

Mech 4651

Chapter 4651 Diaspora

The interview conducted by the award-winning Najan Kittar had reached a hotter phase!

Unwilling to be deflected by her current guest's dubious and slimy excuses, she had brought up another incident that was sure to force at least some admission from the disgraced dwarven emperor that tried to disguise himself under a righteous coat!

At least, that was what Najan Kittar hoped.

Rion Aaden's tall and bulky armored form rose from the bench. The dwarf's presence seemed to magnify as he became larger than life to many viewers.

It was as if he was an ace pilot himself, which was clearly not the case as he could not even pilot a mech!

As the powerful-looking crown made the armored dwarf look even taller, Rion Aaden issued a forceful response to the latest accusations thrown by the female interviewer.

[HUMANITY IS NOT PERFECT. OUR CIVILIZATION IS FAR FROM IDEAL. MANY INJUSTICES TAKE PLACE ACROSS THE STARS. I SHOULD KNOW, AS I LIVED THROUGH SOME OF THEM. THE YEARS I LIVED IN IGNORANCE AND SLAVERY SHOULD HAVE BROKEN ME AND DIMINISHED ME AS A DWARF. IT DID NOT. I REFUSED TO BEND TO THE FORCES THAT SEEK TO BREAK NOT JUST MYSELF, BUT ALL OF DWARVENKIND.]

"You are going off on a tangent, Your Majesty." Najan Kittar interjected with a touch of annoyance on her expression.

[BE SILENT, WOMAN.] The powerful dwarf hissed while his optical lenses flashed. [MY MESSAGE NEEDS TO BE HEARD BY YOUR AUDIENCE.]

SINCE THE START OF THIS INTERVIEW, YOU HAVE DIRECTED THE ATTENTION OF YOUR VIEWERS TO THE WRONG SUBJECTS. THE CRISIS THAT IS AFFECTING MY PEOPLE IS GREATER THAN MY PERSONAL STORY.]

Though Najan Kittar was very much aware that her guest was clearly trying to deflect from his own impropriety, she gained interest in where the dwarven leader wanted to take this dialogue.

"What is this great and terrible crisis that you are referring to, Your Majesty?" The interviewer curiously asked. "If I may say so, I find you to be a fascinating individual. I have interviewed over half-a-dozen dwarves throughout my career as a journalist, but none have demonstrated as much pride and determination as you. We should have allocated more time to this slot."

The dwarf ignored her praise.

[IF YOU HAVE YET TO DISCERN THE PROBLEM THAT I AM ALLUDING TO, THEN LET ME TELL YOU THE ANSWER. I AM REFERRING TO THE TREATMENT OF HEAVY GRAVITY VARIANT HUMANS IN HUMAN SOCIETY. I HAVE EXPRESSLY USED THE FULL AND ORIGINAL NAME FOR OUR KIND, BECAUSE THE WORD 'DWARF' ALL TOO OFTEN MAKES PEOPLE FORGET THE FACT THAT WE ARE ALSO CHILDREN OF HUMANITY.]

"No one here is accusing you of belonging to a different race, Your Majesty."

[THAT IS BECAUSE THE PEOPLE HERE DO NOT WANT TO BE EXPOSED AS BIGOTS. DO NOT MAKE EXCUSES, MISS KITTAR. NORMALLY-STATURED HUMANS ALL TOO OFTEN LIKE TO LOOK DOWN ON US DWARVES, BOTH FIGURATIVELY AND LITERALLY. HEAVY GRAVITY VARIANT HUMANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A PART OF THE MINORITY, SO ANY ATTEMPTS TO CORRECT THIS INJUSTICE HAVE ALWAYS FAILED.]

To her credit, Najan Kittar made a remorseful impression.

"I have personally never discriminated against a dwarf, but as a member of the group of humans with normal proportions, I understand that my words do not mean much to you and your fellow dwarves. I have covered stories before where my fellow humans have not provided fair employment conditions to their dwarven workers."

The Iron Emperor shifted in her direction. [THERE IT IS AGAIN. YOU ARE TALKING AS IF YOU AND YOUR FELLOW HUMANS BELONG TO A SUPERIOR SPECIES WHILE DWARVES BELONG TO A LESSER SPECIES. DO YOU UNDERSTAND MY WARNINGS NOW? THE STATE OF OUR SOCIETY HAS DECLINED TO A GREATER DEGREE THAN YOU THINK IF IT HAS BECOME AN ACCEPTED HABIT TO TREAT DWARVES AS INHUMAN.]

"I have done no such thing, Your Majesty!" Miss Kittar responded with a shocked expression, though no one could figure out how much of that was theater and how much of that was genuine. "You have proven your point, as everyone here can attest to. I can now agree that there are serious issues with how we speak about dwarves and treat them in our daily lives, but not everyone is purposefully trying to disparage heavy gravity variant humans. The vast amount regular humans do not know any better."

CLANK!

[THAT MAKES IT WORSE!] The Iron Emperor boomed! The armored dwarf raised his thick arms as if to express the frustration of his own kind. [YOU STANDARD HUMANS DO NOT THINK ABOUT HOW YOU CASUALLY DISMISS, DISPARAGE AND DIMINISH YOUR MUTATED COUSINS! BECAUSE WE DO NOT LOOK LIKE YOU, IT HAS SOMEHOW BECOME JUSTIFIED TO TREAT US AS DIFFERENT.]

"Look, Your Majesty, we all understand that you and the people you profess to represent have well-founded grievances, but that does not give you the right to paint standard humans such as myself with a single brush. What you are doing is perpetuating the cycle of ignorance and prejudice that you aim to destroy!"

The armored dwarf's eye lenses flashed again.

[DO YOU THINK I AM SPEAKING WITHOUT PROOF? I HAVE THE RESEARCH TO BACK UP MY CLAIMS. AFTER MY RESEARCHERS AND I INVESTIGATING THE STATE OF MY PEOPLE THROUGHOUT HUMAN SPACE, I CAN REVEAL ONE UNDISPUTED FACT TO YOU. DEPRIVING DWARVES OF THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS IS NOT AN EXCEPTION. IT IS THE RULE, ONE THAT HAS PROVEN TO BE MORE UNIVERSAL THAN YOU EVER IMAGINED!]

Najan Kittar's eyes widened as she felt more attacked than she had ever been in her last dozen or so interviews!

"Can you publicize your research for us, Your Majesty? My program has a dedicated fact checking team on hand that can verify any claims or statements that you have made."

[HERE YOU GO.]

After the Iron Emperor transferred the electronic documents to Najan, who subsequently passed them onto her backstage personnel, the interview session continued.

"For now, let us proceed as if the evidence that you have provided is valid." The woman said as she leaned closer to the armored dwarf. "You have spoken plenty of words about the problematic state of heavy gravity variant humans in our society. Surely you must have thought about a plan that can lessen the divide between different versions of humanity."

Forceful and visionary leaders always had a habit of coming up with solutions that they strongly believed in and wished to implement.

Indeed, the Iron Emperor was no exception to this rule.

CLANK.

CLANK.

CLANK.

[I WAS WAITING FOR THIS QUESTION, MISS KITTAR. AS A DWARF WHO HAS SEEN THE BEST AND WORST OF DWARVENKIND, I HAVE THOUGHT LONG AND HARD ABOUT WHERE WE MUST GO AS A SUBSET OF HUMANITY. AFTER CONSULTING MANY WISE AND INTELLIGENT DWARVES, I HAVE FORMULATED AN IMPERATIVE THAT WE MUST ALL PURSUE IN ORDER TO LESSEN THE INJUSTICES COMMITTED TO US ON A DAILY BASIS.]

"What does this grand and ambitious plan of yours entail, Your Majesty?"

The Iron Emperor's crown began to shine with power and intensity. Its lustrous jewels glowed like stars as Rion Aaden placed his arms behind his back as best as possible given the constraints of his heavy armor.

The dwarf completely took over the interview program!

[THE CURRENT MODEL WHERE DWARVENKIND HAS BECOME DISPERSED ACROSS MANY DIFFERENT STATES AND STAR SYSTEMS HAS PROVEN TO BE INEFFECTIVE. HEAVY GRAVITY VARIANT HUMANS ARE A MINORITY AMONG STANDARD HUMANS, AND THAT IS AN UNCHANGEABLE FACT. WHAT YOU MAY NOT REALIZE IS THAT BY DISPERSING US EVEN FURTHER, WE BECOME SO DISUNITED FROM EACH OTHER THAT WE CANNOT EVEN MUSTER UP THE SMALL

AMOUNT OF LEVERAGE THAT WE POSSESS AS A MINORITY WITHIN HUMAN SOCIETY.]

[TO REMEDY A PROBLEM, WE MUST NOT ONLY STOP THE PHENOMENON THAT MAKES IT WORSE, BUT ALSO REVERSE IT SO THAT WE CAN TAKE BACK WHAT WE HAVE LOST. THIS MEANS THAT WE MUST STOP THE CONSTANT DISPERSION OF DWARVENKIND AND MOVE TO RELOCATE ALL OF US TO CENTRAL LOCATIONS. THOUGH THE VULCAN EMPIRE THAT I ONCE RULED HAD ENDED IN TRAGEDY, THE MODEL OF GATHERING HEAVY GRAVITY VARIANT HUMANS IN A SINGLE REGION HAS PROVEN TO WORK IN ENHANCING OUR COLLECTIVE VOICE.]

[LET ME SPEAK DIRECTLY TO THE DWARVES THAT ARE WATCHING THIS PROGRAM RIGHT NOW, WHETHER THEY ARE DOING SO LIVE OR ON DEMAND.] Rion Aaden said as he shifted his armored form directly to the front. [DO YOU DREAM OF A FUTURE WHERE DWARVES SUCH AS YOU AND I ARE NO LONGER TREATED AS JOKES OR VERMIN, BUT AS A GROUP OF STRONG AND INTIMIDATING INDIVIDUALS? DO YOU LONG TO BE PART OF A FORMIDABLE COLLECTIVE WHERE YOU CAN ALWAYS RELY ON THE SHELTER ON A MECH ARMY OF MILLIONS IF NOT BILLIONS OF STRONG WAR MACHINES?]

[THEN DO NOT SIT AROUND AND WALLOW IN YOUR HOMES WHERE YOU LEAD A LIFE WITHOUT A BETTER FUTURE. LOOK ME UP ON THE GALACTIC NET AND LEARN HOW YOU CAN EMIGRATE FROM A STATE THAT ONLY LOOKS OUT FOR STANDARD HUMANS WHICH COMPROMISE THE MAJORITY OF ITS CONSTITUENTS. STOP WAITING FOR THE MAJORITY TO WAKE UP. THE ONLY WAY THAT WE AS A MINORITY CAN GAIN A STRONGER VOICE IS IF WE GATHER TOGETHER INTO A SMALLER NUMBER OF CONCENTRATED

LOCATIONS AND ESTABLISH LOCAL MAJORITIES OF DWARVES IN DIFFERENT REGIONS!]

The Iron Emperor raised one of his arms, activating a projection that not only depicted a map of the Milky Way Galaxy, but also the Red Ocean!

Spread roughly evenly across human space, more than a hundred different points lit up in red.

