geminis had already shown a lot of patience by waiting long enough for the invitees to rendez-vous at their position.

When Gloriana received word that the expeditionary fleet was about to take part in another massive raid operation, she did not hold back her concerns.

"Are you crazy, Ves?" She confronted him with a hiss while their children were sitting on the deck while playing with their new toys. "We already suffered substantial losses in a battle that we had concluded only a few months earlier. What makes you think we are ready to fight against even stronger opponents?!"

Ves did not look concerned. He waved his hand as if to dismiss her fears. "The Gemini Family wouldn't have the guts to organize a coalition fleet if our chances of beating the alien defenses are too slim. Besides, we can always cut and run if the situation is beginning to look wrong. Our Black Cats are

working hard to collect more intelligence and we will constantly keep our guard up. We should at least meet with the Geminis and sound them out before we make our final judgment."

"The Gemini Family can't be trusted!" Gloriana exclaimed. Her raised voice attracted the attention of their children. "Their ideas about families and marriage are horrifying. Sisters should never be compelled to marry their brothers, especially when they are twins. For the Gemini Family to force this upon their offspring not once, but throughout its whole organization is a sign that it is completely rotten from top to bottom! I wouldn't trust a single promise from their inbred mouths!"

Ves grew annoyed. "You are judging a book by its cover, honey. Have you ever met or talked to the Geminis yet? I do not want you to malign our potential allies for a potentially lucrative offensive operation before we have met them properly. You are letting your biases and prejudices get the better of your logic. There are solid benefits to cooperating with the Geminis and I do not want you to spoil this opportunity because you are too intolerant to accept their... exotic cultural practices."

His wife let out a breath in exasperation. "Don't you know how disgusting that is? You are actually thinking about fighting alongside incestual perverts! Look, I don't care what they do in the bedroom, but I do not want any of the Geminis to get close to our clan and begin infecting our children with their unnatural views!"

"What's wrong, mama?" Aurelia innocently asked.

Gloriana quickly turned and directed a loving smile at her daughter. "Nothing is wrong, my dear. Your dum-dum of a father is just thinking about befriending the wrong crowd. There are many awful people in human space that you should never meet, and the Gemini Family is one of them. The people of this

family are not like us at all. They aren't even human to be honest. They are all unnatural spawn that need to be fed into the incinerator wholesale."

While Ves did not exactly feel comfortable with the Gemini Family either, he did not want his wife to spew poison into the minds of their children!

"You are going too far, Gloriana! You may avoid the Geminis if you don't like their practices, but don't make enemies with them just because their culture offends your sensibilities. You don't hear me talking about how much I dislike the Hexers to the point where I want to kill off all of the women who think that men should be driven to extinction. In my eyes, Hexers and Geminis are not that different. They are both pariah groups that cling to their own separate cultures."

"THE HEXERS ARE NOTHING LIKE THE GEMINIS! YOU ARE SLANDERING MY MOTHER AND ALL OF MY RELATIVES WITH YOUR UNWARRANTED COMPARISON!"

"Calm down, Gloriana! What did I tell you about raising your voice in front of our children?!"

As the couple continued to argue against each other, they seemed to have forgotten the fact that their son and daughters had long stopped paying attention to their toys.

"Mama and papa are shouting again." Andraste whispered as she dropped her Dark Witch Prestige Edition mech figurine.

"It will be fine." Aurelia said as she took on the role of the responsible big sister. "Mama and papa always argue against each other. They always make up with each other after they have nothing left to shout. They will stop sooner if we start to cry or ask fussy."

"Let's do that then, sister!"

Aurelia raised her arm to keep Andraste down. "No. Don't."

"Why not?"

Aurelia kept observing her parents with unusually insightful eyes. "Because sometimes our mother and father need to vent at each other. It is not good for them to bottle up their frustrations and defer their outbursts."

Both of her younger siblings looked confused.

"I don't want this." Marvaine whined. "My friends tell me that their mamas and papas never fight like this. Why are ours different?"

"They are different because they are strong. If you want to become as strong as papa in the future, then you need to shout as loudly as him, little brother."

"Ohhh..."

The children eventually tired of the ongoing shouting match and decided to move to one of their bedrooms so that they could jump onto a bed and play with their other toys.

Just as the oldest daughter predicted, Ves and Gloriana eventually ran out of words to say.

Neither of them were demented enough to repeat their earlier arguments. They were mech designers after all. They were too smart to waste their time on such an unproductive activity. They would rather spend their time working on their mech design projects.

"Okay, Ves." Gloriana placed her hands on her hips. "Since I can't dissuade you and the rest from reconsidering your decision to work with the Gemini Family, then I at least want you to limit our cooperation with this group as much as possible. We have better things to do than to hold a cultural exchange with people who marry their own siblings and have children who

they have already decided to form family units of their own. I will not accept any attempt to import their detestable views on family to our clan!"

Ves held her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "That won't happen. I can promise you that. None of our clansmen are crazy enough to think that the Geminis are worth imitating, and I have no desire to replicate their customs. We have our own principles. You should have more confidence in our own way of life. Our clan might not be as old as the Gemini Family, but our values are just as strong, isn't that right, Goldie?"

Nyaaaa!

The Golden Cat materialized in the air and exuded a warm glow that was quintessentially Larkinson.

Ves plucked the adorable ancestral spirit from the air and massaged her chin and cheeks.

"Goldie is the guardian of our culture and our way of life." He explained to his wife. "She plays an extensive role in our clan and can do more than you think. Our glowing kitty over here is our best guardian against any influences that desire to corrupt our clansmen. I don't think the Geminis will proactively attempt to convert us to their ways, but even if they do, it will never work."

Showing off Goldie was the right move. His wife calmed down and became a lot more reassured as she felt the power and the reassuring nature of the heart of the Larkinson Network.

When Ves originally came up with the Golden Cat, he infused it with all of his ideals related to family in her spiritual makeup.

The implications of this move were far-reaching. The rate of people in the Larkinson Clan that got married and started having kids was considerably higher than average.

Goldie could therefore be regarded as an instrument that encouraged the Larkinsons to follow the way of life that Ves had originally proscribed.

This was not entirely fixed, though. Goldie, like other spiritual entities, possessed the capacity to grow and change over time.

Though she still looked as slender and adorable as ever, she had not only grown stronger since her birth, but she had also become a lot smarter and wiser!

Even Ves didn't know how clever she was or what kind of ambitions she had developed during this time.

However, Ves always believed that Goldie would continue to do what was best for him and the Larkinsons.

After Goldie received enough pets, she flipped her tail and removed her manifestation.

What could Gloriana say against all of this? It was impossible for her to argue against the spirit that not only represented the Larkinsons, but also bound them all together.

"I will be keeping my eye on the Geminis, Ves. I will be there the moment they step out of line."

"That won't happen, honey."

The expeditionary fleet continued on its journey until they finally arrived in another obscure star system that didn't even have a proper name.

The local red dwarf star was so weak and unimpressive that there was only a single terrestrial planet in orbit.

Three different fleets were already present in the star system.

The biggest one in the center most definitely belonged to the Gemini Family. Their iconic purple and blue color scheme echoed the duality of many of their couples.

Two other fleets had arrived earlier from different directions and were already making their way to the orbit of the sole planet in the star system.

The Larkinsons already managed to identify them. One of the fleets belonged to the Adelaide Mercenary Company.

The Adelaides initially made their fortune in the mercenary sector, but had long outgrown their humble beginnings as soldiers of fortune.

They still kept their original name and continued to engage in the mercenary business to a limited degree, but with an ace pilot in their ranks they had also become involved in other activities.

From what Ves had learned, the Adelaide Mercenary Company was alright, he supposed. Mercenaries were never completely clean, but this particular group was considerably more upright than usual.

If they weren't, it would have been a lot less likely for them to produce an ace pilot from their own ranks!

The other fleet belonged to a formidable research institution called the Lehrer Institution.

The Lehrer Foundation was a behemoth. Its primary focus laid in research and development, with a particular emphasis on robotics, automation and heavy-duty industrial machinery.

While the Lehrer Foundation was strong to build up multiple powerful mech forces, most of them were assigned to protect the powerful group's many assets.

The Lehrer Expeditionary Fleet was the exception. It was tasked with exploring the Red Ocean to collect interesting samples and data that could further the main foundation's extensive research activities.

In other words, the Lehrer fleet that accepted the Gemini Family's invitation only represented a fraction of the parent group's total strength!

"These guys are a bit of a mixed bag." Ves ultimately judged.

Mercenaries and 'research assistants' did not sound like the kind of warriors that Ves would like to fight by his side, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Since both pioneering groups were good enough to produce ace pilots within their ranks, then their combat approaches shouldn't be too bad.

"Let's see how trustworthy they are when I can meet them in reality."

Chapter 4412 Twin Refuge

It took a bit of time for the remaining two invited pioneering fleets to arrive in the star system where the Gemini Family held court.

Each of the four fleets parked well away from each other. They clearly did not trust each other well enough to move close enough to give the ace mechs hailing from the other parties to launch any surprise attacks.

In order to make sure that an ace mech did not secretly try to take them by surprise, every fleet deployed an extensive sensor and scouting network that monitored the surrounding spaces for unusual warp travel activity.

The chances that any one of the gathered groups would go on the attack against each other was slim, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

The Gemini Family soon requested every group to send over representatives to discuss their proposed cooperation in person.

The Golden Skull Alliance dispatched Ves, Marshal Ariadne Wodin and Master Benedict Cortez among other people.

Patriarch Reginald Cross initially wanted to come as well, but he played an essential role in protecting the expeditionary fleet.

Now that so many ace pilots had gathered in a single star system, it became more important than ever for these powerful warriors to guard against each other!

Besides, the Geminis may be eager to cooperate with their guests, but they weren't stupid enough to allow a powerful ace mech to approach their fleet, especially at this early stage.

The ace pilots of all of the groups would have to wait a while longer before they could meet together.

The shuttles and escort mechs approaching the Gemini Fleet were heading towards the flagship situated in the center.

"What an unusual design." Ves said in an admiring tone. "These Geminis truly love to double everything up. The Twin Refuge looks as if a ship designer has mashed one fleet carrier hull against another identical hull."

The result was a broad capital ship that vaguely resembled a double-barreled gun.

Though the Twin Refuge was a lot slower and more massive than many other fleet carriers, she was able to hold 1500 mechs in total. This was an impressive capacity that even made Ves envious for a while.

"There aren't a lot of shipyards in the Red Ocean that are able and willing to construct hulls as large as this." Ves sighed as he stroked Lucky's back. "I can't imagine how much it cost the Gemini Family to commission such a large and massive fleet carrier."

"Meow." Lucky helpfully replied as he closed his eyes.

It did not take long for the delegations to arrive next to the Twin Refuge.

An extensive series of security procedures needed to happen first before the Geminis allowed the guests to come onboard their flagship.

All of this was routine and agreed upon beforehand so Ves and everyone else patiently waited for the Geminis to clear them and pass them through.

To be honest, all of these precautions were a bit overdone. None of the arrivals were insane enough to mess with a fleet that was guarded by two overprotective ace pilots.

Ves could already feel their overpowering presences from several kilometers away.

Even though the famed or infamous Gemini Saints were not in the cockpits of their ace mechs, their Saint Kingdoms still existed and formed a shell around their bodies.

They were just a lot weaker due to the lack of amplification from a compatible ace mech.

"That doesn't mean they are ineffective, though. A domain field can still produce unnatural phenomena even if the ace pilot is away from an ace mech."

