

Mech 4521

Chapter 4521 Observant Wife

Though Ves really wanted to get back to work and supervise the extensive salvage operation, he found it more important to make sure his wife and kids acclimated to his new self.

He failed to persuade his wife from trying to claim to the Hexers that Ves was literally transitioning into a god. No matter how many times he tried to tell her that it was a bad idea to make such a shocking claim, she dismissed his concerns.

"Hiding is so typical of you, Ves." She said in a patronizing tone as she patted his smooth-shaven cheek. "The truth cannot be hidden. The harder you try to suppress the obvious, the greater the blowback from doing so. You should embrace your true self and be proud of who you are. There is no reason for you to shape your decisions based on the potentially adverse reactions of your lessers. Don't forget that you aren't just a proto-god. You are also a mech designer... right?"

"I can still design mechs as usual. In fact, I've become a lot better at it. You'll see when we begin to collaborate again."

"I am looking forward to seeing how much better you have become." Gloriana happily smiled. "Hopefully, you won't make so many obvious mistakes in your work as before. Anyway, if you have become better at designing mechs, you shouldn't hold back in an attempt to hide your improvements. I cannot tell you how stupid it is to cripple your own work when it is in your nature to design better mechs. Are you truly the sort of mech designer who is content to pretend that he is worse due to societal pressure?"

"Uhhh... I get what you are saying, honey, but this is my life and career we are talking about! I only need to make one wrong move to disappear. Aren't you concerned at all about this possibility?"

She shook her head. "It will be fine. You worry too much. Haven't you developed a close relationship with the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction for these kinds of situations? I suggest you make active use of your network to pre-empt any adverse reactions by letting the MTA handle your problems on your behalf. I am already certain that the Transhumanists will love to study your body. You've got phasewater flowing in your bloodstream, correct?"

Ves almost jumped in shock!

"How did you know that?! I never told you that, and my body should have done a good job at hiding this particular trait!"

"I have invested an extensive amount of time on studying phasewater theory. In order to accelerate my understanding of phasewater, I conducted many different experiments on it so that I can personally witness its effects. I am not a novice when it comes to phasewater."

"That doesn't tell me how you managed to sniff out that my body has phasewater." He became more frustrated. "Can you give me a straight answer on how you have come to your conclusion?"

She lifted her finger and tapped the side of her head. "I have a piece of you inside of me, remember? I am connected to you all of the time, just as you are connected to me. The difference is that I have actively trained myself to become more attuned to what this connection can bring to my life. I can spot and understand your changes better than anyone else. Together with the fact that your new glow carries a slightly familiar 'flavor' that reminds me of phasewater, it is easy for me to come to this conclusion."

She lifted her head and acted as if she was expecting Ves to praise her brilliance.

"I'm impressed." He said. "Do you think that other people will be able to figure this out as well?"

"It's unlikely, but I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you." She told him. "You should expect your secret to be out as soon as you meet with a delegation from the MTA. This is also why I am telling you not to bother with hiding these changes. It will all become exposed sooner or later. It is best that you do so on your terms before it is too late."

"I would prefer not to expose anything more than is necessary." He said. "I don't know how the Transhumanists will treat me once they learn what I have become. I distinctly recall that their researchers are incredibly interested in figuring out how to safely infuse phasewater into human bodies without producing horrible fatalities."

Gloriana let out a sigh in exasperation.

"You're not their test subject, Ves. You are an asset to them. Your value is so much greater than giving them a working example of how a human body can live with phasewater integrated in the body. Frankly speaking, I don't understand why you are so reticent. Human civilization is enormous and there are many transhumans that have gone through much more radical changes than you. You don't see the Big Two kidnapping and cutting up every Terran and Rubarthan in order to decipher and reverse engineer their unique and proprietary augmentations."

A memory flashed through Ves' mind. He thought back on how Master Dervidian of the Transhumanist Faction essentially forced Ves to test and display the effects of the transcendence glow to hundreds of captured Terran and Rubarthan mech pilots.

The results were quite messy and bloody as far as he recalled.

"Ehm, I don't want to base my survival on the MTA's goodwill alone. I have bad experiences with putting too much faith in authorities that decided to break the rules."

Gloriana grew serious. "Then I suggest you build additional relationships with other powerful factions. Haven't you brought our expeditionary fleet to this border region in order to search for a missing first-class scion? As long as we can find Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik and return him to safety, we can gain an inroad into the Yorul Tavik Clan of a genuine first-rate state. That should grant you an escape route in case you have become persona non grata to the MTA."

With everything that happened as of late, Ves had genuinely forgotten about the search for Lord Pearian. The rich rewards for finding the overconfident first-class pioneer was the entire reason why this particular region of space was crawling with pioneering groups like the Gemini Family and the Adelaide Mercenary Company!

Ves had thought about pausing the Trailblazer Expedition so that he could bring his entire fleet back to the nearest port system in order to process all of their gains.

This was the safest and most prudent course of action to take, but he was afraid that another powerful pioneering fleet might beat him to Lord Pearian!

He and his fleet had already expended plenty of time on Operation Lighthouse. This was supposed to be a side activity that had somehow blown up into a massive battle of enormous proportions.

Though he had no complaints about the rewards for this operation, he was well aware that his fleet needed to head over to another pit stop.

Yet... if Ves began to harbor greater fears towards the MTA, then it became a lot more important for him to befriend at least one group of first-raters.

Now that he was thinking in this direction, he already remembered one of his encounters in his strange dream sequence.

The Common Fleet Alliance was supposed to be unfriendly territory to mech designers, but Captain Zonrad Reze sounded a lot more open-minded than many of his fellow fleters.

The thought of cooperating with a CFA warship captain on anything sounded heretical and unholy to him, but practicality was more important than ideology.

Besides, it was not as if he needed to defect to the CFA in order to make good use of this relationship. He merely had to show to the MTA that he was on friendly terms with an up-and-coming fletcher in order to improve his negotiating position. He was tired of the mechers imposing their demands on him while giving him only scraps of MTA merits in return.

"I will think about it." He thoughtfully said to his wife. "You have made a good point, though. We shouldn't build up a dependence on a single human faction. Our civilization is greater than that. I just need to find a way to build bridges with other major factions without alienating myself from the MTA. I don't think the mechers will be happy if I start to grow chummy with the Terrans or the Rubarthans."

"We will deal with that issue once it becomes a problem. There is no need to think too far ahead." Gloriana advised.

The two began to cuddle as they talked about other important matters. Gloriana alternated between asking intrusive questions and providing him with a second opinion on many important matters.

It was times like these that Ves appreciated his wife. Her radically different background and perspective allowed her to analyze his circumstances in a different way. Her remarks always helped him gain a better understanding of his situation.

"Tell me about that secret superweapon that you have launched against the unclean whale." Gloriana demanded.

"Uhhh..."

She reached up with her suited hand and pinched his cheek. "Don't you go silent on me again. You can't get away with pushing me away again. Tell me where you got that weapon. I have rewatched the log footage so many times, but somehow I still couldn't get a clear image of what you have done. The instant transition from your old self to your new self is too abrupt, and that powerful phased projectile that launched from your lap had already turned into a blur by the time it appeared. It was as if everyone but you had suddenly frozen in time, leaving you free to move around and do a lot of work on yourself and your Unending Regalia before you finally built a compact weapon that was powerful enough to pierce the spatial barrier of the unclean whale."

"Uhhh..."

"Don't say anything more." Gloriana smirked and leaned in to kiss his cheek. "I already obtained the clues I need. Your secret is safe with me. I won't bother you any further regarding this matter. I trust you to always do what is best for us and our children. You protected us all today, and that is commendable. I'm interested in how you managed to miniaturize so much powerful technology into a handheld weapon system. How did you do it? What alien tech did you resort to in order to develop a weapon that is powerful enough to break the defenses of an expert mech? Do you have any spares that I can study?"

Sometimes, Ves wished he had married an airhead instead of a highly intelligent and observant woman.

He quickly squashed that thought. How could he entertain such a horrible idea? An airhead wouldn't be able to collaborate with him on his mech design projects.

He at least maintained his confidence in Gloriana's ability to keep up with his growth. That was one of the strongest appeals to maintaining a relationship with her. No matter how far he got ahead, his competitive wife would find a way to close the gap. This way, they would always be able to cooperate with each other as equal partners and contributors.

That was much more valuable to a mech designer than the alternatives.

Ves shook his head after hearing all of her questions. "Stop, please. You know I can't tell you much about what I have done. Besides, I don't think it will be useful to explain all of my methods to you. You have your own specialty and research interests. I suggest you spend your time on them instead."

"Hmm, I suppose you are correct..."

He knew his wife well enough that she was still interested in figuring out his methods. It was the nature of a mech designer to be curious about other people's successful implementations.

Ves needed to pay close attention to his work going forward. His wife would most certainly study his designs in the hopes of acquiring useful inspiration.

Chapter 4522 Loot Discussion

The extensive looting process lasted for a week, and did not proceed without problems.

The temporary coalition grew less united by the day as the individual pioneering groups constantly argued against each other for the same pieces of loot.

So much alien salvage and treasure had become available that greed became ubiquitous. The compulsion to claim the shiniest loot and the most interesting toys frequently provoked quarrels that often left every side dissatisfied with the compromises they made at the end.

Negotiating teams from every pioneering group continually met with each other in order to make backroom deals and form temporary alliances in order to gain priority on certain types of loot.

Time was of the essence. Of the two stars of the Boryan System, one of them was a highly disruptive neutron star that continually bathed the entire star system with unstable magnetic fluctuations and other hazardous activity. Already the derelict alien warships were beginning to degrade at an accelerated rate.

Everyone sped up their salvaging efforts. They concentrated on looting priority goods such as starfighter energy shield generators, containers filled with valuable exotic materials, warp drives that needed a lot of overhauls in order to make them usable for human vessels, databanks and other electronic storage devices, distinctive alien artwork that appealed to collectors, live alien prisoners and most importantly phasewater.

Different groups had different priorities. For example, the Lehrer Foundation displayed an extremely high interest in obtaining samples of advanced alien technology, particularly the powerful transphasic weapon systems of different alien warships.

The Gemini Family wasn't particularly picky about the loot. It just wanted to obtain the goods that could yield the greatest amount of MTA credits and MTA merits.

The Golden Skull Alliance meanwhile grabbed a little bit of everything.

Master Benedict Cortez instructed the Cross Clan to snap up alien tech that could be relevant to mechs once he managed to study and reverse engineer their underlying principles.

The Glory Seekers selected items of particular interest to the Hex Federation, which most notably included relatively intact hulls of disabled alien warships.

The Larkinson Clan also claimed a modest amount of samples of exotic alien technology, but also put a greater priority on biological goods and phasewater.

The division of phasewater became one of the most contentious issues of the plundering operation. The amount of pure phasewater was considerably less than expected as many alien pirates had either used them up or purposely destroyed their stashes out of spite.

This caused most of the available phasewater on the battlefield to be locked inside existing products.

It was certainly possible to recycle warp drives, shield generators and other phasewater-infused products, but the yields were too low. Obtaining 50 percent of the phasewater integrated into a device was the best case scenario, but the prevailing yields were much lower.

All of this meant that the recycling value and the resale value of all of the alien tech were severely discounted.

The only way to gain maximum value out of them was to sell the working pieces of technology to alien buyers who were already familiar with the native products, but that was most definitely a treasonous act!

Every pioneer had to abide by a common set of rules before they obtained passage to the Red Ocean, and consorting with indigenous aliens was definitely an important taboo!

The Big Two had intensified their enforcement of this particular rule as of late. There had been too many incidents of greedy human pioneers trading away valuable human tech and knowledge to the native aliens that examples needed to be made!