[WHAT YOU SEE BEFORE YOU ARE THE DWARVEN REFUGES THAT MY SUPPORTERS AND I HAVE PAINSTAKINGLY ESTABLISHED ACROSS HUMAN SPACE. THROUGHOUT THE PAST NUMBER OF YEARS, I HAVE APPROACHED AS MANY WEALTHY DWARVEN INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS AS POSSIBLE IN ORDER TO GAIN THEIR FINANCIAL AND INFRASTRUCTURAL SUPPORT TO MAKE THIS POSSIBLE. EACH OF THEM CAN ABSORB AS MANY DWARVES AS WE NEED.]

The red points of light that represented the Dwarven Refuges seemed to hold an unnaturally strong attraction to the dwarves that were watching this historical broadcast.

[WE HAVE SELECTED THE SITES OF THESE DWARVEN REFUGES AS CAREFULLY AS POSSIBLE. THEY ARE EITHER LOCATED CLOSE TO A GATE OR A CENTRAL ENOUGH LOCATION. NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE CURRENTLY LOCATED, YOU SHOULD ALWAYS BE ABLE TO REACH A NEARBY DWARVEN REFUGE WITHIN LESS THAN A YEAR OF TRAVEL.]

A new projection replaced the old one. This time, the Iron Emperor wanted to show what life would be like in one of these so-called Dwarven Refuges.

The images in space showed a single star system, but one that was more dense and packed with space structures than normal!

[WITH THE FUNDING AND RESOURCES THAT WE HAVE POOLED TOGETHER, WE CAN CONSTRUCT AS MANY HABITAT STATIONS AS POSSIBLE. EACH OF THEM CAN ALREADY ACCOMMODATE AS MUCH AS A TRILLION DWARVES, BUT IF NECESSARY WE CAN SCALE UP THEIR CAPACITY TO A QUADRILLION OR QUINTILLION DWARVEN CITIZENS!]

That was an unimaginable amount of concentration of people!

The sheer amount of work, effort and resources required to build so many self-sufficient habitats was insane!

Yet Rion Aaden claimed that he and his group of followers could absorb as many dwarves as needed!

[OUR DWARVEN REFUGES MAKE NO HARD DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN FIRST-CLASS, SECOND-CLASS OR THIRD-CLASS DWARVES. WE ESCHEW THIS DIVISION AND DO NOT WANT TO PERPETUATE A SYSTEM THAT ONLY PRODUCES FURTHER DIVISION AMONG OUR KIND. AS A MINORITY, WE MUST WORK TO DO THE OPPOSITE AND UNITE AS ONE PEOPLE. IT IS ONLY WHEN WE ARE ONE THAT WE CAN FIGHT TO GAIN MORE RIGHTS AND RECOGNITION. IF YOU ARE A DWARF AND YOU WISH TO BECOME PROUD OF YOUR IDENTITY, THEN HEED MY CALL AND SEEK OUT YOUR NEAREST REFUGE!]

From today onwards, the dwarves gained a brand new dream.

[AN INABILITY TO PAY FOR PASSAGE IS NO EXCUSE. IF YOU CANNOT PAY FOR TRANSIT, THEN YOU CAN TAKE A LOAN FROM US. SO DO NOT HESITATE AND CONTACT US IMMEDIATELY.]

The armored dwarf's lens eyes flashed a final time.

[OH, I HAVE ONE MORE MESSAGE TO SAY. IF YOU ARE IN A POSITION WHERE YOU ARE DENIED THE RIGHT TO RESIGN FROM YOUR JOB,

LEAVE YOUR HOME AND BEGIN THE TREK TO YOUR NEW LIFE, THEN LET US KNOW. WE WILL DISPATCH AS BIG OF A FLEET AS NEEDED TO GIVE STANDARD HUMANS A REMINDER THAT HEAVY GRAVITY VARIANT HUMANS POSSESS THE SAME RIGHTS AS THEM. I HOPE THAT THEY ARE NOT FOOLISH ENOUGH TO TEST THE DETERMINATION OF OUR PEOPLE. I LIE. I AM LOOKING FORWARD TO IT. MY DWARVEN ARMIES ARE EAGER TO EXACT PUNISHMENT!]

Najan Kittar hastily stood up and stood in front of the dwarf. "I apologize, Your Majesty, but I must cut you off at this point. Our program and news portal strongly disapproves and disavows any threats made by our guests. Please do not take the words of our dwarven visitor here as a sign that we endorse his message and possible violations of different laws. We will be cutting to a quick break as we move on to welcome our next guest."

The feed soon switched to an ad, thereby ending the show for many dwarven viewers.

Chapter 4652 Good Girl

"Lucky?" Andraste walked up to the couch where the gem cat was resting.

"What's wrong?"

"Meoowwww..."

The red-haired girl walked up and poked the cat's stomach.

"MEOW!"

"It's so heavy! Did you overeat again, Lucky?"

"Meeooww... meeeoooww..."

"Papa told me that you evolve whenever you eat a lot of good exotics. Will you do that again?"

"Meow meow..."

"What part of you will become stronger?"

"Meow?"

"You don't know?"

"Meeooww..."

"Then hurry up and digest your food! I wanna see how much stronger you will become? Will you become fast enough to catch up with starships in space? Will you be able to warp space so that you can travel to other star systems? Oh, wait! I know! I bet you will grow laser eyes so that you can cut any mech in half! Yes, that's right! I can already see your bright green eyes beginning to glow!"

"Meooooow!"

"Andraste!" Ves called as he entered his grand stateroom shortly after he concluded another meeting about the matters he had discussed with Master Goldstein. "Stop bothering our cat. What Lucky needs the most right now is a nap so that his body can completely focus on processing all of the high-quality metallic exotics he has ingested. The thing about first-class exotics is that they tend to be a lot harder and more energy-intensive to digest."

"Meow."

"You see? Even Lucky says so. Come over here and sit on my lap instead."

"Okay, papa."

Ves never got tired of hugging and playing with his children. Andraste giggled as he tickled her body and planted lots of playful kisses on her face.

She reciprocated and kissed his cheek in turn!

"Tell me tell me tell me!" Andraste whined.

"Tell you what, honey?"

"I heard that we've become rich again! Rich enough to buy a lot of cool toys!"

"Oh, you heard that, didn't you? Who told you that news?"

A sly expression appeared on the little girl's face. "I won't tell. I promised not to tell."

Her father tapped her on the head. "Naughty girl. You're not supposed to keep secrets from your parents. We're family, remember?"

The girl stuck out her tongue. "I'm not going to tell!"

He sighed. "Oh well. It doesn't matter. It's not that important a secret anyway. Anyway, you're right. I just came off a meeting where we settled on an agreement on how to divide the MTA merits we have earned as of late. Do you know how much the Golden Skull Alliance received in total? The MTA awarded us with over 1.3 billion MTA merits in total. Do you know what a billion represents?"

"That's a 1 with nine zeroes, right?"

"That's right!" Ves grinned and kissed her cute little forehead. "The problem we have is that the MTA awarded it to our alliance as a whole. Our clan and our two allies had to decide how to divide the spoils among ourselves."

"Can't you just divide it equally, papa?"

Ves shook his head. "No. Not when you are talking about sums of this magnitude. Although we have all worked together to beat the alien warships and defeat the alien monsters, not all of us contributed equally to our victories. In general, our clan provided the most mechs and expert mechs and also offered a lot of unconventional support. The Cross Clan on the other hand brought forth the Mars, which is already a massive contribution in itself. As for the Glory Seekers, they have acted as our junior partner pretty much. They

still played an important role as their DIVA infiltrator and commando teams are unmatched."

"DIVA is pretty cool!" The little girl affirmed!

"Now think carefully, Andraste. Given what the three of us have done to win the Battle of the Boryan Belt and the Second Battle of Ramage Repulsor, how do you think we should divide the spoils?"

"Uhhh..."

His daughter looked so cute when she struggled to come up with an answer to a difficult question. This matter was far more complicated for the little girl to solve.

Ves chuckled and ruffled his second daughter's red hair. "It's hard to come up with a fair answer that all three sides can accept, right?"

"Uhm!" Andraste nodded. "This is too troublesome. Why don't you ask Aurelia? She is supposed to be good at this governing stuff."

He gave her head a playful pat with his palm. Though he only touched her slightly, his daughter overreacted as if he had just knocked her with his fist!

"OUCH! That hurts, papa! You're so mean!"

He patted Andraste on the head yet again.

"When I am asking you a question, I don't want you to come crying for your sister's help. When you grow up and start operating on your own, you won't always be able to obtain the help or advice of people who are more skilled at solving different problems. You need to be able to rely on your own nogging to figure your way out of a crisis. This is what your father has learned the hard way. I am first and foremost a mech designer, but I have been forced to take up arms. On top of that, as I built my own organization and fueled the growth

of my clan, I also had to learn how to become an effective leader. Do you understand what I am trying to teach you now, pumpkin?"

Andraste tentatively nodded. "You are saying I need to become good at different stuff in case I am alone or if no one better is around."

"That's right. While I prefer for you to never be caught alone or without sufficient support, life doesn't always work that way." Ves sighed. "Once you grow up and begin to perform your own assignments, you might not necessarily remain with our main fleet all of the time. Whenever you go out on your own or preside over your own unit, you must bear the greatest responsibility. Thinking on the fly and making sure you have judged the situation correctly are both vital skills when you are in a crisis."

"I will do my best to learn how to become good in those areas, papa."

Andraste promised as she blinked her big eyes up at him. "I want to be just as good as you when I grow bigger!"

"Hahaha, I am glad to hear that, my dear, but there is no hurry. It will take at least twenty years before you are expected to undertake any serious responsibilities."

The two cuddled for a time. His daughter melted in his arms while he basked in the love and tenderness of being able to embrace his own child.

He would definitely miss these times in the future, as children grew up so fast. It had only been a number of years since Andraste was still a cute and gurgling baby. She had been so delicate at the time!

Once Ves was done with teaching that little lesson, he asked her a question about her studies.

"You've been taking both swordsmanship and marksmanship classes for a while now, haven't you? Enough time has passed for you to get an inkling of where your talents lie. Of the two specialties, which one do you love more?"

"I think learning how to beat enemies with a sword is a lot more fun than firing with guns!" Andraste happily responded.

She even started to raise her arms and pretend as if she was swinging a blade!

"You think swordsmanship is more engaging?"

"Um! Auntie Ketis is such a fun teacher, and she is way better than the marksmanship instructors that I am learning from! I just think it is a lot more exciting to be able to learn how to fight with my whole body right at the start. I hate that she doesn't always have time to hold a class for me. The other swordsmanship instructors she sends in her place are too boring!"

That should have been an obvious difference to Ves.

A swordmaster was an extraordinary warrior!

Getting taught by one was like a mech pilot receiving personal tutoring from an expert pilot!

The skills, experience and perception of an extraordinary warrior was incomparably greater than that of an ordinary soldier.

From the moment Ketis started to guide Andraste on how to fight with a sword, his second daughter's preference towards swordsmanship had already been set in stone!

Though Ves did not object to his girl learning how to chop apart both enemies and nasty boys with a sword, he did not want her to become as fixated with the weapons like the Swordmaidens.

He leaned in to kiss her head once again.

"I am happy to hear that you are so pleased with your swordsmanship classes, but don't neglect your marksmanship lessons either. Learning how to be precise when wielding rifles and other firearms is important as well. We live

in an age where battles in space are common. If you have watched our previous battles, have you noticed how little melee combat mattered most of the time?"