What kind of changes they could make to reality heavily depended on the nature of the pilot in question.

Patriarch Reginald for example found it a lot easier to dominate the minds of strangers and 'command' them to agree to all sorts of unfavorable concessions.

Ves couldn't exactly determine what the Gemini Saints could do, but he could already get a glimpse of their domains from this distance.

He concentrated his mind and tried his best to get a sense of the two most powerful individuals in the Gemini Family.

"Well... I already suspected that they would be this close, but I never realized it could go this far."

Ves had already speculated that unusual family practices of the Gemini Family inevitably caused the twins who grew up and eventually married each other to develop a bond that was far closer and much more extensive than ordinary couples.

If one or both of the individuals in question happened to be spiritually active, then there was a great chance that they would unconsciously form a weak spiritual bond that faintly allowed them to understand the conditions of their significant others.

Of course, most people never realized what happened because they couldn't properly see, sense or develop this remarkable bond.

The Gemini Saints were different. Not only were they far closer to each other than the vast majority of other couples in human space, they were also extraordinarily powerful enough to actively strengthen their spiritual connection into a strong and unbreakable bond!

This not only allowed them to deeply understand their partner's condition at any time, but Ves speculated that they may also be able to share each other's strengths.

Ves was reminded by the way that Commander Casella Ingvar was able to lend her strength to her brother Imon Ingvar.

It was highly probable that Saint Sandro Gemini and Saint Kaia Gemini could not only lend their resources to each other, but perhaps they may have taken their cooperation a step further.

Ves had the feeling that both intimate ace pilots had invented methods that enabled them to display exceptional forms of synergy with each other!

Even when they were at rest, the powerful willpower of the Gemini Saints passively attracted each other. They harmonized and synergized with each other in patterns that were frankly beautiful to him. He had never witnessed such a deep and total trust and familiarity in any other group of people.

His imagination momentarily went wild as he began to come up with all kinds of powerful spiritual applications that could take advantage of this powerful twin bond.

"The Gemini Family is probably filled with pairings that have developed similar bonds. I can probably draw out the potential of their mech pilots as long as I design the right mechs."

Ves just knew in his heart that he could design mechs that could generate unsurpassed synergy if he wanted to. The rare qualities of the Gemini Family and especially its notable Destiny Teams were rough gems that were begging to be cut!

He retracted his senses and closed his eyes. "Let's not get ahead of myself. I can offer to design a mech for the Geminis if I can get along with them. If not, then I should just move on and work on other designs. I already have plenty of projects on my plate."

The shuttle eventually entered one of the hangar bays of the Twin Refuge.

The flagship of the Gemini Family was so enormous that it was able to receive its guests in separate hangar bays. This allowed the hosts to control the influx of people and prevent any scuffles from taking place in less than ideal conditions.

Ves looked around and took in the environment.

The Geminis were evidently fans of softer and more pastel colors. Many sharp edges and angles had been softened and rounded out in an attempt to reduce their aggressive appearance.

It made the hangar bay and presumably the rest of the interior of the Twin Refuge look like an industrial daycare facility rather than a military vessel.

"At least their mechs still look good enough." Ves muttered.

Since the Gemini Family was large and powerful enough to colonize its own planet and field its own ace mechs, it most definitely had its own mech company.

Unlike the Living Mech Corporation, Gemini Mechs was not that big of a player in the local mech industry.

It didn't really try that hard to build up a market presence, opting instead to serve the needs of the Gemini Family.

The reason for that was because anything related to the Gemini Family tended to arouse a huge degree of disgust and revulsion from ordinary people.

"Strange, that. The Hexers also suffer from the same problem."

The Gemini Family shouldn't be too short of money, though. Any group that had two ace pilots on its retainer was most definitely a force to be reckoned with in the new frontier!

Aside from that, Gemini Genetics was a much bigger economic component of the family.

Though Ves had never heard of it and the Larkinson Clan had never paid for its services, Gemini Genetics was apparently an up-and-coming genetics company that specialized in developing affordable but effective designer babies for people who want their children to gain advantages from birth.

As much as the practices of the Geminis worked against them, it was different in this case.

The genetics company that had originally been founded to perpetuate their practices seemed to gain a positive boost due to its successful track record in keeping the Geminis sane and healthy for so long!

In any case, Ves the Geminis themselves were clearly a lot more pleasant to look at than their rather safe and inspiring mech models.

Many twins and couples not only grew up and slept together, but they also studied the same courses and performed the same jobs.

It was rather odd to see the sheer amount of Geminis performing the exact same jobs as their twins and spouses.

"Everything comes in twos."

Two mech technicians serviced the same part of the same mechs.

Two engineers performed routine maintenance on a power duct underneath the deck of the hangar bay.

Two mech pilots were gaming out their exclusive battle tactics that they intended to employ at the right moments in the upcoming operation.

Every couple looked remarkably similar to each other. Though they undoubtedly possessed the distinct features that were characteristic to males and females, they often exhibited the same hair color, the same eye color, the same facial structure, the same musculature levels and more.

Fortunately, the Geminis still put at least some effort into distinguishing the twin couples from each other. Every pairing featured a different set of external features that should at least prevent Ves from mistaking one pairing for another pairing.

They all looked incredibly beautiful or handsome. Their genes gave them an inherent outward beauty that could easily be enhanced through the clever use of makeup.

Gloriana would have called them perfect if not for the ugly fact that the pairings were all products of incest, if only in spirit!

As it was, Ves developed the strange impression that he had entered a ship that was populated by perfected organic sculptures rather than real human beings.

Together with the nearly identical uniform patterns, they all looked a bit unreal and uncanny.

It was as if the Geminis were playing an elaborate game to outsiders.

Ves knew that wasn't the case, though. These Geminis rarely had good interactions with other groups of people, so they turned inwards instead and only cared about the opinions of their fellow people.

They seemed to be good at following orders though as they did their best to hide their vigilance and animosity towards a foreigner like Ves. It was regrettable that they couldn't hide the emotions in their minds.

The hatred and rejection bottled up inside their heads were palpable at times.

Ves quietly developed a sympathy for the Geminis. These people had probably endured a lot of discrimination, ostracization and even outright abuse from other humans.

Gloriana's initial reaction towards the Gemini Family was the rule rather than the exception.

Did the Geminis deserve all of the backlash for persisting in their unnatural practices? Ves couldn't say. He preferred not to think too much about the ethics of indoctrinating twin brothers to marry their twin sisters from the moment of their birth.

Chapter 4413 Potential Comrades

As the Geminis led Ves and his small entourage deeper into the interior of the Twin Refuge, both sides carefully scoped each other out during this interval.

Just as Ves was learning more about the Geminis by touring different sections of the voluminous flagship, the crew members along the way also paid a lot of attention to the strangers.

Ves, Minister Shederin and the handful of other Larkinsons tried to maintain a professional demeanor.

Shederin had already briefed everyone on the importance of behaving as impeccably as possible.

Nothing good would come about if they ever openly expressed their disgust or contempt at their hosts.

In fact, one of the biggest reasons why the delegation from the Larkinsons was so small was because there weren't many of them that could control their reactions!

The Larkinsons didn't want to leave anything to chance, so it was better to bring only the absolute minimum necessary to meet the Geminis for the first time.

After twenty minutes of scenic touring, the group eventually entered a large and luxurious ceremonial hall that was themed in an interesting way.

Most ceremonial halls of this kind tended to show the history and the splendor of their owners.

Here, Ves could see a lot of animated murals that were all exquisite pieces of art by themselves.

The dramatized depictions of the founders of the Gemini Family and the many twists and turns they had taken since the beginning looked both beautiful and tragic.

This group of eccentric people had known suffering and tragedy from the beginning.

Instead of succumbing to all of the stigma and rejection that they received, the Geminis endured all of the pressure and continued to fight for every scrap of dignity and power that they could obtain.

Ves admired their tenacity and their unflinching belief in their own cultural practices, even if they weren't really okay.

No wonder the Geminis eventually became strong enough to produce two powerful ace pilots!

The emergence of the Gemini Saints completely changed the fortunes of the Gemini Family and allowed it to receive a lot of breathing room for the first time!

With few people daring to provoke two ace pilots at once, the Geminis could finally begin to command respect from others, if only reluctantly!

Nowadays, the Geminis were thriving. They retained the stubbornness and unity that enabled them to endure more difficult times, but also gained the absolute strength needed to step up and elevate their family to a major power!

Ves quite liked the trajectory they followed. The successes and failures they experienced matched with the theories that guided him to lead his clan into riskier waters.

In some ways, the Gemini Family served as a model for the Larkinson Clan.

Perhaps one day the Larkinsons would also be able to produce two ace pilots from their ranks of powerful expert pilots!

As Ves continued to study the murals and other symbolic monuments of the Geminis, he found it a bit strange that there weren't any members of the family in the hall at this time.

Other delegations had arrived first instead. The different groups who originated from different pioneering fleets all beheld each other. They exhibited both curiosity and cautious vigilance towards their potential coalition partners.

Ves nodded respectfully to the delegates of the Adelaide Mercenary Company.

They stood apart from the rest due to their acquired combativeness.

It was easy to figure them out. Each of Adelaides were warriors who had shed blood and witnessed death in battle. Their experiences marked their minds and spirits in ways that only those who lived through the same sort of traumas could recognize from each other.

The Adelaides for their part silently reciprocated the friendly gesture. They also recognized that the Larkinsons were of the same kind.

It was rather disappointing to see that the other delegations did not include as many soldiers or warriors in their parties.

Ves briefly studied the other delegations as well.

Some of the people sent by the Lehrer Foundation possessed a much quieter and more contemplative demeanor.

Ves instantly equated them to the researchers working for various development companies. The Lehrers possessed the same air of academic scholarship and passion for research. It was as if the Lehrers much preferred to spend their time in their labs rather than a diplomatic outing.

Most of the delegates of the Santana Group possessed a more proactive demeanor. They also dressed and carried themselves as successful businessmen who knew exactly how to squeeze as much short-term profits out of a company even as they hollowed out its foundation and piled it with mountains of debt.

This did not surprise Ves as the Santana Group was essentially a financial conglomerate. It was originally an investment company that slowly bought shares in different companies and acquired a lot of real estate during economic downturns when they were sold in a hurry.

All of these assets needed protection, and what better way to do so than to buy out security companies so that they could guard all of those expensive assets for a cheaper price?

This was how the Santana Group gradually built up an increasingly stronger and more expansive mech army!

Good management along with plenty of violent competition with other rivals in the business enabled its mech pilots to grow so well that one of them even became a Saint!

This was quite a rare occurrence among financial investment groups, but obviously the Santana Group had done something right.

Ves found it rather odd that a financial group would not only form a pioneering fleet and dispatch it towards the riskier parts of the new frontier, but also send out their valuable ace pilot along for the expedition.

This was not a characteristic decision for a financial conglomerate. The Santana Group risked losing what may be the most valuable asset in their portfolio if an accident ever befell their precious Saint!

There was probably more to the story than what Ves knew of the Santana Group, but it wasn't really a priority for him to get to the bottom of this story.

If everything went well, they would all just cooperate a single time before going their separate ways again. There was no compelling reason for them to keep each other company after they got what they wanted from the asteroid base raid.

The final group of delegates came from the Boojay Family.

Ves wasn't able to pin them down as easily as they consisted of a mix of different types.

Unlike the other pioneering groups, the Boojay Family was actually based in a more distant middle zone, at least as far as the intelligence showed.