As such, a lot of powerful alien technology could only be sold to human buyers at a fraction of their value.

"It's not so bad, Benny." Ves shrugged as he leaned back in his chair. "I didn't agree to take part in this battle in order to fill the coffers of the clan. The Living Mech Corporation is already doing a good job at that. What I am truly after is phasewater, rare and powerful pieces of tech and other goods that simply don't get sold in marketplaces like Davute. Our research and development divisions have obtained a lot of goods that will easily keep them occupied for several decades."

Ves learned that alien technology was one of the currencies of the new frontier. The overall tech level of the indigenous alien community might be inferior compared to the tech level of humanity as a whole, but the natives possessed an unquestionable advantage in their familiarity and ability to leverage phasewater.

Famed research and development institutions such as Morton Tech and Melmen Advanced Systems largely depended on reverse engineering salvaged alien devices to fuel their own advancements.

If Ves ever wanted to reduce his dependence on external development companies for high-tech mech parts, then he needed to give his clan enough materials to work with, which was exactly why the Larkinson Clan collected so many diverse pieces of alien tech.

"Did we manage to acquire a lot of alien biotech products during the salvaging operation?" Ves asked his personal assistant as he glanced around his office.

He needed to expand the display area for his battle trophies. He wanted to commemorate the defeat of the V'gahnt-Zezne and the unclean whale.

"I am afraid I have to disappoint you, boss. The Palace of Shame lacks a biotech infrastructure. The only major use of biotechnology employed by several pirate groups is related to food cultivation. They have these large flesh pillars that can absorb pretty much every form of organic materials as well as

many kinds of inorganic materials and process them into pure nutrients tailored to satisfy the individual dietary needs of a specific alien race."

Ves grew interested. "Oh? Tell me more about these flesh pillars."

"According to numerous sources, these organic food producers are highly mature products that have long been in use by many different alien races. The tech has been around long enough for many alien races to develop their own racial variants that can efficiently keep them fed under circumstances where the supply of natural food products is unstable. They are particularly common in small outposts, isolated space stations and pirate vessels."

"So what you're saying is that they are basically organic nutrient pack production machines."

"You could describe them like that, I suppose..."

Ves grinned. "Well, be sure to grab a dozen of those flesh pillars. You never know whether they might come handy. How is our internal food production capacity, by the way? If the unclean whale succeeded in teleporting us to a location that is extremely far away from human-occupied space, will we be able to keep our own clansmen fed over the long term?"

"You don't have to worry about starvation for at least a decade." Gavin confidently replied. "We have stocked up on enough nutrient packs to keep our bellies filled. Almost every ship also contains hydroponics chambers that can at least ensure some form of renewable foodstuff production. Our capital ships can keep many more people fed, though their ability to do so is still not adequate enough to meet the needs of a growing population that comprises at least half a million people. The only way to attain a surplus of food is if we convert large internal spaces on ships like the Dragon's Den into specialized food production facilities."

"Hmmm..." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "How much space does it take to maintain a bunch of those alien flesh pillars as opposed to more traditional food production facilities?"

Gavin took a few seconds to consult a couple of sources. "Assuming that we can develop a variation of a flesh pillar that can generate human-compatible food, then we can reduce the allocation of space by at least 90 percent."

"Damn! Why aren't we planting those flesh pillars like mushrooms already?!"

"Do you really think our clansmen will be happy to give up their organic meals for nutrient packs? They will literally revolt and depose you from your seat if you dare take away their hamburgers and sushi."

"Ugh. I guess you're right."

Ves had no choice but to drop the matter and turn his attention to other matters.

Gavin reported on numerous developments, ranging from casualty figures to the amount of pure phasewater that the Larkinson Clan had obtained up to this point.

"So far, we have obtained 54 kilograms of phasewater, which is a respectable amount after splitting up the bounty with the rest of the temporary coalition and the Golden Skull Alliance. You shouldn't expect to gain much more, though. Our salvage teams have already picked the low-hanging fruits. There are probably shielded caches around here that secretly hide a lot of phasewater, but few aliens left alone can tell us where they are buried."

Ves shrugged. "Our men can search them out, but I don't want to waste too much time on this. We shouldn't stick around for too long. When are we scheduled to leave?"

"In two days if all goes well. There are many departments who complain that the time frame is too short. Our salvage teams can secure much more loot if they are granted another week."

"No. I don't want to overstay our welcome." Ves firmly expressed his stance. "I have a bad feeling about this place. We already got most of what we want. I can live with leaving behind warship hulls and buried treasures so long as we can avoid any possible reprisal from the aliens who originally built the Palace of Shame. Will any of the other pioneering groups make their way out as well?"

"The Adelaide Mercenary Company has opted to leave in the same time frame. In fact, General Herman Foraine proposed to join forces just in case the other pioneering groups are planning to follow us and coerce us into giving up our spoils."

That sounded interesting. This was not an easy diplomatic decision.

"What does Minister Shederin think?"

"He thinks that it is not necessary for our fleet to stay close to the Adelaide Third Fleet. Our clan possesses a lot of deterrence due to showing off so many trump cards. Not only that, it has become increasingly clearer that we enjoy the backing of the MTA. None of our rivals are eager to piss off the mechers, particularly when they want to make themselves look good in order to maximize their profits from this operation."

"You're right. It doesn't make sense at all for our competitors to attack us out of greed. This is a clear loss-making transaction."

"That doesn't mean that help from the Adelaides is useless, boss. Any indigenous alien forces that we may bump into will not pay any attention to our MTA backing." Gavin noted.

"I see. It will be a lot more useful to have a fleet that is just as powerful by our side."

The Adelaide Mercenary Company was both prosperous and well-equipped. It wouldn't have been able to retain an ace pilot and an ace mech if the opposite was the case.

Though Ves appreciated the Adelaide Mercenary Company out of all of the other members of the temporary coalition, that didn't mean he was willing to trust his back to this group.

Betrayal was still possible. No matter how illogical it may be for the Adelaides to stab the Golden Skullers in the back, Ves could still imagine scenarios where it could happen.

Rather than tempt fate and open up his fleet to betrayal, he preferred to nip this possibility in the bud.

"Tell Minister Shederin to politely reject General Foraine's proposal. We can take care of ourselves, Benny. It's not as if we are traveling straight towards the frontlines of the ongoing invasion of the Red Ocean."

"Understood. I have already passed on the message."

The main reason why Ves rejected this offer was because he wanted to hurry up and complete the original goal of this diversion into the border region of the Krakatoa Middle Zone and the Zelmar Upper Zone.

He didn't quite know for certain, but he had a feeling that destroying the Palace of Shame and killing the unclean whale might have produced a lot of ripple effects.

Even if these fears were overblown, Ves still didn't want the Adelaides following his expeditionary fleet to the star system where Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik had fled.

Chapter 4523 Starfighter Parallels

The fleets of the Golden Skull Alliance and the Adelaide Mercenary Company were finally ready to depart after a few days.

The Gemini Family, the Lehrer Foundation, the Santana Group and the Boojay Family had opted to stay behind. Their salvage teams were constantly unearthing more treasure from the broken fragments of the Palace of Shame and other tricky places.

Staying behind also allowed these pioneering groups to make good use of all of the enormous warships and warship debris.

Ves had already learned that the more ambitious pioneering groups wanted to package up the alien warships and tow them back to civilization in order to maximize their profits.

He wished them good luck in this endeavor. The profits would be massive if they managed to pull it off, but it would take many months to tow all of the high-value warships to safe harbor.

The probability that they would get intercepted was small, but not completely unlikely.

Ves did not wish to turn his fleet into an attractive target, so his clan declined to drag too many alien hulls away. The Larkinsons only grabbed the smaller and less valuable hulls and only intended to hold onto them long enough to study alien shipbuilding methods.

At least Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai found a new way to occupy her time.

Before the eve of departure, all of the leaders of the temporary coalition met in person once again.

They distinctly did not choose to meet inside the flagship of the Gemini Family, but instead opted to converge inside a relatively intact section of the Palace of Shame.

The trip was risky and would expose every leader to a lot of potential danger, but sending a surrogate was seen as a sign of weakness and mistrust.

Ves opted to go despite all of the warnings he received. There was no compelling reason for anyone to pull off any stunts. Even if an incident took place, he believed that his own precautions along with the protection of the Mars would see him to safety.

He boarded the shuttle and came face to face with the two advisors that he decided to bring along for this meeting.

Minister Shederin Purnesse wore an elegant if somewhat boring gray vacsuit that offered decent environmental protection but not much more.

Director Calabast looked serious and ready for action as she had opted to wear a flexible but armored suit that fell short of looking like actual combat armor.

Ves found it interesting that Calabast chose to wear an outfit that did not feature any obvious stealth mechanisms at all. It lacked the modules that were typically present on infiltrator suits.

"This isn't the time for sneaking around." Calabast answered his unspoken question. "If an incident occurs, we have to confront it head-on. Besides, we already have a secret agent who is much better at infiltration."

She lowered the gaze to a certain gem cat resting on his lap.

"Meow..." Lucky lazily yawned.

His belly had become fuller this time after the Larkinsons had let him loose in the broken remains of the Palace of Shame.

Unlike most salvage teams, Lucky could effortlessly phase through solid matter and stumble upon hidden vaults that were shielded from detection.

The cat successfully managed to devour the contents of a couple of those hidden treasure vaults before other parties finally managed to sniff out their locations.

Ves smiled as he looked at his lazy cat. While his new cyborg cat was much stronger and more obedient, he had left his living divine artifact in his fleet in order to perform a backup function.

Compared to his new cyborg cat, Lucky was a lot more disposable.

Of course, Ves knew better than to voice these thoughts to his first pet. He hadn't even exposed the existence of his cyborg cat to anyone, though he was pretty certain that the Golden Cat already knew due her control over the Larkinson Network.

"Is your armor fully operational again?" Calabast asked.

"In a manner of speaking." Ves replied. "It is easy enough to fabricate replacement parts for the Unending Regalia. The biggest stumbling block is obtaining more Unending alloy. I first thought about cutting a few pieces from the broken remains of the Shield of Samar, but I think that Venerable Jannzi knows her own mech way too well for me to get away with that. I opted to shave off small chunks from our other expert mechs instead. No one will be able to notice the difference except for Gloriana, and she has better things to do with her time."

He lifted his armored hand and confidently patted the newly fabricated armor plates. Although it wasn't obvious from the surface, Ves could still perceive strong differences between the new and old parts.

Much of the Unending Regalia had been exposed to his Spirituality for several years, causing them to undergo a subtle form of baptism that increased their connection to him. This effect had become a lot stronger as of late now that Ves had undergone a spiritual evolution.

He also suspected that the prior lightning baptism had also bled over to his combat armor and caused it to become even stronger and more special than before. His plan to gradually transform his Unending Regalia into a powerful spiritual relic was well on its way to bearing fruit!

He frowned for a moment.

Compared to how close he was to most of his armor, he failed to develop the same intimacy with the replacement parts.

They were like brand new bricks that had been placed in the holes of an old and historical monumental building. The new parts lacked the weight of history and the spiritual imprint that he had become accustomed to over the years.

What was worse was that the replacement armor plating also carried the spiritual imprints of other expert pilots. Trying to wash all of that away and place his own imprint on those pieces would take a lot of time. All of this extra work interrupted and delayed the subsequent evolution of his Unending Regalia, which meant that Ves had to wait a few more years before it turned into a genuine relic filled with power.

As Ves continued to examine the state of his restored Unending Regalia, the shuttle finally arrived at its destination.