"..."

Ves adopted a serious expression. "Melee combat is rare for a reason. It has partially become outdated ever since firearms picked up more steam. It is only in very limited cases such as mech combat that fighting up close has become more relevant again, but even then it is merely an exception to the rule. You don't see the aliens deploying warships that go as far as ramming their prows against the hulls of our starships, do you? That's because it is stupid, wasteful and completely unnecessary. Even the nunsers and puelmers prefer to mount big cannons onto the hulls of their homeships. Do you understand what I am trying to convey to you, dear?"

His daughter crossed her arms in defiance. "I still want to become a swordmaster! That way, I can be strong even if I don't end up becoming a mech pilot!"

"Pumpkin..." Ves rubbed her head in concern. "Don't think about that too much. You're still young. Enjoy these carefree years of yours. No matter what you end up becoming, it is always helpful if you know how to handle a gun, even if you only use it for self-defense purposes. The frontier is dangerous and I can't guarantee that my men and I will always be there to protect you from the bad guys. I expect you to become proficient in handling a basic firearm by the end of the year."

"Papa! Training my marksmanship means I won't have enough time to learn a sword style!"

Ves patted his daughter's cute little head once again. "Don't disobey your father. I am doing what is best for you. Besides, if you ever become eligible to

become a mech pilot, then I will do my best to put you into a first-class virtual mech academy. That means you will have to study and train really hard to pilot a first-class multipurpose mech. Do you know why people deliberately put the word 'multipurpose' in the name despite it being a mouthful? It's because it is supposed to be able to fight effectively in any environment and at any distance! Ranged weapons are a core part of first-class mechs, so I will not have you neglecting this aspect of combat!"

"It's so boooooorrrriiingggg!"

"Don't whine to me about that. Even Ketis had to fire a gun every now and then. She didn't do so that often, but she made sure to train her marksmanship so that she can take down a distant enemy when she has to. How about this? If you do really well in your marksmanship training, I will craft your very own personal luminar crystal gun, doesn't that sound great?"

Andraste's mood suddenly turned around. "What?! Really?!"

Aside from making living mechs, Ves also excelled at making energy weapons. Iconic relic weapons such as the Gray Lotus and the Instrument of Doom clearly showed that he could make monstrously powerful guns if he had the right resources in place!

"I would do anything to keep my little girl safe." Ves grinned and kissed her head a few times. "With the huge amount of MTA merits and first-class salvage that I've obtained from our recent actions, I am sure I can whip up something great for you. However, I won't hand you a powerful gun unless you have proven your ability to wield one safely and responsibly, so take your classes seriously and earn your certificate!"

His daughter's eyes burned with determination. "It won't take long! You better have a design ready for me, papa, because I will definitely become a sharpshooter!"

"Good girl."

Chapter 4653 Windfall Again

"So in the end, you and the others decided to split the MTA merits in a 4:2:4 division?" Gloriana asked in confirmation.

Ves nodded as he leaned back on the couch while sitting next to a bloated and sleepy Lucky. He idly rubbed his hand on Lucky's back.

"Meow..."

"That's right. It's a different split than the one that the one we specified in our alliance treaty, but the Cross Clan has truly been essential to the success of both operations. Without Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Mars, nothing would have been possible. Besides, Reginald would definitely get offended if he and his contributions ever got discounted. It is actually quite impressive how we have been able to ensure that our Larkinson Clan at least obtains a reward that equals that of the Cross Clan."

His wife did not look all that happy, though. She petulantly placed her hands on her hips. "Thereby leaving the Glory Seekers as the distant third as usual."

Ves turned towards her with a serious expression. "Well I am sorry, honey, but if you want the mech force that was named after you to earn a greater share of the profits, then tell the Wodins to reinforce the Glory Seekers to the point where they can match the battle power of an ace mech."

"You are asking for too much! Our dynasty doesn't have an ace pilot on retainer! My mother or grandmother cannot casually bring over one of the Hex Army's precious Saints either. Each and every Hexer ace mech is needed to deter the Friday Colonies from attacking the Hex Federation."

"I am not telling you that the Glory Seekers have to obtain an ace mech, Gloriana. They can do just like our clan has done and compensate in other ways. Our clan has been doing more than fine without an ace mech by relying

on a combination of numbers, innovative technology and intelligence support. Given the spoils that we have all obtained as of late, every alliance partner should have more than enough resources to boost their strength to another level. This is a great opportunity for all of us to plug our greatest shortcomings."

Ves grinned at the thought of how much MTA merits that his clan would have at its disposal. Of the more than 1.3 billion MTA merits earned by the Golden Skull Alliance, the Larkinson Clan received 40 percent of the share.

This amounted to an incredible sum of 537,360,124 MTA merits!

Combined with the amount he already had in reserve, Ves would soon have over 660 million MTA merits at his disposal!

This was enough for him to retire on and live on a safe and prosperous MTA-controlled planet for the rest of his life if he wished!

Of course, there was no way he would take the easy way out. Even if he persisted in pursuing his mech design career, he was certain that he would stagnate once he got too comfortable in a pampered, high-tech environment.

It was out here in the frontier where Ves truly felt free and unburdened.

Surrounded by no one but his fellow clansmen and trusted allies, Ves could go on interesting expeditions and enjoy unique experiences that would never be replicated once humanity came in and settled the hell out of the place.

As such, Ves did not intend to squander his MTA merits on meaningless luxuries. He could easily improve his quality of life by spending more easily obtainable MTA credits instead.

What he needed to focus on was trying to come up with an optimal plan to spend his massive sum of MTA merits on strategic upgrades and additions that weren't easily available on the open market.

The greatest value of the Mech Trade Association Merit Exchange was that it offered a gigantic repository of exclusive or near-exclusive goodies that could not openly be exchanged through other channels.

Life-prolonging treatment was the centerpiece of this exchange, but it was hardly the only item that made cooperating with the MTA so attractive.

As Ves contemplated whether he should splurge an additional 100 million MTA merits to upgrade the Hyber Chamber that he was planning to order, his wife had moved closer and sat down next to his side.

She leaned her body against his own and rubbed Lucky's head, which he happened to enjoy.

"Meow~"

"I was thinking, Ves." She said as her peachy perfume started to waft into his nose and trigger pleasant associations. "Now that we've earned such an enormous windfall, we can consider new options that we haven't considered in the past. I mean, back when we were planning to have Aurelia, we never imagined that we would be fighting a first-class battleship in a serious battle. Our vision was much more limited at the time, so it was not appropriate for us to shop around for expensive items."

Ves rolled his eyes. He had already seen this coming.

"What is it now, honey?"

His wife adopted a shy smile. "Well, now that we have hundreds of millions of MTA merits at our disposal, I have been exploring the catalog of the merit exchange. Did you know there is an option to buy an entire planet with the MTA's blessing? It is a promising arrangement, and it would do our clan a lot of good if we--"

"Stop." Ves immediately raised his palm. "I already know what you are referring to. The MTA already brought up this suggestion."

"So? Did you express any interest?"

"No."

"What? Why not?! It's the best way to found a colony!"

Ves sighed and patted his wife's hand.

"My strategic outlook hasn't changed, Gloriana. A colony can provide us with immense benefits, but the burdens and responsibilities that come with it are also problematic. Mech designers do not necessarily need to own any territories in order to do our jobs. I would rather maintain our current way of life and continue to drift from place to place. The more we stay on the move, the harder it is for any enemies to prepare an ambush for us. Don't forget that we have enemies. We can deter some of them, but those powerful enough to ignore our threat will definitely be able to bring enough forces to roll us over."

His wife grew upset. She crossed her arms and turned up her chin. "You are being so paranoid again! What you are describing is nothing special! Other pioneers have enemies as well, but they don't respond to that by running away. They fortify. They forge military alliances with friendly neighbors or a powerful regional patron. Did you know that the founders of Davute are a lot closer to announcing the formation of a new colonial state?"

He had not heard of that before. Ves had neglected to pay attention to the news related to Davute and its sphere of influence ever since he embarked on the Trailblazer Expedition.

He looked intrigued. "I guess those guys at Davute are almost done with their negotiations with all of the colonies in the surrounding areas."

One of the prerequisites to founding a colonial state was to gain the acceptance of as many star systems in the geographic neighborhood as possible.

If even a single owner of a star system held out, then an awkward hole would exist in the newly-founded colonial state.

It would be especially bad if the recalcitrant colonists sided with a rival such as Karlach instead!

Of course, such situations would never happen in reality. One of the first actions the new state centered around Davute would take was to declare war on the puny colony and take it by force!

Such events had already happened many times before in the Magair Middle Zone.

In those instances, no one bothered to stand up and defend the property rights of the colonists who lost all of their investments. After all, who would want to support a loser who had lost all value and turned into a massive burden?

Every pioneer who colonized a planet was most definitely aware of this possibility, so the hold-outs that lasted the longest had to be extremely careful not to push their demands too much.

"Doesn't it sound interesting to build a greater foundation in Davute?" Gloriana persisted. "We already have ties to the regional community and we have a small but significant presence in the port system itself. We don't have to turn our holdings in the future colonial state into our main stronghold, but a moderate investment can go a long way into providing us with constant returns."

Ves chuckled at her attempts of persuasion. "Nice try, honey, but I am not going to spend my MTA merits on real estate. That will only anchor me more to a fixed location, which is exactly what I don't want to happen."

His wife attempted to convince him to consider the possibility of founding a colony for a few more minutes until she relented.

Her mood had grown a lot worse due to her continual failures.

"Fine!" She harrumphed. "If you don't want to build a future empire for Aurelia, then let us talk about more personal investments. I think it is time to have a discussion about updating our augmentations."

"What about it, Gloriana?"

His wife became a lot more animated. "It has been years since we have last done anything to improve our augmentations. We were much less wealthy at the time so our options were limited to genetic modification treatments and implants at the second-class level. Now that we have become wealthier than many first-raters, we can finally take a serious look at replacing our outdated augments with first-class equivalents!"

The suggestion did not excite Ves as much as Gloriana hoped.

Perhaps he might have become more animated in another circumstance, but not in this specific instance.

"I don't need any further upgrades. I... went through an experimental procedure that has upgraded all of my mental, spiritual and physical capabilities. Every part about me has gone through an upgrade, from my cranial implant to my physical traits. I have become stronger and more capable of processing data than just a year ago. I have never measured my performance against a first-rater, but I have a strong suspicion that I can easily beat them in any test, particularly if I bring my incarnations to the picture."

The strongest sign that he had gone through a comprehensive illusion was the cybernetic limb attached to his left leg. The second brain that he somehow managed to incorporate in it had substantially increased his cognitive capabilities and significantly boosted his productivity.

And this was only one of the many profound changes after enduring an extraordinarily long lightning baptism!

Though Gloriana did not have the full story about this mysterious and unexplainable event, she had worked alongside her husband enough times to know how much more productive he had become.

Her jealousy broke through the roof!

She bent her delicate fingers into claws and mock scratched at his chest.

"Ves! You can't leave me behind!" Gloriana pleaded like a wounded kitten. "I need help in order to keep up with your level of improvement. The more I fall behind, the less useful I will be in our future collaboration projects. As impressive as you have become, you can't shoulder the burden of designing mechs for our clan by yourself."