Ves had no idea why the Boojay Family left their familiar haunt in the distant Greenwich Middle Zone and came all the way to the Krakatoa Middle Zone, but perhaps they were nomadic like the Larkinson Clan.

The Boojay Family delegates attracted plenty of attention due to their colorful and flowing clothing style and their tribal air. There was a sense of unity and kinship in them that Ves could respect, but they also conveyed an implicit rejection towards those that weren't a part of their family.

The Boojays would have never bothered to gather here if not for the Gemini Family's invitations.

A few more minutes passed by until the double doors at the other side of the hall finally slid open.

Two resplendently dressed twins, married of course, floated forward as they clasped their hands.

It immediately became clear that the newly arrived man and woman held a lot of authority.

Ves already recognized the middle-aged looking figures as the joint leaders of the Gemini Family.

One of the biggest reasons why Patriarch Kopal Gemini and Matriarch Sena Gemini were able to gain their positions was because their parents were the famed Gemini Saints!

As such, Kopal and Sena Gemini not only had the right to speak on behalf of the Gemini Family, but they also served as the voice of its ace pilots!

Every member of every delegation immediately became more attentive. None of them exhibited any ugly expressions that might betray what they really thought about the Geminis and their unusual family practices.

Compared to the potential to earn a massive amount of valuable loot, who cared what their main combat partner did under the bedsheets?

Just as with the delegation from the Golden Skull Alliance, none of the people dispatched by the other invited groups were average. Everyone of them possessed enough maturity and self-control to maintain a respectful and even eager posture towards the Geminis.

Patriarch Kopal minutely nodded in satisfaction. "Upon the moment when we have decided to gather help to assault the alien asteroid base that we have recently discovered, we have studied all of the available pioneering organizations carefully. We initially put hundreds of different groups like yours on our list, but we have steadily whittled down our selection until we were left with fifteen choices. We are pleased to see that five of you have not only expressed interest, but also took concrete action by meeting us in this star system."

"Our Gemini Family understands that you are not yet satisfied with the shallow amount of information that we were willing to share with you." Matriarch Sena Gemini continued as she squeezed the hand of her brother who was also her husband. "We are ready to provide you with additional details that will

hopefully convince you that we can make immense gains as long as you join us on our endeavor."

A large projection formed in the middle of the hall that showed an abstract model of the supposed alien asteroid base.

"This is a representation of our target. We have purposefully removed many features which may give clues to where it might be located." Patriarch Kobal said. "As you can see, the asteroid where it is based is dozens of kilometers long and is rife with tunnels, local strongholds and so on. It is a complex maze and city in itself. The reason why its interior has developed in this manner is because there is no single owner of this base. It is all carved up into many different territories held by different alien pirate groups."

Ves and many others found it difficult to imagine that so many different alien forces from so many different races could get along with each other in a single site.

"Does this place have a name?" Someone from the Boojay Family inquired.

"One of the more prevalent alien races has taken to calling it the Palace of Shame when translated into standard language."

"..."

That was certainly a unique way to name a den of thieves.

Matriarch Sena Gemini offered further clarification. "It is a gathering of some of the worst criminals and outcasts of the local alien races that used to live in the surrounding regions before humanity displaced them all. Though all of these aliens are different, most of them share the concept of shame and the stigma against rule breaking behavior. Only the desperate among the indigenous aliens will take up piracy as a career. This is why their pirate base is referred to as the Palace of Shame. It is a pirate base made strong through

the plunder of many riches. It is also a place of exile where the worst individuals of their respective races have taken up residence."

There was definitely a greater story behind this so-called Palace of Shame. Even if the words did not represent the original meaning due to flaws in translation, Ves did not believe this was just an average pirate resting point that gradually grew stronger over time.

He also found it difficult to believe that the Palace of Shame lacked a strong, central authority. There was no way that so many different aliens with so many different racial and cultural customs could somehow get along with each other without starting up wars that could tear the entire asteroid base apart from the inside!

The only problem was that the Geminis were the only source of real intelligence at the moment. They could not only control and massage the information they shared to the rest, but their understanding of the Palace of Shame might not even be all that accurate!

Chapter 4414 The Palace Of Shame

The abstract image of the so-called Palace of Shame might be lacking in details, but it showed a rather complete internal layout of its interior.

Ves wondered how the Gemini Family managed to obtain so much internal information. It shouldn't be possible for the Geminis to sneak human infiltrators past the Palace's formidable defenses and map out the immensely extensive interior on foot.

Even if an agent got through somehow, the pirates who should constantly be on guard against intrusion from their rivals must have the technology to detect hidden spies!

It also shouldn't be possible for the Geminis to map out the entire asteroid base by scanning at it from long range.

Any scans that were powerful enough to look past the thick exterior of the asteroid base and map out the insides to this extent should definitely be noticeable.

From the moment any scout ship attempted to perform high-powered scans on the asteroid base, the local pirate forces would definitely behave as if they were stung by bees and retaliate with overwhelming violence!

After all, no pirate wanted their secret hideout to be exposed and mapped out in its entirety!

Once Ves ruled out these possibilities, he was left with one obvious answer.

The Gemini Family captured an alien individual or an alien starship that possessed a lot of details about the Palace of Shame.

The identity of the captured subject shouldn't be minor either. Only an important element of the local alien pirate forces should contain this much information about a base of this size and complexity.

No matter how the Geminis managed to obtain and extract all of this extremely sensitive intelligence, they possessed an overwhelming information advantage that put them far ahead of the other groups invited to the party!

Combined with the fact that the Geminis was also led by two ace pilots of decent strength, they firmly grasped the initiative of this operation!

Ves understood now why the family was confident enough to invite five fairly powerful pioneering fleets to take part in their offensive operation.

As long as the Gemini Family retained both an information and power advantage, there was no way it could lose!

The Golden Skull Alliance, the Adelaide Mercenary Company, the Lehrer Foundation, the Santana Group and the Boojay Family had little choice but to

act as the Gemini Family's extra muscle if they wanted to earn a share of the loot.

The two leaders of the Gemini Family evidently possessed enough confidence that their invited guests would agree to attack the alien asteroid base alongside their own forces, because they shared real information about what they might be facing.

"It is difficult to obtain current information about the composition of alien pirate groups that are either temporarily or permanently stationed at the Palace of Shame." Patriarch Kobal Gemini explained. "As you can imagine, pirates tend to be rather chaotic and inconsistent no matter whether they are human or alien. Many pirate fleets incur heavy damage that either breaks them apart or causes their remnants to be absorbed by rival fleets. What complicates the dynamic even further is the variable of race."

Matriarch Sena Gemini elegantly waved her hand, causing a projection that displayed the busts of over fifty known alien races. "Many of you may be familiar with how human pirate gangs operate on a shallow basis. One of the advantages of human pirates operating in the vast expanse of human space that we never think about is that we are all part of one race. Though we have created many other methods to divide and discriminate against each other, we are all human, and that unites us and enables us to work together even if we have little in common."

That was true. Ves had to look no further than his own clan where the honorable Larkinsons somehow managed to band together with radically different groups of people such as faithful Ylvainan worshipers, indoctrinated slave soldiers, female sword amazons, biotechnology advocates, extremely traditional swordsmen, reformed Hexer extremists, exiled diplomats and many more groups.

Though the Larkinson Clan managed to bind them together to a common identity through Goldie's Larkinson Network, many of these weird and proud people would have never gotten close if they all consisted of different alien races!

The language problem alone was a huge source of division. The differences in culture would definitely be a lot worse because of how much more alien societies diverged from each other.

Even physiological differences could become a major source of division! Many alien races evolved in planetary environments with different gravities, different air mixtures and different heat and radiation tolerances.

Trying to put them all together in a single starship or a space station for that matter was a nightmare to behold!

Ves found it difficult to imagine that the 50 alien races listed out by Matriarch Sena Gemini could all get along somehow.

"The Palace of Shame and its local pirate organizations are largely divided by race." The older woman confirmed his suspicions. Though we know that mixed groups that consist of dozens of members of different alien races exist, they are not as prevalent. The main groups that engage in piracy, smuggling, illegal production, black market operations and so on largely belong to one group or another. It makes everything easier for them and they can also specialize in jobs that their races or civilization levels are best suited to perform."

Patriarch Kobal took the word again. "No one knows for certain how many different alien races are currently represented in the Palace of Shame. The fifty that we have shown to you are always present in various quantities, but the pirate base may very well be hosting hundreds more sentient aliens from other races. We believe that this number has skyrocketed in the last decade

due to the massive initial success of the Big Two's invasion of the Red Ocean. Many alien empires that used to occupy territory in the regions around us have been swept away virtually overnight. The vast majority of the alien residents have been wiped out during the conquest, but many refugees and other escapees have managed to escape the slaughter."

The people gathered in the ceremonial hall grew troubled.

"Does this mean that the Palace of Shame is filled with refugees?"

Kobal Gemini nodded. "That is so, and not all of them are the poor civilian types who don't know how to fight. The Palace of Shame has a high attraction to the underbelly of alien societies. The amount of armed and able combatants that have settled in the asteroid base had risen to an explosive degree. Though we expect intense internal contradictions to have led to massive deaths, numerous years have already passed since the Big Two's warfleets have swept across the Krakatoa Middle Zone. The internal situation should have stabilized by this time."

"Great. The Palace of Shame is better staffed and more fortified than ever." A delegate from the Adelaide Mercenary Group openly muttered. "I bet that plenty of former military forces have made their way over there. How many of their military warships are still intact and in working condition all this time?"

"We intend to go over their naval assets later." The Gemini Matriarch said.

"First, let me continue to give you an overview of the most important alien races. We are aware that the current list you see before you may be overwhelming. We will only highlight the most important races that you may stumble upon."

The woman pointed at one of the projected entries. It grew in size while others shrunk and moved to the periphery.

Additional data came into view which showed the gravity levels they were comfortable with, the kind of air they liked to breathe and many other racial information.

"Let me start with the strongest though not the most numerous group. The orvens are one of the few major races that are involved in the Palace of Shame. Though the orvens are not as strong or prominent as the nunsers, puelmers, voribugs and so on, they possess their own advantages that have not only helped them maintain a strong position in the alien pirate community, but also bolster its tech and defenses to a higher level."

That was indeed a major source of concern. The major alien races of the Red Ocean were the equivalent of first-rate states in human terms. This meant that the orvens mastered a level of technology that could give the MTA and CFA a run for their money!

Before everyone's fears grew too great, Matriarch Sena made a reassuring gesture.

"The orvens should not be underestimated, but the exiled group that have taken root in the Palace of Shame are far from the most exemplary and well-equipped members of the orven race. Combined with the relative lack of high-quality materials, industrial infrastructure and so on, the pirate organization led by the orvens have degenerated over time. They even had to cannibalize their smaller warships in order to ensure that their flagship keeps functioning."

"I take it the orven warship is the greatest naval threat that we must confront if we attack the Palace of Shame." Master Benedict noted.

"You presume correctly." Matriarch Sena Gemini affirmed. "However, we cannot completely predict the reactions of every alien pirate group. Their attitudes, values and thought processes are literally inhuman. We can model their behavior based on what we generally know about their races and more

specific intelligence about the pirate organizations in particular, but no one can truly say whether any pirate ship or unit will flee, self-destruct, fight to the death or simply wallow in indecision."

This was another reminder to them all that they were not fighting against a homogenous group of humans whose biological and cultural behavioral patterns were well-known to the point where advanced modeling programs could predict their reactions to certain events with a high degree of accuracy!