It had touched down in an alien hangar bay that used to house starfighters. A few of these alien machines had even been left untouched. Their pilots probably hadn't been available to participate in the fight for one reason or another.

Before the delegation moved to the interior of the broken palace segment, Ves requested a delay so that he could study the starfighters up close.

Ves had studied plenty of interesting alien goods and materials that the salvage teams had brought back over the past week.

Though the Larkinsons had brought back a decent amount of elite starfighters, Ves hadn't been around when they had been brought into the cargo holds of his ships.

This was the first time that he was able to see alien starfighters in the flesh.

The craft was smaller than he thought. It was designed for speed and maneuverability and could definitely give a light mech a run for its money. Its disproportionately large thrusters provided it with incredible straight-line acceleration, though Ves could clearly deduce that its agility and turning radius was less than impressive.

The starfighter he was looking at was a rather middling machine that was a little more valuable than an autonomous combat drone but not as expensive as an elite starfighter.

This was why the starfighter had remained in the hangar bay. There were too many of these machines that took up too much cargo space for their value.

"Meow." Lucky turned his head away after he determined that the starfighter didn't contain any yummy alloys.

"Interesting." Calabast said as the gem cat automatically floated into her arms. "Humanity would have been no different from the other races if the history of our civilization had taken a different turn. How do you feel about that, Ves?"

The sight of an alien starfighter evoked a lot of different thoughts in his mind. Could he have become a starfighter designer in another life?

Ves chuckled. "I don't think I would have been a starfighter designer in that alternate universe. It would have been far more likely for me to be a starfighter pilot considering my pedigree. The only reason I haven't become a mech pilot is because my genetic aptitude is junk."

His strategic partner nodded in understanding. "I suppose that is correct. Humanity in that alternate universe sounds much less exciting to me now. I pity the humans who live under those circumstances because they don't have the privilege of being able to buy interesting products developed by a different version of yourself."

"Maybe that's for the best."

Calabast gestured towards the starfighter in front of them. "Do you think that the aliens have the potential to make their starfighters more competitive against mechs? What if they equip their starfighters with a neural interface to improve their control?"

"That is difficult to say. Starfighters definitely have their strengths, but they are too limited in what they can do. Perhaps the aliens will crack the secret of neural interface technology and develop variants that are compatible with their own species, but you know as well as I do that there is more to mechs than establishing a man-machine connection."

"I suppose you are correct."

Ves once held a discussion with Cormaunt Hempkamp on the possibility of alien races adapting their own form of neural interface technology.

It was a lot harder to make this work than everyone thought. Was genetic aptitude still a factor? Did aliens have brains that neural interfaces could latch onto? How much data could a qualified alien pilot process?

All of these questions and more made it so that alien races had to conduct a lot of research before they could develop a working imitation of a neural interface.

Ves floated up and inspected the open cockpit. He could see that it featured a mechanical control interface that was suitable for a small-statured alien pilot with four arms.

"Controlling a craft through a neural interface is much different than controlling it with the help of joysticks and buttons. Compatible alien pilots will have to go through at least a year of accelerated schooling and training before they are anywhere close to competent at controlling a starfighter. They will need to spend many more years if they want to become competent at piloting mechs."

"Do you think the aliens will go through the trouble of developing their own mechs and training their own mech pilots?"

"I truly don't know." Ves shrugged. "I think that a number of alien races that have discovered that they have an unexpected high compatibility with neural interfaces and interfacing with mechs will definitely try it out. They will be too far behind to rely on mechs to bail them out, though. Warships will still serve as their primary means of waging war."

There was no more use in staying around. The starfighter was a rather shabby mass-market product that was made with the expectation that it and its many brothers would get shredded without being able to pose much of a resistance on any given day.

Starfighter pilots were much less valuable than mech pilots. Many alien races could simply spend a bit of time and money on training another batch of individuals to replenish their stock cannon fodder.

Humanity at least treated their mech pilots a lot better. They were scarce resources and it took an awful long time to nurture and train another batch of mech pilots from scratch.

That made him think whether it was a good idea to expand the pool of eligible mech pilots. If Ves or the MTA had the potential to reduce the importance of genetic aptitude, would it really be good for humanity if everyone could pilot a mech?

Chapter 4524 Desirable Tech

Ves enjoyed a brief tour through the broken chunk of the Palace of Shame.

A lot of corridors and chambers had collapsed during the time when all of the mechs opened fire on the unclean whale.

Since the creature was imprisoned in the center of the asteroid base, there was no way to preserve the Palace of Shame.

This was regretful as the original structure used to be filled with a lot of charm and history.

Ves moved through collapsed corridors that had to be cleared and propped up by human visitors. He also passed through numerous messy halls where lots of aliens had died when their surroundings collapsed onto their bodies.

He could still spot plenty of personal touches despite the heavy damage to the environment.

An alien had painted a crude symbol against a wall that his implant automatically translated into a typical alien slur.

There were reasonably intact shops that still displayed the goods that they sold when they were open.

Many of the products were surprisingly mundane. There were packaged nutrient blocks that were clearly categorized per alien species. There were also old-fashioned brooms and cleaning devices that were effective at their jobs but not valuable enough to get stolen.

Ves couldn't help but pause when he stopped at an actual alien nursery.

The architecture and interior design definitely suggested that it was a structure orientated towards children.

Though the human troops who occupied this asteroid base fragment had already cleaned up all of the bodies as well as any biological remains, Ves could still sense the deaths of over a hundred alien juveniles.

Sometimes, Ves disliked his improved spiritual senses. His recent evolution improved a lot of different aspects. His sensitivity towards life had made it incredibly obvious that a lot of young and hopeful lives had met their premature end in this structure.

A part of Ves found it rather perplexing that the alien pirates hadn't done a better job at bringing their children to a safer location.

"Even pirates have children." Calabast said as she observed the interior of the nursery from her own perspective. "Everyone we kill has a family. Don't think too much about it. These aliens don't deserve any sympathy. We humans are irrevocably opposed to other sentient alien life. Our race will conquer the Red Ocean sooner or later, and that means that every alien child will be hunted down and killed in order to prevent our former enemies from making a comeback."

"I know. You don't have to lecture me, Calabast. I am just more perceptive towards life, that's all. The loss of life here is especially grievous compared to other places."

Ves tried his best to set aside any complicated thoughts in his mind. He could not afford to lose his mental composure during the upcoming meeting.

He cut his tour short and headed over to the meeting area without any pauses.

The Gemini Family had opted to organize the gathering in a rather upscale looking mansion that was built for the proportions of an alien race that was twice as large as humans.

This made for large corridors, enormous rooms and comically oversized furniture.

He was only allowed to bring one guard inside, so Nitaa followed with him while the rest of his honor guard waited outside.

"At least these aliens have taste." Ves commented as the place was covered with geometric artwork that someone versed in math could appreciate.

Minister Shederin already approached his counterparts who had gathered in a corner of the large room.

Calabast had already slinked off to chat with a boring-looking executive from the Santana Group.

Ves looked around and spotted plenty of familiar faces, all wearing protective suits and armor in case anything dangerous took place in this alien setting.

Marshal Ariadne Wodin was holding a friendly exchange with a few female Gemini dignitaries while Master Benedict Cortez talked with a bunch of other mech designers.

A part of Ves felt tempted to join the circle of mech designers so they could discuss their views on the effectiveness of mechs against alien warships, but he knew he had more important duties to attend to at the moment.

"It is good to see you in person again, Patriarch Larkinson." General Herman Foraine of the Adelaide Mercenary Company cheerfully said as he approached from the side. "I have been waiting for your arrival, as have many others."

Ves raised a curious eyebrow towards the older man. "Really? I thought my clan and I aren't so popular with you guys these days."

"Ah, pay no mind to that. You know how it goes. Even siblings will go to war against each other in order to grab the best toys. The competition for spoils

can bring out the worst of us, but we have left much of that behind now. Many leaders will come and try to befriend you. I am sure you know why they may be eager to gain your favor."

"Because of my work... right?"

"Right." General Foraine adopted a knowing expression. "I am no exception to that rule. The capabilities that you have shown during the earlier battle is... astounding. What you have done to the Thunderer Mark II and the Infinite Gear is nothing less than groundbreaking. Our mech designers have come up with all sorts of theories to explain how you have massively increased their phasewater utilization, but they have come no closer to replicating what you have done."

That meant that blessed weapons remained exclusive to Ves. There was no other mech designer that could possibly copy every condition that made blessed weapons possible. Just the fact that they needed to acquire their own design spirits was enough to stump most people!

Ves smirked. "They are welcome to keep trying. I would celebrate any mech designer who successfully managed to imitate my work."

The mech general took a second look at Ves. "You've changed."

"How so?" Ves asked as he grew a little nervous.

He had become a lot better at suppressing his more remarkable traits over the week. His glow was no longer as obvious as before, but he still didn't manage to dampen it entirely.

"You look... stronger. More confident. More mature. Given what you and your clan have done in the last battle, you have plenty of reasons to feel this way. You're the bigshot in this gathering. Not even the Geminis can steal your thunder anymore."

That was not entirely good. Ves only had to turn his head around to see numerous members of the Gemini Family glaring at him. They still resented him for encouraging everyone else to kill the unclean whale.

Ves needed to temper everyone's expectations.

"I can't offer as much as you wish. The 'upgrades' that you are looking for have a lot of restrictions and cannot be applied to a large amount of mechs. It also takes time and effort for me to thoroughly implement my tech in any given machine. I suggest that you only limit your requests to your high-ranking mechs, and even then it is a question whether their mech pilots are willing to surrender a bit of control in exchange for power."

The Adelaide general slowly nodded. "We have heard as much from our previous exchanges. Despite these many limitations, the Adelaide Mercenary Company is still interested in procuring your... experimental tech for Jedda Sandivar as well as three of our expert mechs. Can you explain our options to us? How much time will it take for you to upgrade our machines and what do you require in order to complete our order?"

Ves began to give the man a pre-prepared spiel. He already thought about this matter beforehand and succinctly revealed he was willing to offer two different upgrade packages.

The first upgrade package centered around applying the upgrades as quickly as possible.

Just like what he had done to the Thunderer Mark II, Ves would touch the mech in question and quickly turn it into a living machine while making as minimal changes as possible. Once he had done that, he would 'bless' any weapon system with the power of the Phase King.

"The advantage of taking this option is that it is quick and easy. I can have it done within a day." Ves explained. "If your ace pilot and mech designers are

particularly possessive and touchy about your mechs, then they have little reason to worry. Very little has changed and they can easily undo most of my work if they wish."

"That is an appealing choice, but I would be remiss in choosing the expeditious option when there is clearly a more superior one available." General Foraine said.

"It depends on what you define as superior. Still, I get what you mean. My second upgrade package is a lot more thorough because I will be working on them for at least several days so that I can apply a stronger version of my new tech. The boost in combat power will be much more dramatic if you trust me enough to tinker with the mechs or at least a portion of their weapon systems."

"Such as your Instrument of Doom?"

"Exactly, general. That is an excellent example of upgrading the combat capabilities of your mech without compromising their designs. If you give me a copy of the Jedda Sandivar's daggers, I can work on them on a physical and non-physical level so that the Phase King is able to exert his influence over them to a much greater degree than if I did a rush job."

"You have mentioned this 'Phase King' multiple times. Who is he, exactly? Is he an alien phase whale? If so, is it legal for us to consort with one of humanity's enemy?" General Foraine suspiciously asked.

"Relax." Ves answered in a reassuring tone. "I have made use of the Phase King for several years and never received a warning from the MTA. I'm on good terms with the mechers, so they will tell me if I am doing something wrong."

