

Mech 2351

Chapter 2351: Stronger Spirit

When the tests involving the two prior fully saturated mechs ended in failure, Imon stood with the other Avatar mech pilots.

Each of them reacted with horror at what had taken place. When they saw the pained mech pilots being moved to the infirmary, a cloud had cast over the heads of the remaining Avatars.

Evidently, the last batch of modified Bright Warrior mechs were much harder to pilot. Something about them turned them into hazards to their own mech pilots.

"You shouldn't go, brother." Casella Ingvar spoke softly to Imon. "It's clear now why the clan patriarch hesitated to conduct the tests. Not every new invention is safe, particularly when they are too extreme, as is the case right now. I think Mr. Ves should just stop and settle what he has managed to accomplish with the mechs that performed better previously."

Casella already had her turn. She piloted one of the mechs with 50 percent saturation. Though the strain of piloting her machine had increased, it was well within her tolerance. It also helped that her own mech cooperated much more closely with her than before.

In her opinion, every other mech pilot should be pleased at piloting such a responsive and comfortable mech. Casella never experienced any instance of discomfort when she was running her improved mech to her paces.

What she didn't know was that Ves had some good reasons to put the Ingvar siblings in different groups.

He didn't have many Avatar mech pilots with spiritual potential in the First and Second Spaceborn Mech Companies, so he needed to spread them out in order to gather sufficient data.

Ves also valued Casella Ingvar more. As the Mech Captain of the Second Company, Ves couldn't afford to take her out of action.

In comparison, Imon Ingvar's absence was much less consequential. If he ever suffered an accident, then the rest of his unit would still be capable of chugging along as if hardly anything had changed.

Imon was ignorant of these reasons. He just thought that Ves believed in his strength. Why else would the clan patriarch call him in person to put him ahead of the line?

He couldn't wait to prove his piloting ability to the Avatars and the leader of the clan!

Some time later, he settled down in the familiar piloting seat of his mech. The arrangement of its cushioning, support and dimensions had already been precisely tailored to his suited form.

"Please proceed to activate your mech."

"Yes, sir."

A piloting helmet extended from the ceiling and settled over his head. The mech began to come alive seconds later.

"Whoah!"

Imon immediately understood what his sister meant when she felt as if her mech had become 'heavier'.

Compared to his previous piloting sessions, his assigned Bright Warrior mech immediately felt as if it possessed more presence. It was as if Imon previously swam in a shallow pool, but unexpectedly plunged into a deep ocean this time.

Not only that, but the ocean was filled with much more life and activity than before! As the initial systems came online, Imon sensed the heavy presence becoming significantly more active than before.

The mech did not just mechanically go through the checklist without doing anything else. It bloomed to life like a budding flower. A sense of indescribable closeness caused Imon to feel rapturous.

"Remain focused!" Ves barked through the command channel. "The worst is yet to come! Brace yourself instead of opening yourself up. A heavy blow is coming and I need you to endure it in order to make this test a success!"

Though the sudden words caused Imon to pull out of his blissful state, he didn't dare to voice any complaints and did as he was told.

It was difficult. His mech was like a welcoming home that beckoned him to head inside. He felt so tempted to open up his mind and embrace the mech that had become a lot more powerful in some way.

Then, the intensity of their bond abruptly increased.

"Ah!"

Though he had prepared himself for some kind of bump, when it actually happened, he was still caught off-guard!

"It's like someone punched my head!"

Despite the sudden strain, Imon tried his best to stay sober. He couldn't allow himself to fail like the previous two mech pilots. He was better than them! There was no way he was going to shame himself by letting his own mech overpower his senses!

"Please... work with me..."

Imon tried his best to find some way to make his connection with his mech more bearable. His mind churned as he tried several different ways to ease the burden.

Though none of his methods worked, he felt as if his own mech was beginning to bond considerably deeper with him in a way. Though the process stretched on for several minutes, Imon discovered to his surprise that the pressure no longer felt as overwhelming!

His expression gradually relaxed as the strain of piloting his Bright Warrior mech had lessened.

In its place, a very strong bond had formed between him and his mech.

"Imon. Are you okay?"

"I.. I feel great! It's still a bit more difficult to control my mech, but I can still do it! Please send me out! I'm so much more in tune with my mech that I can't wait to see the difference!"

"Very well. You are cleared to deploy."

When Imon's mech launched into space, it quickly began to follow the same standardized routine of the other mechs.

Since the mech was in its swordsman mech configuration, the machine soon began to spar against another sword-wielding mech.

When Ves studied Imon's performance and compared the data to the previous instances where he had piloted his mechs in battle, the difference was very obvious.

"He's performing a lot better than usual! Some of his parameters have grown by as much as 20 percent!"

Though the overall performance boost only averaged at around 10 percent or so, that was still a massive boost. This was just the first time that Imon interfaced with his

enhanced mech. How much better would Imon's performance be if he had a month to get accustomed to piloting his growing machine?

Ves glanced at the projections of Imon's life signs. After the early spike into the red zones, the various figures had dropped to tolerable levels. While Ves felt that they were still rather high, it at least indicated that a mech pilot with strong spiritual skills such as Imon did indeed possess the capital to pilot a fully saturated mech.

This was the result he wanted to see!

"Alright, let's end the session."

"Awwww." Imon whined. "I have just begun to get used to my changed mech. Can you let me stay out longer?"

"No. While we haven't detected any signs that you are under severe strain, we still need to perform an extensive examination of your state. We also have to inspect your mech and make sure that it hasn't changed for the worse. Besides, there is one more Avatar mech pilot who is awaiting his turn."

The Bright Warrior mech reluctantly returned to the Redfeather. Once it returned to its place in the mech hangar, the mech smoothly shut off. Imon eagerly left his cockpit and began to share his unique experiences with his fellow Avatars.

Many mech pilots tried to listen to Imon. The Avatars all wanted to learn what made the altered mechs so different.

In the meantime, Joshua, who had suited up in his customary piloting attire, quietly entered the cockpit of his Quint.

Even before it came active, Joshua already felt the difference. As an expert candidate, his senses and his perspective were different from norms. He also bonded very intimately with each of the mechs he had the pleasure to pilot.

The Quint was one of the most unique and stellar mechs he ever laid his hands on. The young Avatar mech pilot may not know much of the technical details of this exquisite masterwork mech, but Joshua bet that no one could beat his feel for it. He had become deeply familiar with every single nuance of his powerful mech!

This time, Joshua felt a lot of expectation for his mech.

"Please proceed with activating your mech."

When Joshua did as instructed, the Quint slowly came to life.

Unlike the gradual bond that Imon had formed with his mech, the bond that formed between Joshua and the mech was seemingly greater!

Not only that, but the mech already welcomed Joshua as if he was a husband returning to his wife after a long day of work.

Nothing was unfamiliar to him. The Quint was still the same Quint. It was just that the masterwork mech was somehow able to express its strength and appreciation towards its mech pilot to a much greater degree than before!

As time began to pass, Joshua began to feel the strain that others had warned about. Yet unlike the previous mech pilots, he did not experience much discomfort.

He was an expert candidate! He was much stronger than anyone else in certain aspects!

The mech, noting that its own mech pilot was fully capable of bearing its strength, began to do something different.

Instead of minimizing the depth and fidelity of its bond with its mech pilot, the Quint sought to leverage more out of it. The pressure rapidly rose and the observers began to notice some concerning signs.

Ves, who had been watching carefully, immediately noticed that some of the parameters were rising without cause.

He immediately became vigilant. "The Quint isn't supposed to do this. Why have some of its systems become more active? The mech is still at rest!"

Joshua did not notice anything outside of his bond with his mech. As his connection between his mech grew more vigorous, a part of him started to feel as if he had gone heaven.

This is what mech piloting should be like!

"Quint.. You're a fantastic mech. I never realized you were so marvelous."

Ves began to look a bit strange as Joshua seemed to melt into his mech. Though none of the data spiked, a lot of life signs began to rise in a calm and steady fashion.

It was as if some kind of tsunami was forming. The momentum emanating from the Quint began to rise. The mech gave everyone an illusion that a slumbering dragon was about to wake!

"My mech.. is truly alive now." Joshua whispered with genuine wonder. "I always knew that LMC mechs were alive, but this is different. I'm not piloting my mech, I'm working together with the Quint! We are equals now!"

As the momentum from the mech continued to surge, Ves suddenly noted that another important parameter started to rise.

The resonance meter began to bump!

Ves immediately slapped the shutdown button.

The bootup sequence abruptly stopped before it had completely run its course. Joshua went from experiencing a transcendent high only to get ripped away from the mech he melded with the next second!

The sudden transition immediately induced a jarring headache to Joshua!

"Agh! Why did you stop it?! I was almost there!"

"That's why I can't allow this test to proceed, Mr. Joshua. Your time has not yet come. I need the Quint and you to shine in our upcoming battle against the Allidus Alliance. It's a waste for you to take the next step when there is no one around to fight."

Joshua was devastated. He truly felt as if he was about to grasp a better way to connect and bond with mechs that reached out to him. The Quint had become so much stronger and more suitable to him that he didn't want to go back to the old style of piloting mechs!

It was too bad that Ves had different intentions in mind. He already had the data he wanted. He had no intentions of getting anything more out of this experiment.

"The session is over. Joshua, please exit the cockpit. All of the Bright Warrior mechs must be locked down and secured. I will be inspecting each of them in person. Thank you for your cooperation."

Chapter 2352: Reciprocal Growth

Ves was very satisfied with the round of experiments. The mechs enhanced to 25 percent, 50 percent and 75 percent saturation all stimulated their mech pilots to perform successively better.

The differences were fairly minor at 25 percent saturation, but those who were filled up three-fourths of the way exhibited pretty noticeable improvements in many areas.

The benefits of strengthening the spiritual foundation of his mechs were evident. The effects roughly matched his expectations, though he knew that a lot more time needed to pass before he could witness more drastic results.

If Ves had the leisure to run his experiment properly, then he would have left all of the affected Bright Warriors in their current states.

"I can't do that this time." He whispered to himself. "No matter how curious I am about the differences in their development, it's all moot if the pirates beat my forces. I need to survive first before I can explore my ideas further."

He already planned to raise the saturation of every mech to at least 75 percent. This appeared to be the level that most of his Avatars were capable of harnessing.

Trying to pair all of them with mechs at 100 percent saturation would likely go very poorly. The two Avatar mech pilots who had been carted off to the infirmary were proof that too much power was not always desirable.

Of course, the biggest surprise came from the two times that his test subjects succeeded in interfacing with the most powerful and dangerous group of mechs.

The success of Imon Ingvar proved that every mech pilot with spiritual potential met some kind of requirement that allowed them to endure the strain imposed by their mechs.

Ves had keenly noticed that once Imon had gotten over the initial bump, the young mech pilot became increasingly more relaxed. Either the heightened strain was temporary or Imon and his Bright Warrior mech had somehow managed to adjust to each other.

This was a good development. After all, a mech pilot that had to effectively resist the pressure of his own mech during battle would actually perform worse in battle! Such an awful outcome went against his original intentions. Ves would rather strip his mech of most of their added strength if that was the case.

"I still need to see how this develops in the coming weeks."

The experiment hadn't strictly ended after Ves prematurely ended Joshua's chance to pilot his newly-empowered Quint.

While it was possible for growth to happen instantly, Ves knew that his changes needed time to show their full value.

"Hopefully, the strength of all of the affected mechs and mech pilots will evolve quickly enough to make a difference a month later."

Of course, the mech that received most of his attention was the Quint.

When Ves moved to the Redfeather in order to inspect the individual mechs, he visited the Quint right away.

Joshua awaited his arrival with a resentful and grumpy expression. He made for a stark contrast with his current mech, which seemed to be extraordinarily active on a spiritual level. Its glow had become richer as well.