Were the orvens exiled to this part of the Red Ocean brave or cowardly?

Did they consider the Palace of Shame to be their only refuge or simply a temporary stopping point?

Would the orvens be willing to fight alongside pirate groups composed of different alien races?

No one could provide a definite answer to these questions. Not even the Geminis had the courage to make any solid predictions!

The people from the different delegations became more troubled. What the Geminis had mentioned did not bring them any closer to agreeing on committing to this bold and ambitious assault.

Each of them expected the alien opposition to put up stiff resistance, but they assumed they would have the situation well in hand as long as they brought enough high-end firepower.

However, none of them relished the prospect of fighting against even one first-class warship!

Ace mechs or not, the power of a warship fielded by a major alien race of the Red Ocean could destroy any pioneering fleet if left unchecked!

How many warships of this caliber were stationed at the asteroid base?

What were their conditions?

Was it possible to sabotage or disable them before the assault commenced?

As every invited delegate began to worry about the many possible setbacks that might occur, a leader from the Santana Group interrupted the presentation.

"Please excuse me, Patriarch Kobal, but before we are willing to listen any further, we need to determine whether there is any profit to be made from this attack." The business executive spoke. "We will not commit our assets to an operation that will cost us much and leave us with disappointing spoils. Even if we have obtained more than enough to compensate for our losses, it is of little use if we no longer possess the strength to protect our gains."

Both Kobal and Sena Gemini adopted an understanding expression. Neither of them displayed any impatience or annoyance at the interruption.

"We planned to address the topic of possible profits later on, but we can give you a quick summary of what you can expect to extract from the Palace of Shame and its many ships." Patriarch Kobal Gemini said. "Let us begin with the estimate of how much phasewater the alien pirates have hoarded over the years. We estimate that all of the pirate groups put together are sitting on 600 to 800 kilograms of pure phasewater."

"WHAT?!"

Chapter 4415 Divided Palace

Though Ves and the rest of the Golden Skull Alliance had already handled phasewater in the hundreds of kilograms in the past, that did not mean that this substance had become devalued in their eyes.

There was never enough phasewater to go around!

The special exotic material that dominated the Red Ocean during its entire existence was useful to every alien race as long as they possessed the ability to unlock even a fraction of its potential.

Humans couldn't get enough of the stuff, let alone the many indigenous alien races that had long adapted their entire technology trees to better exploit the properties of phasewater!

It made sense that the indigenous alien pirate groups would be eager to plunder as much phasewater as possible from the surrounding territories.

What the delegates gathered in the ceremonial hall of the Twin Refuge didn't expect was that the aliens accumulated so much phasewater without using it all up to strengthen their own equipment and warships!

Even if the aliens regarded phasewater as a holy material that needed to be revered as a gift from their gods, even they shouldn't be stupid enough to leave so much phasewater unused.

In the Red Ocean of today, many alien empires had been wiped out in their entirety and entire races ceased to exist.

Humanity was an existential threat to any native occupant of the dwarf galaxy. The only way the survivors of the initial sweeps could survive in this dark and desolate period was to convert as many resources as possible into strength.

Phasewater could be used to build stronger warp drives that could help nomadic fleets stay out of the reach of their human pursuers.

Phasewater could be used to augment the most important portions of the hulls of warships, enabling them to survive blows that would have crippled their vital components.

Phasewater could also be used to amplify the penetration power of the enormous weapon systems of those very same warships, allowing them to pierce through the armor of the most indestructible opponents!

Though humanity had already managed to develop a lot of powerful applications surrounding phasewater, the native aliens of the Red Ocean

definitely mastered phasewater technology to a much more sophisticated degree!

It was hard to believe that all of those aliens did not use up such an enormous stash already. Perhaps the coalition formed by the Gemini Family might expend a huge amount of effort into taking over the Palace of Shame, only to find that its entire stock of phasewater had already been drained!

The two leaders of the Gemini Family understood the skepticism from the delegates. Patriarch Kobal Gemini moved to reassure the people his family might have to depend upon to attack the alien asteroid base.

"If the Palace of Shame was wholly owned by a single strong pirate group, then it is unlikely that so much phasewater is left unused. That is not the case. We have told you earlier that this pirate base is occupied by many different groups, many of whom are small and must constantly be on guard against their rivals. Their warships are smaller and weaker and their infrastructure is nowhere comparable to that of the orvens."

Matriarch Sena Gemini also chimed in. "What has happened in the last decade also contributed to this unusual situation. The alien pirates based in the Palace of Shame shouldn't have been able to gather so much phasewater in normal times, but the human invasion changed everything. Many alien organizations that used to be rooted in wealthy and developed planets had to evacuate in a hurry with the most valuable assets that they could carry. A large number of evacuation fleets left the star systems in the regions around us and tried their best to flee away from the advancing humans as possible."

"The alien pirates based in the Palace of Shame took advantage of this frenzy and feasted upon the vulnerable." Sena's husband and brother seamlessly continued. "They not only plundered a large amount of phasewater, but also obtained a massive amount of valuable exotics, technological libraries, cultural artifacts, and a large amount of intact pieces of alien technology. The

pirates frankly plundered more valuables than they could digest, hence why the Palace of Shame has turned into an expansive treasure house where every individual pirate group has built its own vault."

That was highly plausible. Though years had already gone by since the frenzy had passed, the Palace of Shame did not appear to possess the industrial infrastructure required to convert so many raw materials into processed goods.

Patriarch Kobal Gemini affirmed this guess. "The Palace of Shame may be many things, but it was never set up to function as an independent refuge or nation state. In the past, the pirate den actually functioned as a trading hub that crossed racial lines. It was one of the few hubs in the region where any alien individual from any race could come and trade with anyone without regard for laws, taboos, diplomatic relations and so on. While the asteroid den does possess a considerable amount of production facilities, most of them are biased towards the repair and to a limited extent production of warships up to a certain scale. The local industries are lacking in too many other areas."

A huge variety of industrial processes were needed to sustain an entire civilization.

There were factories that were set up to refine specific ores into specific alloys.

There were fuel refineries that converted raw substances into powerful fuels needed to keep enormous power generators running.

There were also pharmaceutical plants that produced all manner of essential medicines and bioproducts necessary to sustain the physiological needs of different alien races.

The asteroid that hosted the Palace of Shame couldn't fit so many industrial complexes!

Even if it did, without extensive support of alien civilizations, many of the more advanced factories and shipyards simply couldn't be built due to lack of advanced technologies and expert knowledge!

The two Gemini leaders elaborated a bit on how the criminal and marginalized nature of the Palace of Shame prevented it from becoming an industrial powerhouse.

"We speculate that the alien empires that used to occupy the neighboring territories have tolerated the Palace of Shame to an extent." Matriarch Sena Gemini explained. "Their leaders may have known about it, but they did not gather their fleets to annihilate this scourge in its entirety. The reason for that is because it serves a useful purpose and does not pose a real threat against the ruling classes. The alien officials and the pirate outcasts may have even formed secret relationships to better control the situation. As long as the Palace of Shame does not seek to loosen the collar on its neck, it is not an existential threat."

"These contracts no longer exist after the fall of all of the alien empires." Minister Shederin Purnesse pointed out. "The Palace of Shame is on its own now, and there should be no more oversight that could stop the local aliens from building more advanced industrial facilities."

"You are correct, but even the aliens are not capable of building so much advanced infrastructure in a short amount of time. They are also lacking in too many other areas, most notably the large number of highly educated scientists and engineers that can design, build and run these facilities."

The Geminis brought up numerous pieces of proof that ultimately convinced the delegates that the alien pirate groups likely didn't possess the ability to use up all of that phasewater so quickly.

"There are many alien pirate gangs that are too small and weak to work with phasewater. However, they still managed to steal a few kilograms of phasewater here and there after raiding many of the evacuation fleets that fled this area of the new frontier. Right now, phasewater is more valuable as a form of hard currency that transcends racial differences. The more phasewater in their possession, the more goods and services they can exchange from other rivals and competitors."

The Geminis painted a pirate stronghold that had not only become unmoored by humanity's invasion of the Red Ocean, but also a place that had become overcrowded to the point where a lot of internal contradictions took place.

The high level of division among the alien races and pirate groups meant that all of the stakeholders of the Palace of Shame could not unify their efforts and spend all of their resources in the most efficient and effective manner possible!

Instead, they wasted much of their manpower, combat assets and resources into beating each other up! The grudges between the different aliens ran too deep and the rapid changes in the Red Ocean only intensified the contradictions!

"Does that mean that a concerted attack from humans such as us will cause the local aliens to fall apart and encourage them to go their separate ways?" A delegate from the Boojay Family asked.

Patriarch Kobal Gemini gave an uncertain reply. "That may be possible. It is conceivable that the weaker and most desperate pirate groups will flee at the first possible opportunity. We should prevent them from doing so because they will likely take away all of their most valuable spoils such as their phasewater reserves. We can discuss our action plan later. For now, we are certain that the largest pirate groups such as the ones led by the orven race have too much of a stake in the Palace of Shame. They will put up serious

resistance and will most definitely seek to hit back hard, especially because our forces are not as strong as that of the Big Two."

Many people nodded in agreement.

Many indigenous aliens developed a lot of respect and fear towards the warships and mechs of the Big Two. The human warfleets were too powerful and had access to all kinds of highly advanced technologies.

The pioneers that came afterwards were nowhere near as strong!

If the pirate groups based in the Palace of Shame found out that the attackers consisted of second-class pioneering fleets, then there was even less of a reason to shirk away from a fight!

"Do the aliens recognize the threat of an ace mech?" Ves curiously asked.

Matriarch Sena Gemini shook her head. "We cannot answer that question. It depends on how much contact the aliens still have with their other compatriots. We know that the alien pirates have curtailed most of their external activities in order to prevent humans from locating the Palace of Shame. The pirate groups may have even gone as far as cutting off all contact with the outside galaxy. If that is the case, then the information they should possess about our race should be limited."

There were too many unknowns for Ves' liking. Though he was attracted by the prospect of plundering a lot of phasewater and a lot of valuable alien tech, was it truly worth it to confront a lot of strong and unfamiliar alien pirate forces?

The Geminis still had a long way to go to convince all of the gathered pioneering forces to join the assault.

"I have a question." A delegate from the Lehrer Foundation spoke up. "The vast majority of alien groups that used to reside in the Krakatoa Middle Zone

and beyond have already fled this area years ago. As long as they have enough ships, they have almost always chosen to flee out of range of human pursuit. Why have these pirates chosen to stay behind?"

The woman carried herself as an academic, so she had probably thought much deeper about this situation than anyone else.

The matter she brought up was important. It was too suspicious for so many selfish and criminal alien outlaws to stay behind in hostile human territory!

Ves also began to think about what was so important about the Palace of Shame to all of these aliens.

He became more and more suspicious towards the Geminis. They likely knew at least some of the truth of what made this hidden asteroid base so attractive to everyone!

Chapter 4416 Profit Split

The Gemini leaders did not look surprised that someone eventually brought up this suspicious point.

None of the pioneering groups that they tried to invite to this party were weak, stupid or naive.

Each of them possessed long and extensive track records that proved their competence. They overcame many challenges, outsmarted numerous rivals and defeated strong opponents on the battlefield.

Some of the organizations in questions enjoyed long and storied histories that showed that they didn't easily make mistakes.