"You haven't explained who or what the Phase King actually is. Can I trust him to empower our mechs without any reliability problems?"

"To be honest, I cannot promise you that. I don't want to say too much, but one of the prerequisites of making blessed weapons of this particular style work is to develop a working relationship with the Phase King. If your mech pilots cannot befriend him, then they will not receive his help when they need it the most."

"We understand. We will do our best to keep this Phase King happy if we have developed a dependence on his power."

Ves smiled. "It's a give and take. Treat the Phase King as a friend and he will have your back during a fight. I am sure your Jedda Sandivar will be able to carve through hostile ace mechs when I have completed a pair of upgraded daggers for this powerful machine."

"I wanted to talk to you about that as well, Patriarch Larkinson. Since our fleets will soon split up, how will you be able to deliver our promised weapons to us in time?"

He shrugged. "I am sure we can come to an arrangement. We have courier ships and other vessels that can transport the weapons to the location of your fleet. I will try and hurry up with my work so that our fleets won't move too far apart. Are you happy with that, general?"

"That sounds reasonable as long as the upgraded daggers have truly become more powerful. How much deadlier will they become?"

"I can't say. This tech is new even for me. Conservatively, I estimate that it should be possible to amplify their penetration power by at least 4 times."

"That is impressive!"

"It will cost you, though."

There was no way that Ves wanted to botch this job and disappoint the Adelaide Mercenary Company.

As long as he could apply his distinctive touch to not just one, but several powerful ace mechs, the Phase King stood to receive an incredible amount of high-quality spiritual feedback!

Ace pilots are so much more powerful than expert pilots that it wasn't even funny. The thought of being able to establish a connection between many of the powerful ace pilots in this star system and one of his most important design spirits already made him salivate!

He suddenly froze as he came up with another interesting idea.

What if... Ves didn't turn the Phase King into the only design spirit of those daggers. What if... he attached a second design spirit in the form of himself?

Was it possible for him to siphon away some of that juicy ace pilot-grade spiritual feedback for himself?

Ves suddenly discovered what it was like to be his mother.

Chapter 4525 Start Of Negotiations

Ves was not accustomed to attracting so much interest from powerful pioneers.

His ego gained a significant boost as he verbally danced his way from one negotiation or another.

He had always known that his work was good enough to attract the attention and appreciation of a significant portion of the market.

However, much of the advantages conveyed by his mechs were difficult to translate into hard numbers.

There were many other products on the market that hit harder, withstood more damage or moved a little faster.

Creative and innovative mech designers tried to excel in ways that weren't so obvious and straightforward. Instead of joining the crowd, they stood apart

from the mainstream by developing all kinds of gimmicks that gave their products a competitive edge. These features ranged from adding enhanced self-repair capabilities to their machines to making their mechs a lot harder to detect.

Ves happened to fit in this category of mech designers as well. His living mechs and his glows constantly attracted more and more customers who were willing to take the risk of pursuing an alternate direction of strength.

However, the commercial success of his living mechs had always been confined to the grassroots and the lesser organizations of human society.

These were the parties that were constantly trying to look for bargains and better ways to overcome their competition without spending a ludicrous amount of money.

While the LMC's products weren't cheap by any means, they still presented an amazing value proposition to those who recognized the advantages of living mechs.

It was too bad that the LMC still couldn't break into the largest circle of customers. These massive conglomerates and centuries-old organizations usually developed their own mechs or signed long-term contracts with larger and more established mech companies.

Developing exclusive relationships made sense because major clients gained the right to make additional demands to ensure they obtained the mechs they truly needed.

This was far more convenient than trawling through the enormous mech market in the hopes of finding a mech model that somewhat matched their requirements.

The LMC was still an upstart for the most part. It was hard for the LMC to attract clients as large as the Adelaide Mercenary Company or the Boojay Family.

That was slowly changing as bestsellers such as the Pacifier line, the War Squire line and the Hymenoptera line emerged. The law enforcement mech and industrial mech both proved that the right glows could produce immediate and highly productive benefits to their customers.

While the LMC managed to gain greater traction in these niches, the Larkinson mech company still fell short of attaining critical success in the most important market category, which was combat mechs.

A mech company that could not become the market leader in at least one subcategory of combat mechs was not qualified to attract the notice of major clients!

Without proof that Ves could design a mech that could become a potential champion among its competitors, he would always be faced with skepticism and lack of recognition.

The Battle of the Boryan Belt changed that pattern. The other five pioneering groups fighting alongside the Golden Skull Alliance had tried and failed to overcome the impenetrable defenses of the unclean whale that showed up at the final stage.

Ves had ultimately been the one to personally bail them all out, and he did so twice.

He first did so by launching a mysterious superweapon from his flagship. Though Ves could clearly sense everyone's burning curiosity and desire towards this 'trump card', he always deflected any cautious inquiries relating to this incident.

People quickly figured out that they had no hope of acquiring it for themselves and tactfully avoided the topic.

They had greater success with asking about the second move he made. His capacity of imparting a powerful 'blessing' on a machine as high-end as an ace mech in the middle of an ongoing engagement was just as amazing if not more!

It was this surprise that he was willing to put up for sale.

Ves revealed three crucial pieces of information as he made his indirect sales pitch to the attendees of this gathering.

First, he told them that his so-called blessed weapon method was a new and experimental design application that had only been tested on just two different prototype weapons before the latest battle.

Blessed weapons were so new that Ves could guarantee that no rival pioneers benefited from this powerful invention!

This meant that this was probably their only opportunity to place their orders for blessed weapons when it was still in the earliest stages of its product life cycle.

Second, Ves revealed that there were many limitations regarding the production and use of blessed weapons.

Many of them were practical such as the necessity of making mech weapons alive and convincing mech pilots to build up relationships with their new living equipment and the Phase King.

Ves also told his audience that supply would be constrained for a long time as he could only afford to make a limited amount of blessed weapons at this time.

Whether this was because his resources were limited or because he wanted to jack up his prices by creating artificial scarcity, nobody could tell for certain. No one confronted him on his ambiguity because he possessed a monopoly on blessed weapons.

Third, Ves confirmed that his blessed weapons could be of use to any mech. No matter whether it was a regular mech, an expert mech or even an ace mech, each of them could enjoy a massive boost in combat effectiveness as long as they carried a bit of phasewater!

Technically, it was possible to pair mechs with other design spirits, but Ves had refrained from mentioning this as he had yet to discover and secure a supply of alternative sympathetic materials.

For now, phasewater was the only game in town. It was so famous and ubiquitous throughout the Red Ocean that there was always a place for the Phase King to help.

Once Ves was done with outlining his conditions, the negotiations became serious.

"You are asking for much, Patriarch Larkinson." General Herman Foraine furrowed his brows. "It is true that we have obtained a sizable share of phasewater from the salvage and recovery efforts, but our headquarters have already allocated most of it for pre-planned projects. We have many older mechs that are still waiting to be upgraded with transphasic parts. Our company also intends to develop brand new expert mechs that are transphasic from the ground up. Providing so much phasewater to the company at large will comprehensively boost the combat power of all of our fleets. That is much better for us than upgrading a single ace mech. No matter how much more powerful the Jedda Sandivar can become, it is only a single machine that can only guarantee the survival of a single fleet."

Ves looked unsympathetic as he gazed at a wall that featured a harmonic collection of alien paintings.

"That is your concern, not mine. I don't accept MTA credits, general. Earning money is too easy for me these days. What I truly want for my services are strategic trade goods that are not so easily obtainable on the open market. If your headquarters can't bear the thought of letting go of phasewater, then you can propose alternate forms of payment. I am willing to take orders in exchange for starships, powerful pieces of alien technology, exclusive knowledge related to mech design, phasewater technology or biotechnology, introductions to powerful human factions that are worthwhile for me to associate with and more. I think you get the picture."

The general continued to look troubled as Ves presented quite a troublesome wish list.

"I thought we were friends, Larkinson. Won't you give us some slack on account of supporting you when you pushed for the unclean whale to be killed? We had your back at that time, and you didn't even need to bribe us with a blessed weapon."

Ves smiled at him. "I haven't forgotten about that, general. I have already applied a discount to my offers to your mercenary company. Trust me that the others will have to pay slightly more to receive my services. Now, are you willing to exchange phasewater or other strategic goods so that you can turn your Jedda Sandivar into a true terror on the battlefield?"

"...I will have to consult with my advisors. This is not a decision that I can make alone."

"Feel free to do so, but remember that this is the only instance where I will accept orders. It will take a lot of time before I will offer this business again."

Ves didn't want to lose too much time on this chore. It was enough for him to develop a relationship with a number of foreign ace pilots and expert pilots. He wanted to use these initial deals as a trial to see whether there were any upsides or downsides to propagating blessed weapons outside of the Larkinson Clan.

As General Herman Foraine excused himself and returned to his fellow Adelaides, the contemporary leader of the Boojay Family came next.

The older lady dressed in an exotic-looking garment over her protective suit stepped forward as if she knew what she wanted and what she had to pay in order to satisfy her needs.

Matriarch Rezzie Boojay turned out to be a lot more straightforward. "We want you to augment the penetration power of the primary weapon of the Royal Jeem. If possible, we would also like you to do the same for two of our high-tier expert mechs, one of which is a space knight while the other is a missileer mech. We can pay in phasewater."

Ves appreciated the woman's directness. "I can do the first request without any issue. If I recall, the Royal Jeem wields a fairly normal-looking solid alloy spear that is useful in charge attacks and dogfighting, is that correct?"

"That is correct, Patriarch Larkinson. The spear is made of high-quality materials that is used to form specially developed transphasic alloys that allows it to become sharper, tougher and capable of absorbing kinetic forces."

"Hm, if that is all there is to the weapon, then I can apply a 'blessing' to it that can readily do what I have promised. However, if you want me to maximize its penetration power, you will have to entrust the weapon to our clan for at least a week. I will also need your permission to make small physical modifications to its structure."

Matriarch Rezzie Boojay looked displeased. "It is normally unheard of to hand over the main weapon of an ace mech to a third party. Anyone who is able to obtain precise and accurate data about the characteristics of the weapon will be able to make special preparations against our Royal Jeem."

Ves sighed. "I can give you my word that I will work on the Royal Jeem's spear and any other weapons entrusted by your Boojay Family with utmost discretion. I will not involve any other clansmen in my work and I will make sure to keep it locked away in a workshop that no one else has access to. As soon as I am done, I will put it in a sealed container so that it can safely be shipped to your fleet. Is that enough to satisfy your needs?"

"That is not enough. We want to send a team of observers and guards that will constantly keep watch over the weapons that we have sent. This is non-negotiable to us. If you are not willing to let our family members monitor our most important equipment while it is in your care, then we will have too many doubts about your trustworthiness to proceed with this transaction."

The woman certainly struck a harsh tone, but Ves guessed that she would probably relent if he refused this particular demand.

The desire to obtain blessed weapons was too great. The Adelaide Mercenary Company might not be so interested as it was a large organization that possessed multiple powerful armadas, but the Boojay Family was largely stuck with a single fleet.

This fleet was everything to the Boojay Family. If the Boojays ever encountered an enemy that was too much for the Royal Jeem to handle, their family would definitely come to an end!

This was why Ves knew that the Matriarch Rezzie Boojay absolutely couldn't return empty-handed.

That said, Ves did not wish to be too unreasonable.

"I won't allow you to bring an entire army aboard my ship." He said. "I will grant you permission to bring along a small team of observers and caretakers."

"That is less than what our family wishes to see."

"Well, that is all you will get from us. You can either take it or leave it, matriarch."