The masterwork mech had become greater than any of the other fully saturated mechs. Part of that might be due to its inherent advantage in quality, but Ves guessed that having a fantastic mech pilot like Joshua was also an added benefit.

Before the Quint received its latest boost of strength, its spiritual foundation was already more developed than the regular Bright Warriors, and it was mostly thanks to Joshua.

What took place today largely concurred with his current framework on mechs and spirituality.

When the mech was weak but the mech pilot was strong, the latter slowly nurtured the former.

Ves inferred that the reverse might also be true.

If the mech was strong but the mech pilot was weak, the latter would experience faster growth. Ves intended to track the improvement of all of the mech pilots that piloted the special mechs very closely.

The only snag was that not every mech pilot was capable of getting along with a mech that had grown too powerful.

It was a given that mechs that were 100 saturated provided the most benefits to their mech pilots.

The precondition was that the mech pilot was qualified enough to harness such strength.

So far, two mech pilots without spiritual potential failed to finish the bootup process.

To be honest, Ves was dissatisfied with the lack of observations.

What if another spiritually weak Avatar mech pilot managed to get over the most difficult hurdle?

Was it possible for this category of mech pilots to increase their tolerance to the point where they were capable of withstanding the burden?

If not for his current difficulties, Ves would have wanted to follow up on these questions.

For now, he didn't have the luxury to do so. He needed to pursue fast growth with as little complications as possible.

Since no one who piloted a mech at 75 percent saturation experienced any backlash, Ves was already willing to apply this standard to all of the other LMC mechs in his fleet.

Aside from perhaps the Doom Guard, Ves wanted to empower as many mechs as possible with this new innovation.

Empowering hundreds of mechs did not come without a cost. All of those Deliverers, Aurora Titans, Bright Warriors and possibly other mechs demanded a lot of spiritual energy to fill them up to 75 percent saturation.

Ves wasn't worried about this issue. Only Goldie had to borrow her spiritual energy. Many of his remaining design spirits weren't short on spiritual energy due to the fact that they presided over mass-produced mech models.

If the amount of mechs that needed to be empowered numbered at at least ten-thousand, then Ves might start to worry.

This wasn't a concern this time because the amount of LMC mechs in the fleet was not numerous enough to impose an excessive burden to any design spirit.

Unexpectedly, designing mechs for the market provided an added benefit to his current circumstances. His design spirits would have never been so flush with spiritual energy if he had chosen not to sell his mechs to the private sector!

Ves knew that he needed to continue with this current course. As his Larkinson Clan grew in numbers, more and more mechs had to be enhanced to 75 percent saturation. This was very costly and could quickly deplete the spiritual energy reserves of his design spirits.

The only way to ensure that his Larkinson mech pilots utilized the strongest possible mech was to keep harvesting the spiritual feedback of millions of mech pilots.

"I might even need more if the current limit grows."

When Ves observed certain powerful mechs such as the Quint, he noticed that its spiritual foundation was actually stronger than the spiritual foundation of Imon Ingvar's Bright Warrior.

There was still room for growth in this area. The better the mech pilot and the older the mech, the higher its maximum limit reached.

While this entailed many possible dangers to the mech pilots who bonded with these growing mechs, Ves believed that they were capable of growing in tandem. A growing mech would never let its mech pilot remain stagnant.

"Sir? When will I be able to pilot the Quint again?"

Ves turned his attention back to the present. "Don't be so impatient. You'll get to pilot it when we need you at your best. Right now is not the time."

"What? Sir, you can't take the Quint away! I need to pilot it! Please! Just let me connect with it for a time!" Joshua pathetically pleaded.

Unfortunately for the mech pilot, Ves remained unmoved. He already had a thorough plan in mind. No amount of begging would convince him to release the Quint.

He studied his masterwork mech with a critical eye. "I'm going to upgrade the Quint."

"Is that possible?" Joshua looked startled. "I thought that masterwork mechs had to remain exactly the same in order to retain their quality level."

"That's not strictly true." Ves shook his head. "There is still room for change. Otherwise, getting hit even once might ruin the Quint. The most important requirement is to retain the essence of the mech."

Joshua didn't understand much about mech design. All he cared about was how Ves intended to strengthen the Quint.

"What do you intend to improve?"

"I have progressed quite a bit since I completed the Bright Warrior design. I know it well, and I have thought about solving some of the issues inherent in the design whenever I thought back on it. The main complication is that we are still in the Nyxian Gap. Despite all of the plunder that we have obtained, we don't have access to all of the exotics I need to perform the upgrades I want."

"Does that mean the Quint won't be as strong as you want it to be, sir?"

Ves grinned. "Oh no. Quite the opposite in fact. We have looted a lot of random exotics, some of which are very powerful or have very interesting effects. It might be possible to combine them into fantastic parts that can add powerful capabilities to the Quint."

Part of the benefits he gained from this experiment was that he possessed a deeper understanding of the essence of mechs. Though he hadn't proven all of his theories yet, he was confident that he was able to upgrade a masterwork mech.

The Quint was his own work, after all. He possessed a very strong feel for the mech. If someone other than Ves or Gloriana tinkered with the mech, the chances that something would go wrong was significantly greater. Yet because Ves was revisiting one of his old works, he merely had to refresh his memory.

Perhaps he could plan his upgrades with Gloriana. Both of them designed the Bright Warrior design after all and two heads were better than one.

In fact, they could also design some upgrades for some other mechs.

Joshua's exaggerated reaction towards his enhanced mech suggested that Ves might be able to provide his other expert candidates with opportunities.

Ves intended to replace their current mechs with Bright Warriors configured and modified for their specific inclinations.

Perhaps this might actually be a way to exert control over when his expert candidates were able to advance to expert pilots!

In any other circumstance, Ves would have leaped with joy if he found out that this was a viable method to accelerate the breakthroughs of expert candidates.

Many of them had waited for quite some time! Even if a formidable pirate fleet was bearing down on Task Force Predator, Ves always doubted whether all of his remaining expert candidates would be able to advance during the decisive battle.

Now, he had cleared much of his doubts.

Of course, Ves and Gloriana would have to perform extensive modifications to customize the new mechs to the expert candidates. Aside from Joshua, none of his other remaining expert candidates piloted an LMC mech.

Due to lack of time and resources, Ves planned to take some Bright Warriors and tailor them their new users.

The versatility of the Bright Warrior design was very helpful at this time.

Commander Dise was very compatible with the swordsman mech configuration. Ves might even ask Ketis to assist in preparing this specific mech.

As for Commander Orfan, Ves could either hand her a lancer mech configuration or start from a swordsman mech configuration but replace its sword with a spear.

Tusa's case was a bit more difficult. He specialized in light skirmishers. As Ves hadn't designed a serious light mech yet, he wasn't able to provide Tusa with an easy solution.

Spiritual foundation enhancement only worked for LMC mechs, so it was not very practical to apply this technique to Tusa's current machine.

Perhaps it might be possible to give Tusa the mech he needed by taking a Bright Warrior and modifying it extensively. It wouldn't be the first time that Ves stripped down a medium mech to the point where it became a light mech!

Chapter 2353: Gathering of Candidates

The most skilled and powerful mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan each entered the Scarlet Rose's conference room.

It was rare for the expert candidates to actually gather in a single room. Usually, they were confined to their own cliques within the Larkinson Clan. Aside from their elevated piloting ability, they didn't share much in common.

That said, they weren't strangers with each other.

In addition to the expert candidates, Ves also invited Venerable Jannzi to attend the meeting.

Her presence instantly dominated the conference room upon entry. Even if she didn't deliberately exert her force of will, her aura worked similarly to glows. No matter who was in her presence, people couldn't help but become affected by her strong will.

Norms with weaker, unempowered wills were most susceptible to this effect. If most expert pilots weren't so noble and principled, it would have been easy for them to abuse their auras for unscrupulous purposes.

In fact, some people argued that the expert pilots of Vicious Mountain had already crossed this line. Their obsession with earning glory in battle had warped the lives of everyone who lived in the star sector.

Fortunately, the people attending the meeting all possessed strong wills of their own. As expert candidates, Joshua, Tusa, Commander Orfan and Commander Dise all possessed the ability to remain true to their own selves when faced with external pressure.

Ves may not possess the empowered wills of the rest, but he was a Journeyman with some very strong ideas of his own. Mech designers at his level never lost sight of their ambitions.

"Please take your seats." He spoke.

The three chosen of Qilanxo opted to sit together. For some reason, Orfan and Dise both sat besides Venerable Jannzi as if they were flanking the expert pilot.

Though this seating arrangement made sense from a mech piloting standpoint, the differences in age was difficult to accept.

Joshua and Tusa both sat in their own corners of the conference table. While they were acquainted with each other, they weren't particularly close with each other either. Their lives hardly intersected and their interests diverged.

Curiously, Joshua did not sit next to his supposed girlfriend. Perhaps this might be due to the professional context of this meeting, but Ves couldn't help but be concerned.

Joshua was one of the most valuable mech pilots to Ves. With his rare life domain, his compatibility with LMC mechs was nearly perfect. Keeping him happy and ensuring he remained committed to the clan was an important priority.

If Ves wasn't so swamped with responsibilities, he might have chosen to meddle with their relationship.

"Alright, everyone is here, so let's begin. The reason why I have invited you to this meeting is because I want to make sure that each of you are at your best when we confront the Allidus Alliance. I am sure that you have witnessed or heard about the experiment that I have conducted on the Bright Warrior mechs of the Avatars of Myth. Though the tests haven't entirely gone smoothly, I have gathered enough data and proved enough theories to support my next initiative."

It didn't take much thinking to realize what he was talking about.

"Are you applying this new invention of yours to our mechs?" Commander Orfan asked.

"Not exactly. You are correct that I will be making full use of my latest innovation, but I won't be applying it to most of your mechs. One of the conditions of my newly-developed trick is that I can only apply it to my own mechs. Venerable Jannzi doesn't strictly need any help, and Joshua's Quint has already received the necessary treatment."

"I don't entirely know what has changed, but from what little I've experienced, it's as if the mech that I was familiar with has truly come alive." Joshua remarked. "I just feel so frustrated that my session was cut off!"

"It's for your own good, Joshua. I don't want you to release your pressure prematurely."

Joshua let out a frustrated grunt. "I'm pent up, sir! I feel like I'm backed up! Do you know what kind of torture it is to look at the Quint but be prohibited from piloting it? And why did you take away my permission to pilot other mechs? I'm so itchy!"

Ves threw a flat look at the young man. "Hold it in. Don't you dare let go. If it helps, I can allow you to pilot some of the salvaged pirate mechs we have picked up from the previous battle for some reason. Only the cheaper ones, though. I don't want you to pilot anything too powerful."

"What?! That's hardly better! Most of them are trash!"

"That's the point, Mr. Joshua. Piloting a bad mech may be a better way for you to keep your skills sharp. You've been too pampered by the Quint and my other excellent mech

designs. While I am glad that you are able to master each of my products, you should broaden your horizons."

Joshua's horrified face expressed everything he thought about this suggestion.

In truth, Ves wanted to use this method to build up Joshua's desire to pilot the Quint again. The greater his yearning for the masterwork mech, the more impressive his eventual breakthrough would become! Frustrating him a bit by forcing him to pilot awful pirate mechs with not a glimpse of life within them was a good way to build up the anticipation.

Ves wanted Joshua to explode as violently as possible.

He smiled at Joshua in a patronizing manner. "It's for the good of the clan. We need you at your absolute best, so don't be in a hurry to obtain your satisfaction. I promise you that your release will be greater than ever! While I can't make too many modifications in a month, I will be sure to upgrade several key aspects of your mech so that it can fully support your efforts in the battle that will decide our fate."

"What about us?" Orfan asked.

