

Mech 3071

Chapter 3071: You Need Discipline

Ves spent more time in the design lab, and he was happy about that.

His wife became happy at his increased commitment as well.

Important matters such as the acquisition of new capital ships, the production of Larkinson mechs, the ideological training of the former members of the Purnesse Family, the development of a high-level diplomatic strategy and so on did not require his input for the time being.

Now that the Design Department progressed the Disruptor Project and all of the other ones to the main design phases, the main design lab had become a lot more frenetic.

The mech designers no longer spent most of their time on looking up information or discussing various options to add to the mech designs. Now that they set firm and clear directions for all of the design projects, they were no longer running around aimlessly.

The draft designs all gave them clear ideas of what they were working towards. Gloriana in cooperation with Master Willix and the other Journeymen had already settled all of the major design choices.

Just like with the Disruptor Project, the incorporation of resonating exotics was relatively straightforward and predictable... With a Master Mech Designer solving all of the truly difficult problems related to integrating the materials into a mech design and allowing an expert pilot to resonate with them in an effective manner, the rest merely had to address the more mundane issues.

Of course, expert mechs were still in a league of their own, so Ves had to contend with many new problems that he had never tackled before.

"It's a lot more difficult than I thought to combine high-performance components." He said as he sat next to his wife while she was fiddling with the Bulwark Project. "They are like violent beasts that can easily go out of control if they aren't properly contained."

"Then just put more effort into containing them, Ves. This is not an insurmountable problem." She spoke as she refined the next iteration of the Shield of Samar.

"I can do that, but then I'll stuff the designs with too many structural components that don't provide any significant performance boosts aside from toughening up the internals.

Gloriana briefly paused and turned to Ves. "Did you come here to complain about this difficulty? You're not the only one who is grappling with this issue, you know. I have to work hard to search for solutions as well when I have to do the same."

"I thought you were good at this sort of work."

"I am." She confidently replied. "That also means that I have set higher expectations for myself. There is always a better balance. You just have to be good enough to grasp it. I hope you don't expect me to do all of the heavy lifting this time. I have to oversee so many different projects that I'll be stuck here forever if you skip too much work. I expect more from you this time."

Ves briefly soured, but he did not stay upset for long. What his wife was asking was more than fair. Since he used to lead all of the mech design projects, he understood the pressure she was enduring. Anything he could do to help would allow the projects to proceed much smoother.

After Gloriana finally became satisfied with the implementation of a shield generator, she waved her hand, causing the partial mech design to disappear.

She called up the current iteration of the Disruptor Project in its place. At this stage, the design was mostly illusionary as the draft outlines dominated the projection.

The Miracle Couple intended to change that fairly soon.

"Since we chose to prioritize Venerable Tusa's future expert over the other ones, we should aim to make its design feature complete in two months."

Ves almost jumped into the air!

"Two months?! That's too fast!"

"We're dealing with a light mech here." Gloriana crossed her arms. "What are you afraid of? The total volume of the Disruptor Project is small enough that it is doable to complete the first iteration within the timespan that I have given."

"Sixty days is still cutting it close! Light mech or not, the fact that we are dealing with an expert mech is still a huge factor. While you're right that the smaller volume means less work for us, it also means that we are packing more powerful components in a very slim frame and with precious little buffer for us to work with. It is going to take a lot of effort to integrate all of those powerful expert mech-grade components without causing them to interact with each other in an undesirable fashion."

Matters such as heat management and power transmission became a lot harder to deal with when there was much less room to work with. Even if the smaller components of a light mech were less powerful, this reduction did not keep up with the drop in capacity in relation to a medium mech.

Gloriana huffed and turned her back to him. "I am tired of your constant delays, Ves. Even if you have good reasons to stay away from the design lab, the rhythm of our

design work has never been quite right since we embarked on the current round of design projects. You were never like this when you were still in charge."

"Our clan was a lot simpler back then. It has grown a lot larger and stronger, but it hasn't reached maturity yet. We're dealing with a lot of growing pains."

"Well, whatever it is, most of that ends here." Gloriana declared. "In sixty days, we're completing the first iteration of the Disruptor Project no matter what. It has to be functionally complete to the point where we can fabricate an actual prototype based on the work we have managed to accomplish."

"What if we fall short of this ambitious goal of yours?" Ves cautiously asked.

The stare he got in return clearly conveyed an ominous message.

She sighed. "It's for your own good, Ves. If I don't increase the pressure on you, who knows whether you will let yourself get pulled away from the design lab again. You need to be more disciplined at least for the next two months. As long as you can meet my expectations and make it through for the next sixty days, you can be just as productive for the rest of the year."

Gloriana essentially employed a management trick where she made a difficult demand more achievable by setting a smaller sub-goal.

She also wished for him to find a working formula for himself that he could depend upon to complete the other mech design projects.

How could Ves say no, especially when he had already disappointed her so many times?

"I will do my best. No, I will live up to your expectations this time. These projects are important to all of us. I have long dreamt about realizing my first expert mech design. I can't squander this unique opportunity."

Ves belatedly reminded himself how critical it was for him to propagate his design philosophy to mechs that were more worthy to become alive.

Each of the projects they were working on had the potential to evolve into a legendary machine like the Ouroboros one day. Even though there was no guarantee that the expert pilots would retain the same basic model for at least a century, it was still a prospect that sounded very attractive to him. The Shield of Samar was already on this trajectory and Ves didn't mind adding more to the list.

With just sixty days to go, the Miracle Couple no longer wasted any time. They studied the expert light mech design for a time before beginning to work on specific modules and sections.

Though their relationship had turned a bit rocky lately, much of their disagreements and differences in opinion faded once they got to work.

The two had collaborated with each other so often that it had practically become second nature to them. The fact that each of them carried their spouse's spiritual fragments made it easy for them to achieve a basic level of synergy.

Ves missed this. Though their cooperation had not yet returned to the best level that the couple had achieved in the past, just getting back in the groove did wonders to his productivity.

A few days passed in the same pattern. Ves not only worked together with Gloriana on the same challenges, but also did some work on his own or discussed various problems with the other Journeymen contributing to the design projects.

Since Juliet Stameris possessed the only mobility-oriented specialty among the lead designers, her input was essential to the quick completion of the Disruptor Project.

So much of the expert light skirmisher revolved around enhancing its speed, acceleration, agility and maneuverability. The Disruptor Project's emphasis on multi-directional evasion meant that it had to incorporate a lot of boosters across her hull.

Though Juliet was good at positioning the modules where they could provide the greatest benefit to the expert mech, their presence also weakened the armor and structure around these surface elements.

This was where Gloriana could mitigate the damage. Through the use of general solutions such as using grids to specific solutions that were specific to each individual case, she made a lot of progress in maintaining the overall strength of the frame.

Ves either assisted her or worked on the general aspects of the mech design. He performed broad work on the mechanical and electrical systems, fleshing them to the point where they should work but holding off on refining and optimizing them until Gloriana gave her seal of approval.

Ketis occasionally dropped by to give them an update on the progress of the knives she assumed responsibility over.

"Bissonat is really interesting to me." She explained to him during a brief meeting. "I haven't been able to see it in action yet, but so far I think that it will have great effects when paired with my design philosophy."

Ves looked intrigued. "Do you think the added cutting power provided by Bissonat will overlap or synergize with your design philosophy?"

"I hope the latter will happen, but I don't think it is likely. Resonating exotics that are complemented by design philosophies usually don't lead to such an exaggerated effect. I'm still happy that I am able to work with a material that can make the result that I am looking for even better."

As Ves and Ketis continued to discuss this topic, Lucky stared vigilantly at the floating and seemingly autonomous greatsword that was floating a short distance away.

"Meow..." Lucky began to imagine what it would be like to take a bite out of Bloodsinger.

Swish swish. The sheathed weapon exaggeratingly swung back and forth.

"Meow?"

Swish!

Instead of entering into a fight or something, Sharpie suddenly proposed to do something else.

The weapon lifted up its tip so that its blade went horizontal. The gem cat cautiously flew over and set his feet onto the surface of the scabbard.

Bloodsinger subsequently began to fly forth with its feline passenger. Though Lucky first doubted whether he could keep his footing on the moving blade, he found a way to make himself stay in place by using his gravitic capabilities to press him down on his ride.

Soon enough, the two 'pets' began to fly above the heads of the two Journeymen at increasing speeds!

"Meeeeeoow!"

Swish!

Who said that cats and swords couldn't get along? Unlike Lucky's contentious relationship with Blinky, the gem cat soon developed a friendship with Sharpie.

The two began to fly so fast that Bloodsinger soon exhibited difficulty in shifting its direction.

"Hey, cut that out before you cut into the bulkhead or worse, cut off someone's head!"

The two pets quickly ended their fun. Lucky flew back down in order to settle on Ketis' lap while Bloodsinger took up its usual position a short distance behind its owner's back.

Chapter 3072: Unsung Hero

Antics aside, the design lab turned into a serious venue where a lot of mech designers were too busy with their own assignments to joke around.

The design teams might not be able to contribute as many solutions to the expert mech designs due to the heightened difficulty, they were still essential when it came to other matters.

As Ves watched over the assistant mech designers at work, he wondered how soon he would be able to double the amount. He had not forgotten about the advice given by Master Willix, but it was a bit uncertain where the expeditionary fleet would visit next.

As the Larkinsons and their allies were steadily making their way out of the Yeina Star Cluster, the destinations ahead of them became increasingly more vague.

Ves did not have a solid impression of the Bardo and Fermi Star Clusters. While he was sure that plenty of Larkinsons had already done their research on them, he did not feel the need to direct his precious time away from his work in order to study what made these places unique and what they could offer.

The Red Ocean was his true destination. Any other place in between was a lot more boring in comparison. The only stop that was truly worthy of his attention was the Smiling Samuel Star Sector, but it would still take many months before his fleet arrived at its border...

"Well, at least that gives us enough time to finish all of our expert mech design projects."

Though he did not anticipate he would need to deploy that much strength when he arrived at the dwarf-dominated star sector, it would give him a lot of assurance if his fleet gained an additional trump card.

Last Ves checked up on the Vulcan Empire, the Crown Uprising had destabilized it as well, though not to a worrying extent. The star sector was dominated by a single regime and it was mostly populated by dwarves, who were much more used to banding together than average humans.

Also, the dwarves appeared to have less crown terrorists in their ranks as usual. This was rather strange. Did even the Five Scrolls Compact look down on these short-statured humans?

Whatever the case, Ves hoped that he would be able to meet some sane dwarves and engage in polite and rational discourse with these wonderful variant humans.

As Ves continued to do his best to meet the sixty day deadline set by his wife, he began to feel fulfilled in a way he hadn't experienced in a long time.

"You're right." He told her one day. "I really needed to get back into the groove."

"Told you so." She grinned and pecked his cheek. "I had this version of you in mind when I chose to marry you. Look, even Clixie likes you more."

"Miaow~"

The furry cat arched her back and took a nap as Ves softly brushed his hand across her back.

Whenever Gloriana was happy with Ves, Clixie was happy as well. Whenever Gloriana was unhappy with Ves, Clixie hissed at him as if he was a bad guy.

It didn't make any sense. Lucky never grew angry at Gloriana when he argued with her. His cat might be defective.

Fortunately, he had several other cats to keep him company.

"Bygul, how much time do you need before you finish crunching the numbers on the latest tweaks to the power reactor?"

[Three hours, fifty-two minutes and twenty-five seconds, sir.] An electronic cat projection answered in a formal tone.