If the Gemini Family wanted to obtain their cooperation, then it had no choice but to expose at least a part of the truth about the Palace of Shame.

Patriarch Kopal first elaborated on the composition of the aliens at the asteroid base.

"You should first know that many of the current residents of the Palace of Shame originally weren't pirates at all. They were refugees who boarded ships that for one reason or another did not join the great migration, but ventured to this asteroid base instead. Maybe their ships couldn't make the journey. Maybe the alien refugees were former soldiers who wanted to take revenge against the human invaders rather than run like cowards and condemn their souls to eternal damnation."

That sounded plausible, but it was hardly enough.

"What of the orven exiles and other long-standing pirate groups? Why haven't they behaved like normal pirates and abandoned a site that would soon become surrounded by human alien colonies?"

The current information provided to them did not offer a satisfactory explanation. No matter what kind of weird culture and attitudes the aliens possessed, none of them should be suicidal to this degree!

There had to be more about the Palace of Shame and this location that compelled so many capable alien pirates into staying behind!

The two Gemini leaders exchanged glances with each other. Since the discussion had come to this point, they finally decided to reveal one of the reasons why they wanted to take the risk to break open the alien pirate base.

"The Palace of Shame... is older than you think." Matriarch Sena Gemini revealed in a soft tone. "We will not go into too much detail before you have given your answer on whether you are willing to become a part of our joint operation, but I can tell you that the Palace of Shame used to be built to serve another purpose before it was taken over by pirates and scoundrels. To be honest, we do not know for certain what the Palace of Shame contains that has convinced many powerful alien groups to stay behind and defend this site to their deaths."

That did not sound entirely credible.

Ves frowned. "So the main motivation for your Gemini Family to organize this offensive operation is to obtain possession of some sort of powerful ancient alien relic or sorts that you don't even know the details of? What if it is useless to anyone else? What if the aliens will just decide to destroy it before it can fall into the hands of humans?"

Patriarch Kobal Gemini gave a reassuring smile. "While we do not know what the Palace of Shame truly holds, we have obtained scattered clues that refer to it in allusions and other vague alien descriptions. Only the highest ranking alien leaders should know the full truth, but they have been remarkably thorough in minimizing the chances of exposure. No matter what it is, our Gemini Family is determined to take it as our own. The fact that we are willing to commit our entire fleet along with our two ace mechs should be proof of our confidence that we shall succeed."

Whatever the Palace of Shame was hiding most definitely turned the Geminis crazy. Ves could definitely believe that the Gemini Family was convinced that this was a worthwhile endeavor, but what about the other invited groups?

The delegates of the Santana Group objected the most to this idea.

"It is not polite to demand us to fight against multiple powerful alien warships only to claim the greatest prize that the Palace of Shame has to offer by yourself."

The leaders of the Gemini Family did not give in. "Our family is the one that has taken the initiative to let you take part in our joint operation. We will also be shouldering the greatest burden of defeating the opposition. There are still plenty of other spoils that you can take that will still allow you to earn a handsome profit."

"What if that is not the case?"

"Then we can make other arrangements."

"Hey, don't brush aside the matter of this ancient alien relic so quickly." A leader from the Adelaide Mercenary Company spoke up. "If whatever you are trying to take is some sort of superphasewater or a batch of powerful weapons, then we expect to receive a share of this bounty. None of the other spoils are enough to convince us to accept this job. We can easily go elsewhere and plunder phasewater and alien tech elsewhere out in the vast frontier."

"We agree."

"We appreciate your offer, but the rewards are not proportionate to the risks."

The groups began to haggle with the Geminis on the spot. No one was a fool. Even if the Gemini leaders did not mention this secret alien relic, it was doubtful whether the rest were still willing to assault such a strong alien stronghold.

Seeing that the Adelaide Mercenary Company and the Santana Group acted as if they would turn around leave as long as the Gemini Family refused to budge on this issue, Matriarch Sena Gemini eventually raised her hand.

"We are willing to give you a modest share of the top prize if possible, but we will not surrender the majority of what we are owed. We would rather abort this operation and sell the intelligence we have gathered about the Palace of Shame to a more powerful pioneering group. That will leave you with no chance to enjoy any of the secrets that this alien asteroid base has kept hidden for multiple ages."

The Geminis conveyed the meaning that it was not essential for them to attack the Palace of Shame.

If they had to give up too many concessions, then even they weren't willing to work hard anymore.

The two sides needed to find an acceptable compromise, but that was easier said than done.

"How much are you willing to give us, matriarch?"

"If the alien treasures are divisible, then we will lay claim to 80 percent of what can be taken out. The five of you can divide the remainder among yourselves. If the secret of the Palace of Shame cannot be taken away or split in such a manner, then we will compensate you appropriately with phasewater or resources."

"80 percent?! That is outright theft!"

"We should divide everything equally!"

A lot of tough bargaining took place. The Adelaides and the Santanas fought especially hard at this time as they were perhaps the greediest people in this gathering.

Minister Shederin Purnesse occasionally pitched in as well in order to make sure that the Golden Skull Alliance had a presence in the negotiations.

In the end, the give-and-take session ended in a profit split that Ves had already predicted from the beginning.

"Very well." Patriarch Kobal Gemeni spoke with a strained expression. "We shall make do with 50 percent of the most valuable alien relics. The remainder of you can divide the other half amongst yourselves. If the alien treasure is not divisible, then we will claim it and compensate for it by giving up any claim on the remaining spoils."

Neither side was happy with this split, but it was the best compromise they could reach at this time.

The Gemini Family gave the other five pioneering groups this opportunity to begin with, and also possessed the greatest combat power.

The other pioneers were relatively weaker and knew nothing about the Palace of Shame before this meeting. Their ability to contribute to the upcoming operation was not as good, so it was already fair to give them 10 percent of the greatest spoils each.

"What of the remainder of the valuables that we can obtain from the Palace of Shame?" A Santana delegate said. "Your Gemini Family has already laid claim to half of the secret heritage of the alien base, but we will not agree to surrendering 50 percent of the phasewater, salvage and other goods to you. It is impossible for us to earn a profit if that is the case."

This set off another round of negotiations. Fortunately, everyone was already fairly familiar with each other's negotiating power, priorities and positions, so they did not take too long to determine a general profit split.

"For the remainder of the spoils, the Gemini Family will make do with 1.5 shares while the remaining pioneering groups will receive 1 share each, modified by their actual contributions during the operations."

This meant that if everyone fought equally, the Golden Skull Alliance, the Adelaide Mercenary Company, the Lehrer Foundation, the Santana Group and the Boojay Family would all receive the exact same amount of spoils.

The Gemini Family was entitled to earn 50 percent more, but that was its prerogative as the initiator and leader of this operation.

In practice, the proportion of goodies that every pioneering group received would rise or fall based on their relative contributions in battle.

Those who fought harder, made more sacrifices and defeated more enemies would naturally earn a greater share of the spoils!

In order to ensure that nobody would have any disputes about whose shares should be higher, the negotiators all agreed to adhere to a standard convention.

Problems like these occurred many times throughout the history of human civilization. A lot of clever people had come together in order to hammer out detailed sets of rules and mathematical formulas that attempted to make the distribution of spoils as fair and equitable as possible.

Though no profit-sharing model was truly perfect, the ones that had been utilized by countless human groups throughout the centuries were still pretty decent!

Now that the pioneering groups managed to find common ground on the most important part of this operation, the mood in the ceremonial hall became considerably less tense.

Though they were far from forming an agreement, it was only a matter of time before the invited groups committed to the operation.

Several hours went by as the Gemini leaders continued to brief the delegates on how they planned to assault the Palace of Shame.

As an old and formidable pirate base that had existed for an unknown amount of centuries, its defenses were anything but light!

Not only did the pioneering forces had to overcome the defenses of the asteroid base itself, they also had to fight against the many pirate warships and other mobile combat assets!

Patriarch Kobal Gemini projected images of the types of warships and other dangers they would face if they assaulted the alien stronghold.

"As you can see, the design and combat power of all of these alien pirate ships vary wildly, but the majority of them aren't as intimidating as the ones that the Big Two are struggling to defeat. Some of them are figurative rust buckets while others are the equivalent of medium-sized warships, though each of them are outdated."

"Each enemy ship must be disabled." Matriarch Sena Gemini emphasized. "None should be allowed to escape because each of them might contain precious valuables such as phasewater or even the secret alien relic that we are primarily trying to obtain. In order to prevent the alien pirates from making us attack the Palace of Shame in vain, we must encircle the surrounding space and form a blockade that is effective enough to stop any escape attempts."

That... was going to be difficult. The participants needed to form a careful deployment plan in order to ensure that such an encirclement would not show any obvious weak points!

Chapter 4417 General Herman Foraine

An offensive operation of this magnitude was exceedingly complex.

Even if the Gemini Family already formed a basic battle plan in advance, the other pioneering groups definitely would not find that to be sufficient enough!

Everyone had different strengths and weaknesses. Even the ace mechs that served as their trump cards all possessed drastically different capabilities depending on their mech archetypes as well as the traits of their ace pilots.

No one wanted their mech forces to be treated as cannon fodder.

At the same time, no one wanted to be squeezed out of easy opportunities to make more contributions.

Due to the profit-sharing agreement that they established, every party wanted to perform well.

The more enemies they defeated through their own efforts, the greater their share of the spoils!

Eventually, the leaders, figureheads and diplomats no longer interfered in the planning of the operation.

Instead, people such as General Verle and other military figures stepped forward in order to study the Gemini's battle plan and supplement it with their own input.

The military officials soon moved to a different compartment where they could gain access to more intelligence and better facilities.

This allowed the rest of the delegates to roam free and familiarize themselves with their temporary allies.

As one of the youngest leaders attending this gathering, Ves stood out from the rest. The majority of the people brought by the other groups were at least twice his age.

The gap in generations made it a little awkward for Ves to chat with the other dignitaries at first, but no one here was stupid. The patriarch of the Larkinson Clan was a celebrated mech designer and made a lot of accomplishments throughout his relatively short career.

No one had any reason to despise him, especially when none of them were direct competitors to each other.

The Adelaide Mercenary Group approached him first. The majority of them consisted of mech officers who had all experienced a lot of combat. There was a sense of wildness and ferocity in their demeanor that Ves found familiar.

The lead person stepped forward and clasped Ves' arm. "I have heard much about you, Patriarch Larkinson. They say you're a fighting mech designer."

"Oh, I'm not as exaggerated as they say in those stories, hehe." Ves chuckled in response. "I have ended up in sticky situations numerous times when I was younger, but I have always let my soldiers do the fighting. The best I could have done is scramble for cover and hope my mechs can beat the crap out of enemy mechs."

"Hah! That still makes you better than virtually every other mech designer in the Red Ocean!" The middle-aged man replied. "None of those wussies and lab geeks have ever seen blood being spilled before their eyes. Even fewer have picked up a gun and shot down an enemy while looking him in the eyes. You may have left those incidents behind, but I can spot a killer from the other side of a star system. You're a much finer pioneer than those suits on the other side."

The Adelaide leader clearly referred to the business executives that were part of the Santana Group's delegation.

Aside from a few exceptions, the Santana Group's leadership was dominated by people who were more comfortable with fudging the numbers on a balance sheet than piloting a mech in battle.

Ves did not underestimate the Santana Group, though.

Organizations led by civilians could be just as successful as those led by military officers. In fact, the former was probably better in most cases as civilian leaders were more comprehensive decision makers that could balance many different interests.