"What do you want?"

His wife grinned at him. "I have been looking at replacing my old Erestal-015 cranial bioimplant with a genuine first-class implant that is also specifically tailored to mech designers. Normally, it is impossible for people to replace their existing implants, but that doesn't apply to the Association. I found out that as long as we are willing to pay additional MTA merits, the mechers will use their advanced tech and expertise to perform the replacement process with extreme precision."

"How much?"

"Well, I have found a nice implant that offers many of the features I want. Its processing power is thousands of times stronger than the processing power of my current implant. I will be able to use the first-class implant's monstrous data processing capabilities to develop solutions and complete mech designs with much greater refinement and optimization!"

"How. Much."

"120 million MTA merits."

"What?!"

Chapter 4654 Extended Length

Ves did not say yes to Gloriana's 'modest' request.

It did not exactly go well.

"YOU SELFISH BOY! YOU HAVE OVER 660 MILLION MTA MERITS IN YOUR ACCOUNT! IS IT TOO MUCH TO ASK FOR YOU TO SPEND A FRACTION OF THIS SUM ON HELPING ME KEEP UP WITH YOUR PROGRESS?! HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO BECOME A STAR DESIGNER WITHIN A LIFETIME IF YOU KEEP SABOTAGING MY PROGRESSION SPEED! DIDN'T WE PROMISE TO EACH OTHER THAT WE WOULD ACCOMPANY EACH OTHER TO THE TOP OF THE MECH INDUSTRY?!"

"Meow!"

Lucky became so disturbed by all of the shouting that he decided to run to another room so that the overstated cat could enjoy some peace and quiet.

Ves on the other hand tried his best to calm his wife down.

"I never told you I would say no! I just said I need more time to look at our available options and figure out whether we can save on MTA merits. You're talking about spending 120 million MTA merits on an overpriced implant and the complicated surgery required to put it in your head!"

"THE FIRST-CLASS IMPLANT THAT I HAVE CHOSEN IS NOT OVERPRICED! IT IS WORTH EVERY SINGLE MTA MERIT AND IT IS ALSO ONE THAT IS USED BY MANY MTA MECH DESIGNERS! WHY ARE YOU STILL HOLDING OUT ON ME, VES?! I WORKED HARD TO DESIGN MANY OF THE MECHS THAT WE DEPLOYED INTO BATTLE AS WELL! DON'T YOU THINK I DESERVE REMUNERATION FOR ALL OF THE SERVICES I RENDERED?!"

"Calm down, please! I've told you many times that there is no reason for you to yell and raise your voice. You will wake up the kids if you continue to shout like a banshee!"

"ARE YOU CALLING ME A BANSHEE?!" Gloriana screeched!

In any case, Ves managed to survive his wife's latest outburst by doing what he did the last times.

He simply outlasted her. It took a lot of anger and energy for Gloriana to keep berating him like this. Her stamina wasn't the greatest so she halted her tirade when her voice finally grew hoarse.

Ves did not particularly enjoy a pleasant night of sleep after that. He could feel the anger and resentment coursing through the body of the woman lying next to him on their shared bed.

The next day, Gloriana put on a more gentle guise as she mothered her children and made sure they were ready to attend their classes for the day.

She bent down to hug and kiss her two daughters on their cheeks. "Aurelia and Andraste, try and absorb the lessons taught by the tutors as best as possible, okay? We paid a lot to convince those first-class tutors to do an earnest effort into helping you keep up with your future peers. Not only are they responsible for helping you master all of the coursework that you have missed, they will also be monitoring your progress and filling up a report that

we can use to prove your superior learning abilities. So whatever you do, try your best and complete all of your homework, okay?"

"We will, mama~"

Once their kids went off to start their next virtual lessons, Gloriana turned to her husband and directed a pointed stare at him. She hadn't given up on her request.

Ves sighed. "Don't start with me again, please. I have decided to refrain from spending any MTA merits until we return to Davute. I can't decide on spending so many MTA merits on isolation when there are many other possible major items that we might want to acquire. A Hyper Chamber already costs us at least 100 million MTA merits and the upgrades to the Spirit of Bentheim will take even more MTA merits."

Gloriana snarled at him. "I will wait for now, but do not take too long. I am expecting to achieve parity with you so that we can bring our relationship back into balance. You have your weird improvements, so give me a chance to keep up with you through the upgrade of my cranial implant. As long as I can obtain a first-class implant that are just as good as the ones used by MTA mech designers, I will be able to complete my design projects three or four times faster as well! We will be able to complete the newest batch of expert mechs much sooner if that is the case."

That indeed sounded like a compelling reason to grant Gloriana's request. Ves did not set out to be selfish or anything. He genuinely wanted what was best for the woman he loved.

He just didn't want to sign a check that instantly drained 120 million MTA merits from his account.

A cranial implant was more than a simple handbag! It was a life-changing product that had massive implications for Gloriana's future career!

"I'd love to chat with you more, but I have an appointment to make. Goodbye, honey. I'll see you soon in the afternoon!"

Ves eagerly distanced himself from his dearest wife and moved away as briskly as possible.

Fortunately for his sanity and stress levels, the next woman he was about to meet was not a screeching banshee.

Once he entered his office and received his daily briefing, he opened up a communication channel with Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai.

The woman that emerged from the projection looked as if she had been working nonstop for several nights on end.

Though she did not look as fresh as normal, her eyes shone with so much passion and eagerness that she did not look tired in the slightest!

"Patriarch. Have you called me for a status update?"

Ves nodded as he leaned back on his office chair. "That's right. From my understanding, you have been in discussion with a ship design team from the MTA in order to figure out a refit plan for my flagship. How are the talks proceeding?"

The woman gave him a half-smile. "Not entirely well, to be honest. The mechers are... difficult to work with, sir. Their noses are turned so high that they have difficulty with the more restrained budget and demands that we insist upon. I cannot fault their skills and professionalism, though. Once they set their mind on a task, they have shown great skill and speed in producing high-quality design proposals in a matter of minutes."

"Have you been able to ensure that no matter what changes the Spirit of Bentheim goes through, our factory ship will retain her original character and intangible traits as much as possible?"

"I am not so sure about the latter, but I have tried my best not to transform our flagship too much. As to whether she will be able to retain enough of her 'original character' as you have said, I will leave that up to you, as you are the expert in this matter."

"Show me, then. What is the best proposal that you can present to me at this time?"

The chief shipwright mumbled a few words to herself before she transmitted a high-quality sketch that depicted a different version of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Before Ves commented on it, he made sure to take the time to study the proposed changes carefully.

The quantity of changes was overwhelming. Hardly any corner of the vessel remained untouched.

"Since we are commissioning the MTA to transform the Spirit of Bentheim, I thought it was best to implement as many deep, structural changes as possible." Vivian explained. "Other shipyards including the Diligent Ovenbird and the ones operated by Murphy & Sons cannot overhaul an existing capital ship's inner structure without breaking too many ship sections in the process. Only the MTA has the technological capabilities to replace weaker hull structures with stronger replacements without causing the surrounding compartments and other ship elements to warp or collapse."

As Vivian continued to explain the technical challenges of trying to overhaul the guts of an existing capital ship, Ves continually nodded in understanding.

Mech designers generally had no experience with working on metallic megastructures, but the language of science and engineering stayed the same.

The biggest and most extensive changes that Vivian insisted on pushing through were twofold.

"If we ever want to increase the internal volume of our factory ship while minimizing the negative repercussions as much as possible, then this is our best possible opportunity. The only shipyards outside the MTA that can do a better job at increasing the length of her hull is the CFA, and I do not think you have any desire to take your business to the fleeters."

Ves frowned in concern. "To be honest, I have indeed thought about increasing the size of our factory ship. While her current capacity is already sufficient for our needs, it will become increasingly harder for her to meet the demands of our expeditionary fleet in the future. Still, there are good reasons why we have limited the length of the Spirit of Bentheim to around 2 kilometers. Extending her length will increase her mass and make her much more unwieldy in space."

"That was true at the time, but as long as we upgrade her sub-light propulsion system to match or exceed her increase in mass, she will not prove to be a drag on our fleet. We have formulated two possible extension plans. The more conservative one extends her length by 500 meters and the more radical and resource-intensive one will increase her length by 700 meters."

"Why not go all the way to 1 kilometer while we are at it?" Ves curiously asked.

The woman shook her head. "We don't have the spare materials to extend her any further. We are not resorting to second-class materials to upgrade the hull structure and extend the length of the Spirit of Bentheim. They are too weak by our current standards. If we want to turn our flagship into an impregnable fortress that can protect you and our most strategically valuable mech designers and assets, we need to employ large quantities of genuine first-class materials. Buying them in bulk costs astronomical sums of money, and it is an incredible waste of money to use up much of our valuable MTA merits

on these goods. Luckily for us, we happen to have large quantities of first-class ship salvage in our cargo holds that we can repurpose."

Ves straightened his back. "That's right! I was just wondering how much it costs to procure so many tons of first-class alloys, but we don't necessarily need to buy any when we have salvaged entire chunks of hardy alien warships from the previous two battles."

Most notably, the debris and salvage taken from the largest and most formidable alien battleships of the last two encounters presented the best quality materials!

"We cannot substitute all of the required structural materials with reprocessed salvage." Vivian noted. "We still have to purchase plenty of tons of first-class alloys that excel in different jobs. We have tried our best to be as economical as possible, but it will still cost us a hefty amount. Together with the fee we need to pay in order to commission the MTA to overhaul our flagship, the total cost will amount to around 140 million MTA credits if we extend the hull by 500 meters or 290 million MTA credits if we extend the hull by 700 meters."

Though Ves welcomed as much space as possible, it was not cost effective to opt for the latter option!

He waved his arm. "Let's stick to the more modest extension plan. I understand that we might not easily have the opportunity to increase the length of her hull in the future, but if we really run out of capacity one day, we should easily be able to acquire a second factory ship."

"Very well. You've made our lives a lot easier with this decision, sir. We not only have to purchase as many first-class alloys, but also limit the increase in mass. This makes it easier for us to increase the mobility of the Spirit of Bentheim by upgrading her main thrusters and maneuvering thrusters."

Chapter 4655 Extravagant Upgrades

Extending the hull of a capital ship was not a simple technical feat.

People often mistook the challenges of the exceedingly complicated technical steps needed to complete this seemingly simple task.

When put in the simplest possible terms, the process mostly amounted to cutting a ship in two separate pieces. The shipyard then inserted a newly manufactured hull section in the middle before fusing the three parts into a single whole again.

Simple, right?

Wrong.

Although Vivian did not have the time to explain the full range of complications and additional work that all of these changes introduced, it was enough for Ves to understand the processes in broad strokes.

"I suppose this is why it is worth it to pay millions of MTA merits to commission an MTA shipyard to do all of the work." Ves remarked. "A lesser shipyard will not be able to control all of the variables to a sufficient degree, resulting in many flaws and misalignments."

"Indeed. We can also use the MTA shipyard's help to rearrange the layout and structural design of our starship to meet our future needs. For example, the importance of shield generators is much greater than we anticipated, so we will need to reserve additional space for more of these devices. We also have to provide the necessary infrastructure such as a greater quantity of first-class power reactors in order to compensate for the drastically increased energy drain."

All of these upgrades along with the drastic upgrades to the sub-light propulsion system all added up to a hefty price tag.