Though Ves had to wait hours until he received the data he wanted, it would have taken days to complete the same task aboard his old ships.

The AI core added to the Spirit of Bentheim was one of the factory ship's most useful features. It provided him and every other mech designer with a lot more processing capacity than they had ever enjoyed before.

The CFA knew what it was doing when it came to AIs. Even though the AI core obtained by the Larkinson Clan was supposed to be a defective product, Ves didn't notice any of it except for a theoretical reduction in processing power. Everything else worked great, particularly the neural learning capabilities that allowed the AI core to develop better ways to serve the needs of its users.

As a result, Bygul became a little more clever and efficient over time. He had become a favored presence to the assistant mech designers because of how much tedious work they could leave to automation.

However, there was also another cat that actually provided a surprising amount of help while everyone worked.

Mrow.

When Blinky emerged from Ves' mind, he floated over to Gloriana who idly patted his ethereal body.

"You're so cute."

Mrow~

After Blinky fooled around for a time, he left Gloriana's side and began to fly back and forth between Ves and some other people.

Ves didn't bother to keep his companion spirit a secret to the other mech designers. Though no one knew what kind of existence Blinky represented, he looked absolutely remarkable and possessed a charm that disarmed many people.

Normally, Ves kept a closer eye on Blinky in order to make sure his companion spirit didn't get up to any mischief, but lately he was too busy to monitor his latest cat too closely.

Blinky was ultimately another aspect of himself, so Ves didn't worry all that much about what another part of his spirit and mentality was doing.

Normally, Blinky only explored the design lab for a half an hour or so before he got bored and returned to his home in order to take a nap.

Today was different, however. The spiritual cat quietly floated above the heads of every diligent mech designer. The starry trails streaking along his intangible body zipped faster as Blinky began to concentrate on what the individual mech designers were actually doing.

Blinky's eyes glowed brighter as he quietly approached Catherine Evenson's head.

The woman hardly noticed anything as she directed her full concentration towards the module she was assigned to optimize.

A purple tail curled down until its black tip phased through the former Sentinel noble's skull.

A second later, Blinky retracted his tail. After taking one last look at Catherine, the cat flew over to another assistant mech designer's head before repeating the silent procedure.

Soon enough, Blinky managed to touch all of the assistant mech designers on duty in this fashion.

Blinky flew to the larger work areas where the Journeymen were engaged in their own work. He quietly approached Ketis, only to get detected straight away.

"Oh hey, Blinky! How are you doing?"

Mrow mrow~

The spiritual cat flew closer and Ketis happily hugged him. She briefly became fascinated by the crystal third eye embedded into his forehead.

"What is this all about?"

Mrow.

"Oh yeah, I forgot I can't understand you like Ves."

Blinky did not come here in order to get cuddled this time. Once Ketis finished her hugging session with the cat, the companion spirit slowly approached her head and extended his tail only for it to get stopped.

Unlike the assistant mech designers that Blinky had touched beforehand, Ketis possessed the most formidable mental defenses out of all of the mech designers in the clan!

If Ketis really did not want Blinky to violate the sanctuary of her mind, then there was no way that the cat would be able to accomplish his goal!

In order to make sure that he didn't come away empty-handed, Blinky employed a surefire persuasion method that had always worked.

He widened his glowing eyes and made a pleading gesture with his front paws. Blinky was literally begging towards Ketis!

Mrowwww~

"Hihihi!" Ketis broke out in a rare giggle. "You really want to get into my mind that bad? Well, don't go poking around too much."

There was no way a woman like her could resist such a cute and lovely cat. Of course, part of the reason why she did not fear Blinky at all was because she possessed more than enough strength to crush any nefarious action. She could summon back Sharpie from Bloodsinger in the blink of an eye if necessary.

Fortunately, Blinky did not rummage through her mind. Instead, when his tail passed through her mental barriers unopposed, he simply left a tiny trace of himself behind before pulling out.

"Is that it?"

Mrow.

After waving Ketis goodbye, Blinky flew over to Juliet and Gloriana who allowed the companion spirit to do as he wished.

Once Blinky had touched every mech designer in the design lab, he flew back to Ves and hovered just above his head.

The cat began to curl as if he was settling on a bed and began to concentrate. His eyes glowed brighter as he spontaneously activated an ability that he had never engaged before.

The air above the design lab changed. Slowly but surely, thin, invisible lines rippled into existence.

These tiny lines all originated from the heads that Blinky had touched. These lines directly passed through every obstacle and led straight to the spiritual cat's body.

When viewed from afar, it was as if Blinky had turned himself into a new spiritual network!

The effect of this was subtle at first.

The mech designers began to work a little faster and more effectively. The assistants strangely experienced minor bursts of inspiration or came up with surprising new ways to solve the problems that had plagued them for hours.

The difference actually became quite substantial as nearly every assistant managed to solve a lot more problems than before!

In comparison, the Journeyman did not experience any major increases in productivity. They merely felt more comfortable and sometimes gained a greater understanding of the works of other colleagues.

For example, Gloriana gained a greater appreciation of how Juliet meticulously engineered the flight and booster systems of the Disruptor Project.

Ves grasped Ketis' intentions when she designed the daggers of the expert light mechs in a specific shape.

Juliet began to experience what she had been missing in her work now that her sensitivity towards the life buried in the mech designs had been raised.

Ketis began to approach her work with more care and less sloppiness now that the flaws in her work became a little more glaring.

This seemingly magical state did not last long. Blinky calmly maintained his network for a couple of hours before he stopped.

Mrow...

Blinky looked a lot less energetic after maintaining the new and unknown network for so long. Though the strain on him was not that bad, it still took a lot out of him after continually maintaining it for so long.

The companion spirit took one last look at the design lab before diving back into Ves' mind. Though Blinky could power himself up with as much spiritual energy as he wanted, the strain he endured was not so easy to recover from. The spiritual cat took a long and well-deserved nap.

As for the mech designers, none of them noticed what Blinky had done or that they received a power-up for a couple of hours. Many assistants felt a bit bummed now that their magical state was gone.

Moltar Ringer leaned back and yawned. "I'm so tired. My mind isn't straight anymore."

The Journeymen might have noticed if they paid attention to the effect, but they had all been preoccupied with their own individual tasks. Not even Ketis noticed how easier it had been for her to come up with a satisfactory result.

Just like the others, she merely dismissed this brief phase as a temporary condition.

"I was in the zone back then." She muttered.

The others held similar thoughts. It wasn't unusual for mech designers or any other creative to enter into a special mood where they became a lot more productive than before.

Nobody recognized the role that Blinky played. The companion spirit dozed off as his contribution to the project went unsung, at least for now.

Chapter 3073: Successful Gloriana

The Design Department made quick progress on the Disruptor Project. Though the project presented lots of new issues and challenges to every mech designer, the lead designers were not helpless. They all possessed formidable problem solving capabilities and the knowledge they held was quite expansive.

Ketis was perhaps the weakest Journeyman of the four. She only broke through a short time ago and her knowledge accumulation wasn't extensive enough to assume too many responsibilities.

However, her theoretical and practical mastery of bladed weapons, kinesiology and other fields directly related to her specialty surpassed that of everyone else!

Her hyperspecialization along with her status as a mythical swordmaster caused her to become the undisputed authority of melee weapons and melee mechs.

Gloriana did not trust Ketis to do a decent job in designing the power transmission systems, energy weapon systems and so on. She rarely permitted Ketis to spend her time on tweaking and optimizing the mechanical and mechatronic aspects of the expert mech designs.

Fortunately, Ketis did not lack for assignments. Designing weapons was an art in itself, and integrating them with the mechs that were supposed to wield them was also complicated...

Compared to the Swordmaiden mech designer who possessed an unusual background and approach to mech design, Juliet was a much more orthodox mech designer.

Her classical training along with her solid foundation meant that she was qualified to work on every aspect of a mech.

However, Gloriana mostly entrusted Juliet to configure and fine-tune the mobility systems of the mechs.

This was a major responsibility for Juliet as every expert mech design mainly depended on their flight systems for mobility.

Without the ability to fly, the expert mechs had no way to move around in space and in the air. At most, they would be able to walk and run on the ground, but the Larkinson Clan did not have any desire to design an expert mech that could only fight on solid ground.

For this reason, Juliet assumed heavy responsibility over this field. Her expertise was especially relevant to the Disruptor Project as the expert light skirmisher would instantly lose its value if something happened to its flight system.

Fortunately, Juliet did not disappoint. Gloriana gained a greater appreciation of the Penitent Sister mech designer when the third Journeyman to join the Design Department not only finished her assignments in time, but also delivered better than expected work!

"These solutions are much more refined than I expected!"

"Thank you. I became a bit more inspired today. I did my best to meet all of your expectations. The flight system of the Disruptor Project will become my best and most representative work. I already feel proud of what I have accomplished, but I know that I will gain even more satisfaction once it dominates the battlefield."

To Juliet, the Disruptor Project was more than just an expert mech. It was a platform in which she could fully showcase her skill and talents! So much of her structure was oriented towards maximizing its mobility and minimizing any elements that detracted from this overarching priority that the mech design simply sung to her that she couldn't really describe.

Lately, she began to develop a more emotional connection to the expert mech design. She never really thought she would develop such a reaction to a mech that was obviously designed for a male mech pilot, but her Hexer sensibilities completely left the picture as soon as she threw herself into her design sessions.

Just looking at the projection of the incomplete expert mech design warmed her heart.

It was as if she was looking at her unborn child.

Though it sounded very strange, once she began to treat the Disruptor Project, she felt she understood the light expert mech design to a more intimate degree!

This odd approach did not make her smarter. It did not insert additional knowledge in her mind.

However, she noticed that ever since she altered her approach, she became a lot more sensitive towards which design choices aligned with the design. Her intuition towards certain decisions improved substantially as well.

The only wrinkle was that she wasn't always able to reach this amazing state. She had to become fully invested in her work in order to enter into this heightened state of mind.

"Keep up the good work, Juliet." Gloriana complimented her fellow Hexer. "As long as you can sustain this rate of progress, I can accelerate our work schedule and get more work done in less time."

With Ketis taking care of most of the offensive functions of the expert mech designs and Juliet doing her best to make every expert mech as mobile as possible, the pair of Journeymen lifted a lot of weight on Gloriana's shoulders.

"It's unfortunate that we don't have a defensive specialist in our Design Department." Gloriana complained to Ves. "If we had a Journeyman who excelled in armor systems at our disposal, then we would have a complete trifecta of an essential design team."

Ves nodded as he reviewed his latest work. "We're still ramping up. There will be other opportunities to promote someone to Journeyman from within the ranks or hire an external specialist."

Offense, defense and mobility were the three essential areas that every mech was measured by. Pooling together mech designers that specialized in each of them was considered the most standard and effective team configuration in the mech industry.

Since five mech designers was the most optimal number of contributing designers working on a design project, that left two slots available for other specialties.

Usually, it was considered redundant to add another contributor whose specialty overlapped with the essential ones. This was where more unique mech designers like Ves came in. His area of specialty did not encroach on the territories of the others.

Technically speaking, Ves' design philosophy fell under the category of utility, which was also considered a major area in most circles. The amount of value that he could provide to a mech design made him very valuable in the right circumstances. As long as there weren't too many other utility-oriented mech designers in the mix, he had no trouble justifying his involvement in a mech design project.

This effectively meant that the head and lead designers of the expert mech design projects covered three of the four major areas.