Well, the good ones were like that at least.

"I wouldn't put down the Santanas if I were you." Ves responded in a mild tone. "According to what I know, the Santana Xenoarcheology Division Fleet holds the greatest quantity of mechs among us. Their quality might not be the best, but it will be a lot easier for the Santanas to blockade the Palace of Shame."

General Herman Foraine snorted. "Their glorified security guards might be decent enough in scaring away would-be raiders, but they are not fit for a massive base assault. Their mech pilots are too soft and inexperienced to keep their cool during the heat of battle. At least I have no reason to doubt

your alliance's battle readiness. You and your buddies have earned an enormous amount of respect for us for showing what you were made of during the Battle of Pima Prime."

Ves smiled. No one disliked being complemented. "Thank you, General Foraine. We did not intend to make a show out of it, but I am glad that our most recent battle performance has allowed us to earn your trust. I will caution you not to dismiss the battle effectiveness of the Santanas. They have gone through their fair share of battles as well and their mech pilots are well-trained. It takes a lot for them to produce an ace pilot from their ranks."

"I seriously doubt that. I have studied their past battles and they were almost always on the defensive. As for their ace pilot, they just lucked out in recruiting a highly talented mech pilot."

General Herman Foraine must have developed a strong bias against financial holding companies because he couldn't stop himself from disparaging the Santana Group.

Fortunately, the leader of the Adelaide fleet respected the other pioneering groups more.

"The Boojay Family is alright." The mercenary leader said. "The Boojays don't really excel at anything, but they have built up a respectable mech force and have been tested enough times throughout their long and storied history. Their martial traditions are all unique."

The Boojay Family wasn't actually a particularly brilliant group. There were many other families that managed to reach greater heights in the same amount of time, but there were also a lot of other families that had met their end after suffering enormous defeats.

In contrast, the Boojay Family stood out for its heavy emphasis on the long term. The Boojays were generally conservative in nature and generally did not take a lot of risks.

"It is quite odd to see the Boojay Family among us." Ves shared his own views on this pioneering organization. "The Boojays were supposed to reside in the Greenwich Middle Zone which is far away from here. Do you know why they have come all the way to our Krakatoa Middle Zone and decided to enter this turbulent border region?"

General Foraine shrugged. "I don't have a clue. However, look at their postures and look at the way they are talking with the others. They aren't entirely comfortable in their own skins. Whatever brought them all the way here is not entirely harmless. Maybe they provoked an enemy they shouldn't have."

"Hm. It isn't too important as long as they pull their own weight in the upcoming operation. Old and upright families like theirs care a lot about their reputation, so they shouldn't let us down."

Ves and General Foraine finally directed their attention to the delegates of the Lehrer Foundation.

"I don't know what to think about the Lehrers. Most of them are scientists who all look out of place outside a lab. Why are they even here in the border region?"

"Research, naturally." Ves said in an understanding tone. "While it is fine for them to stay holed up in a well-equipped research lab on a safe and boring planet, the truly passionate researchers will never wait for others to supply them with research materials. The truly ambitious scientists that depend on external input to further their work can make a lot more progress if they go out and find what they need in the field."

He respected this attitude a lot. The mentality of the Lehrers matched his own, though they worked in different fields.

General Foraine looked skeptical. "I suppose it is fine if they want to lead a research team to the surface of an exotic planet, but I wouldn't trust any of them to lead a mech force."

"I don't believe the Lehrer Foundation is stupid enough to let that happen. The Lehrers of all people should know that important tasks should best be left to the professionals. Besides, their mech force should be pretty strong. Their mechs have incorporated a lot of advanced technology."

"The focus of the Lehrer Foundation is not on mechs. Not really." The Adelaide leader shook his head. "I would rely on the mechs of your alliance over that of the Lehrer Foundation any time. Yours are not only rich in features, but also proved their worth against elite military mech units."

Ves sensed an opportunity.

"Are you a customer of ours?"

"No. I am afraid our mercenary company does not have that privilege."

General Foraine regrettably said. "I am not in charge of mech procurement so I have never paid much attention to the mech market. Adelaide is based in the Magair Middle Zone, so for a long time our procurers have been buying their mechs from the mech companies that are closer to our current home. It is only recently that we have heard of your Living Mech Corporation and its fantastic range of products. While some of our leadership is impressed with your work, we have already modernized our mech units a few years ago. The models that we currently employ are competitive in their own right and we will only be throwing away a large amount of money if we replace mechs that we can still depend upon for at least a decade."

"That is an understandable approach." Ves gave his potential customer a reassuring smile. "You don't need to hurry up and replace machines that still have a lot of life left in them. I respect all mechs, even the ones sold by my competitors. I am sure that your men have selected their models carefully."

The other man's expression soured. "Not carefully enough seeing that the dummies in our procurement department completely overlooked strong and useful mech models such as the Ferocious Piranha, the Desolate Soldier and the Crystal Lord. I will definitely push our heads to take a good luck at your mechs in the next procurement round."

Ves and the man continued to chat about mechs for a time. Both of them were deep into mechs so there was an endless amount of topics they could talk about.

It didn't matter to Ves that Adelaide was nowhere ready to buy another batch of mechs. As long as General Foraine became a hardcore fan of LMC mechs, he would definitely be able to push through his demands sooner or later.

"You don't have to think about acquiring our main combat mech lines just yet, but that doesn't mean our company has nothing to offer to you." Ves said.

"Our auxiliary mech models can serve as force multipliers to your existing units. For example, we have our Buzzy Bee model that offers good ECM capabilities while also featuring a special communications method that is much more reliable than what you are using at the moment."

General Foraine frowned. "I am aware of the ECM mechs that you are selling. I would love to purchase a batch of your mechs, but we are stuck in the middle of nowhere at the moment."

"That's not a problem."

"Pardon?"

Ves grinned. "Have you taken a look at our flagship? Our fleet centers around a factory ship! We can fabricate any mech in our catalog! Feel free to place an order. We can deliver the mechs you want in a matter of days."

Though the Adelaide officer looked awfully tempted, he did not possess enough authority to spend the mercenary company's money on a whim.

"I can't. Our company has strict rules and procedures."

"Your Third Fleet is about to launch an attack against a powerful alien asteroid base, right? I think it should be easy to convince whoever is in charge of this to draw out additional money to bolster the strength of your forces even further. It won't cost much but it will definitely save the lives of your mercenary troops."

"Well, If you put it like that..."

Chapter 4418 The Deepest Love

Though Ves managed to hit it off remarkably well with General Herman Foraine of the Adelaide Mercenary Company, he had less success in befriending the other pioneering groups.

They simply had less in common. None of the other delegates were particularly impressed by the Larkinson Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance.

So what if Ves was a talented and accomplished mech designer? He was just a young and brash Journeyman at the moment!

So what if the Golden Skull Alliance smashed the Sundered Phalanx during the Battle of Pima Prime? The Hex Army did most of the fighting!

The other pioneering organizations such as the Lehrer Foundation and the Boojay Family were not weak by any means.

In fact, they were all stronger than the Larkinson Clan because they retained their own ace pilots!

As Ves tried to mingle with the other delegates, he found that he and his fellow allies suffered from one particular weakness.

He sought out Minister Shederin Purnesse and waited for the old diplomat to finish his polite chat with a dignitary from the Santana Group.

Shederin did not look surprised when Ves brought up this particular matter.

"When we attend gatherings like these, we are supposed to represent the Golden Skull Alliance, but in practice we represent just one of its partners. When you spoke with General Foraine earlier, did you stand up for the Golden Skull Alliance or did you merely speak from the position of the Larkinson Clan?"

"It's... the latter."

"I thought so. That is your mistake, Ves. If we want to be taken more seriously by everyone, then we must avoid showing too much division and selfishness. Right now, you, Marshal Ariadne Odin and Master Benedict Cortez are all representing your respective sides. This is not conducive to forming an impression of a strong and united military alliance."

Ves frowned deeply. "Do we need to send just one of us next time? That might be better if we want to form a united front."

"No. That is not necessary. In fact, I believe that would be a mistake."

"Oh? Please explain, Shederin."

"The Golden Skull Alliance does not have a clear leader. Everyone is more or less equal. Our clan used to have the greatest say at the start, but now the Cross Clan is in a more dominant position due to Patriarch Reginald's breakthrough. Nevertheless, the Crossers do not have all of the say. Each of us essentially governs the alliance by consensus. The advantage is that none

of us are marginalized. The disadvantage is that we cannot truly present a strong and united voice to foreigners."

"That sounds bad."

"Is that so, Ves?" Shederin smirked. "There are other advantages to our current state. Explaining them all is beyond the scope of this conversation, but let me just say that speaking with multiple different voices can sometimes be more useful than speaking with a single voice."

"I think I know what you mean. Well, if you don't think that there is anything wrong, I guess there is little harm in maintaining our current approach."

As time continued to pass, the Geminis eventually invited the delegates to dinner.

They all moved to a formal dining hall where the guests began to sample the unique cuisine of the Geminis.

The foreign guests were able to meet more members of the family while they curiously tried out the dishes.

Ves didn't know what the Geminis ate during normal days, but in this fancy dining setting, they brought out a lot of specialty dishes that possessed a clear theme!

"What... is this?" He asked in an uncertain tone.

At first, Ves thought that he had received a grilled and stuffed frog. It was only a little later that he noticed that the animal looked like the amphibian version of a Siamese twin!

A male Gemini who was seated close by gave Ves a friendly smile.

"That is one of our bifrogs. It is a genetically engineered frog species that our genetics company has especially created to symbolize the permanent union of our pairings."

The man couldn't help but place his palm on that of his twin sister who also happened to be his wife.

Two who shared a great resemblance to each other, but the way they looked at each other was much more intimate than that of brother and sister!

"Shall we, sister?"

"Let us demonstrate our love, my husband."

They picked up their forks and knives and began to cut at the bifrog that had been served to them. The two Geminis mirrored the cuts they made and put their portions in their mouths at the same time.

Instead of chewing their bites, they instead turned towards each other and began to lock lips!

Ves and several other nearby guests froze in shock as they witnessed the Gemini pair carefully exchange and chew each other's portions!

The entire stunt was ridiculous from the onset, but the fact that the pair in question were twins who grew up alongside each other from the start made it ten times as outrageous!

Though Ves momentarily felt the urge to vomit, he did his best to maintain tight control over his emotions and body language. He had become quite good at controlling himself so he did not exhibit any behavior that might cause the surrounding Geminis to view him in a worse light.

The other delegates also managed to control themselves. Each of their expressions remained firmly neutral as if the ritual of jointly eating a bifrog was just a common occurrence in their eyes.

Even General Herman Foraine who normally expressed his feelings without too much restraint conspicuously fell silent while looking down at his own meal.

Ves could easily sense the varying degrees of disgust and revulsion radiating from their spirits, but their self-control was so good that he would have been fooled if he did not possess such sharp senses.

This was not an unusual phenomenon in gatherings like these. Human civilization was simply too expansive and diverse, and the Red Ocean happened to bring people from all corners of the old galaxy into a relatively tiny volume of space.

Clashes between different cultures, values and principles happened all the time. Too many pioneers went to war against each other because they disliked the way another group of people treated their underclass or interpreted the same religious scripture in a completely different manner.

Perhaps these motives truly meant a lot to these people, but many of the pioneers who wasted their men, their mechs, their starships and much of wealth on ideological struggles ultimately invited ruin!

The smarter pioneers possessed the ability to distinguish between worthwhile pursuits and wasteful pursuits.