"What about the upgrades to her superluminal travel capabilities?" Ves asked. "Have you explored the possibility of equipping her with a genuine superdrive?"

A superdrive was the most advanced means of traveling across the stars that was accessible to the public.

Though the Big Two definitely mastered more advanced forms of superluminal travel such as portal jump technology, neither the MTA or CFA wanted others to gain access to them. Their value in military operations were too great to be shared.

Superdrives already provided an incredible speed boost compared to the conventional FTL drives of yesteryear.

By combining the active effects of an FTL drive and a warp drive in a single cohesive device, a superdrive could make a starship travel from one side of the Milky Way to the other side of the galaxy in as little as a couple of years!

This was a massive change compared to just a mech generation before. Back before the introduction of phasewater and the Red Ocean, most humans assumed that even the fastest ships required almost a century to travel from one side of the galaxy to another.

"Superdrive technology has come a long way, sir, but they are very much being iterated upon at a rapid pace." Vivian warned the patriarch. "Developers are constantly releasing safer, better, more powerful and more cost-efficient models every year. If you want to spend your MTA merits as wisely as possible, it is best to wait a decade or so until the pace of innovation has slowed down."

Though Ves agreed with this sentiment, when he thought about what happened to the Cenatus Prospecting fleet, he remembered that being a cheapskate would ultimately cost him more in the long run!

"Please explain your proposal first, Vivian. Tell me what we can do to speed up our flagship during FTL travel."

"Very well. When it comes to these new and amazing devices, we can choose between first-class and second-class superdrives. Let me begin with the latter. The most affordable second-class capital ship-grade superdrive we can exchange from the MTA is priced at 120,000 MTA merits."

Ves perked up when he heard this price figure. "That is better than I expected."

"I would advise against this specific model, sir." Vivian's projection looked displeased. "At their lowest, a second-class superdrive can speed up the traversal speed of a ship in FTL travel by ten times. However, the cycle time of the superdrive is identical to that of a standard FTL drive, so the ship in question will still have to spend many hours in realspace or switch to using a second FTL drive."

"We can buy two second-class superdrives then." Ves remarked. "We can alternate between one and the other, thereby permanently traveling through FTL at ten times the speed of a ship using a pair of regular FTL drives."

"That can work, sir, but you cannot sustain this pattern for long. This is because the shorter hops will give the spare superdrives much less time to cycle and recover from their previous exertions. If you alternate between them too quickly, they will quickly accumulate stress and fatigue without giving them enough time to unwind. At worst, they might malfunction or break in situations where we can least afford that to happen."

Ves thought for a moment. "If I recall, the Spirit of Bentheim can accommodate three FTL drives right now. We can replace them with three superdrives instead. That should give us enough capacity to endure the rigors of long-distance transluminal travel, right?"

"Theoretically, that is true, but don't forget that we have an entire fleet as well." Vivian reminded him. "Without upgrading the drives of our other starships, they will not be able to keep up with the Spirit of Bentheim. With our current budget, we can upgrade drives of all of our capital ships, but that still leaves us with a large number of combat carriers that will also require their own superdrives. Then we need to account for our allies. If the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan are unwilling to make superdrives standard-issue for all of their own starships, then our expeditionary fleet won't be able to travel faster than before."

This was because the fleet effectively traveled as fast as its slowest element. The best way to deal with this problem was to abandon every element that was too slow to keep up, but Ves was not willing to go that far. The Larkinson Army and Navy weren't strong or numerous enough to stand on their own in the frontier.

Ves had to rule out this unreasonable option.

"I don't think any of us are willing to go this far. While it is nice to speed up our long-distance travel methods, it is not vital to our operations. To us, it doesn't really matter whether it takes a few days or a month to travel to another zone. Besides, I bet the upkeep and maintenance of all of those high-tech superdrives also impose a substantial burden. I'm not sure our clan will comfortably be able to keep so many high-tech superdrives in working condition."

As the resident ship expert, Vivian understood these problems a lot better, so she could understand this decision.

She just felt it was a missed opportunity. It was not impossible to implement a fleet-wide superdrive upgrade. The Golden Skull Alliance just had to hire a lot of highly qualified naval engineers and drive engineers in order to service the extremely demanding devices.

"Very well. We can come back to this proposal when we are in a better position to implement a fleet-wide upgrade." Vivian dutifully said. "It is not a bad idea to hold off for the most part as the nextgen superdrive models will definitely be twenty, thirty or even fifty percent more affordable than the early models that are available today."

Ultimately, Ves chose to replace the current FTL drives of the Spirit of Bentheim with a set of three decent second-class capital ship-grade superdrives.

He mostly regarded them as a stopgap option in case of emergencies. The second-class superdrives should never operate at their full capacity unless a catastrophe took place and the ship had to run away alone.

With the dangerous state of the Red Ocean, Ves did not dare to take the Spirit of Bentheim on lengthy solo trips across the stars. Escorts were essential in order to deter opportunistic predators from launching raids.

Vivian sighed in regret. "It would be nice if we equipped the Spirit of Bentheim with a set of first-class superdrives. They are so much better on every front. A first-class superdrive is not only at least 100 faster than a standard FTL drive, but their cycle times are also a lot shorter. They are also far more solid and resistant to external shocks. What is even more vital is that they are a lot more resistant to warp interdiction fields. This means that it will become a lot harder for our enemies to prevent our flagship from speeding away from the heat of the action."

"Next time." Ves promised to her. "The modest second-class superdrives that we have decided upon are already luxurious enough for the time being. If nothing goes wrong in the following decade or so, those superdrives will only be used to keep up with the rest of our fleet."

They continued to discuss other possible upgrades, but aside from adding in a Hyper Chamber in the newly-built sections of the extended factory ship, nothing particularly stood out. The minor changes mostly amounted to boring but necessary system upgrades. Ship components such as energy channels needed to be entirely replaced in order to make sure that lots of energy could flow throughout the entire hull without getting bottlenecked, or worse, frying the parts entirely!

Ves tried his best to hold in a yawn. "You don't need to explain each and every individual item on the list. I trust your judgment. Let's make a tally. How much phasewater and how many MTA merits will we have to pay for these upgrades?"

The projection of Vivian Tsai made a gesture. A new list projected into view that precisely explained the costs of all of the discussed upgrades.

"As we have discussed before, extending the length of the hull and upgrading the entire structure and exterior of the Spirit of Bentheim to first-class standards will cost approximately 140 million MTA merits. This is the most far-reaching transformation and one that is much more affordable to us due to providing the bulk of first-class alloys needed to make the necessary changes."

Ves nodded. "Sounds reasonable. It will become a lot easier for us to upgrade the other systems of the Spirit of Bentheim to first-class standards later on, especially since you have retained the highly modular layout of her original design."

The chief shipwright grinned. "That is correct, sir. Moving on, the next major upgrade concerns the power generation and the active defense capabilities of our flagship. It will cost us approximately 50 million MTA merits to equip her with a full suite of relatively basic but economical first-class transphasic shield generators and power generators. The former will also require us to invest

around 33 kilograms of phasewater, though you should keep in mind that the producer of the transphasic shield generators will also charge a fee of 33 kilograms of phasewater."

Ves winced, though he did not bother to complain. Though he was sure he could find a competitor that might charge a lower fee, the quality and performance would definitely suffer.

"Fine. What's next?"

"Upgrading the main thrusters, maneuvering thrusters and other aspects of the sub-light propulsion systems with basic first-class equivalents will cost us 19 million MTA merits in total."

"That doesn't sound so bad. The Spirit of Bentheim will become a lot faster, right?"

"Oh, I am certain you will be more than satisfied with her mobility after these upgrades." Vivian grinned.

"What else?"

"Well, the final major item is replacing our flagship's FTL drives with second-class superdrives. Since we are not moving up to first-class this time, the cost is much more manageable. I estimate that we should spend no more than 870,000 MTA merits as well as 9 kilograms of phasewater, though we must also pay a commission fee of 9 kilograms of phasewater."

In this case, the real payment was not the MTA merits, but the scarce and highly desirable phasewater.

"I see." Ves rubbed his smooth and hairless chin. "If we include the expensive Hyper Chamber, then the total cost of upgrading the Spirit of Bentheim to a quasi-first class factory ship will amount to 309.87 million MTA merits and 84 kilograms of phasewater."

That was an enormous price!

Was it really worth it to spend so much to upgrade a single ship?

Chapter 4656 Exclusive Reality Show

Ves could not responsibly make the decision to spend more than 300 million MTA merits and 84 kilograms of phasewater on upgrading a single ship.

Of course, if he had a say in the matter, he would unequivocally approve of this upgrade proposal!

The Spirit of Bentheim was his first true ship that he truly regarded as his own home. After living and working aboard her for numerous pivotal and eventful years, her value to him transcended that of a regular second-class factory ship.

The upgrade plan did not uplift all of her functions to first-class standards. Not yet at any rate. There were still a lot of ship systems that would remain second-class for the time being.

Ves was not in a hurry to upgrade the remainder of the vessel. As far as he was concerned, upgrading her defenses, power generation and mobility already covered the most important priorities. Each of the relevant improvements directly increased the survival capabilities of the ship.

"The defenses of the newly refitted will become so high that she will be able to tank direct battleship attacks with her active and passive defenses." Vivian Tsai boasted. "Her mobility won't increase as much due to the vast increases in the mass and density of our flagship, but she will be much harder to corner in the future."

"Do you think that it is wise to upgrade the Spirit of Bentheim first as opposed to our more combat-oriented capital ships?" He asked the chief shipwright. "A part of me thinks that it may be better for our clan if we upgrade a fleet carrier

like the Wild Torch or the Gorgoneion first. They are much more relevant in battle and they can make much better use of the massive boost in defenses."

The projection of Vivian Tsai shook her head. "I do not agree with that idea. From the perspective of the fleet and the Larkinsons as a whole, we cannot afford to lose our flagship and the people who reside in her. More specifically, we cannot lose the mech designers that not only provide strong mechs to the Larkinson Army, but also generate a lot of revenue by expanding and updating the product catalog of the Living Mech Corporation. We can lose the Gorgoneion, but we cannot afford to lose you, sir."

When she put it in these terms, then Ves felt a lot better about letting the Spirit of Bentheim have the first turn. A factory ship she may be, but the fact that a vessel of this type became the flagship of the Larkinson Clan said much about the outsized value of its mech designers!

"I have one more question before you can go, Miss Tsai. If our clan agrees with this proposal and everything else is in order, how long will it take for the MTA to upgrade our capital ship?"

"I have only received an estimate from the mecher ship designers that I have been working with. They told me that the productivity of their shipyards are much higher, so there is not that much of a waiting list. That said, the requested upgrades and modifications are incredibly drastic, and our request to keep the ship in one piece as much as possible while completing the refit will require the shipbuilding crew to employ more inefficient work methods. If no major unexpected complications occur, the entire process will likely take around half a year."

"Understood."

After Ves concluded his extensive call with Vivian Tsai, he contemplated the ship upgrade proposal once again.

He felt good about it. He looked forward to receiving the newly transformed Spirit of Bentheim after a short break.

The time it took to send the factory ship off to the MTA also coincided nicely with the expeditionary fleet's upcoming pitstop.

As Ves called a meeting with the other leaders of the Larkinson Clan to discuss the massive proposal, he received mixed feedback in return.

Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse expressed the most reluctance. "The opportunity cost of spending almost half of the MTA merits at our disposal on upgrading a single capital ship is... well, not entirely selfish, but not entirely prudent."

"How so?" Ves curiously asked.

"Investing so many resources into upgrading our factory ship may sound logical at first, but from what I can see, we will be making the same mistake as Mr. Otrus Magrin." The son of Shederin Purnesse answered. "No matter how much we increase the defenses of any single ship, there are always enemies that can destroy them no matter the price. I think that instead of trying to put all of our eggs in a single basket, we should spread them to multiple baskets. This way, we can not only hedge our bets, but also ensure that other vital capital ships such as the Diligent Ovenbird and the Vivacious Wal become much less at risk of collapsing from a single blow."

Ves turned to Chief Minister Abigail Evern. "You're the highest-ranking Larkinson with a naval background here. What is your opinion?"

The former commodore remained calm. "There are arguments in favor of both choices, but I am not inclined to support Novilon's suggestion. Spreading out upgrades across a large quantity of ships will not make a major difference in the operations or combat power of our expeditionary fleet."

This was an understandable perspective to many of the people in the meeting. It applied to mechs as well. There were cases where concentrating a lot of resources on a single elite mech unit might yield more results than spreading them out across many mech units at once.

Within the Larkinson Army, the Nullifier Battalion and the most revered veterans of the Swordmaidens happened to serve as exemplary examples of how this approach worked out well.

"Paying for a major upgrade to our most important ship is definitely worth it for the reasons that have been mentioned before." The older woman continued. "I can see many uses for a ship with such an unreasonable amount of defenses. It will become much harder for both second-class pioneers and weaker alien warships to inflict serious harm to our flagship and our most important figures. She can also serve as a highly secure refugee for our civilians during a particularly dangerous crisis."

That last part alone was enough to win over a lot of neutral clansmen. The Spirit of Bentheim possessed more than enough space to accommodate hundreds of thousands of people in an emergency.

Sure, space would become so cramped that they would probably have to dump a lot of cargo, but a capital ship was nothing if not a lot of flat cities stacked on top of each other!

"I think Abigail makes a good point." Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson voiced her own opinion. "One of our worst habits is that we repeatedly bring our entire fleet, civilian ships and all, to the battlefield. I understand the reasons why we must do so, but we are nevertheless risking the destruction of a relatively fragile ship and all of the innocent civilians aboard her at any time. If there are circumstances where we can transfer all civilians and non-essential personnel to a near-impervious floating fortress, then it would lift a massive burden to our mech pilots in the field."

Currently, many mech pilots felt that their backs were pressed against the wall. Though it massively increased their motivation to fight well, it was not good for their stress levels to engage their enemies with the knowledge that a single mistake might cause thousands of vulnerable clansmen to perish!

In the end, most of the Larkinsons rejected Novilon's proposal to spread the wealth for this reason. His idea was not that bad, but upgrading the Spirit of Bentheim first brought a lot more benefits to the table.

"There is also another point I would like to warn you about." Director Calabast spoke up. "If we send our flagship and the vessel where much of our design and production-related activities take place to the Mech Trade Association, I will bet everything that I have that the mechers will bug every single cubic meter of her hull. No corner will be left untouched. By the time we welcome the 'improved' Spirit of Bentheim back into our fold, anyone who gets back in will essentially become the new characters of a massive, constantly-running reality show. Observers assigned by the Association will constantly observe and track your every move."

A lot of expressions changed. The people who were already living and working aboard the Spirit of Bentheim especially felt uncomfortable by this realization.

Ves did not show as much concern, though. "I have already taken this possibility into account. When I discussed ways to spend my MTA merits with Master Goldstein, I mentioned my concerns to him. The Master personally reassured me that the refit work will be done by a crew and shipyard that is completely in the camp of the Survivalist Faction. The wrong people won't be able to access those feeds."

The spymaster snorted. "The fact that those hidden bugs will be placed in the hull of your factory ship will mean that at least some people will make use of them. Instead of the MTA as a whole, it will just be your Survivalist 'friends'

who will keep an eye on you and the rest of the people aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. Are you sure you can live with that, Ves?"

"We are not defenseless against them." He retorted. "Lucky is particularly good at sniffing them out. He will just have to spend a lot of time on carpet searching her entire hull like he did once before to catch most of those hidden bugs. I'm sure the MTA will try to plant those sneaky devices onto our ship once again at a later date, but I am sure we can figure out a more effective solution to ward away these stubborn listening devices. If nothing else, we can always ask Patriarch Reginald to hop into his Mars and scrub our factory ship clean of bugs by enveloping her with his handy Saint Kingdom."

This was one of the many reasons why pioneers with ace pilots on retainer became a lot more formidable. Nothing could escape the attention of an ace pilot when his Saint Kingdom swept through the hull of a ship.

Ace pilots could easily detect the malice and ill intent from the likes of suspicious spies, treacherous informers and the tiniest listening devices imaginable.

This was a phenomenon that went beyond science, and that made it extremely difficult for other parties to form a countermeasure against this metaphysical method of surveillance!

Still, just because it was hard did not mean it was impossible!

Calabast crossed her arms. "No one knows more about ace pilots and the properties of Saint Kingdoms than the Mech Trade Association. They have plenty of god pilots at their disposal whose might and mastery of willpower far exceed that of ace pilots. I am convinced that the MTA has developed multiple solutions that can circumvent this method of detection."

Ves shrugged. "If that is the case, it is futile to guard against the MTA. I mean, the mechers will bug my ship regardless if we bring her to the MTA or not. At

least this way we can better ensure that it will be our friends within the Association that will do all of the monitoring."

"Aren't you afraid that the increased monitoring will negatively impact your work?"

"Why should I be afraid?" Ves shot back. "I'm just a mech designer. I am not engaged in any shady or illegal work. Nothing happens aboard the Spirit of Bentheim that I am ashamed about. If the MTA wants to watch me work, then they are free to do so. I don't think they will learn much from seeing me at work, but that is their business."

"...Uh huh."

The look Calabast gave him showed that she did not find his statement credible in the slightest!

Chapter 4657 Serious Interest

The plan to refit the Spirit of Bentheim into a quasi-first-class factory ship received lukewarm support from the other leaders of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves knew quite well that the main reason that people such as General Verle and Director Ranya Wodin supported the initiative was because the patriarch wanted this to happen.

No other pioneering organization would squander half of the immense windfall of MTA merits on transforming a factory ship of all things into the most luxuriously equipped vessel of her kind in second-class space!

The fact that the planned refit upgraded her so much that she could justifiably be classified as a quasi-first-class vessel already said much about the insane level of spending required to make her this good.

Sure, spending over 300 million MTA merits as well as 84 kilograms of phasewater on a factory ship sounded crazy, but it was exactly the kind of crazy that enabled Ves to produce one fantastic innovation after another!

Though it was possible to fund the refit plan using money instead of contribution tokens, even the most modest versions could cost the clan billions of MTA credits!

What was more problematic was that the clan would have to commission a shipyard belonging to a normal first-class power such as the Yorul-Tavik Clan. No matter how much these ordinary first-raters invested in their shipyard facilities, they would never be able to match the quality of the MTA's state-of-the-art technology.

When it came to his personal baby, Ves only wanted the best for her. His flagship was the safe haven where he could shelter in when everything else around him became hostile and dangerous.

People like Gloriana who kept pushing the idea of colonizing a nice planet fundamentally misunderstood his mentality.

Ves had no desire to found a colony and rule over an entire planet.

The Spirit of Bentheim was his colony. Its 'surface area' might be smaller than the smallest moons, but every single part of it belonged to him and remained under his control!

When given the choice between owning a planet that was permanently stuck in a fixed orbit around a star and a tiny corvette that barely offered enough living room for a few crew members, he would pick the latter any time!

This was because a corvette could at least move around and travel anywhere in the cosmos as long as she was well-equipped!

Of course, the Spirit of Bentheim was much more than a tiny corvette. She was a genuine capital ship that not only functioned as a large manufacturing complex on the move, but also contained first-class lab and workshop facilities.

Mech designers such as Ves could make excellent use of these luxurious facilities to conduct their research and design their mechs, and the comfort of having them around in his travels ensured his productivity remained high.

In short, spending half of his gigantic stash of MTA merits on the factory ship was not a stupid decision in his eyes!

"Make no mistake." Ves said as the meeting wound down. "We are not wasting the huge sums put into her extensive upgrade and overhaul. We are not only gaining a powerful defensive asset that can play an immensely useful role on the battlefield, but we are also future-proofing our most important capital ship. Later on, we do not have to invest a lot of money or replace the Spirit of Bentheim with a brand-new first-class factory ship, because we already have a quasi-first-class vessel in our possession. It won't take much effort to remove the word 'quasi' from that designation."

The hard work of upgrading the foundation and half of her essential systems had already been done by that time. It would become a lot easier to replace the remaining second-class components and ship systems that had fallen behind such as the superdrives!

Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse remained one of the few people who maintained his objections over this spending plan. He maintained his stance that the opportunity costs of pursuing this plan was too great. There were many other highly useful goods and services that the clan could exchange from the MTA instead.

Still, as long as Ves remained at the helm, his opinion outweighed everyone else's. Besides, he already won over the support of the majority of the leadership of the clan, so he did not bother to pay attention to the remaining naysayers.

"What of the remaining 360 million or so MTA merits that we have left?" General Verle asked.

"I am open to other proposals." Ves made an inviting gesture with his arms. "My main concern is the refit of the Spirit of Bentheim. I do not have any other pressing needs at the moment. Each of you can continue to come up with your own plans and bring it up for discussion. If enough people think it is a good idea, then we will implement them. Just make sure that increasing our short to medium term combat power takes priority. We will be heading back into the deep frontier sooner or later, so make sure we are ready to deal with anything thrown in our direction."

After the conclusion of the meeting, Minister Shederin Purnesse stayed back and approached him for a private chat.

"What's up, old man?"

The aged diplomat's impeccable control over his body ensured he did not display any adverse reaction to the patriarch's overly informal greeting.

"Word of our latest deeds have already begun to circulate, sir." Shederin quietly informed Ves. "Not only do they dramatize our operations against the Palace of Shame and the Fractured House of the Collapsing Star, they also mention how many MTA merits we have received for our heavy contributions."

"What?! The news has spread already?!"

Shederin nodded in confirmation. "The exact sum of MTA merits are on every headline related to our actions. The stories are just starting to appear on the smaller news portals, but it is only a matter of time before the major ones will publish the same articles. By the time we arrive in Davute, we will be swamped with attention, both good and bad."

"Ugh. That is just what we need. Let me guess. The Mech Trade Association had a hand in publicizing our deeds."

"We don't need to guess. One of the MTA's official news bulletin has published a highly condensed summary of our positive contributions less than an hour ago. The mechers have even managed to insert the exact sum of MTA merits that our Golden Skull Alliance earned in total."

"Great. That will definitely unleash a horde of freeloaders and sycophants in our direction." Ves grumbled.

"Our clan can handle the heat." Minister Shederin reassured the younger man. "You should keep focus on doing what you do best. Our people and institutions are more than adequately equipped to handle the changes. The benefits of increased fame and renown are more than worth it. Not only will it become easier for us to forge more lucrative agreements with new business partners, but we have received new applications to join our clan from more formidable and worthy pioneering organizations."