Gloriana had no choice but to invest most of her design time on filling up the remaining design work. Every day, she worked to design the exterior layers of the expert mech designs. Her sensitivity towards flaws and her drive to seek the most perfect solutions served her well. While she did not finish her work assignments quickly, her design results were always usable and rarely needed to be revised.

The faster-than-usual progress along with the optimistic performance of all of the mech designers injected Gloriana with a lot of confidence.

"I was born for this!" She boasted. "I'm a much better leader than Ves!"

"Miaow!" Clixie proudly nodded her head.

She started to gain more momentum when everything started to go right. She worked faster, came up with better solutions and began to receive more and more inspiration during her design sessions.

Her passion flared up like a bonfire. Her growing confidence along with her stellar optimism seemed to infect the other mech designers.

Even if she started to issue greater demands to the other mech designers, no one wanted to be the person who disappointed her expectations.

It felt good to receive her trust! Her standards may be insanely high, but that meant that anyone who satisfied her requirements was worthy of her appreciation!

Gloriana was quite pleasant to be around as long as she was happy. Her depth of knowledge, her passion for mech designs and her constant encouragement seemed to lead to a virtuous cycle where the other mech designers always sought to do better and better.

Even Ves was impressed by this shift. Gloriana hadn't yelled at someone in a week. That was practically a record!

Her good mood not only made her a lot more tolerable during their work shifts, but also caused her to be a lot more generous during her off-time.

"Meow."

"Miaow."

Lucky and Clixie licked each other's sides as they lay on a floating pillow.

Meanwhile, Ves and Gloriana cuddled together as they just finished a long but productive work session.

"The Disruptor Project has reached the halfway mark." Gloriana happily noted as her tired face smiled in contentment. "If we keep up this pace, we'll be able to turn Venerable Tusa's expert mech into something truly special."

Ves embraced her shoulder and squeezed her close. Her body felt exceptionally soft against his side.

"Master Willix also delivered her latest on the design." He said. "It's quite interesting how she integrated Perfidious Steel in the structure of the Disruptor Project."

"Mhmmmm. Once the resonating exotics are completely integrated in the expert mech, its performance will assuredly be strong. Still, aren't you forgetting about something?"

Gloriana gazed at Ves with an expectant eye.

"Uh, what are you talking about?"

"The proto-gods, of course! The Disruptor Project of our dreams won't be complete until it receives the appropriate support from the proto-gods that only you can provide. Have you made any progress in this area?"

"Uhm, I have already fleshed out an idea. I want to try something new for the Disruptor Project."

"Like what?"

"It's difficult to explain."

"Then give me an idea, at least. I can't go on without knowing what you have in store. I need to take all of your contributions into account."

Ves hesitated a bit. "Well, you know about my prime mechs, right?"

She nodded. "I've studied the Piranha Prime plenty of times. It's Venerable Tusa's current mech and I've frequently referenced its design in order to increase the fit of the Disruptor Project."

"Well, my assumption is that the strengths and capabilities of prime mechs can also be transferred to expert mechs. While I am not entirely certain that this is the case, according to my theoretical framework, prime resonance and true resonance should not conflict. They might even interact with each other in uncertain ways."

Gloriana frowned. "You're trying out a new experiment, aren't you? What did I tell you about experiments? We can't afford to engage in excessive risks, not when everything is going so well at the moment!"

"Hear me out, Gloriana! True resonance is mainly a product of the mech and mech pilot. Prime resonance on the other hand is product of the mech, mech pilot and design spirit. That extra factor originally didn't have much relations with expert mechs and true resonance, but through the use of prime resonance, I can make the design spirits play a greater role in combat."

Gloriana began to look intrigued. "Your story sounds logical, but I doubt it's that simple."

"I already have a couple of design spirits in mind, but I have yet to figure out how they will be able to affect the Disruptor Project." Ves spoke. "In a way, I'm glad that we are working on finishing it first. This is a good opportunity for me to explore new ground and try out new solutions. As long as I am able to come up with a successful implementation this time, I can apply the same approach to the other expert mech designs."

All of this sounded rather iffy to Gloriana. However, the continuous string of successes caused her to become more indulgent.

If the project was running behind schedule and if the work completed by others was disappointing, then she wouldn't be so tolerant to her husband.

As it was, Gloriana did not mind too much this time. Ves had been so focused and productively in the last couple of weeks that he deserved a reward once in a while.

She could also sense the potential of his latest idea. If Ves was able to integrate the elements together into a greater whole, then the expert mech they were working on would stand out from other ones!

Chapter 3074: Diplomatic Strategy

Ves did not make life easy for himself by aiming to go big on the spiritual design of the Disruptor Project.

This was a rare opportunity for him to combine the strengths of a prime mech with an expert mech.

With a rare resource like Unending alloy at his disposal, there was no way that Ves wanted to squander its potential by maintaining a cautious approach!

In truth, one of the reasons why Ves behaved so well lately and tried his best to meet and exceed Gloriana's expectations was because he knew her too well.

If he didn't make her happy, how could he get away with any stunts?

Fortunately, his ploy succeeded. Gloriana was so upbeat about the progress of the Disruptor Project that she eventually allowed Ves to have his fun.

Everything would be fine as long as Ves succeeded in his implementation, but if he screwed up in any way, there was no doubt that Gloriana would turn into a demoness again!

Ves shuddered as he imagined the reckoning he would face if he caused the project to be delayed because of his distractions.

Despite this threat, he did not intend to scale back his ambitions... A moment like this would not come again for a very long time and he instinctively felt he was working on another powerful innovation.

Though he wasn't able to predict the power of his latest preoccupation, he guessed that it would not be weak!

"This is the key to differentiating my work." Ves whispered to himself.

He wanted to make a mark on the mech community. The invention of prime mechs and prime resonance had already given him a lot of fulfillment, but they were clearly inferior substitutes to the real deal.

Now that he was able to work on actual expert mechs that were able to evoke true resonance, what would they be like if he was able to alter this established dynamic by leveraging his spiritual engineering capabilities?

While Ves didn't exactly know how Seniors and Masters enabled expert mechs to exhibit true resonance, he theorized that this was a completely different approach from his own ones.

He was absolutely certain that no existing mech designer had ever created anything comparable to prime resonance!

Since design spirits played a key role in making this phenomenon possible in the first place, he predicted that he would gain an absolutely extraordinary result if he increased the union between design spirit and mech!

However, before he could explore this topic any further, he received an important message.

Shederin Purnesse had finally formulated a diplomatic strategy for the Larkinson Clan. The man spent weeks pouring through numerous archives, speaking to many different Larkinsons, looking up information on the galactic net and so on. He tried his best to come up with the most fitting plan for the clan in order to showcase his value.

Ves took a brief moment off his schedule to meet with the former ambassador at his new office. The Larkinson Clan had recently set up the Foreign Relations Department in order to emphasize the growing importance of forging ties.

Shederin had come in at the right time. Though the former Loxian had yet to become the leader of the department, as long as his plan was sound, the job was as good as his. Out of all of the Purnesses, only he had the talent, experience and wisdom to assume this major responsibility!

Ves already saw the difference that someone like Shederin could make when he entered the compartment which housed the new department. The various Larkinsons assigned to expand the foreign relations activities of the clan had become a lot more focused and driven.

The old man was already starting to make his mark here. Previously, none of the Larkinsons knew what they were doing. While they could make simple contacts and conduct straightforward business deals, their level of thinking couldn't keep up with the expanding scope of the Larkinson Clan.

Now that someone who used to be in charge of the foreign relations of an entire state entered the picture, the existing workers finally began to see the light.

The air of optimism in the Foreign Relations Department resembled that of the Design Department. This was a good sign in Ves' eyes as it appeared that Shederin's influence was absolutely not weak.

What would it be like if he actually took charge of this department? Once he gained the authority he needed, the Larkinson Clan would no longer appear like brutes in front of other people!

Ves became more certain that it had been worth it for him to rescue the Purnesse Family. The trivial losses the Avatars and Vandals suffered during the previous battle were incomparable to the gains.

He quickly moved through the main hall and entered a small and fairly barren office compartment.

Shederin already prepared his presentation. The desk and other furniture had moved over to the side in order to make way for a large projection that displayed multiple key elements.

"Patriarch Ves, please come in. I think you'll be quite excited to hear what I am about to say."

Ves smiled. "Let's hear it, then. Our clan has gone on for too long without a clear idea on how to interact with outside parties. I'm very interested in hearing your perspective."

The ambassador did not waste any time on pleasantries or small talk. He had already spent enough time in the Larkinson Clan to know that its members preferred to be polite but direct. There was a lot of work to be done in the fleet and no one wanted to become a burden to their comrades.

"I've taken stock of the Larkinson Clan and its current situation." Shederin began. "Before I can formulate a strategy, we first need to define our goals. Based on what you have said and what I have observed from other Larkinsons, I have summarized a small list."

The old man gestured to the projection which began to display a few key goals.

"The primary goal of the Larkinson Clan is to exist as an independent organization that is able to provide for its clansmen. It must belong to the Larkinsons and no one else should be able to order them around. The members should also be happy in the clan and be able to live and die in it without any regrets."

This was a more general goal, but one that Ves could support. "While I haven't exactly thought about it that way, I do think it is essential to achieve all of these points. We have been burned too many times by others to put all of our trust in outsiders. We should be able to take care of our own and be able to make ourselves happy."

"One of the terms that is rather challenging to work with is that you do not wish to subject yourself to the rule of others, correct?"

"That's the primary reason why I have put so much effort into establishing a spaceborn clan. Only by retaining our mobility will we be able to prevent ourselves from being tied by local power players."

Shederin nodded in understanding, but he did not look optimistic. "I can understand why you think this is the right course of action, but your demand imposes many restrictions on us. At the very least, it rules out the possibility of taking shelter under the umbrella of the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact. Both alliances are hierarchical in nature. If you join the Terran Alliance, you must dance to the tunes of the ancient clans. If you become a part of the Rubarthan Pact, you are obliged to follow any instruction given by a Rubarthan prince. Regardless of their differences, the leading figures of the first-rate superstates only have their own interests in mind."

Ves sighed. "You're right. The two alliances that are based in the Red Ocean truly aren't suitable for our clan. It's a pity that we have to rule them out from the beginning. They provide a lot of benefits to those who join their ranks."

The Terrans were especially generous. With the Red Ocean Promise, the strongest pioneers in the Terran Alliance actually had a chance of ascending to the same height as the powerful and prestigious ancient clans that had dominated the Greater Terran United Confederation for millennia!

Ves would be lying if he claimed he wasn't interested in this reward. While he did not have a good opinion on the Terrans, they were rightfully considered to be one of the most powerful groups in human space. Becoming one of their top dogs would instantly propel the Larkinson Clan to a galactic power!

However, how realistic was it for his clan to climb on top of all of those other pioneers who would be willing to do anything to achieve this ultimate ambition?

Ves had no confidence that his clan would be able to survive in this horrible competition! Their foundation was too shallow and their starting point was too low.

The pioneers who originated from the galactic heartland and the galactic center had a lot more wealth, assets, personnel and connections at their disposal. This head start provided these ambitious competitors with an unassailable advantage!

The fact that the expeditionary would be entering the Red Ocean years after its opening also caused his clan to fall behind.

Though it pained Ves to cross these options off the list, it had to be done.

"Then our only option is the Red Ocean Union, right?"

Shederin nodded. "It is the only regional alliance that makes sense for us. As we have discussed earlier, it does not impose too many restrictions on its members, but it doesn't offer as much benefits either."