"Those of you who don't pilot an LMC mech can keep using your current machines. Just keep in mind that you won't be piloting them in the decisive battle. Unless something has gone wrong, I will be passing heavily-modified Bright Warrior mechs to the three of you. Each of them will be upgraded and customized to fit your preferred fighting style."

The three expert candidates who were the targets of this program looked surprised.

"Are you crazy, Ves?!" Orfan erupted. "Switching mechs isn't trivial! Even if we're expert candidates, we still need a couple of hundreds of hours of drilling and practice to understand how to use our new machines to the fullest! Without this preparation, we'll never be able to perform at our best!"

"I understand the downsides, but I am confident that you'll be able to adjust quickly. The performance of the custom Bright Warriors will definitely exceed that of your existing mechs. They're still third-class mechs, after all. The base model of the Bright Warrior design already exceeds most of their parameters."

Commander Dise frowned. "There is more to a mech design than the numbers on the spec sheet. Some designs simply don't match my fighting style. I don't want to pilot a mech that is too awkward for me to employ my sword style."

"Ketis will assist in customizing your new mech. The two of you can work closely to make sure that the modifications complement your fighting style rather than detract from it. Will that assuage your concerns?"

The Swordmaiden leader visibly relaxed. "I trust Ketis. As a fellow sister, she knows exactly how I prefer to fight. Just make sure to listen to her recommendations. The Bright Warrior in its swordsman mech configuration is decent, but... it's clear you only possess a superficial understanding of swordsmanship."

Ves accepted her light critique. "I'll address this shortcoming in due time, but I am inclined to let Ketis handle everything related to swordsman mechs."

"What about my machine? You haven't made any spearman mechs." Commander Orfan stated.

"Your mech requires a bit more work. Are you comfortable with piloting a lancer mech?"

She shook her head. "Lancer mechs are too inflexible. Now, don't get me wrong. I love how they can punch through anything with their charges. It's just that it is not my style to conduct hit-and-run attacks. I like to get into the fray and dual my opponents up close."

"I see. Then just like Commander Dise, I will start with the swordsman mech configuration and work my way from there. I understand that wielding a spear is different from wielding a sword in battle, so don't hesitate to review my work and tell me what aspects need to be changed."

"If this is the best that you can do, then okay. I can live with this as long as my new mech is good enough."

With Commander Orfan placated, Ves turned to the final expert candidate. "Tusa, your case is the most difficult of all. I truly don't have a suitable light mech in my mech catalog, so I can only take a Bright Warrior and overhaul its structure and armor scheme."

The light mech specialist looked ugly. "These conversions rarely succeed. Medium mechs are simply built differently from the ground up. Even if you remove a lot of fat from a Bright Warrior, the bones can't be thinned so easily."

"That is.. correct."

"I have witnessed these situations several times." Tusa smiled sardonically. "Some mech designers believe that all you need to produce a light mech in a hurry is to tear out a lot of armor and other parts from a medium mech. It never quite works out because the mechs often end up in between."

"I'm aware of the challenges. Although I haven't designed any serious light mechs, I am confident I'll be able to work something out. The light mech that I'll deliver to you next month will certainly satisfy most of your demands."

"Just make it fast. I don't care about armor or weapons. As long as its acceleration is top notch and its agility is good, I can cope with the rest."

This was not a light demand especially due to the situation that Tusa had just described. Ves would have to perform some pretty deep modifications to Tusa's custom mech in order to fulfill this major demand.

Ves believed he was up to the challenge.

"Gloriana will be assisting our efforts by remote. With her participation, each of your mechs will be sound. Aside from that, these mechs will be more responsive, more complementary and more welcoming than your current mechs. You can just ask Joshua or the other Avatars if you want to hear the benefits of my latest innovation."

"What is this exactly supposed to do for us?" Tusa asked.

His reluctance to this initiative was the greatest. He possessed the least amount of confidence that his new custom mech would meet his requirements.

Seeing that the other expert candidates needed some convincing as well, Ves decided to be open about it. "Each of you is on the cusp of breaking through. What if I tell you that I think that pairing you up with your new custom mechs can guarantee that you'll be undergoing apotheosis?"

Everyone except Joshua looked shocked!

Even Jannzi looked a little startled!

"Is that true, Joshua?"

"I don't know. All I can say is that it works for me, but then again the Quint isn't a normal mech. I've already bonded a lot with it. Who knows whether this will work when you pilot your new mechs for the first time."

"He's not wrong." Ves admitted. "There is no guarantee that this measure will work the way I intended. Still, it's better than letting you keep your remaining mechs. A small chance of breaking through is better than no chance. Now, do you still doubt the necessity of replacing your current mechs with my customized works?"

No one raised any more objections.

Chapter 2354: Wish List

After the general meeting, Ves talked with each of the expert candidates in private in order to hear their initial demands.

He started with Joshua first.

"In the decisive battle, we need to pair you with a mech that can allow you to threaten an enemy warship." Ves spoke. "Two out of four of the Bright Warrior configurations are suitable for this purpose. A lancer mech will allow you to perform a single overwhelming attack while a rifleman mech will give you substantially more reach. Which one do you prefer?"

"I'm used to piloting the lancer mech configuration, but I can brush up my marksmanship skills if you need me to. It's just.. will either be able to allow me to fight against a warship?"

"Breakthroughs will always allow you to exert more power than usual. This is especially the case when you reach Unity of Man and Machine."

"I'm not Jannzi."

"You're right. You are not like her. That doesn't mean you should underestimate your own ability. Out of all of our expert candidates, you have the greatest understanding of my mechs. While I can't say whether it will truly happen, I have high hopes for your ability to meld with the Quint."

"It would help if I can pilot it a few times." Joshua remarked.

"Don't bother making this request again. I have already told you my answer. Now let's return to our original question. Lancer mech or rifleman mech?"

This was a very impactful choice. His choice of configuration had the potential to change the entire course of the upcoming battle.

After half a minute, Joshua made his choice. "I'd like to keep the lancer mech configuration if possible. I always felt as if it is the most powerful configuration of the Quint, sir. My mech is able to penetrate much tougher obstacles than the regular Bright Warriors. This is a powerful advantage."

"You made the right choice." Ves smiled.

Of the five gems that Ves had used to build the Quint, one of them stood out due to its high amplification factor.

[Fist of the Faithful]

The memory of a punch that changed the course of the galaxy resides in this gem. Increases the impact damage inflicted by a mech by 30 percent.

The sole advantage provided by this gem was not trivial. Ves eagerly wanted to leverage it even further when he improved the Quint. Whether it was enough to threaten a warship, he didn't dare to make any claims.

The few instances where expert mechs directly confronted warships often ended in tragedy.

The power of a demigod seemed incomparably frail compared to a heavily-armored ship that was capable of outputting enough damage to crater an entire city in a matter of minutes!

Only ace pilots were able to offer meaningful resistance against sub-capital warships.

As for god pilots, no one knew what they were capable of. The rumors suggested that they were worse, equal or even superior to CFA battleships.

Joshua was not a god pilot. He wasn't even a proper expert pilot yet. Even if he broke through in the most powerful way imaginable, there was only so much he could do. That was why Ves did not bet all of his chips on this plan alone.

Still, making sure that Joshua was able to exert more power would definitely open up some opportunities in the upcoming battle.

Once the two decided to settle on a lancer mech configuration, Ves called up a wireframe model of the Quint and began to illustrate some of his suggested changes.

Many of them were rather subtle and overly technical, so Joshua quickly got lost. It wasn't until Ves marked out the miniature missile launchers that the young expert candidate paid attention again.

"I never used those missiles. I never found a need to resort to them." Joshua said.

"I know, but the opponent we'll be facing is different." Ves responded. "The biggest disadvantage of missiles is that it's not easy to stock up a mech with a lot of missiles. You have to make the most out of the limited payload the mech is able to carry. I intend to replace the standard second-class missiles supplied to the Quint with custom, handcrafted missiles."

"You're making them yourself?"

Ves grinned. "Oh, you betcha. All of the other Bright Warriors that I intend to supply to the other expert candidates will enjoy the same treatment. We have accumulated a lot of medium and high-grade exotics from Ulimo Citadel. At least some of them can produce potent explosive reactions."

"This isn't enough. Once I fire all of the missiles loaded in the Quint, I'm dry."

"That's okay. This is just a secondary weapon system. Let's move on to the core enhancements of the Quint."

Ves outlined several improvements to the acceleration and the shock-absorbing systems. He also proposed to replace the Quint's current lance with a different one that was substantially stronger.

Joshua was surprised at the last suggestion. "Do we have a material that is stronger than Breyer alloy, sir?"

"Yes, though it's not easy to work with. I might have to spend a lot of time on this subproject."

Ves intended to make the Quint's new lance out of Unending alloy. Even though he hadn't found a way to work this first-class alloy, he might be able to manage something if he cooperated with Lucky.

His cat still suffered from an awful stomach ache, but hopefully that might change in the coming weeks.

If not, Ves was prepared to cure his cat in any way he could.

"Do you have any specific requests? Do you think the Quint in this configuration is missing something?"

"I..." Joshua trailed off for a moment. "Lancer mechs are kind of one-dimensional. I could use another weapon if charges are impractical. I'm not talking about a backup knife. I want something I can use to tear something up without building up momentum."

That was not an easy request. "I can pair the Quint with another weapon, but your mech isn't geared towards brawls. A lot of capacity of the lancer mech configuration is taken up by its shock-absorbing systems. It has to carry all of these cumbersome parts because you and your mech are liable to squash yourselves flat if these components are absent."

"I don't need anything too fancy. I can rely on my skill to overcome the awkwardness of my mech."

Even though people such as Melkor might not be able to win against a Swordmaiden in a swordfight, he was still able to hold his own to some extent.

Against regular street thugs, a trained soldier like Melkor would still be able to win the fight with relative ease when both of them were wielding swords for whatever reason.

A talented mech pilot such as Joshua possessed a very broad skillset. His skills were not in question, but the frame of a lancer mech didn't really possess the agility and full range of motion that allowed real swordsman mechs to outduel their opponents.

Ves couldn't do much to address this problem without creating other problems.

After discussing some other matters, Ves finished his discussion with Joshua.

The upgrades to the Quint weren't very complicated. The lancer mech configuration still retained its essence. Ves merely planned to add some selective improvements to enhance its core functionality while possibly adding a touch of flexibility as well.

He ended his meeting with Joshua and called up Commander Orfan. He replaced the projection for the Quint with the projection of another Bright Warrior mech.

"I intend to create your spearman mech by adapting the swordsman mech configuration of the Bright Warrior. Do you have any specific requests that you think might help?"

She pointed at the spear held by the projected mockup of her future mech. "This spear looks a bit thin."

"Don't worry. It's a lot stronger than you think. Don't think it is weaker because it's not as thick as a typical spear. It's made out of incredibly hard material. The mech will break before the spear begins to crack."

Commander Orfan looked impressed. "If that's the case, then I don't have as many complaints. I actually like thinner and lighter spears because I can launch my attacks faster. Just make sure the spears are straight and solid. I don't want to fight with those weird floppy poles that bend and tumble as if they are acrobats."

"I didn't plan on supplying you with this kind of spear. It's rarely used in the Komodo Star Sector."

"There's something else I want you to add to my mech. I want you to add a small shield to my mech."

"Uh, are you sure?"

She nodded. "It would help a lot if I have something that can absorb a lot of damage. Just make sure it isn't big enough to slow my mech down. I don't want a big fat tower shield."

"Understood. I'll pair your mech with a modest shield."

The Valkyrie Redeemer design already possessed a lightweight shield, so Ves could just copy it over while making some small adaptations.

She didn't impose any other important demands, so Ves quickly moved on to hearing Commander Dise.

"Ketis will know what I want for my mech." The Swordmaiden Commander uttered. "It will take too long to list out my exact requirements to you. I am very particular about the swordsman mechs I pilot. The Bright Warriors that are armed with swords are too balanced for my tastes. Aside from their admittedly impressive defense, they aren't weak or strong in any other aspect."