That last part perked Ves up. As much as he was pleased with the current state of the Golden Skull Alliance, Operation Lighthouse exposed him to the benefit of bringing greater numbers to a fight.

He could do a lot more on the Trailblazer Expedition if the amount of mech forces he could bring to bear was at least six times greater!

Of course, Ves was not willing to let anyone fight alongside his clan. The Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan may have their fair share of flaws, but they had proven their trustworthiness and loyalty many times over.

That made it even harder to welcome new additions to the Golden Skull Alliance. The contrast between trust and intimacy would be so great that it would definitely disrupt the vibe within the expanded alliance.

"Are there any pioneering organizations on the list that have a serious chance of meeting all of our criteria?" Ves asked.

"It is still early, but we have received surprising offers from a number of familiar organizations."

"Oh?"

"Do you recall the pioneering organizations we fought alongside during the Battle of the Boryan Belt? Well, they have become so impressed with us that they are willing to join us if the conditions are right."

That caused Ves to look skeptical. "As far as I am aware, each of them are strong enough to match the numbers of our entire alliance. They are already strong enough in their own right. They even have their own ace pilots on retainer! Why would they give up much of their independence and autonomy to abide by our rules and restrictions?"

Minister Shederin smirked. "The decision is highly logical when you study the right data. We may be small for the moment, but there are many indicators that show we have great promise in the future. First, we have earned an astronomical sum of MTA merits, which we will certainly use to fuel our growth. Second, we are a new and dynamic alliance that does not carry as much burdens as other groups, so our prospects of promoting to first-raters are considerably higher. Third, it is clear to discerning people that we enjoy an excellent relationship with the MTA, which means that any newcomers can benefit from this as well."

There were many more reasons why other parties would want to join the party.

Selfish as their motives may be, Ves didn't mind so much as long as they took the same risks and endured their fair share of pressure.

"Above all else, people have become more convinced by our string of successes." The minister summed up. "We have acquired a strong winner's

halo, and others want to bask in it. So long as we manage to keep it up, everything will go smoothly."

"And what if we lose this valuable halo?"

"Then it will be up to us to ensure that our new alliance partners will remain committed during times of adversity."

The circumstances did not sound ideal, but they were better than before. Attracting stronger pioneers who had already proven their ability to survive in the frontier would make for strong additions to the expeditionary fleet.

The upcoming pitstop made for an ideal moment to meet with the promising candidates and evaluate them thoroughly.

"Which of the pioneering organizations that we fought alongside the last time have decided to join our little alliance?"

"So far, the Third Fleet of the Adelaide Mercenary Corps and the entirety of the Boojay Family have signaled their strong interest to join our alliance." Minister Shederin seriously responded. "In our initial exchanges, we have already judged that they are sincere about their intentions. Their terms are reasonable and they have already shown a good amount of willingness to abide by our many rules."

If Shederin said so, then it must be true.

This stood in stark contrast to many of the offers that the Golden Skull Alliance received in the past.

Usually, stronger parties expected to come in and throw their weight around. Some did not even do a good job at disguising their intentions to outright take over the alliance by usurping its leadership from within!

Ves didn't know what those guys were thinking, but at least the Adelaides and the Boojays had better sense than that. Their decision to approach the Golden Skull Alliance without leveraging their individual superiority already demonstrated a willingness to bow their heads.

It also helped a lot that he had good impressions of both during the time the Gemini Family had gathered them all together to assault the Palace of Shame. Both the Adelaides and the Boojays came across as sensible and practical people, unlike a certain other group that developed unusual cultural practices to say the least.

"Did we happen to receive any interest from the Gemini Family?" Ves curiously asked.

"No."

"Thank the heavens. We can do without their brand of weirdness. I don't want our Golden Skull Alliance to turn into a cesspit of weirdos, exiles and miscreants."

"I believe our clan already has that area covered, sir."

Chapter 4658 Prejudged Candidates

Compared to the other pioneering organizations that had signaled their willingness to join the Golden Skull Alliance, the Adelaide Mercenary Company and the Boojay Family both enjoyed a massive advantage.

Their forces had fought alongside the Golden Skullers in a tough battle.

That not only gave the Larkinsons and so on a good look at their objective combat performance, but also their intangibles.

How well did they maintain their command and control during unexpected setbacks and complications?

How readily did they commit their forces to a difficult mission?

How much could they be trusted to cover everyone else's backs?

Though the Battle of the Boryan Belt did not provide the Golden Skull Alliance with the answers to all of these questions, the Larkinsons at least knew the Adelaides and the Boojays a lot better than the random names that showed up out of the blue.

Ves especially looked forward to adding their ace mechs to the expeditionary fleet.

"It's nice that we can depend on the Mars to defeat alien warships and hostile ace mechs, our fleet is relying too much on a single point of failure." Ves told Minister Shederin. "The difference of having one or multiple ace mechs at our disposal is massive. Just look at the Gemini Family. The tactical and strategic outlook of our combined armed forces will undergo a qualitative transformation if we are able to group three or more together. We don't necessarily need to rely on trickery to defeat a modestly-sized alien battleship like the Tower of Babel anymore. The teamwork of three different but powerful ace mechs is stronger than deploying three ace mechs in isolation."

It also helped that the ace mechs were all substantially different from each other.

The Jedda Sandivar piloted by Saint Marissa Lewandowski was not only a blazingly fast and mobile ace light skirmisher, but its Saint Kingdom was an incredibly effective disruptive tool that was much more effective than conventional ECM solutions!

The Royal Jeem was a much more straightforward ace mech. Piloted by the older and more veteran Saint Kalasandra Boojay, the ace spearman mech could outduel a lot more opponents in single combat, and its Saint Kingdom could play a key role in weakening powerful adversaries.

When combined with the Mars who could provide a huge amount of flexible fire support at different ranges, the expanded Golden Skull Alliance should no longer be afraid of confronting smaller alien warfleets in the wild!

Minister Shederin provided Ves with a little more information about the applicants.

"The arrangement that the Adelaide Mercenary Company wants to establish with our alliance is one that is similar to that of the Glory Seekers. The main organization will remain separate from us, but their Third Fleet which they will convert into an off-shoot organization will come under our auspices."

"Hmm, I see."

The Adelaide Mercenary Company was actually much larger than the entirety of the Golden Skull Alliance at the moment. It was a behemoth that built up its success in the old galaxy and was trying to expand its tentacles in the new frontier.

Its Third Fleet happened to be one of those tentacles. In a sense, what the Aidelaides were doing was nothing more than a diversification strategy. Some fleets would remain independent and go off to earn their keep on their own while others banded together with other strong powers.

Ves did not mind this arrangement. The Adelaide Mercenary Company in its entirety was too large for the Golden Skull Alliance to swallow whole. He could make do with just the Third Fleet, at least for the time being.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs thought the same way given his sly smile. "If our alliance becomes ten or twenty times greater in the future, then it is not out of the realm of possibility to absorb the rest of Adelaide's mercenary fleets into our fold. We only have to keep winning."

The two didn't have much else to talk about for the time being. The Adeilades and Boojays had just begun to show their interest. They still needed to go

through multiple rounds of exploratory talks and conduct a lot of background research before they could move on to the next phase of this exhaustive process.

Ves trusted in the ability of the diplomats under the lead of Minister Shederin Purnesse. There was no need for the clan patriarch to step forward in person to take care of this chore himself.

"I will update you on any major developments or complications during the negotiations." The diligent minister spoke. "It will take around two to three months to complete the entire process and know for certain whether the candidates are a good fit for our alliance."

"Okay. That sounds good." Ves nodded. "If it looks as if the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family are likely to become a part of our lovely band, then I'm not in a hurry to welcome more partners. You can raise the criteria for any other third parties that are looking to join the fun. Only bring them in if they are really worthy of our trust."

Once Ves ended his talk with the minister, he finally had enough time to spend on his own work.

He still had a lot of mech design projects that demanded his attention, so he was eager to get back to them. He also entertained the idea of starting a bunch of new research projects based on the inspiration that he managed to harvest in the past few months.

Naturally, he was not the only mech designer in the Larkinson Clan who wanted to work on new and promising projects.

The most pressing need of the clan was to enable the Larkinson Army to defeat the tougher warships fielded by the indigenous alien races. The strong transphasic energy shields that protected a lot of critical hulls from damage had become a universal annoyance to every human!

Mech designers had a tendency to respond to these sorts of situations by proposing mech designs that specifically addressed the problem in question.

The first pair of Larkinson mech designers to give their pitch to Ves was Juliet Stameross and Dulo Voiken.

Ves initially expected the mobility specialist and spearman mech specialist to introduce an unusual melee mech concept to him, as at least one half of the pair had no business designing a ranged mech.

His guess was not that far off the mark.

"What... am I looking at?" Ves furrowed his brows in confusion.

"You are looking at a sketch of our solution against heavily shielded warships." Juliet plainly responded. "While the entire mech industry is working towards developing efficient counters against transphasic energy shields, we all know that it may take years or decades before the landscape changes. We cannot wait that long, so Dulo and I have joined forces to develop a stopgap solution that is highly suited for the Larkinson Clan."

păndă Ńovê1,còM Dulo Voiken spoke up next. "As the previous battle has shown us, there is no better quick fix on the battlefield than employing missiles. The pair of Stormsurge Missiles launched by the Mars produced exceptional results. While our missile-carrying mech cannot produce as much damage in isolation, they can expose the hulls of a lot of warships when fielded in greater numbers."

Though Dulo Voiken mentioned a missile-carrying mech, the sketch clearly showed a lancer mech!

Ves pointed his finger at the projected sketch. "I don't see any missile launchers in this draft design. Are you sure you selected the right design file?"

Neither Juliet nor Dulo acknowledged that they had made a mistake.

"Sir... our Woodpecker Project is not a conventional missileer mech. There are good reasons why it looks like a lancer mech. In this case, the warheads are integrated in the lances carried by this mech."

When Ves studied the lance held by the mech in the sketch more closely, he could finally see how it could carry a warhead. The shaft was not only longer, but substantially thicker and more complex at the front!

He initially thought that the tip of the lance looked thicker in order to facilitate higher impact charges, but it turned out that the additional layers had been added to make it harder for ranged attacks to eliminate the warheads in advance!

"Okay, I need an explanation for this." Ves crossed his arms. "This better be a good idea, because I am not in the mood to entertain a joke."

"Our Woodpecker Project is no joke, sir." Juliet responded with the assurance of a mech designer who came up with a solid idea. "The codename of the project should already tell you much about its concept. It starts with the use of normal missiles against alien warships. Though we have never experienced it in person, other forces that have already started to make use of missiles against alien vessels have found to their dismay that the craft they are targeting are highly effective at intercepting missiles in flight."

This did not surprise Ves. "Just as with human warships, the secondary or tertiary weapon emplacements of many alien warships are specifically designed to shred incoming enemy missiles or starfighters. The nature of these weapon batteries mean that they are much more effective at their jobs than a bunch of ranged mechs. The smaller the missile volley, the greater the chance that all of the payloads will get shot down before they can come close to their destination."