"If that's the case, why not skip these alliances entirely and try to forge a different path?"

"This is too difficult, patriarch. I do not advise starting from scratch. The Golden Skull Alliance is still lacking in too many areas."

Shederin pointed at the projection, which showed a basic diagram of the Larkinson Clan and its various connections. It also showed three different bubbles which broadly represent the three regional alliances.

Right now, the Larkinson Clan sits outside the alliances. Our contact with the groups that chose to join them will either be hostile and neutral. There is little chance we'll be able to forge friendly ties with them. Even the members of the Red Ocean Union will not open their doors to us. Do you know why?"

"Because... the members of these alliances can already befriend others who made the same decision. There is an inherent increase in trust and common ground between different groups."

"The only partners we can forge ties with are those that have also chosen to reject the alliances. Think about that. What kind of pioneers and groups would reject the entreaties of all three major regional alliances?"

"They're crazy." Ves threw out a guess.

Shederin softly coughed. "I would not use that terminology, but my overall judgement is similar. The Red Ocean is highly dangerous. Pioneers and fleets either get destroyed or disappear on a regular basis. The groups that chose to brave these risks while rejecting systematic assistance are quite unique. It is unlikely that they can become one of our trusted partners because the fact that they have eschewed the Red Ocean Union already indicates that they do not like to make lasting commitments."

They were all selfish, in other words.

This meant that the only option that Shederin found acceptable was to apply to join the Red Ocean Union once they reached the Red Ocean.

"The Red Ocean Union is constantly developing, right?" Ves recalled.

"That is true. It is constantly changing and refining its rules and approach. If we join it at a relatively early stage, there is a good chance that we will be able to gain a lot more benefits as the alliance grows."

"It's a bit risky, though. Who knows if the Red Ocean Union will actually become better?"

The Big Two are behind this alliance. That should explain everything." Shederin confidently smiled.

Chapter 3075: Choose Your Friends

When the Larkinson Clan, the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan reached the Red Ocean, they had to make a lot of difficult choices.

The decision to join one of the major regional alliances was one of the most crucial ones.

Rejecting one of the three major alliances meant cutting themselves off to a lot of powerful contacts. The Larkinsons really couldn't afford to make this decision even though Ves was attracted by the lack of entanglements.

Even though Ves really wanted to keep his clan completely free of outside commitment, that was wholly unrealistic.

"The Red Ocean is a region that is in flux." Shederin explained. "The advantage of that is that no one has claimed all of the turf in the dwarf galaxy. The downside is that the star systems outside of the direct supervision of the Big Two are absent of order. Anything can happen over there and those without friends become very tempting targets to those with malicious intentions."

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This was where the value of the regional alliances came in. Becoming a part of one of these large gatherings not only reduced the chance that members of the same alliance would break out in hostilities, but also imposed a modest degree of deterrence against outsiders.

"The Red Ocean Union provides the least amount of protection, though." Ves pointed out.

"That is true, but this is just the starting point, patriarch. Don't assume that signing up for the Red Ocean Union and passively enjoying the benefits is all you can do. The Red Ocean Union may lack the structure of the other regional alliances, but that means that we have the freedom to develop our own faction or powerbase within this gathering."

That was new to Ves. "What do you have in mind, exactly?"

The former ambassador turned to the projection and moved the symbol that represented the Golden Skull Alliance into the bubble of the Red Ocean Union.

He subsequently began to draw some loose lines within this bubble so that it was split up into smaller groupings.

"The Red Ocean Union's internal cohesion will probably never be high, but those who gain more prominence and those who try to befriend others within the regional alliance will gain more out of it than others. The establishment of sub-alliances or factions is inevitable for that reason. The Red Ocean Union will become too big and diverse to maintain a united front. It is a given that it will split into different factions led by prominent pioneers."

Although this all sounded logical, Ves did not exactly like the implication behind this explanation.

"Are you suggesting that we should establish and lead one of these factions?"

"It doesn't have to be a major faction." Shederin clarified. "You can use the Golden Skull Alliance as a starting point and expand it to encompass twenty different groups. You can also pursue a more ambitious agenda and opt to gather over a thousand pioneers."

Ves almost had a heart attack when he heard the latter.

A thousand pioneers!

That was too ridiculous! Leading a thousand prominent and powerful pioneers was no different than herding a thousand cats.

Since Ves already had trouble trying to control a single cat, how could he possibly restrain so many of them? He would probably tear his hair out if he tried to manage so many different groups!

"The latter scenario is not as difficult as it sounds." The Purnesser said. "As long as you set up a suitable hierarchy, the burden of controlling so many pioneers will become manageable."

"I understand what you are saying, but it's quite dangerous to rely on powerful groups to maintain control. What if they betray us? As long as the benefits are great enough, it's possible for them to launch a coup. I don't want to invest so much hard work into forming a large faction only to allow someone else to benefit from our hard work."

The old man paused. Ves was known as a risk taker within the clan, but he was overly cautious when it came to trusting outsiders. This limited a lot of options that Shederin had in mind as trust played an important role in establishing ties.

To be honest, Shederin had never worked with such a difficult case before in his life. The Loxians were much more willing to extend their trust to others. The Purnesse

Family eagerly developed an expansive network under the umbrella of the Hegeneration Party.

Unfortunately... the death of the Loxic President and some other disasters caused the downfall of the party. All of the connections forged by the Purnesse Family became worthless as the situation changed too rapidly for him to form an effective response.

His eyes lowered. Perhaps it was best that he was working for a more distrustful leader this time. He could not afford to make the Larkinson Clan repeat the mistakes of the Purnesse Family.

"If this is your will, we will limit our outreach and seek to form a smaller and tighter network of friendships and alliances."

This approach entailed partnering up with like-minded pioneers in order to build up a collective that could make it easier for them to achieve goals that could not be accomplished alone.

"What is important is that our growing alliance must incorporate groups that each offer a useful benefit." The old man said "For example, we should ally with a technological group that engages in comprehensive research and development. Such groups tend to have shortcomings in their military and cultural aspects. We should also seek to partner up with a trading company or commercial conglomerate. As much as the LMC is able to fund all of the expenditures of the Larkinson Clan, its current business model is anything but ideal."

They already had this discussion before. The Red Ocean's mech market and distribution network was still in its infancy. Ves did not relish the headaches he would have to deal with in order to increase the sales channels of his mechs.

"Are you telling me that we should give up on trying to build our own sales and distribution network?" Ves frowned.

"You shouldn't be too worried about that, patriarch. Your mechs are intrinsically valuable. You'll be able to sell your mechs in many markets sooner or later. Therefore, it does not make a significant difference if you pick one trading company or another to sell our products. If this company is truly short-sighted enough to break these relations, it will not be difficult to establish a new trading relationship with another distributor."

It was actually very normal for mech companies to operate in this manner. Low-ranking mech designers and smaller mech companies especially needed help with selling their mechs and delivering them to their customers.

Even Ves used to cooperate with Marcella Bollinger once.

Of course, high-ranking mech designers usually didn't need to rely so much on mech brokers or distributors anymore. Their mech models had become popular enough that customers proactively sought them out. It made a lot more sense to cut out the middlemen and start selling mechs directly to the company's target audience.

While Ves preferred to adopt this model, the biggest problem was that the Larkinson Clan wasn't based in any state or fixed position. Without establishing his clan in any single location, it was a lot more challenging to establish a distribution network.

It wasn't impossible, though.

Still, investing in sales and distribution channels not only tied the Larkinson Clan down to an extent, but also served as a big distraction.

It was a lot more convenient if he just dumped this responsibility to a partner that excelled in trade.

"I'll take your suggestions under consideration." Ves replied with a noncommittal answer. "We don't have to make any immediate choices so we can afford to take our time. What matters most is finding suitable partners that we can trust. For example, I know I can count on the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan to back me up because they proved their commitment in the past and we are bound by mutual interests. Any other partner must be able to provide us with similar guarantees."

"I shall do my best to look out for partners that are willing to cooperate with the Larkinson Clan in the long term, but it shall take some time. Right now, we are too far away from the Red Ocean. The galactic net is not enough for us to understand the true situation in the new frontier. Once we pass through the beyonder gate, much will become clear when I am able to speak to others in person."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I hope you succeed. I do agree that we cannot completely rely on ourselves and a small handful of friends to survive in the Red Ocean. A certain degree of cooperation is essential."

"Since our goals are rather modest, we do not need to become the most prominent or powerful group in the Red Ocean. Our faction doesn't need to be too big as a result."

The point of starting a faction within the Red Ocean Union was to secure their own safety and positions. Ves did not want to stick his neck out too much. He wanted to gain enough allies to deter enemies but not enough to turn into a leader who vied for hegemony in the Red Ocean.

Even though the dwarf galaxy was a lot smaller than the Milky Way, it was still huge in absolute terms! There was no way for the Larkinson Clan to have any serious chance of occupying a significant slice of the pie when Rubarthan princes and Terran clansmen were already competing to do the same.

The only outcome of trying to get in between these two giants was to get squashed in the middle!

"All of this sounds nice and all, but most of these plans won't come into action until we reach the Red Ocean." Ves remarked. "What about the period before we arrive? We can still do something while we are traveling through a couple of star clusters."

"That is a different matter." Shederin said. "To be honest, I have already identified numerous potential partners that are at least of the same caliber as the Cross Clan that might be suitable to add to our growing alliance. However... I think we should refrain from partnering with these groups."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "I thought an ambassador like you would be happy to make a lot of friends."

Shederin Purnesse smiled. "You are not wrong, but some friends are more valuable than others. The local groups who are begging to join a pioneering alliance are usually leftovers that have failed to gain passage early. Their potential is lower and the benefits they can provide to us are not as attractive. If possible, you and your existing allies should seek to accumulate the required amount of merits by yourselves. This will give you much more leeway in banding together with other pioneers once you use your beyonder ticket."

There was a vast difference between pioneers who were able to earn enough MTA merits to reach the Red Ocean and ordinary organizations that were still stuck in the old galaxy.

On the one hand, these weaker groups were much easier to control.

On the other hand, they weren't as useful.

"Patriarch Ves, don't forget where we come from. We originate from one of the furthest star clusters from the center of human civilization. Our wealth base, resource endowment, technological base and development level pale in comparison to the more central star clusters. The pioneers who come from the latter are much more powerful and a lot more worthy to befriend."

"Won't it become difficult to form relations with those powerful organizations?" Ves frowned.

"Ah, our Purnesse Family is not unfamiliar with forging ties with these kinds of organizations. It is one of the core strengths of the Grand Loxic Republic. Just leave it to us. There is always a way to forge a common understanding between different groups with different backgrounds. This is especially the case when you have something unique to offer to them. Your unique abilities as a mech designer will play a central role in expanding our network once we reach the Red Ocean!"

Chapter 3076: Wider Contributions

In general, Shederin Purnesse didn't think it was worthwhile to associate with any local organizations.

"Don't misunderstand." He said. "We are not the strongest or most impressive group in the surrounding star clusters. Far from it. We may meet several other individuals or organizations that may be willing to make heavy concessions to become a part of the Golden Skull Alliance. However, taking them in is a grave mistake. We must not only look at the present circumstances, but also take our future trajectory into account."

"What do you mean by that?" Ves leaned back on his chair while clasping his hands.