"I've studied some of the swordsman mechs in your mech roster. I take it you want something that is more focused on offense?"

She nodded. "Defense is good and all, but that is not our way. We cut through every obstacle or evade the attacks we can't afford to take."

Part of that was due to necessity. Back in their pirate days, the Swordmaiden mechs couldn't really handle too many complex repairs. High-quality armor systems were not only expensive and challenging to source, but difficult to repair when damaged. It was better for them to rely on simpler mechs that may not be the toughest but were easily to service in resource-deprived regions.

Though these constraints no longer applied to the Swordmaidens, they had already developed a strong martial tradition around these limitations.

"I will make sure to improve the mobility of your mech. I'll focus on enhancing its reaction time, agility and immediate acceleration. The armor system will largely remain similar, so its defenses should still be as good as before. As for the weapon, I might cooperate with Ketis to replace the Breyer alloy greatsword that is paired with your current mech with something better."

"I look forward to seeing the result."

She didn't put up a fuss. Of course, Ves didn't think she was charmed by his design ability. She mainly placed her trust on Ketis. As long as the Swordmaiden mech designer had a say in the project, Commander Dise had nothing to be concerned about!

This kind of unflinching trust was very touching to Ves. Dise did not express an inkling of doubt towards Ketis. Even though the two hadn't spoken about this topic, the Swordmaiden Commander already believed that Ketis would succeed!

How come other Larkinsons didn't exhibit this degree of closeness? It turned out that there was still a lot more room for improvement for his clan. Ves hoped the rest of his clan would develop this degree of implicit trust and intimacy.

After they quickly completed this discussion, Ves raised another topic to the Swordmaiden leader.

"There is something else I'd like to talk to you about."

"What is it?" She looked at him questioningly.

"I.. have another experiment. It's not tested and it's mostly theoretical, but if it succeeds.. It might be possible to empower your Swordmaidens through completely different means. Are you interested?"

"I'm not sure. Your experiments.. aren't exactly the cleanest."

Chapter 2355: Forgotten Group

Ves explained his intentions to form some kind of way to pool the minds of the Swordmaiden mech pilots through mysterious methods.

Since he didn't really know yet how to accomplish this unprecedented feat, he failed to articulate his complete vision.

It couldn't be helped. Much of what he intended to do was related to spirituality. Though he didn't really care about the MTA's insistence on keeping 'psionic power' secret, exposing it to Commander Dise would only complicate the situation.

Unfortunately, Dise saw through his obfuscation.

"You're talking about something dangerous, aren't you?"

"Uhhh... it's largely theoretical, but there is still a solid foundation behind it. Think about what has changed ever since you joined the clan. Have you ever thought it was odd that you feel a lot more close to your fellow non-Swordmaiden clansmen than you normally should?"

She frowned. "Ketis said something about Golden Cats and whatnot. I don't really understand what is going on, but I know that this is anything but normal."

"We're all connected to an invisible network." Ves succinctly said. "This network doesn't do much other than affect our perception towards our fellow clansmen. However, I have barely scratched the surface of this network. I can do much more with it, though I still need to work out the details."

"That sounds very vague. Maybe it will help if you explain what exactly you want to accomplish."

"Are you familiar with Master Huron? Probably not. Let me explain his work to you. He has been a great inspiration to me. If I wasn't exposed to his design philosophy, our clan would have never become so cohesive at this time."

When Ves showed the Swordmaiden Commander what Master Huron accomplished, she looked impressed.

"I can see how this can help. I admit that I'm impressed with these neural networks." She raised an eyebrow at him. "I don't see what this has to do with you, though. You are not a Master Mech Designer. You are not Master Huron's apprentice. In fact, if any of this involves modifying neural networks, then I will immediately end this conversation. Don't think I am unaware of some of your experiments on Aeon Corona VII!"

Ves awkwardly coughed. "This is different. I would never treat your Swordmaidens like I did the dwarves at Aeon Corona VII. Your Sisters are valued people. I haven't forgotten about your sacrifices at Kesseling VIII. It's because I value your Swordmaidens so much that I want to grant them all a means of gaining greater power."

He finally managed to sway Dise to an extent.

"I'll have to discuss your proposal with my fellow Sisters. Nothing will happen unless we all agree to take part in this.. Experiment. While we are eager to gain more power, we don't want to throw away our lives."

"I don't want any of you to die. This is why I'm urging your Swordmaidens to take part in this experiment. My network is different from that of Master Huron, but the benefits should be similar."

"I will think about it and discuss it with my subordinates."

That was the best that Ves could accomplish. Contrary to the superficial image of the Swordmaidens, Commander Dise wasn't the type to mindlessly take action. She couldn't afford to be as reckless as some of her subordinates when the future of her mech troop was at stake.

The pirate outfit founded by Commander Lydia had suffered so many successive setbacks that less than a single mech company was left. Until their trainees graduated from their years-long training regime, the Swordmaidens weren't going to expand in numbers anytime soon!

Due to the very limited number of mech pilots among the Swordmaidens, each of them were irreplaceable treasures. Neither Ves nor Commander Dise wanted to lose the irreplaceable heritage that every surviving Swordmaiden mech pilot possessed, but the desperate circumstances left them with little choice.

Aware that the Swordmaidens in their current form wouldn't be able to play a major role in the upcoming battle, Dise reluctantly decided to take this suggestion seriously.

Once Commander Dise left, Ves met with the final expert candidate of the clan. Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson did not look content.

"So now it's my turn." Tusa crossed his arms. "Did you deliberately put me at last?"

"What? No! I just wanted to speak to you last because the mech I intend to prepare for you requires a lot more work."

"Oh. I see."

Ves summoned two separate projections. It depicted the Bright Warrior mech in both its swordsman mech and rifleman mech configurations.

"As you can see, the swordsman mech configuration is an excellent melee combatant, but it is too heavy to fit in the lightweight class. The rifleman mech configuration features a considerably slimmer profile and is much closer to what I intend to shape for your custom machine. The problem is that its musculature and overall layout is optimized for ranged combat."

"What does this mean?"

"As I have said, your mech requires much more work to make than others. I have to redesign a lot of aspects right down to the deepest portions in order to shave off mass. Unless you are willing to pilot a medium mech, I will have to spend a lot of time to design and implement all of the necessary changes. It might be possible that I won't be able to finish your new mech at the time the enemy pirate fleet forces us into battle."

Tusa reacted nonchalant at that. "If that is the case, then so be it. I'm already familiar with piloting my current machine. Getting a better one is nice, but not entirely necessary."

"I'm glad you are so accommodating. For what it's worth, I don't intend to leave you hanging. I haven't spent as much time on you as I did with some of the other expert candidates."

"We light mech pilots are used to being ignored." Tusa sardonically remarked.

"Ah, that won't be the case for long." Ves quickly replied. "I intend to design a very good light skirmisher for the Larkinson Clan in the near future. The Flagrant Vandals have been requesting one for a while, but I'll make sure the rest of the clan has access to the new model as well. I'll definitely make sure that yours fits your piloting inclinations like a glove."

"I'll take your word for it, Ves. It's about time for our clan to receive a powerful light skirmisher. My fellow light mech specialists feel as if you don't acknowledge their existence. In fact, if not for me, they might even doubt you are aware that our clan has mech pilots who prefer to pilot lighter machines!"

Obviously, Tusa shared the same sentiment. Ves could feel some of the edge in the expert candidate's nascent force of will. It became a bit more agitated, which meant that Tusa likely spoke from his heart.

Ves looked apologetic. "I will truly make it up to you all. The wait will be worth it as all of the improvements and innovations that I have made in the last couple of months will all be applied to your new light skirmisher mechs. Unlike the Bright Warrior, our new light skirmisher design will become a full second-class mech design. This means that once you and your compatriots obtain your new mechs, you'll be able to stick with them for many years. They'll easily stay relevant, and if that's not the case I'll publish a minor revision to the design to elevate its performance."

The hefty promise finally placated Tusa. The expert candidate wanted to stand up for his fellow light mech specialists, and he accomplished his goal. There was no reason for him to put up a tough exterior anymore.

"Thank you. Ves. You're a fantastic mech designer, and from what I know, you have always abided by your promises."

"My word is gold. I always mean what I say."

Ves realized that he needed to hurry up with replacing all of the non-LMC mechs in the clan with his own mech designs. While it took a lot of time to represent all of the essential mech types, he would just have to expand the role of his design teams.

"Oh, by the way, don't just design a single light mech and leave it at that, Ves. There are more light mech types than light skirmishers, you know. Not everyone remembers this detail. Even if the other varieties of light mechs are rarely used, they can be very powerful under the right circumstances. I know for sure that the Flagrant Vandals will request more varieties of light mechs."

"I'll take that into account, but generally speaking we can't neglect medium mechs either. In our situation, medium mechs are our mainstay mech models. We aren't short on funds or resources, which means we can invest in more durable mechs. In fact, we are much more limited by our available pool of manpower. Each Larkinson mech pilot is precious. Putting more of our mech pilots into light mechs is not desirable."

"I don't want to see that either." Tusa said. "Piloting light mechs is a calling. Those who aren't cut out to pilot them are better off with frontline mechs or something. It takes a special kind of daring and courage to entrust your life to a machine that can shatter into pieces after suffering just a couple of serious hits."

Ves respected the mech pilots who chose to pilot light mechs regardless of their glaring weaknesses. They were the true daredevils of the mech community.

When Ves finished his enlightening discussion with Tusa, the round of meetings had finally ended.

He gained a good impression of what the expert candidates wanted to see in their custom mechs.

These designs were vital and Ves expected to spend much of his time on developing them all. He was even prepared to put aside most of his workload related to the Design Department's ongoing design projects.

Gloriana was very understanding towards him. With his life, it didn't matter if it took an extra month to finish the Valkyrie Redeemer design.

Besides, it wasn't as if those projects stalled the moment Ves shifted his priorities. Gloriana and the design teams were more than capable of completing the projects by themselves.

Ves only needed to stop by every couple of days in order to clean up and direct the spiritual development of the developing mech designs. He also had to flesh out their other spiritual properties, but that didn't demand too much of his time.

More and more, he felt like he needed multiple copies of himself to handle his increasingly growing workload.

He even thought about ordering Ranya Wodin to cultivate a couple of clones of himself.

Since the spiritual version of Ylvaine was able to breathe life into the physical copy of Ylvaine, Ves vaguely guessed that he might be able to do the same.

If he could develop a technique that was similar to his mother's incarnation ability, then he might be able to control additional instances of himself!

How great would it be if he could make more copies of himself, each of which were capable of handling as much work as his original self?

Ves slapped the side of his head. "This is a stupid idea!"

First, some aspects of his body couldn't be replicated. Some aspects of his Jutland organ had become completely unique, and clearly he wouldn't be able to gain another implant as good as the Archimedes Rubal.

Aside from these practical constraints, Ves also feared what would happen if his clones somehow gained independence. What if they didn't want to work for the real Ves anymore? What if they wanted to live their own lives?

Just the threat of such a rebellion was enough to deter Ves from following up on this idea.

"It's probably impossible to accomplish such an unreal feat." Ves muttered.

He would have to be a god to be able to make this work, and he was clearly not a divinity.

He was just a mech designer.

Chapter 2356: Same Boat

The war had changed for the worse.

Venerable Ghanso Larkinson smelled the desperation from some of the Fridaymen. Despite the upbeat news, despite the pronounced victories, most of the Fridaymen who served at the frontlines knew that the Hexers were continuing to gain ground.

The Crestfallen Stars were teetering on collapse! It was only a matter of time before the hinterland and the core provinces of the Carnegie Group became vulnerable to successive raids and invasions!

The Friday Coalition couldn't let this pass.