Dula nodded. "The most reliable way to make sure that enough missiles make it to their targets is to saturate the target with thousands of missiles. While effective, the amount of waste is huge, especially when you make use of more expensive phasewater-infused missiles. This is why we have decided against designing a more conventional missileer mech. They are easy to use as they only need to deploy in space long enough to launch their entire stock, but a competent opponent will easily be able to shoot down all of the missiles in flight."

Juliet Stameross gestured towards the draft design. "Hence why we have decided it is better to employ this sort of construction. The short story behind its concept is that we think that an expensive transphasic missile stands a much better chance of striking an enemy warship if a sufficiently armored mech escorts it right on top of the enemy ship."

"Ah. I see now." Ves responded as he looked enlightened.

The odd lancer mech made a lot more sense now that he figured out that it was meant to be an explosive delivery system!

"This is not an efficient way to launch a missile to an enemy target." Ves remarked. "The 'lancer mech' basically functions like a torpedo in this instance. A manned torpedo. I hope that your Woodpecker Project is at least able to detach the explosive warhead before it blows up in its face, right?"

"That is a given. This is not a suicide mech. The lance incorporates a small but extremely powerful short-range booster that can launch the payload at the target at such a high speed that it should be nearly impossible to intercept in a short amount of time."

Overall, this was a funky design concept, but one that had solid reasoning behind its special configuration.

"I'm sure that an idea like this has been done before." Ves stated. "Did other mech designers have any success in employing this sort of explosive lancer mech concept?"

"There are enough successful examples in the past, but their market circumstances are radically different. The mech models were all niche because they weren't as necessary in the environments where they were sold. It will be a different story here in the Red Ocean because of the prevalence of shielded warships."

Ves paused for a moment before he made his decision. "Alright. This idea might be effective enough to work, so I will give you a chance to prove the value of this Woodpecker Project. You can go ahead and work on this mech design, but once you are able to produce working mechs, I want to test it out on a smaller scale at first. The best way to test its viability is to employ it in the field."

"That is acceptable. Thank you for giving us a chance, sir."

"No problem. Now that I look at it, I might have a way of giving this Woodpecker Project an extra edge..."

Chapter 4659 Surge Of Storms

Ves did not mind so much if Juliet Stameross and Dulo Voiken ended up botching the Woodpecker Project.

This was a realistic possibility given that it presented a funky and unusual combination of traits. Arming a lancer mech with an explosive lance could either work out brilliantly or blow up in their faces.

Regardless, it was a fresh and interesting take on a mech. Ves loved it when he or other mech designers mustered up the courage to get off the beaten path and pursue innovation.

There had to be a certain tolerance for failure in order to produce persistent successes. Now that the Larkinson Army and the Larkinson Army already accrued a sufficient number of strong and effective mech models, Ves became more open to risky experimentation.

If a new mech design worked out somehow, then that would be a welcome addition.

If the latest work of a mech designer failed to live up to expectations, then that was okay as well.

Everyone could learn from the failure and there were always other opportunities in the future.

After giving the pair of Journeymen a few more encouraging words, Ves waved Juliet and Dulo off. The two mech designers eagerly wanted to begin with fleshing out their promising new shield breaking lancer mech design!

Shortly after their visit, another Larkinson mech designer showed up in order to gain his blessing for another new proposal.

"Ketis, I haven't seen you in a while. How is my daughter doing?" Ves asked as he greeted her into his work corner.

The woman gave him an encouraging smile. "Andraste is the most talented squirt that I have had the pleasure of teaching. It is just too easy, so much so that I have to adjust my training program and introduce more artificial obstacles in order to exercise her ability to work under adversity. If all first-class kids are like her, then I can understand why so few first-class mech pilots have what it takes to break through to the rank of expert pilot."

This was a familiar argument to Ves. A soft environment bred soft soldiers. Professional training could help a lot with compensating for that, but there were still a lot of limits. Children who grew up while having it easy had to learn many lessons from scratch!

"Don't be afraid of giving my girl a hard time." Ves told the swordmaster. "I would like to protect her for her entire life, but that is not what a good parent should do. I should give her the opportunity to learn how to stand on her own. Sometimes, that requires me to give her a bit of tough love."

Ketis nodded in agreement. "That is true. I do the same thing to my children. The difficult part is to balance it out with gentler treatment. No child should bear so much pressure all of the time."

They talked a bit more about young Andraste's performance in her beginner swordsmanship classes.

Though the energetic little girl had not attended a lot of classes to figure her out entirely, Ketis already had a good idea what the designer baby may be capable of in the future.

"If she doesn't become a mech pilot, I think she can become an excellent swordmaster that can cut the lives of mech pilots while they are in their machines."

"Truly?" Ves looked surprised. "Even you can't do that... right?"

His former student did not like that remark. "Don't remind me of that. All swordmasters have their own strengths. Andraste's little companion spirit opens up a lot of options for her that no one else has access to. If she is able to develop the right sword style that takes maximum advantage of Yaika's death affinity, then it is not impossible for your little girl to replicate the effects of a death energy wave attack on a smaller scale."

"That sounds impressive."

"Don't get excited too soon. Even with her talent, it will take a lot of focus and dedication before Andraste reaches this point. She can produce a similar outcome much easier if she focuses on channeling her special power through a rifle."

"Do you mind it if I tell her to train her marksmanship?"

"It's fine." Ketis said in a laid-back tone. "Swordmasters don't necessarily have to be pure about their weapon choice in order to become powerful. It helps, and some of the more close-minded Heavensworders insist on swearing off ranged weapons forever, but that's nonsense in my opinion. I can't comment on her ability to wield rifles, but her talent in swordsmanship is enough to make the Heavensword Association welcome her with open arms."

Ves smiled with pride. "That's my girl."

"Anyway, I did not come here to update you on the progress of your kid. I have a more work-related matter to present to you. I'd like to show you an idea for a new mech design."

When Ketis projected her draft design in the air, Ves immediately spotted a lot of familiar design elements.

At first glance, he thought that he was looking at the design of the Second Sword.

The Second Sword was Ketis' first gift to the Swordmaidens where she hailed from. Despite the relative age of the original design, the heartland-level swordsman mech still served as the premier unit for the elites of the melee-oriented mech regiment!

However, when Ves looked a bit closer at the draft design, he noticed plenty of small details that diverged from the familiar Second Sword design.

The greatsword wielded by the mechs carried more technology. The armor systems were much more high-end. The overall level of refinement was slightly higher.

"I take it that this isn't a simple update to the Second Sword design." Ves noted. "What am I looking at here, Ketis?"

The swordmaster grinned. "This is my first answer to the transphasic energy shield problem. I know that Juliet and Dulo already presented you with their own proposal, but their idea has obvious shortcomings. What I offer is a more affordable, sustainable and effective counter to transphasic energy shields, especially in the long run as I will continue to iterate on the design."

She waved her hand, causing another projection to appear into view.

The latest projection showed a short clip of the First Sword breaking the spatial barrier projected by the Trampler of Stars.

Many people within the fleet rewatched this very same clip. Though the effort to strip the phase lord of his strongest form of protection had definitely been a team effort, it was undeniable that Venerable Dise's new extraordinary sword technique played an outsized role in breaking the camel's back!

The projection did not do the spectacle justice. The moment when Ketis connected to the Decapitator, her first masterwork sword, and imbued it with the power of Sharpie, the magnificent weapon swept a crescent of stars against the nunser phase lord's nearly impervious spatial barrier.

As soon as the dense twinkling light spots struck the invisible barrier, the latter melted with unnatural ease!

Ves couldn't even begin to understand the theory of all of the mechanisms that made this feat possible. He just chalked it up to the reality-distorting effects of extraordinary willpower and left it there. Only madness would follow if he attempted to come up with a scientific explanation for all of these crazy phenomena.

"I thought this Phase Cutter technique could only be employed once in a couple of months."

"That is not correct, Ves. This attack indeed took a lot out of Sharpie, but she doesn't need to wait that long to recover again."

păndă Ÿovê1,còM As if to emphasize her point, Sharpie jumped out of the floating Bloodsinger and swung her tiny sword.

"Sharp! Sharp! Sharp!"

The miniature version of Ketis flew a few circles around Ves as if to show off her energetic state. Once she had made her point, the companion spirit flew back into Ketis' personal greatsword.

Ves looked mildly impressed. "I see. That is handy to know. I don't think we will encounter another warship soon, but it is great to know we can count on the First Sword to make a repeat performance. The same cannot necessarily be said for the Amaranto."

Though Ves was able to amplify the firepower of the Instrument of Vengeance in a similar fashion, he had to expend the much more special Worclaw energy to amplify its firepower. That was troublesome because the rate in which he was able to replenish this rare type of energy remained limited.

"We are going off on a tangent." Ketis said. "My new mech design shouldn't come under such a restriction. My intention with this project is to design a high-quality standard swordsman mech that can largely rely on its own strengths to overcome transphasic energy shields. The mech has to be strong enough to stand a good chance of surviving a high-risk assault, but it also has to be economical enough to fabricate enough copies to form a new elite mech unit."

Ves widened his eyes when he noticed what was special about the armor system. It consisted entirely of first-class materials, and it wasn't Unending alloy!

"Wait a second. Are you expecting to derive all of the first-class materials from the salvage that we have collected?"

"That's right. That is my intention. I mean, we still have many tons of salvaged alien warship debris in our cargo holds."

"I already pushed a plan where we will use up most of it on upgrading the structure and hull plating of the Spirit of Bentheim."

"I know, Ves, but you should still have plenty of tons of material left. I'm not picky. I will take whatever scraps are left and fabricate as many of my Storm Swords as possible."

"Storm Swords?" Ves questioned the name.

"Oh, I haven't gotten to the best part yet." The swordmaster grinned and pointed at the weapon in the draft design. "Do you remember the stormblade technology that I am working on implementing in the Samurai Project? While I haven't completed this mech design as of yet, I have experimented with stormblades enough times to know what it is capable of and how it can be used. My new Storm Sword design is meant to wield a single first-class stormblade greatsword. The difference in materials along with the much greater size and heft of the weapon will allow my new elite swordsman mechs to abuse warships as if they are crispy frogs!"

Ves scratched his head. "Aside from using a lot of salvaged first-class materials, how does this Storm Sword differ from the Samurai Project?"

"There are huge differences!" Ketis loudly insisted! "The Samurai Project is a more general purpose machine that is mostly designed to fight against mechs, including ones that are shielded by decent but not too powerful transphasic energy shields. The Storm Sword can fight against mechs as well, but they are mainly designed to get close to human or alien starships and exhaust their energy shields at a rapid rate."

"And how do you expect to do that with a bunch of standard mechs? Making use of first-class materials doesn't necessarily make your expensive swordsman mech more powerful. It just makes it a lot harder to break it apart."

The female mech designer emphatically pointed at the greatsword of her draft design.

"Haven't you been paying attention, Ves? I've made several design choices that will make my Storm Sword super effective! My idea is to combine stormblade technology, first-class materials and most importantly a specialized sword style based on Venerable Dise's brand-new Phase Cutter technique!"

That could be a powerful combo! Not many mech designers possessed the skill and expertise to skillfully combine these elements to produce extraordinarily powerful synergies, but the first mech designer to become a swordmaster as well may just be able to realize Ketis' ambitious vision!

Still, unlike the previous proposal, the idea presented by his former student was incredibly expensive!

The cost of failure was much higher as a substantial amount of increasingly more scarce first-class materials might go to waste.