"When I evaluate the growth potential of the Larkinson Clan, I see many positive signs. Granted, most of them are based around you and your unique products, but that sets us apart from the competition. The enduring success of the LMC and your personal relationship with Master Willix of the Mech Trade Association are two clear indicators of your high potential... For all intents and purposes, at this stage you should be regarded as a highly accomplished Senior rather than an up-and-coming Journeyman. Now, what do you think will happen once you advance your mech design career in reality?"

Ves understood the gist of what the former ambassador tried to convey.

"You're saying that I'll turn into the equivalent of a Master by that time."

"Not literally, and not completely, but it is undeniable that your value and your influence will vastly surpass that of a more conventional Senior such as the Cross Clan's resident mech designer. The power of a real Master is not simple. Aside from their individual design prowess, their ability to network and make deals with similarly powerful individuals is enviable. It is a relation manager's greatest dream to work for a Master."

Shederin Purnesse exuded excitement as he imagined this scenario. The look he directed towards Ves hinted that the old man thought very highly of his new employer.

If Ves was able to advance to Master one day, then Shederin or his descendants would likely be entreating some of the most powerful and influential individuals in human space!

It appeared that Shederin Purnesse's research on Ves and the Larkinson Clan fully convinced him that he should embrace his current situation. The old man no longer held any reservations about giving up the Purnesse Family in favor of becoming a member of a more powerful and promising family organization.

Ves waved his hand. "All of this sounds nice, but let's not get too excited. Much of what you said won't become relevant until later on. Right now, we shouldn't neglect our short-

term needs. Not only do we need to find more opportunities to earn MTA merits, we also have to procure enough goods and assets to prepare us for our trip ahead."

"It will take around one to two more years to reach the beyonder gate. Time will be tight, but I have faith that we will be able to find a solution."

It was easy for someone like Shederin to say that Ves should earn more MTA merits, but it was anything but simple. Otherwise he wouldn't have agreed so easily to Master Willix's latest assignment.

Right now, Ves had no idea how many MTA mech pilots he could successfully elevate to expert pilot at the end of the five-year period. Perhaps he might only be able to pull it off once or twice, which hardly made any difference in the greater scheme of things.

He briefly recalled that Professor Benedict managed to earn a couple of million MTA merits not too long ago. The speed in which he earned this reward was rather unreal and only further emphasized that the Skull Architect hadn't been driven out of the Friday Coalition because his products were bad.

The presence of Professor Benedict in the expeditionary fleet exerted a lot of pressure on the Larkinson Clan. If he didn't want this ruthless but incredibly capable Senior to dominate the alliance's mech industry, then Ves had to work harder in order to narrow the gap!

He frowned. "There are several opportunities to earn a lot of MTA merits, but none of them are quick and easy to accomplish. It will be very hard to gather all of the required merits in a short amount of time without partnering up with more aspiring pioneers."

"I have a different view on the matter." Shederin confidently replied. "First, our two allied partners are not standing still. I have heard that even the Glory Seekers are trying to make up for the shortfall."

Ves looked surprised. "That's new to me. I thought they would just continue to freeload off our merits."

"You haven't been paying attention to them lately. The Hexers are proud and arrogant people. How can they be satisfied with their current situation? Marshall Ariadne Wodin is aware that the Glory Seekers is the weakest of the three partners in the Golden Skull Alliance. The strength of our clan is already evident, and the Cross Clan has just started to enter its own rapid growth phase. If the Glory Seekers wish to remain relevant, they have to develop their own specialty in order to maintain their value."

Shederin Purnesse had become a lot more sensitive towards this dynamic due to the tragedy that had befallen the Purnesse Family.

Before the Purnessers joined the Larkinson Clan, it had been a part of a large and broad coalition of the Hegenarion Party. However, his family had become so complacent about its apparent value that everything went drastically wrong when Crown Uprising upended the status quo.

The current situation of the Glory Seekers highly resembled that of the old Purnesse Family. Compared to the two clans, this Hexer organization did not really bring that much value to the table these days. The advantages it used to possess such as superior military power and extensive ties to the Wodin Dynasty and the Hexadric Hegemony became less relevant.

The Larkinsons already took advantage of most of what the Glory Seekers was able to provide. Their well-trained mech pilots fought and died on behalf of the Larkinson Clan when it was still weak. The dynasty supporting them from behind also extended a lot of favorable deals to Ves.

However, now that Ves had just obtained the core technical library of the Hexadric Hegemony, the state had less and less to offer to him. If not for the fact that the Glory Seekers were supposed to be his wife's personal household troops, he would have sought to assimilate them in his clan already.

"Do you have any indication of what the Glory Seekers are up to?" Ves curiously asked.

"I have my guesses, patriarch. Currently, the Glory Seekers do not have the capital to earn MTA merits, but do not forget the Hexers that stand behind them. If the matriarchs of the Hegemony throw their support behind the Glory Seekers, the problem of accumulating sufficient merits will not be a great concern anymore."

"How?"

"For example, transferring one of their Master Mech Designers to the Glory Seekers."

For a moment, Ves became speechless. Would a Hexer Master really condescend to join the Glory Seekers? A woman of this high status already possessed a powerful network and organization of her own! Hexer Masters were fully capable of banding together in order to secure their own passage to the Red Ocean.

"If a Hexer Master truly wants to butt into the Golden Skull Alliance, I won't give my approval." Ves stated. "I can imagine the Cross Clan doesn't want to get overshadowed like this as well. An outside Master is far too powerful and will completely break the balance of power within our alliance."

Of course, the benefits that a Master could provide were also great. Ever since Ves started to collaborate with Master Willix on the current round of mech design projects, he gained a much greater appreciation of what it was like to work alongside someone with greater skill and vision.

Though Master Willix rarely issued any remarks on the ongoing work of the Larkinson mech designers, the corrections she made over the course of her highly effective implementation of resonating exotics to the expert mech designs provided a lot of help on the sly.

Though the influence of a Master inevitably meant that Ves and the other Journeymen lost some of the ownership of the mech designs, the increase in performance was worth the tradeoff.

"The possibility that a Hexer Master will seek to join or merge with the Glory Seekers is a low probability event." Shederin reassured Ves. "The greater point that I am trying to make is that you are not alone in trying to earn enough MTA merits to redeem a beyonder ticket. In fact, I think you are actually underestimating your fellow colleagues."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Out of the four Journeymen in residence in the Larkinson Clan, two appear to be fairly normal. Both your wife and Juliet Stameris will not be able to contribute much to the Mech Trade Association until they advance to Senior."

"Your judgement isn't wrong, though Gloriana won't be happy to hear the truth." Ves replied.

"Regardless, that leaves two Journeymen who possess unique and unusual talents. I don't need to say anything about you, but have you ever thought about the implications of what Ketis Larkinson can do? An existence like her is unprecedented. If she is able to leverage her abilities as a swordmaster in her mech design work, she can create novel innovations that might be able to catch the attention of the Mech Trade Association."

The old man made a good point. Ves knew exactly what the MTA was like. Master Willix's persistent attempts to squeeze his secrets out of his mind reflected the organization-wide compulsion to acquire more knowledge and advance the level of mech design across human civilization!

The MTA's mission might sound noble, but the mechers were undeniably looking out for themselves.

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "I think you are onto something now that I think about it. The problem is that Ketis hasn't really shown off her capabilities yet. We'll have to wait until we deliver our first expert mech design in order to see if your idea pans out. I'll be happy if she can succeed in her ambitions."

Ketis did not keep her goals a secret. She frequently stated her intention to give Venerable Tusa and every other melee expert pilot an extra advantage by imparting an extra gift to their weapons.

It was similar to how Ves planned to supercharge the performance of the expert mechs by combining true resonance with prime resonance.

As long as either or both of them successfully implemented their ambitious ideas, the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan would definitely stand on a greater height compared to equivalent machines designed by other mech designers!

Such unique machines would likely possess significant research value to the MTA. Master Willix had already awarded Ves with MTA merits before, so this might be a good opportunity to earn another sum of merits.

"Don't forget that merits represent real and significant contributions to human society and the galactic mech community." Shederin reminded Ves. "The most obvious contributions are directly related to your profession, but it doesn't have to be so narrow. As long as you are able to come up with any other means to advance humanity, you should present it to the MTA and see if they will recognize your accomplishments. The Association has always been generous to those who contribute their strength as opposed to reserving all of their advantages to themselves."

Ves responded with a cynical smile. "Yeah, right. I'm sure that all of those selfless people will receive a nice pat on the head from the Association, but the latter will always gain the most benefit."

He hated the fact that the relationship between the MTA and its contributors was so lopsided. Still, as one of the most powerful organizations in the galaxy and the definite authority on everything related to mechs, Ves had no choice but to obey the prevailing rules of the game!

Chapter 3077: Implicit Understanding

Shederin's diplomatic strategy and advice roughly covered three different time periods.

In the short term, the Larkinson Clan should seek to earn MTA merits as much as possible. Ves agreed with the Purnesser that he shouldn't be the sole provider of merits. If Ketis and anyone else in the clan could pitch in, he would gladly welcome the assistance!

In the medium term, the Larkinsons should immediately join the Red Ocean Union. However, rather than settling for that, it should seek to find strong but trustworthy partners within the Union in order to develop a more personal and intimate faction.

In the long term... well, Ves didn't take Shederin's vague aspirations seriously. Anything could happen in the next century. He had no idea how quickly he would be able to advance to Master and be able to enter into the true upper circle of human civilization. The distant future would look drastically different depending on how many centuries it took for him to reach the coveted rank of Master.

At the end of Shederin's presentation, the office fell silent as Ves mulled over what he heard.

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This was a very important moment for the former head of Purnesse Family. This session was a demonstration of his capabilities. While he wasn't able to show off his ability to charm and negotiate with outsiders, his vision and judgement was on full display at the moment.

Though Shederin did not entirely feel comfortable with seeking the patronage of someone who was just a fraction of his age, he did not show any of his misgivings on the surface.

The galaxy wasn't fair, and the old rules no longer applied. Talent, ability, strength and background were far more important than the accumulation of age and wisdom.

Just because Shederin was a century older than Ves didn't mean the older man had the right to look down on the young man!

The difference in status was too great. If the Purnesse Family was still in power, then Shederin might be justified in treating Ves like a youngster, but the current reality no longer allowed him to act as a patronizing elder.

It was good that Shederin was accustomed to adopting different faces and attitudes towards vastly different people. His adaptability was so good that his change of behavior went far beyond acting.

If necessary, he was even able to hypnotize himself to believe in different truths!

Ves wasn't aware of these thoughts. His mind focused on other concerns.

He did not agree with everything that Shederin suggested. The former ambassador wanted to accomplish more than what Ves felt comfortable with. Building up an influence in the Red Ocean, however small, would put the Larkinsons in a position where they had to make more commitments and put their trust in a lot more people.

None of that appealed to Ves, but he recognized that the Purnesser offered him a coherent path to survival in a very dangerous and chaotic region of space.

Yet just because the proposed strategy fell outside his comfort zone did not mean he should dismiss it out of hand.

"Mr. Shederin, in our first meeting, you told me that you gave a very low judgement on the survival odds of the Larkinson Clan. Now that you understand our situation better, do you still stand by the percentages you stated last time?"

The older man smiled. "The numbers may have shifted, but my overall conclusions haven't changed. If the Larkinson Clan continues to develop along its current trajectory, I think there is a 20 percent chance that it will be able to survive the challenges to come."

"That's better than before." Ves decided to look on the bright side of this prediction. "What are the reasons behind this upwards adjustment?"