Lady Aisling Curver already warned him that the CRC intended to reinforce Unit L with additional expert pilots.

"That's good." Ghanso responded. "They're all good mech pilots that can make a difference in this war. Why us, though?"

"The brass thinks that we are worth investing in. We'll not only be able to replenish the lost Scarra faster, but also gain some help in other ways. Be ready to greet some new guest expert pilots."

"Please tell your superiors that I prefer to serve alongside other Brighter expert pilots. Our shared background and training will allow us to get in sync right away."

"I will pass on your request, Ghanso, but my influence is limited. From what I have heard, the brass believes it is better to split the foreigners up in order to avoid the formation of insular cliques. When you wear our uniform, we expect you to dedicate yourself to the Friday Coalition."

"We are losing ground against the Hexers. I don't think this is the time to focus on integration. We need to gain immediate battle effectiveness in order to stall the Hexer."

Back when he served in the Mech Corps, Ghanso became acquainted with many Brighters. He trusted his mates from the Volari Starhawks with his life and developed ties with many other honorable Brighters.

Though the Hex Army unexpectedly drove the Fortune Legion from the Marrakath System like rats, a few individual units performed brilliantly enough to mitigate the disastrous defeat.

After killing more than half-a-dozen elite Hexer expert pilots, Ghanso fully gained the Friday Coalition's recognition. Master Huron was already exploring options to start up additional units with asymmetrical networks while Aisling largely washed away her guilt for letting Ves Larkinson hijack her assigned ship.

Neither Ghanso nor Aisling were pleased at their modest success. Killing a bunch of Hexer expert pilots would likely save the lives of several thousands Fridayman mech pilots over the course of the Komodo War, but that hadn't been enough to stave off a crushing defeat at one of the Crestfallen Stars.

The Blessed Squire and its revolutionary glow changed everything. The crazy Hexers became even crazier whenever they fought in the vicinity of one of these annoying supportive mechs.

According to some strategists, the sudden entry of the Blessed Squire onto Marrakath III directly spared the Hexers the lives of at least a hundred-thousand mech pilots and trillions of coalition credits worth of supplies and war materiel!

What was worse was this was just the start. Even when Ghanso heard that the Master Mech Designers of the Friday Coalition were close to publishing their first counters against the Blessed Squire, the powerful force multiplier was showing up in almost every battlefield!

They were ubiquitous on land and became more common in space after the Hex Army started to deploy them onto floaters, which were basically levitating platforms adapted for combat.

Though slow, inefficient and unwieldy, the Blessed Squires flying around on top of floaters gradually caused the Friday Coalition to suffer more losses in crucial space battles.

The ripple effects of the introduction of the Blessed Squire potentially caused more than a million valuable Fridayman mech pilots to perish ahead of time.

This was a very serious consequence that directly tilted the balance in favor of the Hexers!

Such an outcome couldn't stand. With increasing desperation, the Friday Coalition reached out to more and more lesser states in order to poach their most talented mech pilots.

The Coalition not only borrowed a lot of foreign expert pilots, but also started to recruit a lot of talented third-class mech pilots.

The elite mech pilots from the smaller states such as the Ylvaine Protectorate and the Bright Republic were able to pilot some of the best standard mechs of their respective mech militaries.

Now, they were only qualified to become the Friday Coalition's cannon fodder. By piloting resilient but simplified frontline mechs, these new additions were one of the Fridaymen's many countermeasures against the rising momentum of their archenemies.

When the first batch of reinforcements finally arrived, Ghanso eagerly awaited his new colleague.

Unfortunately, he did not like what he saw.

"You!"

Ghanso reacted with shock!

Standing opposite to him was a woman who wore a similar uniform as his. Though Ghanso knew that the Coalition Reserve Corps engaged in an extensive recruiting spree in the past couple of months, he never expected to see a familiar face!

Aisling calmly approached the new arrival and shook her hand.

"Venerable Relia Foster. Welcome aboard the Pallas Intaer. We have just transferred to this new combat carrier, but we have made sure to reserve some room for you and your upcoming expert mech."

The Vesian expert pilot perfunctory accepted the handshake and looked around. "I am not pleased with this assignment. While I am willing to do what I can to help you defeat the Hexers, I can tolerate only so many stunts. Why am I standing in the same room as a Brighter?"

The air between the two expert pilots turned volatile as their wills pressed and clashed against each other.

"Venerable Ghanso Larkinson is different from Mr. Ves Larkinson. He is opposed to his cousin."

"THAT MAKES THIS WORSE!" Relia burst out! "I cannot stand you Larkinsons! You and your family have inflicted untold damage to my state. While I can reluctantly accept the fact that both of our states are allied to the Friday Coalition, that does not mean that I am willing to fight alongside one of the butchers of my fellow Vesians!"

"Oh?" Ghanso growled and stepped forward in a menacing posture. "I can say the same for you, witch. You're one of the biggest hopes of the Hafner Duchy. You have tons of Brighter blood on your hands. Why don't I take revenge for the lives of my fellow compatriots right away?"

"ENOUGH!" Aisling shouted. "Calm down and act like adults for once!"

Upon her command, some bodyguards moved in between the two acrimonious expert pilots. Even though it was difficult for the guards to endure the strong wills of both expert pilots at close range, they were well-trained Fridaymen who possessed a natural sense of superiority against third-raters.

Soon, the distance between the Brighter and the Vesian doubled. Aisling stared at both young expert pilots with considerable irritation.

She didn't agree with Venerable Foster's transfer. She already knew that sparks would fly once the two former enemies met. What happened completely fell in line with her expectations.

"Neither of you are allowed to pursue any old grudges and private vendettas. The Bright-Vesia Wars are relics of the past. Your two states no longer have any reason to fight against each other after a lot of devastated territories have opened up for reclamation. The Bright Republic has also lost the Bentheim System, so it has lost much of its value."

The fall of Bentheim was a very sore point to Ghanso, who witnessed its fall up close. Though the sandmen were to blame for launching their final apocalyptic offense, the Bright Republic would have been in a better position to resist the aliens if the Vesians hadn't been spoiling for a fight a few years prior!

His hatred of the Vesians almost exceeded his hate for Ves and his band of traitors!

After the bodyguards forcefully dragged them to different rooms, Ghanso spent some time cooling himself down. Aisling visited him a half hour later.

"I expected better from you, Venerable Larkinson."

"The CRC deliberately presented a former enemy in front of my face." Ghanso resentfully growled. "How else do you think I'm supposed to react? It would be the same as if a Hexer suddenly stepped up to you. Would you really be able to restrain yourself when Gloriana Wodin—"

"DO NOT SPEAK THAT NAME!"

Ghanso shut up, but his eyes twinkled as he made his point.

He knew about Aisling's obsession with his hated cousin. Mesmerizing this brilliant Fridayman mech designer was yet another crime to lay at the feet of the destroyer of the Larkinson Family.

Ever since he learned about Aisling's fascination, he tried to convince her to move on many times. A loathsome profiteering bastard like Ves did not deserve her affection.

It was too bad that any news about Ves' exploits only made her even more regretful at her missed opportunity.

Aisling finally calmed down a bit. "Look, neither of us likes this situation. I really don't know why the brass decided to transfer Venerable Foster to Unit L despite all of the warning signs, but we have no choice but to work with the hand we have been dealt. Can you bring yourself to forget about the past and work to secure our future? Not just the Friday Coalition, but also lesser states are at risk of being subsumed by the Hexers."

She was right. A Hexer victory would definitely lead to a comprehensive transformation of the Komodo Star Sector. Just like in Vicious Mountain, a single dominant second-rate state in a star sector would definitely spread its cultural influences to the third-rate states.

Both Brighters and Vesians were at risk of slowly losing their unique identities! Instead, they would slowly take on Hexer norms and begin to treat men and women differently.

This could not happen!

"...I understand. I will try to get along with Venerable Foster." Ghanso reluctantly promised.

"Good. I'll call her in so that you can introduce yourselves to each other properly this time. I hope that the both of you can take the bigger picture into account this time."

"I am not a lout, Lady Curver. I know when to take a step back."

Once she made sure that Ghanso meant what he said, Aisling activated her comm and transmitted a brief signal.

Venerable Relia Foster entered the compartment and stoically stepped forward. "Venerable Larkinson. Lady Curver is right. The Komodo War is too big and pivotal to allow any room for us to solve our grudges. Let us bury the hatchet for the duration of

this exceptional conflict. We can always resume our fight after we have dealt with the threat of the Hexers."

Her response precisely matched his own intentions. It seemed that they had more common ground than he thought!

Without hesitation, Ghanso stepped forward and shook her hand. "Welcome to Unit L. Though it will take some time for me to accept fighting alongside a Vesian, neither can I accept the Hexers taking over our star sector. If I may ask, how will you fit into Unit L?"

Venerable Foster turned to Aisling, who gave the new transfer permission to talk.

"A new expert mech is under development. It is set to be called the Jeanne d'Arc, and it will mainly be a swordsman mech. I will be offering close-ranged protection to you under normal circumstances, and I will also be able to support you against the more formidable Hexer expert pilots such as the Ruination Witch."

"What are the strengths of your Jeanne d'Arc."

"I'm not exactly sure, but it will take a lot to take it down. It won't be a problem for me to fight in extended engagements."

Aisling looked pleased as the two expert pilots no longer generated any sparks between them. Perhaps the upper ranks were right in putting former enemies together. Though expert pilots were known to stand their ground when it came to their principles, they were also able to change if it benefited their cause.

Friend or foe, the two enemies were on the same boat now. Both of them had to do their best to survive the coming Hexer storm!

Chapter 2357: Minxie

"Whahaha! Bow before me! I AM INVINCIBLE!"

The Adonis Colossus flew majestically in space as Vincent Ricklin-Larkinson was having the time of his life!

Though he was merely taking his mech out for a spin, he felt as if he had made a small breakthrough in his piloting skills.

How else could he have suddenly increased his performance and won more points in the simulated drills?

His large mech had become a familiar sight in high orbit of Cinach VI. The locals, the traders and the Hexers all ignored the sight of the strange mech with a flowing particle cape trailing behind its back.

The rifle in one of the Adonis Colossus' hands barked out a couple of harmless false shells that precisely hit the target dummy bots that were whizzing back and forth a fair distance away.

At the same time, the mech relied on its heavy armor to deflect the stab of a simulated light skirmisher.

"I've been eying you from the start, you rat!"

With a single swing of the Adonis Colossus' blade, the projection light skirmisher broke into pieces as the powerful attack decisively registered as a fatal blow to the non-existent mech!

On and on the solo practice session proceeded. Vincent exulted in his greater ability to pilot his mechs as he felt more in tune with his personal machine than ever!

"My mech is singing to me, and I'm singing back! Damn I'm good!"

His talent for piloting mechs must have finally bloomed into splendor. There was no other way to explain his increased performance!

The only snag was that his improvement didn't carry over so well when he piloted other mechs. Whenever he piloted a landbound mech to practice his duelling skills for his upcoming competitive matches, he seemed to lose a large amount of fluency in his piloting skills.

"Maybe I'm bad at piloting landbound mechs." He thought. "I'm better off piloting mechs in space!"

After he completed his practice run, he brought his mech back to one of the carriers of the Living Sentinels. He hopped out of his cockpit and handed his mech off to the mech technicians before entering a shuttle that brought him back to the surface.

Though the commute was rather tedious, Vincent had no choice to take these regular trips. The Adonis Colossus was at home in space and did not perform well on land.

Once his shuttle reached the landing zone of the temporary Larkinson Clan base, Vincent exited the shuttle and walked across the extensive courtyards.

The Larkinson Clan had grown even larger in the past couple of months. Recruitment of critical personnel may have slowed down, but it never stopped. Vincent constantly spotted new faces, each of which seemed to have come from further and further away.

No matter where they came from and who they used to be in the past, they all became Larkinsons once they passed all of the requirements.