Chapter 4526 Alternative Form Of Payment

Ves and Matriarch Rezzie Boojay continued to haggle the broad strokes of their agreement in the next ten minutes.

They debated on many different points and constantly made compromises in order to reluctantly satisfy both of their needs.

However, neither side wanted to walk away from this mutually beneficial deal so easily, so they kept pressing on in order to finalize a general framework of their agreement.

In the end, the Larkinson Clan ultimately agreed to bless a single ace mech-grade weapon and a single expert-grade mech weapon for the Boojay Family.

"I would be happy to upgrade the main weapon of the Royal Jeem as well as that of your high-tier expert space knight." Ves smiled like a salesman that had just closed a massive deal where he was bound to earn a lot of commission.

Matriarch Rezzie Boojay did not look entirely happy. "What of our expert missileer mech? Why are you unable to provide the same service to this machine?"

Ves sighed. "I am sad to say that I am probably unable to be of any use to your expert missileer mech. Missile launchers are glorified collections of tubes and don't really play a significant role in the firepower or penetration properties of their damage output. The only way to apply my new method to this expert

mech is to 'bless' each and every individual consumable missile. This is an enormous waste of time and resources. Not only do I have to work on an excessive number of missiles, they won't even last as they will blow up as soon as they are put to use against enemy targets. Why not consider other expert mechs?"

"No. Two orders will be enough for us, then. What are your prices in phasewater?"

"I charge 50 kilograms of phasewater to augment an ace mech-grade weapon and 10 kilograms of phasewater to do the same for an expert mech-grade weapon."

The matriarch of the Boojay Family momentarily exposed her shock at the high price tag.

"That is excessive, Patriarch Larkinson! It is much more reasonable to charge 10 kilograms for our largest order. You are only applying your method to a single weapon, not an entire mech. I doubt this costs as much as you want us to believe."

Ves snorted. "You are welcome to turn to other suppliers if you want to get a better deal. Don't think about what you are giving up. Think about what you are getting in return. 50 kilograms of phasewater will turn your Royal Jeem into an unstoppable offensive powerhouse that can defeat pretty much every other ace mech at its level. Doesn't that sound much more valuable than risking the life of your ace pilot and the rest of your fleet?"

The two continued to haggle until they finalized their agreement.

Ves had eventually been persuaded to lower his prices to 40 kilograms to augment the spear of the Royal of the Royal Jeem and 7 kilograms of phasewater to do the same for the mech sword of a high-tier expert space knight.

In exchange, Ves received all of the payment upfront, and also took responsibility if he somehow ruined the weapons when they were temporarily under his care.

Of course, the Boojay Family couldn't arbitrarily declare the weapons ruined when they finally received them again. Ves especially did not want the Boojays to blame him if Saint Kalasandra Boojay somehow couldn't get along with her new living weapon and its attached design spirit.

If any disputes took place, both sides would present their case to the MTA so that they could obtain a fair and impartial judgment.

Arbitrating disputes relating to mechs was one of the core functions of the Mech Trade Association. The mechers had worked hard to build up a reputation of neutrality. They could be trusted to refrain from playing favorites, even if the Larkinson Clan was much closer to the MTA than the Boojay Family.

Although the two sides hadn't signed a formal agreement yet, it was only a matter of time before the lawyers and nitpickers of the Larkinson Clan and the Boojay Family finalized a formal contract.

Ves and Matriarch Rezzie Boojay already shook hands with each other. This turned out to be a little awkward due to their protective gear.

"We will transport 47 kilograms of phasewater as well as the two mech weapons to your fleet as soon as our contract goes in effect." The leader of the Boojay Family said. "We trust you not to renege on this deal. The main reason why I agreed to pay upfront to begin with is because you have developed a good reputation in your business dealings. It surprises me that you are much less volatile outside of combat and mech design."

"I started from the bottom, matriarch, so I have a great understanding of the necessity of money, resources, assets and relationships in my business

ventures. I can't play around as much if I'm broke. You can rest assured that I will make excellent use of the 47 kilograms of phasewater that will enter my vault soon."

"Please do not remind me of how much of our spoils we have given up in exchange for your services."

Ves chuckled as the matriarch finally went away.

He still couldn't believe that he actually managed to force the Boojay Family to cough up 47 kilograms of phasewater!

He had almost doubled his initial share of phasewater for participating in Operation Lighthouse!

This was a much greater sacrifice than the annual sum of phasewater the Hex Federation paid to the Larkinson Clan in exchange for the right to gain access to the proprietary Mental Simulation Training System!

Ves metaphorically rubbed his palms as the next potential customer walked up to his position.

The man looked different from the rest as he wore a ceremonial version of a white lab coat over a more protective suit that was mainly designed to cope with laboratory accidents.

It was clear to see that the man was much more at home in a research lab as opposed to a boardroom.

"Patriarch Larkinson. I am Stanley Goetha, a vice director of the Xenoarchaeology Division of the Lehrer Foundation. You have mentioned earlier that you are willing to take alternative forms of payment for your services, including knowledge on various subjects, is that correct?"

Ves smiled in return. "That is correct, though I want to make it clear that I won't accept a crummy pile of outdated university-level textbooks that will not

be able to help our clan develop stronger mechs. I am primarily interested in any R&D related to transphasic mech systems."

"The Lehrer Foundation does not put too much emphasis in this field." Vice Director Goetha replied in a firm tone. "We can offer other advancements in fields that are much more infrastructural in nature. For example, I am authorized to share useful research and powerful applications related to robotics, automation and industrial processes."

"That sounds interesting, but it won't make our mechs stronger. I am looking for innovations that will allow us to gain a greater advantage on the battlefield. All of that fancy tech that you have mentioned earlier won't be any use of a powerful alien fleet that has smashed through our mech forces and pounded our starships into scrap."

"Do not be in a hurry to dismiss our offer." Vice Director Goetha calmly said. "For example, not all of our robotics and automation projects are civilian in nature. We have developed plenty of products that are relevant on the battlefield as well."

The man waved his arm, exposing numerous mechs that carried extra modules on their backs.

The live test footage showed different prototype mechs fighting against many different opponents.

While the prototype mechs were mostly armed with rifles that allow them to take potshots at long range, their primary weapon systems turned out to be combat drones!

These weren't the standalone starfighter-sized drones employed by the alien pirates during the Battle of the Boryan Belt.

The drones developed by the Lehrer Foundation were instead designed to be paired with specialized drone-carrying mechs.

Although Ves could easily design a mech with a similar configuration, it was pretty much impossible for him to develop a drone mech as good as the ones developed by the Lehrer Foundation!

As Ves carefully studied the edited footage, he could clearly see that the drones looked like they were excellently controlled. They moved and fought far better than typical off-the-shelf combat drones.

He was especially impressed by how well they coordinated with each other!

The more combat drones on the battlefield, the greater their cooperation!

"It would take weeks if not months to explain all of the nuances and technical innovations that make our drones so effective." Vice Director Goetha said with a smile when he noticed that Ves had become fascinated with what he saw.

"In the interest of brevity, I will mention three key systems that are key components to our drone mechs."

The man swiped his finger. The projection changed to display specialized AI processors.

"It begins with the AIs that independently govern the behavior of the combat drones. Their movements, their damage mitigation actions, their targeting priority, their aiming systems and more must all be accomplished by the drones themselves in order to ensure minimum latency. Networking is too unreliable as heavy jamming is prevalent in congested battlefields. Our investment in AIs is so great that each of the ones that we have developed for every individual combat drone performs no worse than if it was controlled by a professional mech pilot."

"That is a bold claim." Ves said.

"I am not in the habit of making statements that are groundless. I can provide you with sufficient data to prove my assertions."

"I get it. Can you continue?"

"Very well, patriarch." The older man swiped his finger again. "Next is the specialized neural interface. You see, our foundation does not support total automation, not just because it is dangerous, but also because we believe that human direction will complement our combat drones."

Ves took a closer look at the projection of the neural interface. "How much control can the pilot exert over the combat drones? How much of a burden do they need to endure to keep track of so many individual machines?"

"It is not as difficult as it looks. We have worked hard to reduce the mental burden to the mech pilot as much as possible. The pilot will only receive filtered input from the combat drones, and should exert enough control over them by issuing simple commands that the AIs will interpret to the best of their abilities. We liken it to a mech officer that is issuing orders to a mech squad. We also provide the possibility for the pilot to assume more direct control over the combat drones, but the burden on the mind can quickly escalate. In practice, only mech pilots with above average genetic aptitudes can pilot mechs paired with more than two combat drones."

That was certainly impressive. Ves already began to entertain many new ideas as he grew fascinated with the possibilities opened up by drone mechs.

"What is the third component of your drone system?"

"The designs of our combat drones themselves." Vice Director Goetha smiled as the projection changed to display the exterior of numerous existing models. "We are aware that you and your clan excel at mech design, but combat drones are substantially different products. Perhaps your design teams will be able to develop fantastic combat drones after spending decades on developing the right competences, but we can give you a considerable head-start by transferring our designs of our older generation drone products."

Ves furrowed his brows. "I can obtain combat drone designs from many different channels."

"That is true, but we will provide detailed annotations with ours. Please remember that our combat drones are specifically designed to work with our distinctive drone systems. The advanced AIs and the specialized neural interfaces will not be able to display their full potential when paired with generic combat drones."

"I see."

Chapter 4527 Serial Trade Deals

The trade deal that Ves forged with Vice Director Goetha was awfully vague.

Ves had made concrete promises to augment a number of weapons of the Infinite Gear in exchange for lots of data and information related to drone mech solutions.

It was basically a starter pack that was tailored to get the Larkinson Clan up to speed with drone-carrying mechs.

The breadth of knowledge was impressive. The Lehrer Foundation was willing to provide useful information related to almost every aspect of combat drones, from configuring their AIs to designing compact weapon systems that were powerful enough to be effective against mechs.

There were many pros and cons to drone-carrying mechs.

Normally, Ves didn't think they were worth all of the downsides, but the Lehrer Foundation invested so much time, manpower and resources into them that they had elevated this unusual mech type to an impressive height!

Vice Director Goetha had been prepared to address every possible doubt.

"If you question the reason for why drone mechs should exist, then I advise you to look at our fleet's performance during the last battle. Our combat

drones have proved to be particularly effective at cutting down the alien small craft. The enemy starfighters are especially vulnerable to flanking attacks, so our combat drones tried to encircle them whenever possible. It is much easier to surround a hostile force with a larger amount of lighter units as opposed to a smaller amount of heavier units."

Ves could see that this could be useful in many different cases, but combat drones were not a panacea against every possible type of enemy.

"These combat drones of yours are certainly effective and all, but their firepower is too light to pose a threat against alien warships. I would rather stick to traditional mechs as their larger caliber weapons at least won't bounce away from the thick hull plating of enemy vessels."

"That is what other mech types are for." The vice director retorted. "We have no illusions about the universality of our drone mech solutions. Be that as it may, we have developed specialized combat drones that are explicitly designed for sieging or swarming large constructs such as warships and space stations."

No matter what, Ves wanted it all, but the Lehrer Foundation was a lot more reluctant to share their accumulation of drones armed with heavy weapons.

Ves only managed to gain a few concessions when he addressed the demands of the Lehrer Foundation.

"You guys are getting a lot more augmented ace-mech grade weapons than my other trading partners. The nature of your Infinite Gear makes it difficult to upgrade just one weapon. It is better to upgrade a wider range of weapons so that it will retain its penetration advantage when it changes in configuration. Considering how much work I am willing to do for your foundation, I think I deserve a lot of extras."

In the end, Ves promised to apply his blessed weapon methods to four individual weapons of the Infinite Gear.