"Well, I was already aware of some of your potential, but your clan has gathered quite a number of impressive talents. Your expert pilots have plenty of untapped potential. Miss Calabast Arnlend has made a considerable impression on me. Miss Gloria Wodin is a brilliant mech designer whose drive to improve is the highest that I have seen among her kind. The former citizens of the Life Research Association and the Heavensword Association are already becoming the pillars that can share the burden of supporting your clan. Due to the existence of this mysterious kinship network of yours, you have been able to gather and assimilate a diverse population of helpers. This is actually one of our main points of strength."

Shederin was right, in a sense. Ves was far from alone these days. He already tried that in the early days of his career but quickly bumped into many limitations.

These days, the Larkinson Clan had grown to a scale where Ves hardly ever had to address trivial issues anymore. He completely delegated the running of the LMC to Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and just assumed that General Verle would be able to manage the increasingly stronger and more diverse mech forces.

"Alright, I'm glad that you think so highly of the Larkinson Clan, but a 20 percent survival chance is still too low. What are our chances if we follow your strategy to the letter?"

The Purnesser did not immediately beat his chest. "It is difficult to summarize a difficult prediction in a single number. There are too many variables at play. I also cannot fully account for large, epochal shifts in the society we live in. If I had that ability, I would have never allowed our Purnesse Family to suffer a rapid fall from grace due to the ripple effects of the Crown Uprising. Still, if you insist on hearing my estimate, then I cautiously think that I can double our chances."

"Forty percent?"

"More or less. I do not have the confidence to raise this figure."

Suffice to say, forty percent hardly sounded satisfactory to Ves. Yet there was more to this figure than what was obvious from the surface.

Ves did not feel that Shederin Purnesse exaggerated or massaged the numbers. The old man was being brutally honest because Ves and the Larkinson Clan needed a reality check rather than misleading flattery.

In addition, doubling the Larkinson Clan's chances was already impressive. Shederin had to work under disadvantageous circumstances. Compared to the more impressive pioneers that were already starting to become famed in the Red Ocean, the Larkinsons were still too lacking at the moment!

The only way to close this gap was to bank on the future and do their best to draw out their potential. That was the entire point of seeking more allies. Ves and the clan needed to buy a lot of time to grow powerful enough to be able to survive on their own. The best way to do that was to borrow other people's strength. This was also why Shederin was so eager to partner up with higher caliber organizations.

All of it made sense. The plan was not overly complicated nor did it attempt to steer the Larkinson Clan in a direction that Ves could not tolerate. This was enough for him to conclude this trial.

"Alright, I've made my decision." He spoke in a more imperious tone. "I'll give you a chance to implement this strategy yourself. From today onwards, I'd like you to work as the chief diplomat of our clan. While the final word on matters always stays with me, I am willing to give you a lot of space to realize your own vision. Your family members are already a part of us anyway, so I trust you will work earnestly to keep your bloodline alive."

It was quite crass for Ves to refer to the 'hostages' so directly, but Shederin merely brushed it aside and responded with a formal bow.

"Thank you for this opportunity. I shall endeavor to do my best to provide the best possible service to our clan. My family members will also prove their worth in the next couple of months. As long as you give them a chance, they will definitely give you a surprise."

Last he heard, the Purnessers were just starting to graduate from their so-called training regime. Though Ves and the Larkinsons only hastily set up the indoctrination program, the tender mercies of the Swordmaidens and several other groups that had taken charge of reforming the former Loxians reported a lot of progress.

None of them were snobs anymore. After enduring several weeks of harsh training, basic food, no luxury and constant one-sided lectures, the Purnessers had become a lot more manageable!

The ones that adjusted well to their new circumstances had already been released from the training program. They were already assuming vacant positions in the fast-growing clan administration in order to help with the enormous backlog of bureaucratic work that had been piling up in the last few months.

As for the more stubborn ones, none of them should be able to hold on for much longer. The threat of undergoing extra training from the Swordmaidens would definitely motivate the Purnessers to get their act together!

It didn't take too much work to finalize the appointment. Everyone in the clan already knew that Shederin Purnesse was on trial for this position. As long as he didn't cross any serious lines, he was practically guaranteed to become the highest-ranking diplomat.

The clan didn't have any alternatives. There was little point in settling for one of the younger Purnessers because there was a substantial gap that was difficult to overcome.

Ves signed all of the documents and went through all of the formalities quickly. Once he was done, he issued some instructions to Shederin before he departed from the Foreign Relations Department.

He didn't exhibit any surprise when Calabast quietly appeared by his side as he made his way to the design lab.

"I take it you were watching and listening."

"You know me too well." She threw him a quick grin. "I must say that I am a bit disappointed with your performance, though. You allowed yourself to get caught by his rhythm. Though Mr. Shederin has tried his best to portray himself as your subordinate, there is no question that he seeks to exert his own influence on you. The interests of the Purnesse bloodline surpass that of his new clan."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "That's fine. In fact, I expected it. He's too old, wiley and experienced to fall for our indoctrination and I doubt that the Golden Cat is able to influence his mentality."

Even though Shederin Purnesse was not a high-ranking mech designer or mech pilot, the two professions weren't the only ones who could produce strong-willed humans!

His lack of concern did not alarm Calabast too much. "Mr. Shederin should be clever enough to work earnestly for the clan. Many of his relatives should make the same conclusion. The problem is the bad apples among the Purnessers. You cannot expect that all of them will be able to accept the fact that their old lives and the continuation of the Purnesse Family have been sacrificed in order to become a part of us and receive our protection. You know how proud people can be about something that is personal."

A brief reminder of Venerable Ghanso Larkinson flashed through his mind. Ves absolutely loathed people like his least favorite cousin.

He released a sigh. "I hope that Mr. Shederin will be able to teach them a lesson."

"What if that doesn't work?"

"If they're harmless, then just leave them be. If they don't keep their opinions to themselves and try to persuade others to deny their new reality..."

Ves didn't need to finish this sentence. Calabast merely responded with a minute nod to signal that she received the message.

The two of them had cooperated long enough to develop a thorough understanding of each other. While they may not fully agree on many points, they were still united by a common cause.

Neither of the two wanted the Larkinson Clan to fracture from within. Even though the Larkinsons enjoyed a lot of rights and were able to express themselves in different ways, as long as they turned into a problem, they had to be taken care of one way or another!

Chapter 3078: Tusa's Feedback

Shederin Purnesse's appointment as the chief diplomat of the Larkinson Clan did not result in immediate changes.

Ves understood it would take a lot of time for the Foreign Relations Department to produce noticeable changes when their role wasn't so big at the moment.

Most of their current work entailed facilitating the Living Mech Corporation in opening up new markets and forging important deals with local business partners.

The Foreign Relations Department was also tasked with cooperating with the military and logistical wings of the clan to help with procuring additional supplies and hardware.

Ves hoped that Shederin would be able to accelerate the long and torturous acquisition process of additional capital ships.

It was already difficult for private organizations to get their hands on brand-new capital ships. The strategic shipyards that were capable of constructing these huge and complex machines were obliged to meet the needs of governments and powerful stakeholders first.

Foreign customers had to join the end of the line, which happened to have lengthened considerably now that more people recognized the value of greater protection.

It was virtually impossible for the Larkinson to get their turn fast enough if they followed the normal process. The only way to skip the line and get their critical capital ships fast enough was to find a way to go through the back door.

This entailed a lot of persuasion and horse trading. Ves did not envy Shederin Purnesse for having to negotiate with lots of foreign shipyards and officials in order to place an order.

"At least I don't have to devote any time to this issue myself anymore." He muttered.

The integration of the Purnesse Family in the Larkinson Clan would hopefully reduce a lot of headaches for Ves. The rapid growth of the clan always produced more issues for him, so he truly needed a large influx of directors, executives, managers and other officials to lighten his own load.

Though Ves still held some concerns about entrusting newcomers with so much power and influence, he knew he could count on Goldie and Calabast to watch out for anything untoward.

In fact, either of the two should already be sufficient enough, but the two of them together should ensure that no one should be able to slip the net.

Ves made Gloriana happy again by returning to the design lab and placing his full attention on his work.

Time continued to pass. The Disruptor Project moved past the halfway mark and became more and more complete with every passing day.

The minor interruptions failed to stall their momentum. Gloriana had become more demanding than ever but the assistants and the other lead designers rarely failed her expectations.

Each of the Journeymen continued to deepen their influence in the expert mech design projects.

One of the more interesting moments during the design process was when Gloriana invited Venerable Tusa to the design lab. Since the Disruptor Project was so closely tied to a single pilot, it was essential for Tusa to make himself available for additional measurements and request his input on various influential design choices.

For example, should the Disruptor Project carry a spare pistol or carbine or no ranged weapon at all?

Should the expert light skirmisher add additional boosters or strive to maintain as much protection as possible?

These decisions and more were quite personal and every mech pilot had a different idea on what their ideal mechs should look like. While the mech designers constantly made a lot of smaller and less important decisions on Venerable Tusa's behalf, it was improper not to cut the expert pilot out of the loop entirely.

Hence why he became a frequent visitor of the design lab. He drew attention whenever he showed up and his force of will exerted a considerable influence on the assistants.

Fortunately, the design lab was big enough to lead Tusa to a separate room in order to discuss important matters without disrupting the work schedule. This was one of the many benefits of operating on a capital ship.

During one particular visit, Ves and Gloriana provided their client with an overall update on the Disruptor Project. The first iteration of the expert mech design was 75 percent complete. The projection already displayed a remarkably complete wireframe diagram that allowed laymen like Tusa a pretty good idea of what the end product looked like.

The pleased expression on his face already made it clear that he was optimistic about the outlook of this design project.

He never enjoyed such luxurious treatment in his mech piloting career!

"Do you have any questions about our work?" Gloriana sincerely asked.

"Yes." Tusa turned to Ves. "I still haven't heard anything solid yet about the abilities that I can expect to use when I am finally able to pilot this expert mech. All I've heard are vague promises and uncertain answers."

Ves helplessly shrugged. "I can't really help you with that because I truly don't know what I'll be able to accomplish until I integrate it all into an actual mech frame. I'll give you a proper explanation once we are ready to begin actual trials. I can reassure you that I have completed most of my preparations."

He already formulated the designs of the spiritual constructs that he had in mind. However, the more important step was to create the design spirits that would lend their unique strengths to the expert mech.

Ves intended the Inexorable One to become the main design spirit for the Disruptor Project. The former avian dark god should possess a high affinity for light mechs and speed-based machines. Though the Inexorable One also stood out for her wind-based abilities, perhaps this might add an extra surprise to the expert mech.

Arnold was also supposed to play a key role in empowering the Disruptor Project. The chubby little exobeast had been enjoying Calabast's affections for too long.

It was time for the little critter to pay his dues and contribute to the Larkinson Clan as the design spirit as he was meant to be. With his extraordinary ability, Arnold had the potential to supercharge one of the Disruptor Project's key resonance abilities.

Perficious Steel bestowed the expert mech with the capability to confound distant opponents, but what about up close?

The closer the range, the weaker the illusion. This was where a short but extremely effective decoy ability could give the Disruptor Project an edge against nearby opponents!

In fact, this was just the basic expectation that Ves held towards adding prime resonance to an expert mech. What he was really looking for was to merge a resonance ability with a prime ability.

The results were completely unpredictable and could even blow up in his face. However, if Ves successfully managed to pull it off...

His body shuddered with excitement, which inadvertently caused him to look a bit creepy in front of Tusa!