Those that engaged in the former only picked a fight where they stood to become stronger in the end.

Those that engaged in the latter suffered a lot of casualties without being able to replenish what they lost!

In a frontier that was devoid of order and security, pioneers with insufficient strength had no right to exist!

This was why everyone who attended this banquet meticulously conducted themselves with utmost respect.

It was not necessary for them to engage in facetious flattery, but at least they should not engage in any behavior that might cause offense and ruin their upcoming joint operation.

The Gemini Family was anything but done with their open displays of affection.

As waves of serving bots continued to deliver exotic dish after exotic dish, the twin couples seemingly went out of their way to make a show of their family's atypical cultural norms!

"Brother..." A Gemini woman lovingly said as her brother fed a spoonful of thick and hearty pea soup in her mouth.

At the same time, the sister did the same for her husband which she grew up alongside with all her life.

They then leaned in and began to engage in a long kiss while exchanging the contents in their mouths with each other.

The moans and other signs indicated that plenty of tongue action was taking place!

Ves and many other guests opened their eyes to how creatively the Geminis turned their meals into rituals of affection.

On the surface, it looked as if the Geminis openly revealed their perverted tendencies.

However, when Ves looked deeper, he understood that it was far more about creating shock value.

Ves could sense the deep and unbreakable love that the couples held towards each other.

Every single brother and sister not only adored each other as their siblings, but treated each other as soul mates who they were eternally bound to for the rest of their lives!

None of the Geminis showed any unwillingness or rejection towards the matches that their family had arranged for them from the moment they were conceived.

Through the unremitting indoctrination efforts of the Gemini Family along with lots of clever gene manipulation, the Geminis not only lost their instinctual revulsion towards incest, but embraced it as the only form of love that they could ever accept!

Every Gemini couple was happy and grateful to be able to share their most intimate moments with the brother or sister they knew best.

Dinnertime turned into the most enjoyable moments of the day to them. The special meals they formulated weren't meant to be consumed alone. They were dishes that should be savored with their significant others.

The Geminis affirmed and strengthened their affection towards each other through the mutual interaction engendered by their meals.

It was all too easy for people to treat the simple act of eating their breakfast, lunch or dinner as a solitary moment to fill their stomachs, but the members of the Gemini Family went beyond this point.

The Geminis were feeding love to each other's hearts.

The display was tender and loving. Ves wouldn't have any problem with this strange custom if not for the fact that the Geminis were too closely related to each other!

The Geminis had to be well aware of how extensively they violated one of life's fundamental taboos.

The most absurd aspect about this was that the Gemini Family took pride in their choices!

Ves did not sense any hesitation, remorse or even shame in the Geminis. They loved their brothers and sisters and wanted to make that known to the entire old galaxy as well as the new frontier if possible!

It would have been even better if other humans began to accept and embrace their expression of love!

Every member of the Gemini Family played this game. Even the leaders of the family set an example for their subjects.

As Patriarch Kobal Gemini finished passing on the piece of lemon pie to his sister and spouse, he turned to face his audience with a smile.

"Our Gemini Family thanks you for your tolerance and understanding. Times like these make us glad that there are people that respect our freedom of choice. Please do not mistake our customs as frivolous acts that serve no other purpose than to indulge our fantasies. There is a purpose in everything we do. Everything we do is for love."

His wife and sister picked up the thread.

"Love is eternal. Love is universal. Love is the source of strength that allows us to rise above everyone else. Our founders and ancestors believe that love is an indescribable force that can give us strength that is far beyond what ordinary machines and people can evoke. They fought against everyone that opposed them and forcibly started a family organization where they could prove their beliefs by producing offspring whose lives are filled with the greatest amount of love imaginable. By binding our twin children with both family love and romantic love, the bonds of affection that they have developed towards their closest relatives as well as fated life partners have become strong beyond any of you have ever witnessed."

The patriarch and matriarch of the Gemini Family proudly rose to their feet while raising their wine glasses.

"Once we commence our joint operation, our soldiers will most certainly vanquish over the aliens and take their possessions as our own. I wish you all success and hope that our love has inspired you to borrow this force to infuse you with additional strength and purpose. Let us toast to the wonders of love!"

"For love!"

Chapter 4419 The Temporary Coalition

The Gemini Family firmly grasped the interests of the invited groups. The Golden Skull Alliance, the Adelaide Mercenary Company, the Lehrer Foundation, the Santana Group and the Boojay Family all became increasingly more invested in the upcoming joint operation.

It did not take long for the Geminis and the delegations to finalize a contract that precisely detailed all of the terms and conditions for their temporary coalition.

At the same time, their military officials got together in order to expand and improve upon the initial attack plan developed by the Geminis.

While there was nothing fundamentally wrong with the strategy adopted by the Gemini Family, many steps could still be improved by relying on the unique strengths and circumstances of the individual coalition partners.

Ves unconsciously jerked whenever an individual mentioned the word 'coalition' in his vicinity.

The Friday Coalition pressed onto his life for so many years that the word in question had become tainted in his mind.

He developed such an allergy towards this word that he proposed an alternative.

Of course, no one outside of the Golden Skull Alliance seriously entertained his suggestion.

To them, it didn't matter if their temporary collective was called a union, an alliance or a coalition.

They just settled on the last term because it possessed an obvious temporary connotation.

None of the coalition partners intended to team up with each other after they had topped the Palace of Shame. They had too little common ground with each other and there was no particular urgency in seeking safety in numbers.

Some of the pioneering fleets that had committed to the operation were also detachments of larger organizations. The Adelaide Mercenary Company, Lehrer Foundation and the Santana Group were all headquartered in different places and had spread out their forces in order to pursue multiple goals at once.

Ves dreamt that his Larkinson Clan would grow to this point as well one day.

Once his clan grew large enough to be able to send out multiple strong fleets in different directions, the Larkinsons would be playing an entirely different game!

Due to the concerted efforts of the Geminis, many people became familiar with their family's customs and ideals.

While the Geminis did not always succeed in gaining the support and approval of their guests, the people they had invited to break open the Palace of Shame no longer exhibited as many negative reactions as before.

People still liked to talk about it, though. Their practices were just so strange and different that it was as if the Geminis were aliens!

One of the people that started to think about the Gemini Family's unusual family customs was Venerable Imon Ingvar.

The expert pilot spent a lot of time with two different individuals: his expert mech and his sister.

One of the most enjoyable periods of his life nowadays was when it was time for dinner.

The two Ingvar siblings were both busy with their own lives and no longer spent as much time together as before.

Commander Casella Ingvar was especially swamped with work due to serving as the legion commander of the Living Sentinels.

Though Venerable Imon Ingvar tried his best to accompany his sister, he was not a part of the chain of command and did not really have any business meddling with the management of the mech legion.

He could make much better use of his time by training his skills or deepening his familiarity with his expert mech.

This was why Casella forcefully kicked him away so that he could spend his time on more productive activities such as polishing his combat skills or tutoring other mech pilots.

Still, no matter what responsibilities Casella and Imon carried out these days, they always tried to synchronize their schedules so that they could gather together at least once a day.

Breakfast or dinner became the most common periods for them to spend quality time together. It was either at the start or the end of their work days that they could put aside their work and share their thoughts and concerns with each other without any pretensions.

As the pair of expert pilots quietly enjoyed their meals in a private room deep inside the Gorgoneion, Imon curiously glanced at his sister who was seated on the other side of the dining table from time to time.

Someone as sensitive as the Sentinel Commander quickly noticed the scrutiny.

"What is wrong, Imon?"

"I've heard a lot of stories about the Gemini Family." Imon started. "They are an odd folk, but they are also brave for practicing the ideas that everyone thinks is wrong. I admire their courage. It is difficult beyond belief to go against the grain and reverse a standard that is no longer of this time."

Casella paused in her attempt to put a bite of pasta in her mouth.

"No longer of this time?"

"Yes. It is such an obvious idea that more people should have realized this truth a long time ago. We live in an era where the genes of our children no longer have to be formed by mixing a collection of random genes together. The biotech experts can precisely formulate a set of genes that is free from genetic defects. There is no reason that a child born from this scientific process is in any way inferior to a child born through the natural process. In fact, I would argue that the former is always better because a lot of smart people have worked carefully to mix together the right genes."

Casella did not expect her brother to be so taken in by the Gemini Family's ideology.

"Many natural processes are no longer an important part of our lives." She said. "That doesn't mean that we should get rid of them all in order to pursue greater efficiency. The biggest reason why we are different from bots and aliens is because we are defined by our humanity. It defines the way we organize our families since the beginning of our race's history. For example,

our society holds the expectation that every child should ideally be raised by two parents, no more and no less. Any challenge to his long-held notion is not only seen as an attack on a historical custom, but is also regarded as an attack on the foundation of what makes us human."

Her brother grew confused. "I'm not advocating for that at all. I love humanity. I'm human. I don't think that children should be raised by one parent or three parents either. I agree with you that there are still a lot of good reasons why this tradition should still be upheld. It is just that far too many humans still cling onto notions that used to make sense in the past but no longer have any reason to exist in the present day. Why can't we take a good look at all of the rules that have become redundant and sweep them in the dustbin of history?"

The Avatar Commander did not hurry to respond. Instead, she slowly resumed eating while letting a few minutes go by. Her silence was palpable. Her willpower was unnaturally calm and composed, making it difficult for Imon to discern her stance on this topic.

Casella eventually broke the silence.

"Brother. I advise you not to fall into the trap of the Gemini Family. Sure, many traditions that humanity has long held dear have grown stale over the millenia, but it is these exact same traditions that have bound our race and civilization together for so long. The primary reason why the Geminis have never gained acceptance is not because they have proven us all wrong by trying to suspend a practice that is no longer strictly necessary, but because they are treating nature as a joke."

"Huh?" Imon wanted to scratch his head. "What's wrong with that? Humans like us rose up because we had the courage to address our natural weaknesses. We relied on technology to stop freezing in the cold and to break the gravity that has bound us to our ancestral home planet. We have become

far greater than what our biological limitations has allowed us to become because we broke and eliminated the rules that held us back."

Casella snorted at his words. "And what does that have to do with the Geminis?"

"Their ideas have made me realize that I was thinking too narrowly all of this time. Brothers and sisters used to receive a lot of stigma whenever they had the temerity to marry each other and start their own families. In truth, they earned it because the children born from such unions will always end up miserable due to their genetic ailments. However, we live in a completely different age from the times where this taboo was necessary. If a brother and a sister who love each other so much that they want to take their love a step further, why not let them do what they wish? They aren't harming anybody, especially if they follow the necessary procedures to produce healthy children."

"Imon..."

"C'mon, sister! Don't bring up tradition and all of those other stuffy arguments to me. Our civilization has grown so enormous that there should be room for all kinds of people! The Gemini Family's extensive growth and increasing prosperity shows that it is no longer necessary for people to follow the rules that society has imposed upon us all. As long as people form their group or join an existing one that is tolerant enough, they can do whatever they want!"

Casella frowned deeper as she put down her utensils. She wished that the Golden Skull Alliance had never come into contact with the Gemini Family. Her brother used to be a lot more tolerable before he became infected by these odd notions!

"We are Larkinsons, Imon. The clan doesn't belong to us. Do not forget your identity. We are its servants. The Larkinson Clan has formed their own ideals

about family, and if you ask me, they are much more preferable to the subversions celebrated by the Gemini Family. I will not tolerate any further discussion about this. It is fine for the Geminis to do what they want, but we do things differently."