"A mech sword, a mech lance, a mech rifle and a mech cannon, huh?" Ves thoughtfully said. "That is certainly a decent range, but your greatest modular mech should have more weapon loadouts. Don't you want me to augment them as well? It is not as if you have to pay actual money or phasewater when sharing your foundation's research with my clan."

Vice Director Goetha responded with a strained smile. "I am not allowed to make any further concessions. As much as I am in favor of securing additional commitments from you, my superiors have imposed strict rules on how much proprietary research I can exchange with a third party. The scope of our current transaction is still within my discretion. If we trade anything further, I will have to send this matter up the hierarchy, which means that it can take months if not years before we can agree to a definite trade agreement."

"Annoying, but understandable. Your headquarters will certainly want to have a say in this matter." Ves remarked.

"That is true, but I cannot wait for my superiors to make up their minds. They will demand hard proof in the form of empirical data generated by systematic experiments. They won't take us at our word."

"And you do?"

"I have witnessed the might of your blessed weapons first-hand. You have saved my life and that of every other member of our fleet. That is all of the proof I need." Goetha said.

"So if I want to approach your foundation for additional research, I just have to bring additional proof, is that correct?"

"It is not so simple, Patriarch Larkinson. Research drops in value the more it becomes available. It is not true that it is costless for us to share our research.

If we give away too much of our work, we will only be fueling the rise of our competitors."

Both sides were ultimately happy with their deal. They didn't actually make any painful concessions as neither of them exchanged any scarce resources such as phasewater.

The Lehrer Foundation could make as many copies of its drone research as it wanted.

Ves on the other hand only gave up a bit of time and effort to bless four ace mech-grade weapons.

In truth, Ves believed that he was definitely getting the upper hand in all of these trade deals.

Phasewater and drone research all sounded nice, but they were not as pivotal to his work and ambitions as getting in touch with many different high-end mech weapons.

Being able to touch and study the impressive weapons of the Royal Jeem and the Infinite Gear would expose him to a whole new world of high-end mech design!

The best Master Mech Designers associated with the Boojay Family and the Lehrer Foundation had invested their best design solutions to these products. The spear of the Royal Jeem and the eclectic collection of weapons of the Infinite Gear all represented the apex of second-class mech design!

In fact, the tech and material composition of those weapons were so high that they were more at home among first-class products.

Ves deeply wanted to tear apart those weapons to figure out all of their design nuances.

He also wanted to examine their spiritual properties. Each ace mech weapon had mutated from their initial states after undergoing long-term willpower baptism from different ace pilots.

Ves had already taken a close glance at the Thunderer Mark II. If he could make observations on the weapons of several other ace mechs, he could conduct focused research on the phenomenon of willpower baptism and possibly figure out a way to replicate the effects through his own methods.

This was potentially the key to reverse engineering Lucky's gems!

It was because of his eagerness to obtain four powerful weapons of the Infinite Gear that he was willing to settle with a starter pack on drone mech systems.

The knowledge that the Lehrer Foundation was willing to pass on was thorough enough for the Design Department to develop their own brand of combat drones, but not extensive enough to match the performance of the current generation products of the research institution.

While the Lehrers assumed that it was impossible for the Larkinson Clan to develop competitive drone-oriented mechs shortly after receiving the starter pack, Ves had different ideas in mind.

There was so much potential for Ves to empower combat drones in different ways by resorting to his unique design solutions. The only downside was that he was working on so many different projects that he might not have time to play with drone mechs.

After Vice Director Stanley Goetha left with a satisfied expression, General Herman Foraine finally came back.

"We have discussed your terms and conditions. The Adelaide Mercenary Company is willing to work with them. We would like you to upgrade the

daggers of the Jedda Sandivar along with the main weapons of four of expert mechs."

Ves smiled at the prospect of receiving additional business. "I would be happy to oblige, but it will cost your mercenary company a lot of phasewater despite your friend discount. Are you sure you want to place a big order?"

"We can get phasewater from other sources." General Foraine said. "We might not be able to acquire your upgrade again if we miss this opportunity. Besides, it is better to invest resources into greater combat power than to allow our wealth to remain unused. The last battle has given us all a powerful reminder that alien battleships and hostile phase whales care nothing about our reputation and our balance sheets."

"Well said. I think you have made the right decision. While you might not be able to earn an enormous windfall of phasewater like this again in the future, I believe your new and blessed weapons will save your lives one day."

The two quickly concluded their negotiations. They essentially took the Larkinson Clan's trade deal with the Boojay Family as a model and only changed a couple of parameters.

In exchange for upgrading a number of the Adelaide Mercenary Company's high-end weapons, the Larkinson Clan received a rounded figure of 50 kilograms of phasewater.

The two shook hands.

"Why the long face, general?" Ves asked with a smile.

"You cannot imagine how much it hurts to give up on all of the ways we could have spent that phasewater on. We could have applied a more comprehensive upgrade to the transphasic systems of the Jedda Sandivar and all of our expert mechs. I was also looking forward to equipping our capital ships with superdrives."

"Eh, as I've said, you can always scrounge more phasewater elsewhere. This is especially the case now that your mechs stand to gain a lot of extra combat power."

Once General Foraine returned to his group so that he could share the good news, an executive of the Santana Group walked up to Ves.

"Patriarch Larkinson, we would like to make a deal with you." The man's slick voice began.

Ves tried to cheer himself up again. "Let's talk."

Unlike his previous trading partners, the Santana Group was much less willing to spend a fortune on upgrading their high-ranking mechs.

"You have already augmented our Thunderer Mark II." The businessman stated. "We do not see why you must make a heavy sacrifice to strengthen the foundation that you have created beforehand."

Ves already anticipated such a response. "That isn't a freebie. What I've done to the Thunderer Mark II is a highly unstable rush job."

"Saint Jelmer Osenring does not share your opinion. He can tell that the changes that you have applied to his ace mech are fully stable."

"My blessed weapon system relies on more than just a living mech. Let me remind you that the Phase King plays a critical role in empowering the phasewater utilization of your ace mech. Without his support, your Thunderer Mark II will have to fall back on human science, which is much further behind. If you want to encourage the Phase King to help your fleet in battle in the battles where you need his power the most, I advise you to allow me to do a proper job with your ace mech."

In the end, the Larkinson Clan and the Santana Group agreed to a limited trade deal.

Ves only promised to touch up the Thunderer Mark II under the supervision of Saint Jelmer Osenring and nothing else.

In exchange, the stingy Santana Group only promised to pay 28 kilograms of phasewater.

Well, some phasewater was better than nothing.

He already got the feeling that the Santana Group was unwilling to sacrifice any additional phasewater. The financial group already allocated much of the bounty from Operation Lighthouse for other purposes.

Now that he had secured a tentative trade deal with the Santana Group, only one pioneering group remained.

"Oh boy." Ves muttered under his breath.

Patriarch Kobal Gemini and Matriarch Sena Gemini stepped forth while holding their hands in a clear display of affection.

"Larkinson."

"Gemini."

"Let us discuss the future."

Chapter 4528 Business Before Grievances

The relationship between the Larkinson Clan and the Gemini Family was not exactly harmonious as of late.

The mech patrols and salvage teams from both pioneering organizations frequently generated friction with each other whenever they came into proximity with each other.

Diplomatic talks became more tense and arduous whenever the Larkinsons and Geminis took part at the same time.

Minor incidents had already taken place and it was only a matter of time before a few idiots lost control of themselves and came to blows.

This was also one of the reasons why Ves was eager to leave the star system. He did not want his clan to stay in proximity to the Gemini Family any longer than necessary.

It was clear that the Geminis resented the Larkinsons for 'robbing' them of a huge reward. The value of the remains of the unclean whale was but a fraction of what it was worth when it was alive, especially now that large parts of the carcass had been taken away.

The Gemini Family would be lucky to earn tens of millions of MTA merits at this rate.

Was that a good reward? Most definitely. Could it have been an order of magnitude greater if they kept the whale alive? Probably yes.

The feeling of missing out due to the actions of another generated a lot of resentment. Ves could easily sense that the patriarch and matriarch of the Gemini Family did not harbor any positive associations with him at this moment.

That did not stop them from putting on a civilized air and assuming a demeanor expected of leaders responsible for an entire population of like-minded people.

The mark of a good leader was the ability to put duty over feelings. Ves was quite familiar with this dynamic, so he understood that the Gemini leaders did not approach with the intention of raising a commotion.

They instead approached with rapprochement in mind.

"Is your clan recovering well after the recent battle?" Matriarch Sena Gemini asked in a light tone that completely disregarded the tension between their respective organizations.

Ves had to think about his answer.

On the one hand, he would gain great satisfaction from snubbing the Gemini Family. This group of deviants whose goal was to propagate their own warped vision of universal incestuous relationships had not exactly been acting in good faith all of this time.

It went far beyond taking a risk to subdue a living highly dangerous alien powerhouse.

Calabast and Minister Shederin had already deduced that the Gemini Family knew far more about the real threats of the Palace of Shame.

Rather than be upfront about all of those risk factors, the Geminis deliberately withheld crucial information in order to hoodwink five other powerful pioneering fleets into taking part in an exceedingly dangerous assault.

Though Ves understood why the Geminis had taken this approach, that did not mean he liked getting fooled into a venture that turned out to be a lot more threatening towards his life than he initially thought!

Just thinking about it made him want to spit in the faces of the Geminis. Why should he give them any regard after everything they had pulled off? They might not harbor any intent to kill Ves and his clan, but their deceptive behavior was completely intolerable!

At least Ves always made sure to properly explain the risks of his own ventures to the people he dragged along. He never wanted to make others feel the same as him whenever he got hoodwinked.

Considering that the Geminis behaved similarly to the people who betrayed him in the past, it took a lot of effort for Ves to maintain a cordial expression.

In the end, he continued to do so even though his emotions objected to his approach.

The reason why he did not express his true feelings was the same reason why the Gemini leaders did not expose their dissatisfaction.

They were both better off if they transacted with each other. Whatever grievances they had in the past should be set aside in order to advance the interests of their respective organizations.

It was for this reason why Ves and the Gemini leaders were able to hold a cordial conversation.

They did not talk about anything important at first. They just asked trivial questions about what they thought about the plunder they had managed to obtain and what they learned from the last battle.

It wasn't until they talked about the latest changes to the Thunderer Mark II that Patriarch Kobal Gemini finally brought up the reason for their approach.

"Are you still open to accepting additional orders for your latest service? You have accepted an impressive number of expensive orders as of late."

Ves shifted on his feet. "I can still fit more in my schedule, but demand is high as you have just seen. My time is valuable and I am already obliged to delay my ongoing design projects if I want to free up enough hours to work on my new commissions. I will have to make more drastic changes to the design schedule in order to squeeze in additional commissions."

In other words, Ves was demanded more payment for his services, perhaps unfairly so compared to the trade deals that he had just concluded with the other pioneering groups.

The patriarch and matriarch looked at each other while squeezing their hands. They clearly anticipated such a response.

"We can work with that as long as your rates are not... excessive. We may have earned a greater share of the spoils from this operation, but we have already reserved most of it for the buildup of our colony in the Hoster System. It will be difficult for us to justify the expenditure of tens of kilograms of phasewater for singular upgrades to our ace mechs."

"Those upgrades can save the entire future of your Gemini Family one day." Ves mildly retorted. "Let me remind you that your much-vaunted Gemini Saints failed to penetrate the defenses of the orven battleship and the unclean whale by themselves. They managed to make it through with the help of others, but what about next time? If you are ever caught by yourselves by a phase whale, do you think your Embodiment of Love and Sacrifice can truly overcome the defenses of this beast?"