What kind of deviant thoughts did Ves have in mind for the Disruptor Project? Tusa suspected that he might not want to hear the details!

Gloriana leaned over and placed her hand on the expert mech's shoulder. "Don't worry, Tusa. Ves often tries to hide the truth, but he usually delivers."

"What if he doesn't?"

She adopted a vicious grin. "I'll make sure that Ves succeeds."

The threat of punishment from Gloriana was enough for Ves to make sure he succeeded! He did not want to see what happened if he failed to earn a passing grade.

The three Larkinsons continued their discussion. Tusa asked for additional clarification and the mech designers obliged.

Even though many details were still unclear, Ves and Gloriana comprehended their design well enough to be able to provide accurate guesses on some of the future performance parameters.

It was already clear that the baseline acceleration and agility of the Disruptor Project was insanely high.

"Let me put it this way. The Piranha Prime resembles a chicken while the Disruptor Project is more akin to an eagle." Ves said.

"Is the difference that big?" Tusa raised his eyebrows.

"Heh, we stuffed a lot of goodies in your mech design. While it has been a pain to squeeze so many high performance parts in a slim and narrow frame, the results are worth it. While there are other expert light mechs that can boast even faster speeds, they usually have to sacrifice a lot of direct combat power in order to maintain their supremacy in this area. We have chosen to develop the Disruptor Project in a different direction, so it can absolutely hold its own in a duel between expert mechs."

This was their original goal. The Larkinson Clan had many different ways to solve a large number of standard mechs. Ves just needed expert mechs to keep the enemy's own ones in check.

"Will I be able to name my mech?"

"Of course. Although we are the ones who are putting our heart and soul into realizing this fantastic machine, you are ultimately the person who will entrust his life to it. If bestowing a name to your future expert mech will make you feel better, then we won't insist onto this right."

In truth, it was usually the mech designers who named their products. The only instance where customers had the opportunity to make this decision was when the mechs were tailored for their use. The naming of an expert mech was a sacred ceremony in the mech community and it was a great honor to be the person who defined the identity of such a great machine!

Tusa perked up a bit. "Will I also be able to customize the paint job and the look of my expert mech?"

"Uhm, let's not get too overboard." Ves quickly held up his palms. "Trust in our design ability. I'm quite a good artist, you know. None of the mechs that we've designed for the clan looks bad."

"Oh yeah, that's right. I guess I should leave it to the professionals. By the way, how long do I have to wait until I can enter a new cockpit?"

"We're not sure yet." Gloriana calmly replied. "Although we have stated that the design is close to becoming feature complete, that doesn't mean it is the definitive version. We still need to spend more time on testing and optimizing it. We're heavily disadvantaged by the fact that it is economically unfeasible to perform tests on prototypes. Many of the expensive materials we use are non-recoverable."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that once we use up the expensive resonating exotics and other remarkable materials on a mech, we can't easily recover it by scrapping the machine. Basically, it

means we need to perform most of our tests through simulations. We will try to devote as much processing power as we can in order to run all of these simulations, but with our current means it will take at least a month to refine your expert mech. If there is anything amiss, don't be surprised if we delay the completion of this project by a couple of weeks."

"That said, just because we are finally ready to fabricate your expert mech doesn't mean that development has ceased." Ves added. "Your expert mech doesn't have to be perfect right out the gate. We can continue to refine and update the design over the course of its service."

"AHEM." Gloriana coughed and jabbed her elbow against his side.

"Err, I mean your mech will certainly be exactly what you need at the time of its release, haha! It will be absolutely perfect for your current needs!"

That seemed to be the better answer as Gloriana slowly subsided.

Of course, Ves made sure to allude to Tusa that the Disruptor Project's suitability might degrade over time. People changed, technology advanced and circumstances constantly evolved.

A mech that used to be perfect yesterday might no longer provide the right solutions tomorrow. This was why it was essential for the Design Department to keep the expert mech in active development.

If done correctly, the Disruptor Project would continually be able to keep up with Tusa's growth!

Chapter 3079: The Crucial Difference

The expeditionary fleet quietly traveled along the major space lanes. It was already on the way out of Winged Serenade and would soon cross over into the next star sector.

After that, the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers would enter a different star cluster for the first time in their lives.

The vast majority of humans never traveled so far. The cost was great, the travel time was long and there were already many destinations to explore close at home.

Those who had the wealth, power and opportunity to leave their star cluster only consisted of a fraction of the total population of humanity.

Anyone who fell in this category of people were not necessarily better off. While there were plenty of galactic travelers who went on to achieve success, many more stumbled and fell along the way.

The Golden Skull Alliance was just the latest group of hopefuls who sought to escape the limitations of their home regions and bloom in a different environment.

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During this quiet and uneventful time, the entire fleet experienced a great amount of changes.

The Glory Seekers were quietly bolstering their numbers. They cautiously began to recruit ambitious female mech pilots and other personnel now that they gained a kinship network.

Their previous concerns about loyalty and lack of belief in Hexer ideology no longer mattered as much. By offering attractive options such as good pay, a new future and an opportunity to join a powerful sisterhood, the Glory Seekers gradually began to expand their effective strength.

The Cross Clan did not fall behind. Their lack of distinction between genders allowed them to attract both men and women.

Compared to the radical ideas of the Hexers, the militaristic principles of the Cross Clan possessed broader appeal. What particularly attracted skilled mech pilots was the prospect of fighting alongside the Crosser expert pilots.

Patriarch Reginald Cross was an undeniably strong expert pilot! His battle record listed a lot of large-scale battles where he and his Bolvos Rage performed magnificently.

Not only was he a powerful expert pilot in his own right, but his father had also achieved the mythical rank of ace pilot. Even if Saint Hemmington Cross had already died, his legacy should still be intact!

As a result of all of the renewed activity within the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan, they both entered a period of rapid growth and accumulation.

The Larkinson Clan was much calmer. Except for receiving ordinary shipments, the central partner of the Golden Skull Alliance did not really expend that much effort on recruitment or expansion.

They had already absorbed more than enough personnel to keep them busy. The integration of all of the new recruits was not a trivial matter. The Larkinsons did not simply leave all of the work to the kinship network because many lessons had to be learned through experience rather than conveyed through a vague and abstract method.

Though the nominal size and combat strength of the Larkinson Clan hadn't grown by much, the clansmen, both new and old, had become a lot more happy and cohesive.

The clan became their new home and shipboard life didn't seem so bad anymore now that they were surrounded by those they considered family.

The relative lack of outsiders in the Larkinson fleet may have made the clansmen more insular, but also allowed them to let down their guard.

A notable group of outsiders were quietly observing the changes around them. The MTA mech pilots that had all gotten used to living and training alongside the eccentric Larkinsons were able to see more due to possessing an outsider's perspective.

"The confidence of these Larkinsons are getting more and more inflated." Peter-Jan Mavelon remarked. "It's kind of cute to see how they think they can compete against better second-class forces. They have no idea how wide the gap is between them and their equivalents from the galactic center. The difference in tech and resource endowment are not the only factors that matter."

"You can't blame them, Mavelon. If anything, we should blame ourselves for having the awful luck of being assigned to this remote region of space."

Those who came from the galactic heartland or the galactic center possessed an undeniable advantage in areas that were more difficult to define. Their backing, their mindset, their adaptability towards advanced technology and most importantly their connections to other powerful human organizations gave the pioneers from the core regions of human civilization an undeniable edge!

In short, the Larkinsons were no different from space peasants in their eyes. Notable clansmen such as Ves and the expert pilots were slightly fancier space peasants. Even if the MTA elevated them to galactic citizens, everyone in the Association knew that low-tier galactic citizenship was mostly symbolic.

It was unfortunate that the real galactic citizens in the Larkinson fleet weren't allowed to show off their true status. Mavelon frequently chafed at his instructions.

Many of the training methods of the Larkinson Clan were too primitive!

Mavelon shifted from his seat and stared at the bare bulkheads of the ready room.

"We've been training for many weeks now but haven't made any progress." He complained. "I don't think I have taken a single step closer to becoming an expert candidate. In fact, I have a hunch my piloting skill has actually deteriorated since we are forced to abide by the limitations of our assigned mechs. These second-class mechs are too basic and unresponsive and don't even get me started on their small and restrictive loadouts."

Milly Petrov frowned at Mavelon. "You've been complaining about our circumstances every day from the moment we transferred to the Larkinson Clan. Don't get me wrong. I

don't necessarily disagree with your points, but are you here to whine or are you here to seek an opportunity to improve yourself?"

Mavelon glared at the female mech pilot. "Do you know what kind of training we've been through!? We're being put through pointless physical exercises that don't do anything to strengthen our optimized physiques any further. We are tasked with sparring against a variety of opponents in awful simulations with an abysmal degree of realism. We are able to outfight so badly that the instructors have started to pit a large number of mech pilots or individual expert candidates against us. Only the latter can give us close to a satisfying challenge."

It couldn't be helped. The performance of the MTA mech pilots was so good that the instructors looked a bit lost when they were assigned to train these difficult cases. Though they tried many different training activities, few of them were worthwhile and none of them made the mech pilots feel happy about their assignments.

"There is more to the Larkinson training methods than what is apparent on the surface." Petrov claimed. "Have you paid any attention to the stories told by the veterans? The anecdotes shared by the trueblood Larkinsons are particularly worthy of consideration. It's one thing to read about them, but it's another thing to hear them from those who grew up and fight alongside the expert pilots of the old Larkinson Family."

"They're merely retired third-class mech pilots. Their teaching is hardly relevant to us. Compared to the battles we were trained to fight, the petty conflicts between weak and tiny third-rate states don't generate any interest in me. A single first-class multipurpose mech could have easily wiped the floor against the enemies that pushed them to the brink!"

Jessica Quentin frowned deeper. "I really don't know why we keep listening to you. I think Petrov is onto something. We've already gone through several different training programs that are a thousand times more sophisticated than what the Larkinsons are putting us through. However, the doctors all say that our prospects to become an expert candidate are still low. Putting us through a similar program won't change anything. Our only chance is to follow a different path and focus on developing our other traits. Have you forgotten about the theories we have learnt?"

Mavelon receded a bit. "I know about the importance of sharpening our willpower. However, the training programs the MTA put us through had pushed us a lot closer to the brink than what I have experienced during my stay here."

"Well, whatever the Larkinsons are doing is somehow working out for them. Have you counted the number of expert pilots and expert candidates they have? The proportion is already relatively high and the current figure doesn't even factor in the rapid expansion of their pilot roster."

"According to what I've read, all of those mech pilots broke through in battle and not through systematic training. The only conclusion that I can make from this observation is that the Larkinsons are lucky to have a decent number of talented mech pilots in their ranks. It was only a matter of time before they broke through."

Though the MTA mech pilots desperately wanted to become expert candidates, they were not impressed by the existing ones in the Larkinson Clan. Talent and extraordinary boosts weren't enough. The Larkinson expert candidates still possessed limited skill sets and were not accustomed to fighting in higher-level battles.

Under certain circumstances, the MTA mech pilots actually beat the Larkinson expert candidates in a fair fight!

Quentin shrugged. "That may be true, but these expert candidates probably wouldn't have thrived so easily in any other organization. There are numerous oddities about these Larkinsons that suggests they do possess a special advantage in nurturing expert pilots. It's just that they're kind of a closed shop in our eyes."

"The key has to be their glows." Kelly Petrov uttered her suspicion. "Certain mechs such as the Bright Warrior model seem to complement the Larkinsons in a new and unexplainable way. Some of their machines with greater pressure than others are particularly favored among their mech pilots. There has to be a secret behind those powerful machines."