That pretty much ended Imon's attempts to convince his sister from taking a deeper look into the Gemini way of life.

As the pair of siblings were just beginning to eat dessert, Imon finally gathered enough courage to bring up a slightly different topic.

"I have learned of an interesting new way to share a meal that I want to try out with you. Just for fun, of course."

"Oh?"

"They say you can get closer to your brother or your sister if you take a bite but pass it to each other's mouths. They say it can deepen the bond of love and drive away alienation. That sounds useful, right? Since our cooperation on the battlefield depends so much on how extensively we love and trust each other, I think it would be useful to add this interesting ritual to our daily lives. What are you, Casella?"

"..."

"I mean, there is plenty of objective proof that it works! I can think of no other means to productively increase our synergy and teamwork than to share our food with each other. We should at least try it out to see whether there is any truth to the claims!"

His sister did not respond immediately. Instead, she continued to eat her cake until she stopped halfway.

The Avatar Commander abruptly rose from her seat and marched over to her brother's side of the table.

She leaned in so that her head was almost pressed up against the head of her sibling.

Was Casella truly willing to try out this exotic custom?

Just before Imon opened his mouth in anticipation of a kiss, Casella violently sprayed the half-chewed bits of cake into her brother's face!

"Aaahh! That's disgusting!" Imon complained as he tried to wipe off the mess.

"You're the one that is disgusting! If you bring up this notion to me again, I will do something that will make you want to wear a codpiece for the rest of your life! Now scram! I don't want to see you for the rest of the day!"

Chapter 4420 Naughty Andraste

Casella and Imon Ingvar were hardly the only people who explored the strange ideals and practices of the Gemini Family.

Many other Larkinsons in the expeditionary fleet also began to get pulled into uncomfortable conversations.

It was as if the upcoming assault on the Palace of Shame took a backseat to discussing the merits of breaking the taboo on intimate relationships between siblings!

The discussion became so widespread that even the children started to overhear what the adults were talking about!

For example, when Marvaine was sitting in a playroom, one of his sisters hopped inside.

"Mar-Vaine~! There you are! What are you doing, little bro?"

Marvaine did not bother to turn around and look up. Instead, he continued to play with the animated exobeast plushies that continued to make all kinds of cute noises.

"Prince Longfang here is about to defeat and dethrone King Snugglepants so that the Beast Kingdom will have a new leader!" He exclaimed!

Andraste stared at the orange and purple plushies and grew disinterested in them. None of these juvenile toys interested her that much anymore. She would rather play with cool and awesome mech toys like the Dark Witch mech figurine her parents had recently bought for her. Mechs were much cooler than alien beasts!

"That's interesting. Say, little bro, do you want to try out something new? I just heard our mama talk about something really fun with Nanny Shannon."

A small shudder ran through Marvaine's juvenile body. He began to get a bad feeling about this, especially when her sister began to show a devious grin!

"Uhm, the Beast Kingdom still needs to depose its old king. Can it wait, sister?"

"Nuh-uh! I can't wait! Let's do it right now! I even brought candy!"

Marvaine immediately perked up when he heard the word candy. He no longer paid attention to his exobeast plushies anymore.

"What did you bring this time, sister?"

"I saved up a few pieces of Uncle Garvey's gummy bears. Look, here's a strawberry-flavored one. It's your favorite!"

Andraste sweetly placed the gummy bear in question into Marvaine's palm.

The boy had no patience and immediately popped the candy into his mouth.

His sister did the same with her own portion.

"Mmmhmm..."

Just as Marvaine began to chew his strawberry-flavored gummy bear, Andraste grabbed his shoulders and leaned forward.

"Wait, what are you doing, sister?"

"Open your mouth for me, Marvaine."

"B-But I haven't chewed my gummy bear yet!" The boy objected.

"Just do what your big sister asks!"

Marvaine opened his mouth by reflex after hearing Andraste's commanding tone.

The older of the two siblings grinned wider. Seeing that her brother was nice enough to cooperate, she no longer held herself back and began to lean closer so that she could try out the exotic Gemini Family ritual for herself!

"MIAOW!"

Yet just before her lips touched the lips of her brother, a cat suddenly interspersed between the two siblings and pushed them away from each other!

"Ow!"

"Ouch! Clixie! What are you doing!?"

"MIAOOOOOW!"

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat acted as if she had just saved Andraste and Marvaine from killing themselves!

Andraste wasn't so deterred and tried to complete her naughty little plan.

"Go away, Clixie. Why aren't you staying with my big sister? Move aside so that I can finish what I started with my lil bro."

"Miaow!" Clixie hissed as she continually used her formidable strength to nudge and push Andraste's body away from her bewildered brother.

"Uhm, I think we should listen to what Clixie has to say." Marvaine said after he greedily chewed and swallowed the strawberry-flavored gummy bear.

"Papa always said that we should listen to her if he and our mama aren't around."

"Well, mama never told us that! She said that humans like us should always be in charge. Clixie is just a pet!"

Marvaine shook his head. "Clixie is family, and she's older than us. If she thinks that something is wrong, then we should stop."

"No! I was so close! Damn you, Clixie!"

"Miaow miaow!"

Though the interruption of an unwelcome cat had spoiled Andraste's plan, she did not give up so easily.

She planned to wait until it was bedtime. Perhaps Andraste might be able to sneak into her brother's bed and restart her plan while Clixie was getting cuddled by Aurelia!

Yet before she could think about her plan any further, a furious-looking mother barged into her room!

"ANDRASTE! Explain yourself this instant!"

Uh oh!

As someone who grew up under a demanding mother for numerous years, Andraste knew exactly how much trouble she was in right now. Gloriana rarely used this tone on her unless she truly broke the line!

Fortunately, not many children were as naughty and adventurous as Andraste.

Time moved on. When the delegates finally returned to their respective ships, the coalition had formally taken shape!

All of the pioneering fleets gathered in the quiet star system were scheduled to depart shortly afterwards.

None of the groups needed to make any further preparations as they were already fairly combat ready to begin with. The crews and soldiers just needed to spend a bit of time on making more specific preparations that could slightly further their chances of performing well in the upcoming operation.

They still had plenty of time to do so while the fleets journeyed to their next destination.

When Ves finally returned to his grand stateroom, he first approached his children and kissed each of them on the top of their heads.

"I missed you, Aurelia."

"I missed you, Andraste."

"I missed you, Marvaine."

Though the Gemini Family was filled with love and affection, Ves never truly felt at home while he was staying aboard the Twin Refuge.

The sheer amount of twin brothers and sisters openly treated each other in ways that defied the family norms that the Larkinson Family and the Bright Republic instilled into Ves when he was young.

Though Ves had grown old enough to be able to question some of his biases, the Gemini Family did not manage to convince him that it was okay for close siblings to start treating each other as lovers.

This was a bridge that Ves simply couldn't cross!

As Ves tried his best to wipe away some of the more expressive images from his memory, he noticed that his second child looked a little glum.

"What's wrong, Andraste?"

"Nothing." The red-haired girl grumbled in response.

Though he sensed that not everything was alright at the moment, Andraste refused to say why she was feeling upset.

"Ves." Gloriana spoke as she tapped her foot against the deck. "I hope you did not come back from the Gemini Family's fleet with strange ideas in mind. I don't want you to corrupt our children with deviant notions on how they should treat each other. In fact, I don't want to spend any further time with this revolting group. Please tell me that our clan and alliance decided to decline the offer and move on. Please tell me that you have made the wiser decision this time."

It sounds as if Gloriana still couldn't move past her strong dislike of the Gemini Family. That would make the following discussion harder.

"Uhm, I hate to break it to you, but... the Golden Skull Alliance along with the other groups that have gathered here has decided to attack the alien asteroid base. The benefits are just too good to pass up, and we are confident that our forces can make short work of the pirate warships."

"WHAT?!"

It took a while for Gloriana to vent her feelings on this decision. Ves had already gestured for Lucky and Clixie to take the children elsewhere so that he could give his wife an update in private.

After Gloriana completed her usual rant, both she and her husband sat down on a couch.

"Tell me the details." She commanded. "What has convinced you to keep tolerating the Gemini Family's antics and commit to this attack?"

"The Geminis are alright." Ves said. "Wait, before you say anything, I don't agree with their personal views, but that isn't really relevant here. They have studied their target carefully and they have formed a good plan to assault the Palace of Shame."

Ves subsequently outlined the attack plan and talked about the spoils that they expected to obtain.

Aside from plundering a heap of phasewater as well as an abundant sample of alien technology, he also emphasized the possibility of obtaining powerful alien relics that the Palace of Shame had hidden for centuries!

Unlike the excitement welling up inside Ves' heart, his wife did not put much stock in this claim.

"That's it? I can understand why you are attracted by the prospect of looting a hundred kilograms of phasewater, but you just told me that this valuable resource is spread among many scattered pirate groups. I seriously doubt whether you can gather them all when the pirates scatter in every direction."

Ves smirked. "Ah, but that's where you are wrong. We have enough forces to form an effective blockade."

"What if the enemy ships engage their warp drives?"

"That's not a problem for the most part. The Palace of Shame is situated in the middle of a dense asteroid belt. Not only is this a good hiding place, but it also makes it a lot more difficult to engage in warp travel as there are too many asteroids in the way. The alien ships that are deep inside the belt need to navigate through all of the rocks in the way before they can safely leave the star system."

"What if some of the ships possess a more advanced warp drive that can ignore the obstacles in the way?"

"We already prepared a solution for that as well. No vessel will be allowed to form a warp travel on our watch. We are truly serious about stopping every single ship and vessel that tries to flee from our encirclement. Everything they carry will eventually fall into our coalition's hands."

"Then what of the supposed secret alien relics that you are all trying to plunder from the Palace of Shame?" Gloriana skeptically asked. "Do you even know whether such valuables exists in the first place."

"No."

"You mean you don't know?! Have the Geminis told you nothing!?"

"The Gemini Family has shared what little intelligence they collected about it. They truly know nothing more. All they have is scattered clues that the Palace of Shame hides an ancient secret that is valuable enough to make all of those powerful pirates stay in place even as many other aliens from the surrounding regions have departed human-occupied territories."

Ves ultimately did not believe that the orvens and all of the other aliens chose to stay deep in enemy territory because of irrational reasons.

There were theories that all of those alien pirate groups stayed because they were religious fanatics, doomsday cultists or simply afraid that the alien space police would come and execute them for escaping their 'prison'.

He didn't think that any of these reasons could convince so many different alien races with drastically different personality traits and cultures.

There had to be a strong logical reason why all of those selfish criminals chose to remain so deep in a region that became increasingly more human!

His wife wasn't as optimistic, though. "In other words, you don't know anything. Great. Did you at least ask your intangible crystal ball whether this Palace of Shame truly contains any worthwhile relics?"

"I did, but he did not give me an answer, which is nothing new." Ves replied. "All that means is that we should handle this situation by relying on our own judgment. In my case, that means playing along with the Geminis."

"Do you trust these people?"

Ves smiled. "They're definitely holding back relevant information, so they haven't been entirely forthcoming to us. On the other hand, they are all sincere about our chances of success and the spoils we can expect to gain. They are excited, Gloriana. They don't think the opposition can do anything to stop them from taking what they want, especially since we have gathered so many ace mechs. Some of the enemy warships may pack a notable punch, but I don't think those indigenous aliens have ever handled anything comparable to a machine piloted by a Saint, let alone seven of them at the same time!"