"We have already exceeded our quota." Matriarch Sena Gemini said. "We do not intend to expose ourselves to any further excessive danger."

Ves snorted. "You might not want to look for trouble, but there is always a chance that trouble will reach your doorstep. What if an alien incursion fleet drops by your colony? What if your neighbors do not take kindly of your unorthodox family practices and intend to wipe you out for moral or ideological reasons? Having lived this way for multiple generations, you have to acknowledge that this is a very real possibility."

"This is not a new problem for us. We have always succeeded in keeping ourselves and our ideology alive."

"That was then. This is now." Ves snapped back. "Previously, your Gemini Family was bound to a fleet and could always move away before attracting too much animosity from the locals. That is not the case anymore now that you

have decided to found a colony in the Krakatoa Middle Zone. Not everyone will be as tolerant towards your Gemini Family as us. The only language that matters in the Red Ocean is force. Overwhelming force to be more precise. I can think of no better way to dominate an opponent than to raise the effective combat power of your ace pilots to that comparable to a senior ace pilot."

Ves had taken the time to review the battle footage and evaluate the performance of every ace mech.

The Embodiment of Love and the Embodiment of Sacrifice were certainly the most impressive of the bunch.

Their ace pilots worked so well together that they could actually combine their ace mechs into a superpowered combination machine that was greater than the sum of their parts!

Ves greatly admired what the Geminis had accomplished. The Embodiment of Love and Sacrifice was the most powerful 'mech' that he had ever witnessed in person. Not even a first-class multipurpose mech of the MTA could reach its level of power!

Yet... as much as the Gemini Saints were able to exert much greater power through synergy, it was not enough.

There were much more powerful pioneering groups out there that could either field multiple ace mechs or retained a genuine senior ace pilot.

The latter was the scariest of all. Similar to how a single high-tier expert pilot could easily slaughter a dozen low-tier expert pilots, those that were just a few jumps away from becoming a god pilot were much more overpowering than other ace pilots!

Although god pilots were the most powerful individuals that humanity could field in battle, in practice they had risen above mundane conflicts between rival human polities.

This meant that senior ace pilots had effectively become the top powerhouses that states and organizations could employ against each other.

The chance that the Gemini Family would attract the hostility of a powerful group that had at least one senior ace pilot on retainer was small, but the Geminis could never rule out this possibility.

Sharpening the teeth of the Embodiment of Love and the Embodiment of Sacrifice would go a long way into deterring these powers from targeting the Gemini Family.

It just so happened that Ves possessed one of the few whetstones that could make the Embodiment of Love and Sacrifice at least twice as deadly as before!

Matriarch Sena Gemini appeared to have run out of patience. "Let us stop dancing around circles and discuss concrete terms. What will it cost you to upgrade the mech rifle of the Embodiment of Love and the mech sword of the Embodiment of Sacrifice?"

"120 kilograms of phasewater." Ves immediately said. "That is quite a generous deal, you know. Oh, before you try and claim you don't have that much phasewater in your possession, we have already calculated the share of phasewater that your family has claimed. It is several times the amount allocated to my clan."

The Gemini Family was entitled to double shares while the Golden Skull Alliance only had to make do with 1.5 shares.

Since the Golden Skull Alliance was made up of multiple groups, the Larkinson Clan only received a part of that bounty.

Ves was quite jealous of the Gemini Family for being able to claim twice as much spoils than normal without having to share what they obtained.

It would be nice if he could claim much of that generous loot for himself.

Naturally, the Gemini Family did not want to part with all of their recently obtained phasewater so soon.

"We have already informed you that we have already reserved our phasewater for other purposes." Patriarch Kobal Gemini reminded Ves as if he had faulty short-term memory. "We have not changed our stance regarding this matter."

"That's fine." Ves flatly replied. "My services do not come cheap, though, and I do not have a habit of working for free."

"We do not intend to ask you to upgrade our most powerful weapons without an expectation of earning remuneration. We have already observed from your agreement with the Lehrer Foundation that you are willing to accept knowledge instead of a hard good such as phasewater."

Ves slowly nodded. "That is true, but I won't accept anything that I can buy from a random street stall."

"That is understandable. Do not worry, Patriarch Larkinson. We have come prepared. We have already formulated a list of technologies that we are happy to pass on in exchange for your services."

"Oh? What do you offer that you think is of interest to our clan?"

Matriarch Sena Gemini smiled. "How about a database that will teach your geneticists and exobiologists how to formulate healthy, intellectually gifted and most importantly empathetic designer babies?"

Now that caught Ves' attention!

"Tell me more." He demanded.

Chapter 4529 Homebrew Designer Babies

"We have discovered through various sources that your three offspring are products of Witshaw & Yeneca." The Gemini Matriarch mentioned. "W&Y deserves to be one of the market leaders of designer babies. The company's research on formulating hybrid human-alien organisms is impressive, but it has always tried its best to make its end products as stable and reliable as possible, though they are also overpriced. There are good reasons why the MTA has allowed W&Y to make use of its own channels to reach customers across the entirety of human space."

Ves nodded in agreement. "Those are the reasons why my wife and I have repeatedly turned to Witshaw & Yeneca whenever we wanted to expand our family. I see no reason why I should turn away from a company that you yourself has described as a market leader."

Patriarch Kobal Gemini smirked and crossed his arms. "As a mech designer and an entrepreneur, I am sure you understand why it may be more advantageous for you to design mechs for your own use rather than buy off-the-shelf copies of mainstream mech models."

"Ever since our Gemini Family chose our current way of life, we have always tried our best to solve our... reproduction issues... in-house." Matriarch Sena Gemini explained. "Many biotech companies are either prohibited by law to produce the offspring we desire or have severe moral objections that prevent them from accepting our business. Then there is the possibility that our business partners might attempt to sabotage our genes in the hopes of ending our way of life. That is not acceptable."

"We have therefore decided to invest in our own genetics company so that we can solve our needs without requiring outside intervention. Our geneticists have become quite good at their jobs over the generations. They may not be as the geneticists working for a leading company such as W&Y, but they are

far more specialized in developing a single type of designer baby. Our biotech experts are not burdened with the need to study many different alien genes in order to formulate many different varieties of designer babies. They only need to become good at producing the designer babies that meet our specific requirements."

Patriarch Kobal backed up his sister and wife. "I dare say that not even W&Y can produce a superior version of our specific type of designer baby. I am also willing to dare that our designer babies are superior to yours."

That got a rise out of Ves.

"We paid good money to get Witshaw & Seneca to take us seriously." He claimed. "My first two children may be derived from their more affordable lines, but my third kid is remarkably better as my disposable income has risen at the time. Next time, I will be able to spend even more money to get a higher quality designer baby."

"Don't get me wrong, Patriarch Larkinson. Withshaw & Yeneca is by no means overpraised as a genetics company. It is just that despite their size, the company does not allocate their leading geneticists to satisfy the needs of ordinary consumers such as yourself. You have only been dealing with their middling biotech experts who are adequate at their jobs but have only truly worked with creating variants of standard product formulas. They are far from able to offer you customized genes that have been formulated from the ground up. It is similar to commissioning a personalized variant of a standard mech model and commissioning a custom mech from the beginning."

The analogy made it easier for Ves to understand what the Geminis were trying to say. He couldn't help but agree with their logic, even though designing mechs was substantially different from formulating designer babies.

"Okay. Let's assume that your claims are accurate. What does this mean for my clan?"

"We are willing to give you a 'starter pack' that consists of all of the essential data and information packages that your people need to begin producing your own designer babies. You will need trained and competent geneticists, exobiologists, doctors and other specialists to properly harness our teachings, but I am told that your Larkinson Biotech Institute is more than up to the task."

Ves smiled. The Larkinson Biotech Institute definitely had the right people, but he intended to expand its responsibilities in the near future. The addition of biomechs to the Larkinson Army meant that Director Ranya needed to hire a lot of new biotech experts in order to fulfill all of the new responsibilities.

"That may be true, but my men could easily learn how to make designer babies ourselves." He pointed out in an attempt to reduce their bargaining power. "What stops us from buying out a genetics company and obtain all of that juicy know-how ourselves?"

Surprisingly enough, the Gemini leaders did not look concerned about this possibility.

Patriarch Kobal Gemini kept smirking. "You are welcome to try, but any genetics company that is within the range of your budget will not offer the quality of products that require. Gemini Genetics is different. Our company only occupies a small niche in the market, but it has invested greatly into securing its current place."

"Uhm, did I mention that our Larkinson Clan does not have an interest in adopting your... interesting family planning policies?"

Both of the Gemini leaders chuckled at Ves.

"We do not insist you follow our lead, though we will appreciate it if you do. This is also why it is sufficient to give your biotechs a foundation to build upon

rather than a copy of our whole structure. I can guarantee you that you will not be disappointed with what we can offer. While we do not intend to offer our most current and effective gene packages to your clan, we will still transfer enough information to allow your geneticists to develop their own competitive products within a decade or two. The exact quality of their work depends on their competence and your demands."

Ves frowned. "That sounds a little too vague to me. The reason why I agreed to the Lehrer Foundation's offer is because I have the technical background to understand most of what they have chosen to trade with us. I am not able to do the same with your family's offer. I will have to consult with my specialists in order to obtain an accurate assessment of the value that you are willing to transfer."

"Please feel free to do so, Patriarch Larkinson. We will stay here and await your prompt return."

The Geminis transferred a short electronic document to Ves that briefly summarized the contents of the designer baby starter pack.

Although Ves had actually gained enough of a background in biotechnology to figure out at least half of the contents of the list, he did not want to reveal that he knew more than what everyone expected. Not yet, at least.

He dutifully called Director Ranya and passed on the list.

"What do you think?"

"Hmm." Ranya's projection looked thoughtful. "It looks legitimate at first glance. Let me pass on this list to the foremost experts in our institute."

It took a couple of minutes for Ranya to receive the information she needed to make an accurate assessment.

"If the list is accurate, then the Gemini Family has made a serious effort to give us an accelerated introduction into developing our own designer babies. The breadth of proprietary textbooks, manuals, gene templates and research logs is remarkable, but their depth is a bit more shallow than what I would have liked."

"Is that bad?"

"Not necessarily." Ranya shook her head. "The Geminis did not lie about giving us a solid foundation. It is just that we will have to contribute plenty of original research in order to build a proper house of what we have received. That will require a lot of time and effort, especially if we have the ambition to develop more capable designer babies that excel in areas that we deem important. It may take more than a single generation before we can deliver a designer baby that satisfies our criteria."

"That is way too long." Ves frowned.

"It doesn't have to be that way, sir." Ranya replied. "The time frame that I have given only applies to situations where we develop the capability to formulate designer babies without additional measures. If you are willing to spend a large sum of money, then I can go ahead and acquire an existing genetics company. It doesn't have to be as good as Gemini Genetics, but it must already be in the business of developing designer babies. Once we have secured the loyalties of our new acquisition's geneticists, we can pass on the valuable knowledge package to them. They will quickly be able to get up to speed and develop an adequate designer baby in five years or less."

That was a much better outcome. Ves looked impressed.

"That is a great idea. It doesn't matter if we don't have the right personnel as we can always hire them. If it is possible for us to develop our own designer babies within the next decade, then I am open to investing in this venture. I

have always wanted our clan to develop its own designer babies as we enjoy advantages that not even Witshaw & Yeneca possesses."

Ves already thought about all of the spiritual shenanigans he could pull off. It might even be possible to ensure that every future offspring of the Larkinson Clan would be born with active spiritualities and greater aptitudes in relevant professions!