"Hey, Vincent!"

"Good luck on your next match, Vince! I'm rooting for TSV!"

"Take care not to piss off the Hexers next time."

"I did not mean to insult them!" Vincent protested. "I was just complimenting those beautifully toned stomachs as those babes were running across the field. How could I know that they were willing to chase me all the way to the men's toilet and kick me to pieces?"

"You enjoyed it though, right?"

"I'm not THAT kind of a man!"

All of the banter was well-meant. As one of the more flamboyant members of the Larkinson Clan, Vincent was something of a local celebrity. His Adonis Colossus alone ensured that every Larkinson would learn about him in time, though not everyone thought well of him and his chosen occupation.

He heard a lot of talk behind his back about his choice to pass on an opportunity to be a part of Task Force Predator.

As much as he wanted to prove his courage, Vincent was wary of the Nyxian Gap. Just like Raella, he had enough of war. As much as he wanted to prove his masculinity, he hadn't survived this long without developing a keen sense of danger.

The latest news that had come from the Nyxian Gap did not bode well for the clan. Though the Larkinsons at Cinach VI all tried to maintain a normal routine, beneath the surface a lot of elements were moving.

When Vincent finally returned to the accommodation he shared with his girlfriend, Raella sat glum at the window.

"You're back." She said flatly.

"Is work bringing you down?"

"It's the usual. The LCS is not as easy to organize as I thought, and interest in watching our preseason duels has dropped ever since the news broke that our fellow Larkinsons are in serious trouble."

"That's odd. From my experience, people are even more eager to seek out fun when times are hard."

"We Larkinsons are different from the rabble you mixed with before. You're not a part of the Bentheim Liberation Movement anymore."

"Eh." Vincent shrugged as he walked up behind her and pulled her into a hug. "There are more similarities than you think."

The two fell silent for a moment as they took in each other's company. Raella eventually pushed herself off her boyfriend.

"How was practice?"

"Great as ever." Vincent replied as he approached the sofa and took a seat. "Where's Minxie?"

"She's taking a nap maybe. MINXIE! Where are you?"

It took a moment before Vincent and Raella heard a response from an adjacent room.

"Nyeow! Nyeow!"

Raella instantly melted as she turned to greet the arrival of a young feline. "Minxie! There you are. Did you just finish your nap?"

"Nyeow."

The woman picked up her pet and hugged her white-furred companion with an adoring smile.

Raella and Vincent's adoption of a cat was another custom that had taken over the Larkinson Clan. The clan had ordered a large variety of specially-bred cats from Felixia.

Though the new cats weren't as amazing as Lucky and Clixie, the new cats like Minxie each had their strong points.

What was common to all of them was that they enjoyed longer lifespans. They had also developed a measure of sentience and were capable of learning and understanding human speech.

There were other advantages, but that did not change the fact that the cats were still pets. They did not strengthen the clan, but they enriched the lives of those within.

Since the Larkinson Clan was known for its cat motif, many Larkinsons defaulted to adopting cats. Only a small minority adopted other pets such as lizards, insects, birds and dogs.

Raella took a liking for beautiful cats. She chose to adopt a surprisingly gentle modified white persian than a more active and energetic pet.

Though Vincent disagreed with her choice at first, he had come around later on. Minxie was simply too adorable for him to dislike her. When he approached Raella, the cat curiously looked up at his face.

"Nyeow?"

"Who's your daddy?"

"Nyeow!"

Raella giggled. "Pfff! Stop teasing our little kitty. She's too innocent for your humor."

"Who said I was joking?"

The two cuddled and played around a bit with Minxie before the cat quickly lost interest. Once the white persian chose to doze off in her new cat bed, Vincent and Raella sat together on the sofa.

"So... how are you holding up, Raella?"

"Not that good, to be honest. I can't help but worry about Ves and the rest of our clansmen. They're being hunted by pirate warships of all things. I can't believe the Big Two allow the pirates to get away with building them. Now, our trapped Larkinsons hardly have any choice but to fight their way through the worst of the Nyxian scum."

"You already heard Gloriana. There's nothing we can do but put ourselves in danger. Our mechs are simply too weak at the moment. It's better that the Wodin Warriors sent a couple of thousand mechs in their stead."

"I still felt I could have done more." She sighed. "I don't usually feel this way."

"Our clan has a way of worming its way into your heart. I used to think that all of this emphasis on fellowship, brotherhood and kitties was soft. Now that I've been in the clan for a while, I can't imagine turning back to my old life. I never had a real family before now, you see. Here, I can be myself or be the Vincent that everyone knows without caring too much about what others think."

"This has always been the case in our old Larkinson Family. It was just that we didn't have this weird clan glow that causes us to feel close to our fellow clansmen at all times. The implications are kind of disturbing."

"I like it." Vincent straightforwardly said. "It helps with making friends. Without it, our clan would have devolved into a collection of factions. Everyone who came from the same

state would have stuck with each other with little reason to go out. I've seen that happen in the BLM to some extent as the boys from the same city stuck together despite being told to get along with the other rebels in the same cell."

Raella looked at Vincent with a curious expression. "Do you truly not miss your old life anymore?"

"Being a rebel sucked. I only joined because I had problems with my family and expected more from the BLM. I didn't really care about fighting for Bentheim's independence. I just wanted to start a new life and feel like I belong."

She knew about some of the details of his sordid past. Vincent had lived a colorful life and developed a colorful personality. That excited her, as did his formidable prowess.

"Our new life will be under threat if Task Force Predator can't make it back."

"I know." Vincent squeezed her shoulder. "I'm not giving up hope, though. While I don't think that Ves and his pals can run away from the pirates forever, I think it's possible to stay out of reach of the pirate warships and prolong the chase long enough for the Hexers to come to the rescue."

"Oh, have you become a genius navigator, or are you just saying something random?" Raella sneered.

"Hey, I heard this from one of the mech captains. The Nyxian Gap is filled with meteorites and a lot of other junk. It's not easy to chase after a single target."

"We'll see. I don't want to develop any false hopes."

Raella almost couldn't believe how Ves could bring himself to go on this risky excursion. Her wildly-successful cousin could be so stupid sometimes.

The two continued to share their concerns over the course of their idle talk.

Meanwhile, Minxie crawled up to their laps and demanded their affection.

"Nyeow!"

"Oh, you pretty princess you. Your fur is so soft and fluffy."

Vincent smiled as Raella became besmitten by her new cat again.

"Do you think we can get another pet?"

"Huh? Is Minxie not enough for you? She's more than cute enough to satisfy us both!"

"It's not that, Raella. I just think like we could spice up our lives with a dog."

"No. Forget about it, Vincent. Minxie is enough. If she's lonely, we can get her another cat. Under no circumstances will I allow you to bring a dog or any other animal."

"Why not? Do you hate dogs?"

"I love them, but I love cats more. This is one thing I have in common with Ves. His Lucky is amazing."

"What about obtaining a mechanical dog? They're pretty low on maintenance but they can be even better companions."

"I told you to stop it. No dogs allowed. Besides, mechanical dogs aren't really alive. They're just good at pretending they are. How can you love a bunch of computer code?"

"I don't know, but Ves seems to do fine."

"Lucky is different! So are other cats!"

Though Vincent appreciated cats as much as anyone, some Larkinsons simply took it too far!

Chapter 2358: Mother's Child

The mood at Task Force Predator slowly recovered from a low point.

Even though the prospect of facing not one, but several pirate warships worried the Larkinsons to no end, the threat only galvanized them into working harder.

To some, every second counted. Finishing repairs a day sooner meant that the Larkinsons would have more mechs to field at the time of the decisive battle.

An interesting dynamic took place. Even when it looked as if they had restored plenty of mechs, the mech technicians kept dragging up wreckage to restore to working condition.

Ejections typically happened quite a lot in battle. The ejected mech pilots would usually fly back to their motherships and mostly sit around until the battle had ended.

Not this time. The casualties suffered by the Larkinsons gave them much greater leeway to build up a reserve. Ves even decided to make more room on his carriers by dumping out the least valuable loot.

With the most difficult battle of this run on the horizon, no one cared about bringing home riches or earning an extra bonus. They just wanted to get back home alive.

For this reason, every material aboard their ships became accessible for use in various applications.

For example, the Larkinsons salvaged a lot of wreckage that used to come from the Penitent Sister mechs that had succumbed in the previous battle.

Though the grey mechs pounded their internal parts to pieces, much of their armor plating still remained intact or in pristine condition.

The enterprising mech designers and chief technicians eagerly claimed this armor and crudely installed them on specific mechs such as Aurora Titans or other defensive mechs.

The hasty jury rigging did not look elegant at all. The low-ranking mech designers neither had the time nor the skill to implement more cohesive modifications. They just wanted to give their mech pilots a greater chance to withstand enemy fire.

"Come on, boys! These mechs aren't going to armor up by themselves! We still have three more mechs to reinforce by the end of this week."

Whether these actions would help remained to be seen. If the Gravada Knarlax fired her main cannons at any of the crudely-upgraded mechs, a bit of extra second-class armor plating wouldn't meaningfully change the outcome.

Still, the extra armor would definitely come handy when the Larkinson mechs fought against the pirate mechs. The strong layers also allowed the mechs to last a little longer when targeted by secondary gun batteries.

Nobody thought this was enough to tip the scales of the fight. Ves knew he had to do more in order to give his task force a meaningful chance of defeating the enemy punitive fleet.

He had already begun to do that by promising to upgrade the mechs of the expert candidates in the clan. He even offered to upgrade the Shield of Samar, though how he would do so still remained to be seen.

As a real expert pilot, Jannzi's role in the coming battle might ironically be eclipsed by the expert candidates.

Jannzi had already broken through. No bottleneck stopped her progress anymore. Though her smooth growth was good for the clan in the long run, it was counterproductive in the current crisis.

Expert pilots without expert mechs were only capable of channeling a fraction of their strength.

The lack of resonating materials in the inventory of the task force was a very sore point to Ves. Even if he couldn't develop a complete expert mech for Jannzi, having some resonating materials at hand would have given her some additional strength in the coming battle.

"I guess she'll have to make do with a mildly-upgraded Shield of Samar."

Ves intended to replace her shield with one made out of Unending alloy. This was the fastest, simplest and most convenient way to upgrade the Shield of Samar's strongest aspect, which was defense.

All he needed to do was to find some way to carve out a large, rectangular chunk of this material out of the statue of the Unending One. Hopefully, Lucky would recover quickly, because the cat was the only cutting implement that Ves knew of that could damn well chew through anything!

"Lucky can probably drill a hole through the hull of a CFA battleship if he wanted to!" Ves joked to himself.

If Lucky still remained sick, then Ves would just drive his gem cat to work. No one in the fleet who could be of use was allowed to slack off at this time!

As Ves arranged many matters and laid out several bold plans, he also took the time to meet with the Penitent Sisters.

Instead of requesting Commander Chancy to meet him aboard the Scarlet Rose, he decided to go to her instead. He took a shuttle and traveled to the Surly Cockatrice. The large Hexer combat carrier did not exactly look inviting to Ves due to her six-sided interior, but the mood among the Penitent Sisters wasn't as hostile as before.

Months of fighting along with constant companionship had a way of turning any strangers into battle buddies. While the Penitent Sisters weren't exactly friends with the Larkinsons, they implicitly trusted each other to cover their backs.

This was very welcome progress to Ves, but he wasn't satisfied with that. This was why he met Commander Chancy in an empty conference room. Juliet Stameris, the resident head designer of the Penitent Sisters, sat by her superior's side.

"Mr. Larkinson." Chancy greeted with a neutral tone. "I believe you wish to talk about something of great import."

"I do." Ves nodded and casually sat on one of the available chairs. "As you know, our task force is facing a great threat, but we are not about to roll over and let the pirates have their way with us. No matter how small the odds, we will fight them to the end."