"If that's the case, why haven't the Larkinsons issued those special mechs to us?" Mavelon challengingly asked.

The others shrugged.

"Maybe there aren't enough available. Maybe we don't meet the requirement to pilot them. You know how the Bright Warriors are like. If the Larkinson patriarch didn't customize our own machines, we wouldn't have been able to pilot our mechs in peace."

They already tried to pilot some of the other Larkinson-exclusive mechs. The clansmen watched on with great amusement as the MTA mech pilots who claimed to be able to pilot anything prove their assertions.

Suffice to say, the results weren't good. While the mental fortitudes of Mavelon and the rest were more than sufficient enough to resist the pressure of an incompatible mech and design spirit, they did not enjoy the piloting experience!

Though they could have forced themselves to pilot odd and unusual mechs such as the Transcendent Punisher and the Eternal Redemption, the mechers ultimately went back to their basic Bright Warriors that had been especially tweaked to accept outsiders.

"Maybe we need to pilot a mech that is specifically tailored for us." Carlton Detrivo finally broke his silence. "I've heard that some of the mech designers in the Larkinson Clan are good at customization. If they design a special mech for us, we might gain the opportunity we need."

That caused the other three MTA mech pilots to pause.

"Maybe that's the key to the Larkinson Clan's strength all along." Quentin guessed. "It's not their paltry heritage or their primitive training approach that's the determining factor. It is also doubtful that their martial traditions and their culture make a significant difference. It's the mechs that are the key! Have you seen how a humble training mech aimed at cadets has revolutionized the mech academies of the clan?"

"Are you referring to the Chiron?"

"Yes! That's the true treasure of this fleet. Even though the cadets that train with the Chirons are nothing impressive in our eyes, I can tell they will already surpass the current generation of Larkinson mech pilots once they graduate. If we want to obtain the same opportunity, then we need our own training mechs!"

The MTA mech pilots all came to the same conclusion. The biggest reason why the Larkinson Clan nurtured so many expert pilots and expert candidates in a short amount of time was because the Larkinson Patriarch made all of the difference! Without his help, the clan would have never become renowned in this area!

Chapter 3080: Training Challenges

"Do you remember the MTA mech pilots that we've been assigned to train?" General Verle asked during a rare personal visit to the Spirit of Bentheim.

Even though Verle spent most of his days aboard the Graveyard as of late, he still visited other ships whenever the fleet transitioned back in realspace from time to time.

This was the mark of a good and caring leader. Verle didn't let his huge promotion get to his head. With the increasing number of senior officers joining the clan, he felt more pressure than ever to work hard and supplement his learning. If he just sat back and enjoyed the comforts of his rank, then it would only be a matter of time before Ves put a more competent general officer above his head!

Though General Verle did not actually mind if a better general was able to do a better job at strengthening the Larkinsons, he did not intend to admit defeat so easily.

Just like Ves, the general tasted the benefits of being the top dog. With him in power, he was not only able to ensure that his Flagrant Vandals were treated fairly, he was also able to push his own fighting doctrines onto the Larkinson Clan.

It was fortunate that his views on how soldiers should achieve victory happened to match the circumstances of the Larkinson Clan. Boosting friendly morale and attacking enemy morale was his bread and butter... The glows of certain Larkinson mech provided him with incredibly effective and reliable tools to accomplish his desired results.

However, he didn't come here today to talk about strategy.

"There are two items on the agenda which I wish to talk to you about, sir." General Verle spoke. "One of them is relatively minor and one of them will substantially affect the future of our military force makeup."

Ves grew curious enough to stop petting Lucky's back. "Start with the small one first."

"Meow."

Lucky looked annoyed that Ves stopped giving him his daily pampering. When Ves resumed caressing his back, the gem cat relaxed and squinted in pleasure.

"First, I'd like to report on the progress of the MTA mech pilots. More than a month has passed since we started to put them through their paces."

Ves groaned. "Let me guess. They're sulking like children because their parents dropped them off at the wrong house, am I close?"

"How did you know?" Verle looked amused.

"It's not hard to put myself in their place. I once went through a similar experience when I took part in the Glowing Planet Campaign."

That happened a long time ago. The Glowing Planet was where Ves became exposed to massive mech battles for the first time in his life. Dietrich, Walter's Whalers and Rorach's Bone used to be important in his life.

Now, Ves hardly even remembered that Dietrich was a member of the Battle Criers. Last he checked, the former Cloudy Curtainer had matured into a trusted officer and cadre among the Kinners.

General Verle patiently waited for Ves to finish reminiscing about the past. Memories of past experiences were precious. Neither of the two were young anymore and their increased status made it very difficult for them to repeat their earlier exploits.

If either of them were forced to enter the field, then something had badly gone wrong.

Ves eventually snapped out of his memories. "Anyway, the patience of the mechers must be wearing thin, right?"

"They're not even hiding their opinions from us, sir. They have voiced a lot of criticism of our methods. To be honest, our instructors are at wits end. Most of their lessons don't stick or are completely redundant. Their willpower is not weak, but we don't have any leverage to exercise it any further."

Ves frowned. That sounded worse than he thought. "What about pitting them against our expert candidates and expert pilots?"

"Sparring against our expert candidates is one of the few activities they enjoy. While they respect our expert pilots, that is all. The gulf between them is too vast to give the expert pilots any meaningful improvement opportunities. Part of the reason why expert pilots are so effective even when they are piloting ordinary mechs is because their intuition and battle instincts are transformatively better. Other mech pilots simply can't approach this level through regular training."

Though it was true that Ves didn't expect the mech pilots to make much progress, he was still displeased when his prediction came true.

A part of him hoped that these extremely skilled and privileged mech pilots were able to show their superiority in this aspect. Their failure to do so indicated that the Association was truly far behind in certain aspects.

Of course, this was not entirely bad news to Ves. Now that he confirmed that regular training was unlikely to change the situation for the better, only his more extraordinary methods could make the difference.

"The MTA mech pilots have actually issued a request to us. They want to see if you can make a difference by designing custom mechs for them. Whether they are right or wrong, they are convinced that your design philosophy can play a decisive role in changing their fate."

Ves frowned deeper. "I don't think they're wrong, but their demand is too extravagant. Do you know how valuable my time has become? I haven't even finished any of the expert mech designs as of yet and I already have a lot of pending ideas for the next round of design projects.

Was it worth it to occupy a design slot in exchange for 500,000 MTA merits? Perhaps he would have jumped at this opportunity in the past, but to Ves the time and effort he had to reserve to design a single proper mech was far more valuable!

A lot of mech forces had issued persisted demands to receive their own exclusive mechs. The Living Sentinels, the Battle Criers and the Flagrant Vandals were feeling a bit unloved lately. Though the clan took great care of them, the lead designers of the Larkinson Clan had not yet showered them with attention.

The adoption of well-received mech models such as the Bright Warrior and the Ferocious Piranha didn't count because of their universality. What the Sentinels and so on really sought were mechs that bestowed them with a unique advantage.

Ves was happy to oblige them, but he first had to finish the current round of mech designs before he considered anything else. He already sketched out a handful of interesting mech concepts in his free time.

"I'm not going to oblige their demands." He shook his head. "I already have another solution in mind. I don't have the time to work it out at the moment."

"Well, you better start doing something in the near future or else these mechers will get really mad. Some of them are already approaching the limits to their patience."

Ves sighed. "You can tell them that I'll supply them with a special machine sometime later this year. I won't commit to designing custom mech for all twenty of them, but I think I can come up with a targeted product that will accelerate their progress."

This was just a spurious idea of his. He was quite interested in designing or adapting a mech model that could exercise an aspect that mech pilots needed to become an expert candidate. Whether it was willpower, experience or something else, anything that closed the gap between a standard mech pilot and an expert candidate would probably increase the success rate of his main experiment!

Ves and General Verle continued to discuss more details about the mechers.

Though Ves knew that his personal intervention was likely the key to bestowing spiritual potential to these elitist mech pilots, Gloriana would kill him if he diverted his attention from his current work.

Fortunately, all of the training performed so far was not in vain. The MTA mech pilots provided him with a lot of detailed information. Ves gained a much more accurate picture of the differences between his own mech pilots and the ones that stood on a much higher starting point.

The mechers also became influenced by the Larkinson ways. While Ves had no illusion that the powerful mech pilots wanted to defect to the Larkinson Clan, they should at least develop a measure of respect towards their hosts.

This would definitely become useful in the future. In what way, Ves could scarcely guess, but his intuition told him that the tedious training was not completely pointless!

Once they finished discussing this topic, General Verle moved to a more important matter.

"Do you remember that the Ylvainans are about to set up their own mech force?"

A wry smile appeared on Ves' face. "I remember. Haven't they gotten their act together yet? It has been months since they started to make their preparations."

"It's not like the old days, Ves. You can't simply add a major combat unit to our organization without setting off a lot of upheaval. Personnel need to be reassigned. Ships have to transfer from one mech force to another. The Ylvainans have to build an entire structure from scratch and hire enough officers and technical personnel to ensure their mech force would run smoothly. Our military bureau had to provide a lot of assistance to them in order to fill up the gaps in their staff."

"So what is holding them back?"

"Not much, actually. They have already smoothed out most of the remaining wrinkles. I believe they will be ready to make an announcement within a week."

"Oh. That's fast. Will the Ylvainans be unveiling some extra surprises?"

"I don't believe so, sir, but may Calabast can tell you more." General Verle replied. "What I can say is that the Ylvainans will primarily focus on precision-based warfare. The Transcendent Punisher has played a great role in defining their place in our fighting lineup. You can expect a lot of Ylvainans to become artillery mech enthusiasts. They have thoroughly fallen in love with relying on the 'Great Prophet' to guide their aim and distinguish key targets from distractions."

Ves had some misgivings. "It is not a good idea for a mech force to become overly dependent on a specific mech model or design spirit. Even if Ylvaine is a really big deal for them, they should try to broaden their horizons and ensure they will remain battle effective even if Ylvaine no longer bestows his blessings on his flock."

"I agree, sir, but these Ylvainans are stubborn about change. Only an authority figure that they can truly respect such as the former Living Prophet and you can command their attention. You should pay them a visit once they are ready to establish their mech force."

"Ugh. Fine. I owe these Ylvainans. I can give them a favor."

"Meow." His cat squirmed on his lap.

"You're missing the point, Lucky. The Ylvainans might be loyal, but their faith is a bunch of nonsense. We shouldn't encourage them too much. The growth of their new mech force must be subject to constraints in order to prevent religious Larkinsons from taking over our clan."

General Verle slowly nodded. "My men will definitely be monitoring the Ylvainans closely. My greatest concern is that they may become overenthusiastic in their attempts

to pull in new converts. Aside from organic growth, the only way for the Ylvainans to expand their ranks is to pull in other clansmen."

"Every clansmen is free to act in a reasonable fashion in their downtime, but I hope my men aren't gullible enough to fall for any scams.

"I don't think this is entirely bad." General Verle stated. "Those who are more susceptible to religion will end up believing in one faith or another. It is better for these impressionable individuals to commit to a faith that is already under our umbrella than to believe in other, more dangerous religions."

Ves had become a bit more pragmatic about this issue than before. He had come across too many fanatics to think they could simply stop believing in anything. The voids in their hearts needed to be filled, so why not resort to a friendly and harmless belief like the Ylvainan Faith?