Ranya also looked forward to what the Larkinson Clan might manage to produce in the future.

"I am already regretting the decision to have children so early." The wife of Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson said. "The Geminis are correct when they state that their knowledge transfer can enable us to develop our own specialized designer babies. This is especially the case when there are manuals and gene packages on the list that can teach our how to formulate designer babies that are much more empathic and prone to developing strong bonds with friends and family."

That did not surprise Ves that much. "So the proclivity of the Gemini family members to love and marry their own twin siblings is a product of their genetics rather than just their culture?"

"That is correct." Ranya enthusiastically grinned. "Our best genetics experts will have to study the information in detail, but if the summaries are accurate, then we can produce future mech pilots that can develop much stronger emotional bonds with living mechs. It is as if our mech pilots were all born to pilot Larkinson mechs! We can even take steps to genetically look our Larkinson-exclusive mechs to our clansmen. This way, you can develop much more specialized mechs that can take full advantage of the genetic strengths of our unique strain of designer babies."

The director of the Larkinson Biotech Institute painted such a promising picture that Ves became convinced.

"Okay, Ranya. I've heard enough. If you think the starter pack is comprehensive enough, then I am inclined to accept it, but this doesn't mean the Geminis can get away with paying 120 kilograms of phasewater."

When Ves returned to the leading pair of Geminis, he gave them a somewhat favorable response.

"I am interested in this starter pack." He said. "However, that is not enough. You need to sweeten the deal. Is there anything else of value that you can offer to our clan?"

The patriarch and matriarch of the Gemini Family frowned. "We cannot offer you any further knowledge that you would be interested in. Our main business activity centers around human genetics. We have other companies that generate revenue for us, but their competitive advantages are rather slim."

"You could teach our clan a bit more about biotechnology."

Patriarch Kobal Gemini shook his head. "No. We need to protect our trade secrets. Everything we can add on top of our initial offer will stray too close to what makes us stronger. We would rather refuse this trade deal than to leak out core secrets."

That left the two sides at an impasse. Ves was not willing to get taken advantage of, so they had to find another way to satisfy his need to conclude a favorable exchange.

When he thought about the strengths of the Gemini Family, he quickly came up with another promising suggestion.

"Your ace pilots must know a lot about their profession, right?" Ves spoke up again. "Can you persuade them to tutor the expert pilots and expert

candidates of my clan? They don't have to do much as long as they are earnest about helping my best soldiers find their ways to advance further."

"That.... can be discussed."

Chapter 4530 Unfinished Business

It didn't take as long as Ves thought to secure an additional concession from the Gemini Family.

Granted, it didn't really cost the Geminis anything to provide this additional service.

The only point of uncertainty was whether the Gemini Saints would agree with this additional chore. It was not exactly proper for them to provide guidance to a bunch of foreign expert pilots and expert candidates.

After consulting with Saint Sandro Gemini and Saint Kaia Gemini, the leaders of the Gemini Family issued a mostly positive response.

"Our Saints have agreed to tutor your expert pilots in person for half a day. They have no objection to promising to do their best to promote the advancement of your most powerful Larkinson mech pilots. However, they have refused to do the same for your expert candidates."

Ves frowned in displeasure. "Why not?"

"They say it is not conducive to their growth prospects." Patriarch Kobal Gemini calmly answered. "The gap in strength is too big. Your expert candidates will likely lose their confidence in themselves if they meet and receive lessons from ace pilots at close proximity. You need to remember that expert pilots only emerge from soldiers who have strong willpower. Expert pilots have enough resolve to resist the urge to surrender to a Saint, but I am afraid that expert candidates are far from reaching that level. This is for their own good."

Now that he thought about it, the Gemini Saints had a good point. Expert candidates were truly too fragile to engage people like Patriarch Reginald Cross in a serious discussion.

"Okay. I can accept that argument." Ves said after a time. "We already have plenty of expert pilots to occupy the attention of your ace pilots. As long as your Gemini Saints will make a solemn promise to help our Larkinson expert pilots without any ulterior motives, then I am willing to accept this service as an additional concession."

As long as the wording of the promise was solid enough, then he would not have to fear any possibility where the Gemini Saints deliberately tried to sabotage the Larkinson expert pilots by leading them astray.

Their strong principles prohibited them from breaking their promises!

Ves already had plenty of experiences with expert pilots honoring their commitments. This trait was even stronger among ace pilots!

There wasn't even any need to put these terms in a written contract, though the Larkinson Clan would insist on doing so anyway just to make it nice and official.

Ves and the Gemini leaders continued to chat with each other for a while. They cautiously explored further trades, but neither side could come to any further agreements.

The Gemini Family wasn't able to offer any further value. It had already committed to investing much of the spoils gained from Operation Lighthouse into building a future state where the Gemini way of life was the new standard.

The opposition to this initiative would probably be massive, so the Geminis wanted to counter that by being overprepared.

The more wealth and resources they had at their disposal, the greater their chances of success in challenging the status quo!

As such, Ves did not receive a positive response when he asked to obtain a portion of their harvested phasewater, alien technology, valuable materials and other high-value goods.

As for Ves, he was not that enthusiastic about backing the Geminis to the same degree as the Hexer people.

Ves had already become irrevocably tainted by his strong association with the Hexers. His iconic products not only strengthened their military, but also influenced their culture and beliefs!

The fact that he somehow maneuvered his way into getting recognized as the living son of their most important deity was a blatant sign that he had — rather haphazardly — become the spiritual leader of the Hex Federation!

This was profoundly ironic considering that he was a man rather than woman!

In any case, Ves could only tolerate one such stain in his record.

"Once may be an exception. Twice is deliberate."

If it looked as if Ves made great efforts to prop up the Gemini Family through his works, then that would lead the public to develop many false assumptions!

For example, people might be under the impression that Ves actively supported its family policies!

Perhaps people might suspect that Ves was secretly a huge sister lover and that he wouldn't have hesitated to start an intimate relationship with a sibling.

Only the fact that his parents had one kid stopped Ves from fulfilling this taboo dream!

He coughed. This was a complete falsehood, of course. Ves wanted nothing to do with the Gemini Family after this ordeal was over. His only goal was to try and see if he could squeeze more concessions from the Geminis.

Seeing that neither side was able to agree to any further trades, they decided to settle with the current outcome.

"You are welcome to send your expert pilots over to our fleet as soon as our lawyers have finalized the contract." Matriarch Sena Gemini said.

"Got it." Ves smiled and nodded. "We maintain an active rotation of expert mech patrols so we can only send them to you piece by piece."

"That is not a problem. We can formulate a schedule that we can both agree upon."

"Alright. I guess that's it. Happy cooperation."

"Happy cooperation."

While Ves did not forget about all of the shenanigans the Gemini Family pulled off, the trade deal that he had just concluded wiped away much of his resentment.

There was nothing like a good agreement to help two resentful parties make up with each other. It was a reminder that they had much more to gain by cooperating with each other rather than engaging in any unproductive conflicts.

The rest of the meeting did not drag on for too long. It seemed that it had mainly been held to give Ves an opportunity to sell his blessed weapon upgrades to the different pioneering groups.

The Geminis only held a few informative speeches before sending everyone on their way.

Minister Shederin Purnesse and Director Calabast joined Ves and his guards as he made his way out of the half-restored alien base fragment.

Lucky also came back after he had snuck out some time ago. The cat somehow looked a lot more satisfied than before.

"Did you find anything good?"

"Meow~" The cat comfortably flew into Calabast's embrace.

"Anything you are willing to share?"

"Meow meow."

"Thanks, Lucky."

Ves waited until they boarded their shuttle before he solicited the opinion of his closest advisors.

"What do you think?"

"You performed well." Minister Shederin voiced his opinion. "You dominated the gathering with ease. While I can tell you that you could have employed different tactics that could allow you to gain further concessions from your trading partners, that would come at the cost of souring your relations with them. The manner in which you have conducted yourself has always made your counterpart come away with a more positive outlook towards the Larkinson Clan than before."

Ves furrowed his brows. This was not an ordinary remark. "What are you saying, Shederin?"

The older man gestured to him. "You have changed, Ves. You had always been greedy to gain advantages for yourself, but the approach you have decided upon has discouraged you from driving a harder bargain than normal. Certainly, our new trading partners had to make significant concessions, but I highly suspect that you have hardly touched their bottom lines."

"Maybe you're right, but I see little point in quibbling over a couple of kilograms of phasewater."

"That may be true, but that does not change the fact that you have adopted a softer attitude, apparently without conscious thought. I think you have changed in a way that has made you more inclined to seek mutually beneficial agreements."

Ves wanted to scratch his head. "That doesn't sound any different from what I have done before. I don't like screwing people over. Besides, I am already gaining more out of these deals than everyone realizes. Just the opportunity to get into contact with so many different mech weapons developed by so many brilliant mech designers will do much to advance our own weapon development."

"I should caution you that it is not always in our best interest to placate another party. There are times where reconciliation will cost us more than if we maintain a confrontational stance."

"If that is the case, then I hope that you and your guys will warn me in advance."

"That is what we are for, sir." Minister Shederin affirmed.

The only major downside was that none of the other mech designers of the Larkinson Clan was permitted to examine the powerful gear. Only Ves himself was allowed to work with the exclusive equipment.

Calabast voiced her opinion as well. "Whatever you are doing, it's working. This gathering could have ended much uglier for us all. While I cannot speak with any certainty, we have analyzed that there was a small but very real possibility that some of the coalition partners could have turned hostile against us. The charm that you have shown earlier today has eased much of those concerns."

"That doesn't make any sense." Ves looked skeptical. "Anyone knows that I have the backing of the MTA. Our clan is not weak either. Anyone who attacks us will suffer so much damage that they will lose more than what they can gain out of an assault."

"That is true, but there are ways to circumvent those losses. They can conspire with other pioneering fleets in the region for example. This is a rather common occurrence in the region. They can also find and lure a hostile fleet of aliens to our location, though this is much more difficult to pull off. Whatever the case, none of the coalition partners have any reason to engage in hostilities against us, especially when you still need to work on their mech weapons."

That was a good observation. Ves felt a lot better about himself. Anything that reduced potential threats against himself and his clan was a positive development in his book.

Ves continued to exchange his views with his two advisors until his shuttle finally returned to the Spirit of Bentheim.

After he handled a few affairs, he finally found an opportunity to retreat to a secure chamber at his personal workshop.

He had jammed and locked down the entire space as best as possible to ensure that not a single signal would leak out. He did not want the MTA or anyone else to learn about what he was about to do in this space.

"Here, kitty kitty. It's okay for you to show up now."

"Myaow."

His cyborg cat phased through the floor while dropping its camouflage. The living divine artifact exuded both power and elegance as its beautiful silver plating reflected the ambient lighting.

The cat possessed quite a curious and playful personality by itself, though Ves could easily assume control if he wished.

The only complication was the powerful and unquestionably hostile spiritual entity contained within its belly!

"Sorry for letting you wait for so long. I had to make sure that no one noticed what had happened and decided to follow up on the matter. Has it been hard for you to contain that rebellious whale?"

"Myaow myaow."

The cyborg cat was coping better with the situation than before. It had been hard for the divine artifact to keep the harvest spirituality of the unclean whale contained, but it had gradually grown and adapted to this role.

That was good news.

Ves didn't intend to keep the captured spirit in limbo much longer, though. Anything could happen while the unclean whale was in his current predicament.

Though the natives of the Red Ocean did not stand out in terms of spiritual excellence, they were not weak in this aspect. It was best for Ves to deal with the unclean whale before he turned into another Nyxie.

"What will I do with you?" Ves idly asked as he continued to stare at the cyborg cat's belly.