"We share the same sentiment." The leader of the Penitent Sisters smiled. "If we put in our all, we might be able to take down some of the pirate smaller warships. Ridding the galaxy of a pirate destroyer or a couple of pirate frigates will hopefully be enough for us to achieve redemption."

She spoke as if her death and the death of her subordinates was already set in stone.

Ves raised his chin. "What if I told you there is a way to accomplish more? What if I told you there's a chance of winning the upcoming battle?"

Perhaps other people would be fooled by his confident boasts, but the Penitent Sister Commander was well aware of the overall strategic situation.

"That is very unlikely."

"You'd be surprised." Ves smiled. "After all, didn't we accomplish successive miracles in the previous battle?"

"That was just a fluke." Juliet Stameris interjected. "Venerable Jannzi has earned all of our respect. Her dedication to her mech is admirable and has put many of our fellow Penitent Sisters to shame. Of all of the mech pilots in your clan, she is the only one who is worthy to achieve perfect resonance."

Ves slowly shook his head. "You know too little. The Shield of Samar isn't my most brilliant mech in our fleet. The Quint is considerably more potent. What do you think will happen if Joshua breaks through? What if all of our other expert candidates break through as well with the custom mechs that I intend to provide?"

Both Penitent Sisters tried to imagine the sight. If it worked out the way that Ves hinted, they might be able to witness more miracles!

Commander Chancy recognized that she was being caught up in Ves' rhythm. She quickly calmed herself down and regained her composure. "While I welcome any development that increases our odds of victory, what does this have to do with us? Why have you come, Mr. Larkinson?"

This was the moment where Ves revealed his ambitious proposal. "I want you and your Penitent Sisters to accept some of my arrangements. While some of them seem radical, it is in our best interests to augment your strength as much as possible before the decisive battle starts. It will be hard on you all, but if any of you survive, I promise to let you join the Larkinson Clan."

"Pardon?!"

"Are you serious?!"

"I am absolutely serious." Ves spoke with a straight face. "Aside from Gloriana and Ranya, I refused to let any other Hexers join my clan. However, considering your valiant service during the time that you have stayed with us, I am willing to make an exception on account for your great valor and contributions in battle. Even if the Hexadric Hegemony doesn't want you back, you have already redeemed yourselves in my eyes."

Both women looked very conflicted. Emotions such as disgust, confusion, repulsion and other negative emotions flitted through their faces.

Juliet settled on confusion. "Why.. why would you think we want to join your clan? Ever since our fellow Hexers have forced us to seek our penance, we have been working towards earning our penance. All we have ever wanted was to return to the Hegemony and be welcomed with open arms."

"While I don't claim to understand you Hexers well, I know enough that they will still consider you tainted no matter what you do." Ves stated while crossing his arms. "You were a problem that the Hexers needed to get rid of. Why should they want you back?"

"Chasing after an unattainable dream is better than settling for less."

"My clan is not any lesser than your former state. In fact, as long as we are able to sustain our current rate of progress, we might far exceed the Hegemony one day."

Valerie Chancy looked skeptical. "That is unlikely. Even if you do manage to accomplish this, it has nothing to do with us. We're Hexers, not Larkinsons. The prosperity of your clan is as irrelevant as the wealth and splendor of the Terrans and Rubarthans."

"You are wrong, commander. I have already revealed so much to you over the course of this excursion. Let me remind you of a true Hexer."

Ves did something he would ordinarily never do. He concentrated his mind and reached out to the dormant Superior Mother.

Even if the still-transforming ancestral spirit had entered a state of hibernation, Ves was still able to interact with her to a degree.

He attempted to channel a portion of her presence through his body. He wore his mother on his mind like a mask and deliberately tried to amplify her strong, motherly glow.

The process unexpectedly went smoothly. Ves somehow felt that he was incredibly compatible with the Superior Mother. It was as if his mother embraced her son!

Of course, another reason for their incredible fit was because Ves was the Superior Mother's progenitor. It was a given for his mother to embrace him because she was his child.

The effect he managed to induce immediately took over the conference room.

Both Valerie Chancy and Juliet Stameris became gobsmacked as Ves radiated the same vibe as the statues of the Superior Mother that the Penitent Sisters had started worshipping.

For a moment, both of them were barely able to process what they were sensing from Ves. They already suspected that Ves had some ties with the Superior Mother, but this was the first time they directly witnessed his relation to the revered Supreme in such a direct fashion!

"You are blessed by the Supreme, no, you are truly her son!"

"How can this be?! You're not a Hexer, yet.. It's as if you are more of a Hexer than us! This is impossible!"

Though Ves loathed to play the role of a charlatan, he really needed the Penitent Sisters to be fully onboard his plans. He did not hesitate to sell out his principles in order to bring the exiled Hexers fully under his heel.

"The Superior Mother is my birth mother." Ves boldly claimed. "You may take that as figuratively or literally as you wish, but I am her only envoy in the material realm. Do you know what this means?"

"Ummm.."

"Let me ask you a question." Ves held out his palm. "Would you rather earn the redemption of the Hexers who rejected you and cast you out of the Hegemony?"

He held out his other palm and concentrated some of the Superior Mother's glow onto it. "Or would you rather receive your absolution from the greatest Hexer Supreme?"

A shocked silence swept through the compartment.

Chapter 2359: Perfect Test Subjects

As the strongest element of the fleet, the Penitent Sisters would definitely play a crucial role in the upcoming battle.

As Hexers who possessed unusual ideas and uncertain loyalties, the former cultists could either save Task Force Predator or hasten its demise!

As Ves did not like to leave this question hanging, he wanted to secure their loyalty for real.

The problem was that the Penitent Sisters didn't have much in common with the Larkinson Clan. They used to be some of the worst kind of Hexers imaginable. They fit every man-hating stereotype that foreigners held towards the citizens of the Hegemony.

He did not think it was impossible to integrate the Penitent Sisters into the clan. Ves had already noticed that the exiled Hexers had mellowed out during the time they traveled alongside Ves and his clansmen.

Months before, Ves fabricated and distributed a bunch of statues of the Superior Mother to the Penitent Sisters.

As expected, they became charmed by the glow of the supposed Supreme and worshipped it every day. To the Penitent Sisters, the Superior Mother was their greatest example! The authority of this mythical figure exceeded that of any matriarch of their home state!

Therefore, getting their buy-in turned out to be incredibly simple. Ves merely had to channel the Superior Mother a little bit and he easily managed to hoodwink these gullible Hexers.

His contempt towards fanatics had risen because of that. No wonder Prophet Ylvaine used to be able to seduce entire states with his drivel. The more someone was inclined towards fanaticism, the less they engaged in critical thinking!

Asking simple questions such as whether the Superior Mother was real or whether Ves was even channeling the genuine article never came up. Commander Chancy and Head Designer Stameross easily accepted the falsehoods that Ves had spouted.

After the two Penitent Sisters swore their devotion to Ves and the Superior Mother, they calmed down a bit and asked what he had in store for them in the future.

"It won't be easy to earn your redemption from the Superior Mother." Ves spoke in a normal mood. "You will need to go through the fires of damnation yet again and pass the tests that I will set for you. None of them are trivial. I have no doubt that many of you will fall and turn to dust. However, those who can survive these successive challenges shall be reborn anew under the Superior Mother's blessing!"

He had already drawn back the ancestral spirit's presence because he didn't want his mother hanging over his shoulder all the time.

Regardless, his audience remained fixated by his earlier illusion. This was good, as Ves would easily tire if he had to do the whole song and dance over again whenever he met with the Penitent Sisters.

"What must we do, sir?"

Ves spread his arms. "I will pass on a number of plans in the coming weeks. You will have to make a lot of sacrifices, beginning with your ships and mechs. I hope you aren't too attached to them, because we will probably have to use them up in the upcoming battle."

The Penitent Sister Commander frowned. "You intend to use them as consumables? Do you know how valuable those ships are? You can't just throw them away!"

"No material assets are more valuable than our lives! Wake up, commander. If we don't give our all when we confront the pirate warships, then preserving our ships is pointless. We'll be dead anyway and many of those fine Hexer combat carriers will probably end up in the hands of the Allidus Alliance. Does it please you to hand your precious ships over to the Nyxian pirates? They'll be able to make bolder raids with the possessions that you have left behind!"

"None of us want to help the pirates."

His argument hammered home the fact that nothing should be ruled out. Commander Chancy and the rest of her fellow Penitent Sisters never thought about making more use of their resilient ships because they were long used to valuing them. Even in the Hegemony, a fleet of combat carriers represented an enormous amount of wealth.

"As long as you pass the tests and earn the Superior Mother's redemption, you will join our clan and be able to obtain new mechs and ships that we procure for you. Don't get overly attached to your current war machines. Although it is regrettable to make use of them in a destructive fashion, they will have served their purpose in the most brilliant way possible. I think the Hexers who made your assets would have wanted them to go out with a bang while taking out as many degenerate pirates as possible. Don't you agree?"

"We understand your point." Commander Chancy responded. "Can you tell us what your plans entail?"

"In the short term, your engineers and ship crews will have to transform their ships as much as possible. Each of your combat carriers must be modified to excel at frontal collisions. I want to convert as many of them into ship-sized torpedoes as possible. At the very least, we should increase their bow armor, magnify their sub-light propulsion systems and pack them with as much enriched nuclear warheads and other explosives as we can stuff inside their hulls."

This was an extravagant proposal! To utilize combat carriers as slow, jumbo-sized torpedoes was unimaginable to the Hex Army!

However, this was the only way that Ves could think of to inflict meaningful damage on the Gravada Knarlax. Any other missile or projectile would instantly get chewed up by the hundreds of secondary weapon batteries.

In a frontal battle, only pure resilience or devastating long-ranged firepower could put a dent on a heavy cruiser like the Gravada Knarlax.

Of the two options, the latter was not practical. Building, mounting or adapting a cruiser-grade laser cannon or a kinetic spinal cannon on a ship was not doable under the current circumstances. Ves and the Larkinson Clan lacked the proficiency in making these weapons and they didn't have access to the drydock facilities or the lengthy amount of time required to mount a couple of ships with these devastating weapons.

Ves had no choice but to resort to a more primitive solution. Flinging armored vessels forward was the only way that he believed would work against the pirate fleet, but not just any ship would do. Third-class ships were simply too fragile against large-caliber guns. Only the second-class combat carriers had a chance of making it through.

In fact, he was pretty sure that half or three-quarters of the suicide ships would never make it all of the way to their targets.

That was not a big issue. These ships were very large, very heavy and would probably accumulate a substantial amount of forward momentum once they reached their targets.

Since a heavy cruiser like the Gravada Knarlax was known to be sluggish, there shouldn't be any way for this big fat target to dodge the incoming suicide ships!

Only a couple of collisions and subsequent explosions should be enough to cripple or at least heavily damage the flagship of the Allidus Alliance.

Perhaps the lighter destroyers and frigates might be able to dodge the suicide ships, but the Larkinson Clan could deal with them in other ways.

"There are limits to what we can do in a month." Juliet Stameris warned. "Trying to modify a starship while she has to remain active and on the move is much slower than if we can park somewhere or put her in a drydock facility. Also, I doubt we have the materials required to make the best possible conversions."

Ves casually waved his hand. "Don't bother with trying to make everything perfect. Just do what you can within the deadline. We are not trying to make works of art."

Both of the Hexers understood his point. While they were still fanatics, they were also soldiers. Not every Hexer was as obsessive as Gloriana when it came to pursuing perfection.

After discussing the modifications needed to turn their ships into deadly suicide vessels, they asked what else Ves had in mind.

"I'm not ready to unveil my other plans yet." He admitted. "I'll inform you as soon as possible when I am done with my preparations. Some of them are pretty radical and

experimental. I will ask much from your mech pilots, but as long as they have faith in the Superior Mother, I am sure that they shall overcome the danger."

"Can you be more precise? We would like to have an idea of what the Superior Mother requires of us humble servants."

"Let's just say that I am trying to implement a method to tie you to the Superior Mother during battle. I can't say more than this, but if it works the way I think it will, the benefits to you and your mech pilots will probably be substantial!"

His claims suitably impressed his audience. They didn't look reluctant at all. Instead, both Commander Chancy and Juliet actually looked like they wanted to experience what he said right away!

He intended to form a separate neural network for the Penitent Sisters. This one would be different from the network that Ves had planned for the Swordmaidens. He wanted to try out several ideas in order to see what worked and to avoid putting all of his eggs in one basket.

Since Ves was forced to resort to extreme measures in order to narrow the gap between his forces and the pirate fleet, he might as well take advantage of all of the opportunities for experimentation!

As long as he used the current crisis as an excuse, his test subjects became much less opposed to subjecting themselves to radical tests!

In fact, they happily volunteered to take part because their duty compelled them to. They would do anything to help!

Ves inwardly sneered at all of the displays of blind acceptance that he had witnessed so far. These Penitent Sisters eagerly listened to 'boy' just because he found a way to present himself as the envoy of the Superior Mother.

Their reactions only affirmed his belief that fanatics made for the perfect test subjects. They were willing to set aside any doubts to please an illusory deity, even when it pertained to their lives!

The meeting ended shortly afterwards. Commander Chancy promised to convince the rest of the Penitent Sisters to go support his plans, but it likely wouldn't be easy.

"It will help if you address all of my Sisters in person." She said. "It's easier to believe you if you show yourself to them as you did to us. Otherwise.. It will be difficult to ensure compliance."

"I understand. Schedule a general assembly so I can address as many Penitent Sisters at once."

This was not something that Ves was concerned about. If he could convert Commander Chancy in an instant, then her subordinates likely wouldn't be able to resist his illusion either.

"I have one more question. If.. if we ever manage to make it out of the Nyxian Gap, how will you integrate us in the Larkinson Clan? Will we be able to retain our own identity?" Chancy asked.

Ugh. That was a problem that Ves hadn't fully considered. He was much more focused on the present than the future.

"Don't take our oaths lightly." He warned. "When you join our clan, You are no longer allowed to regard yourselves as Hexer. You are Larkinsons first, and the interests of our clan triumph over every other loyalty. That said, you are allowed to develop your own beliefs or priorities as long as they don't conflict with the core tenets of our clan. Just look at the Ylvainans in our midst. While they have changed remarkably, they still cling on to their faith, though they have made a lot of adaptations."

"Understood. We shall do our best to fit in if we live that long."

Ves didn't need to mention that the Penitent Sisters would have to stop discriminating against boys. He wasn't concerned about this problem at all. Just like Ranya, they were doomed to become more closely aligned to the clan once they joined the Larkinson Network!

Chapter 2360: Defiant Ves

There was so much to do. Ves not only had to start making the custom mechs for his expert candidates, he also had to develop plans and put them in motion.

Even as Task Force Predator slowly moved about while deploying aggressive patrols to beat back the increasing number of pirate scout mechs, every clansmen became swamped with work.

Repairing mechs, modifying mechs, converting starships and more caused the entire fleet to resemble a large scavenger operation. A lot of materials were being consumed in order to ready the forces for the most difficult battle of what looked to be an exceptional campaign.

As long as at least some of the Larkinsons survived to the very end, each of them would all come out as battle-hardened veterans! The value of these mech pilots and other personnel was incalculable and well worth many of the risks that they had taken.

However, it was easier said than done to get to this point. A few miscalculations on his part had led his forces in an inescapable confrontation against one of the most powerful pirate fleets in the Nyxian Gap.

When Ves asked Calabast if there was any way to avoid getting intercepted by the main pirate fleet, her answer remained the same.

"The pirates really hate us." She grimaced. "Did you expect that all of your actions against them wouldn't somehow bite you back in the butt? There are good reasons why neither the Peacekeepers nor any other major pirate groups have tried to assault pirate bases such as Ulimo Citadel, and it's not just because of all of the superweapons defending these locations."

"Yes, yes, yes, I know. Pissing off pirates with friends is a bad idea, I get it already."

"I'm being serious, Ves! While it may sound strange, diplomacy is one of the main reasons why most pirate organizations in the Nyxian Gap remain in existence. No one can withstand getting ganged up by multiple hostile factions. At the same time, no organization can be assailed when backed by numerous allies. Let this be a poignant lesson to you. If we ever travel to a bigger pond, we can't afford to get chased by sharks all the time."

Ves glanced to his display case where the drooping Prosperity Tree looked as if it lost a bit more life than before.

"I don't endanger myself and the rest of our clan because I think it's fun. I'll watch myself a lot more closely once we escape the Nyxian Gap."

"You better."

Calabast moved over to one of the couches in his stateroom and draped herself over it. She tilted her head at Lucky, who was dozing off on the armrest.

"Is he okay? It would help us a lot so we can employ him as a commando cat again."

"I'm not sure, to be honest. I'm willing to give him a few more weeks to get over his indigestion. If nothing changes, then I'll resort to other measures to get him up and running."

A brief silence ensued as Calabast did not immediately make a remark. Instead, she looked around with her head and observed the various pieces of furniture and other objects in the compartment.

"What are you doing?" Ves suspiciously asked.

"I'm trying to take a measure of your personality. It's difficult to pin you down these days. There are moments when you act selfishly and callously and there are other times where you come across as compassionate and caring. It's an interesting duality, but not exactly the most stable one. Don't you think?"

What was Ves supposed to say to that?

"Are you doubting my sanity?"

She released an amused chuckle. Her black uniform rippled as her body shook. "Oh, heavens no! Doubt has long left my mind! I think that anyone who knows you well can already say with a hundred percent certainty that you are not right in the head."

"I am not insane!" Ves angrily stated. "I am just a little bit eccentric, that's all! That's normal with mech designers. Besides, I only look a bit worse at the moment because there's a huge threat closing in. Desperation can lead everyone to extremes."

His answer did not satisfy the spymaster.

"I've seen you spinning around like a hyperactive cleaning bot for several days now. Not only that, you've been cooking up more and more outlandish plans. While I don't necessarily disagree with the measures you are resorting to, I feel it is important for you to regain some perspective."

"What are you talking about?"

"Let me be frank with you." She adopted a concerned expression. "I am concerned about mental wellbeing. While it's true that the Nyxian Gap is capable of bringing out the worst in people, I'm afraid that some of it will stick if we return to civilized space. You've become more unhinged, Ves. It takes a very deplorable kind of person to experiment on his own people."

BANG!

Ves stood up and slammed his fist against his desk!

"I CAN'T AFFORD TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT MYSELF WHEN IT WILL LIKELY LEAD TO OUR DEATHS!"

He stepped forward and pointed his finger towards her. "Don't misunderstand me. I take my responsibilities seriously! I am doing everything possible to get as many of us back home as possible. Didn't you tell me a few days ago that you have already made preparations to sneak away unnoticed?"

"That's different! Escaping a battle that is unwinnable is a reasonable action to take!"

"Abandoning our fellow clan members is far more cruel than what I am doing! At least I am giving everyone a fighting chance! I have never forced anything onto my clansmen. Each of them are ready and willing to gain as much power as possible to achieve an upset against the pirate armada."

The two of them harbored opposing sentiments on this issue. Neither of them were able to reconcile their differences, so they just moved on. Calabast had already made her point and it was up to Ves to find his way out of the dark hole he had entered.

Ves collapsed onto another couch but still remained a bit upset. It wasn't his fault that he had to spin all kinds of extreme measures. The circumstances forced him to do so. If the Larkinson Clan was stronger, he wouldn't have any reason to go crazy!

"We can't live like this, Ves." Calabast remarked as she stroked the sleeping gem cat's back. "Ever since you have started your career, you have been tumbling between danger, rest, danger, rest and so on. You're not growing any younger, Ves. Have you ever thought that Journeymen like you don't have any reason to expose yourselves to extreme risks? You could have sent out this task force without you. Even if it suffers an accident, you would have been safe at home next to Gloriana designing your next mechs."

Though her words made a lot of sense, Ves grew contemptuous at her description. "You know what I think about this cowardice. I'm a Larkinson, and you are supposed to be one as well. How can you not know what we are all about?! We are a clan of warriors, not businessmen or scientists! With the dangers I face, I can't afford to become a purely civilian mech designer like Gloriana. Whatever dangers we are facing right now, I can already foresee that it will be worse in the Red Ocean!"

Calabast stopped petting Lucky and turned to frown at Ves. He looked pretty defiant as he crossed his arms across his chest.

"Have you ever thought about not going to the Red Ocean? As a mech designer, you can do your business anywhere. Before the Red Ocean even opened, you intended to go on a more modest sightseeing tour, right? Why not do that instead? Not only will you be able to spare the millions of merits that you have accumulated, but you'll also be sparing your entire clan from another existential crisis like the one we are currently subjected to. Doesn't that sound better?"

Ves huffed dismissively at her. "I'm not one to take the slow and steady route. There are good reasons why I need to push myself. As a mech designer, I need to be stimulated in order to squeeze the utmost of my potential. Haven't you seen the results of my latest experiment yet? If it works out the way I think it will, I may have unlocked the secret to accelerating the breakthroughs of every expert candidate! I would have never come up with an innovation like this in peaceful circumstances."

His stubborn answer did not sit well with his conversation partner.

"You're insufferable, you know that. We're getting by one of the bad bets you've made. Instead of wising up, you are already looking forward to making riskier bets!"

"Is there something wrong with that?"

She paused. "Do you think it's sustainable to act this way all the time? Even if you don't care about risking your own life, what about the other people you care about? What will you do if your future wife is imperiled? What will you do when your children pay the price of your choices?"

"That's not fair, Calabast."

"This is exactly what you will have to consider if you continue to choose the more dangerous options out of all of your available choices. While I admit that entering the Red Ocean can bring many benefits to us, it's not the only choice we have. As an independent, you don't have to answer to anyone who is above you, but you must still answer to those who are beside you and below you. Are you really determined to stick to your current course?"

"You don't understand." Ves sighed and shook his head. "I am under a lot of pressure. I have to run from some very powerful enemies and I also have to advance as fast as possible. I don't like what you have said, but I am even less willing to accept the alternatives. Every gift comes with burdens. You should know. You signed up with me despite knowing the huge interests involved."

She understood what he was alluding to. The gift that propelled him to success was a tainted one. Even now, Ves always retained his fear of getting cornered by its former owner.

"You're right. I did partner up with you despite knowing what a hot potato you are. It's just that I didn't expect my hands to get burned so much from holding you. I really do hope you will change soon, Ves. If you want to get your dose of excitement, then go engage in politics or participate in some mech games or something. There are many ways that people have come up with to get their fill of excitement without literally putting their lives on the line."

Ves remained unmoved. "I don't know. I don't like it when the stakes are too low."

"I think you'll change." Calabast confidently stated. "When you grow older and start having kids, you'll change your tune. I'm sure of it. You may be a daredevil, but you are also a caring person. I don't particularly like Gloriana but I really hope she can help you enter into a different phase of life."

"Hahaha! That's a funny joke! What about you, hmm? You're older than me, right? You look like you're forty years old. Are you going to tie the knot with anyone? I haven't seen you together with Commander Dise at all. Maybe you should turn your fake relationship into a real one and visit Ranya to produce an offspring. Who will be the mother? Oh, I shouldn't have to ask. There's no way that Dise is the mother in your relationship. When will you be waddling around with a swollen belly?"

Calabast scowled. "That's enough, you brat! My personal life is none of your business! Take care of your own mess before you stick your nose into other people's lives."

"Isn't this what you have been doing this entire time?"

"You naughty boy! Don't make me spank you!"