

Mech 2431

Chapter 2431: Living Star Club

Ves continued to grin even after the press conference ended. He turned around and bowed minutely.

"Thank you for showing up and lending me your support. Your contribution will help stave off the decline of the LMC. Don't forget that wealth is the root of our strength. As long as you continue to help our mech company by taking part in promotional campaigns, I can promise you that every single clansmen will thank you for our effort."

His expert pilots did not seem terribly pleased. Aside from Joshua, the others looked as if this chore was a waste of time.

"We're only doing this because we don't want you to deprive our fellow Larkinsons of their benefits." Venerable Jannzi spoke as she passed him by. "Don't call on us for these kinds of stunts too often. We exist to defend our clansmen, not to enrich your own pockets."

"All of the money earned by the LMC will eventually be invested back into the clan in some way. Where do you think our future factory ship and combat carriers come from?" Ves retorted.

Expert pilots made for poor businessmen. This was a shame, as expert pilots also happened to be the most effective promotional material that a mech company could have. Almost every mech pilot in the galaxy admired expert pilots.

Unfortunately, it was not so easy to take advantage of their ingrained ability to attract followers. They were very principled and did not really understand the tremendous cost to keep them happy.

If Ves had not come up with the argument that lending their likeness to the LMC directly improved the lives of his clansmen, he wouldn't have been able to persuade Venerable Jannzi to show up today!

The fact he succeeded proved that he still had ways of making her do what he wanted. Ves was definitely going to milk her for all she was worth when he was ready to publish some defensive mechs.

"This will help us improve our upcoming expert mechs, right?" Joshua eagerly asked.

"Naturally. Expert mechs cost a fortune, and when it comes to second-class mechs, the upper range is very high. It's always helpful to have more money."

That was enough to satisfy Joshua. "I hope you can design a powerful mech that can grow with me for a long time."

"I will try. Continue to cooperate with the LMC's Marketing Department and we won't be stingy with the budget of your future expert mech."

Some of the other expert pilots and expert candidates chatted with him for a bit before they exited the Gravada Knarlax's bridge. They had a lot of duties to attend to as greedy pirates still lurked from afar. If the Larkinsons did not frequently show off their strength, who knew whether the pirates would all mass together and launch a costly assault!

"You know, even I didn't think you would stoop so low as this." Gloriana's projection teased as she dropped her mature demeanor.

"Not every private mech company has access to expert pilots like I do." Ves grinned. "More than that, those expert pilots just happened to be directly tied to the success of that same company."

In most states, expert pilots strictly served in the military. It was considered dishonorable for them to be used as advertising platforms.

Ves didn't care. Unlike conventional states, the Larkinson Clan did not earn any revenue from taxing its own members. Instead, it was almost entirely dependent on the wealth provided by his mech company.

This was a rather precarious situation. If anything happened to the LMC, his clan might directly go under because it did not possess any other means of earning money!

Well, that was not strictly true. Its considerable military strength was an asset in itself, but Ves was not willing for his clansmen to become soldiers for hire.

The time where the Larkinsons fought on behalf of a state or other employer was over. Ves wanted to cultivate a proud and independent mindset in his clan.

"Well, with the introduction of the Living Star Club, I don't think we'll have to worry about the Doom Guard scandal anymore. Our subordinates will take care of the rest. I have to say that starting up this association is quite an ingenious way to restore the trust we had lost from our customers."

"It also helps that we don't have to fork out as much as 500 billion hex credits to compensate the injured parties. If the buyers or owners aren't stupid, they will skip the cash compensation and cling to their exclusive membership."

Ves came up with the idea of starting a company membership organization due to his unwillingness to lose so much money.

The LMC could not avoid paying something back to its aggrieved customers. What happened to the Doom Guards was truly the fault of the company. Trying to shirk responsibility would not go over well.

For years, the LMC cultivated a reputation for quality, reliability and customer satisfaction. The Doom Guard scandal just so happened to affect all of them at the same time. If his mech company did not go above and beyond to make its customers happy again, then the LMC might never be able to regain their trust!

The difference this made was huge. So far, the mech market basically treated the LMC as one of the 'good guys'. While it charged a hefty premium for its products, its customers never regretted their purchases. Owing to this satisfaction, customers generated a lot of positive word of mouth to their fellow friends and acquaintances.

Advertising through word of mouth was at least ten times more effective than expensive marketing campaigns. As long as the reputation of the LMC remained high, both customers and non-customers were more than willing to generate positive buzz around its products, thereby perpetuating their sales.

Yet as soon as the scandal initially exploded, this positive buzz threatened to collapse. If the LMC did not offer adequate compensation quickly, then the public might begin to view it as a greedy, uncaring company!

Suffice to say, Ves did not wish for his company to acquire this false, totally, completely and utterly untrue impression!

After a lot of thought, Ves realized that there were multiple ways to regain the trust of his customers.

From a fundamental level, many of his customers felt that they had suffered a loss. Transferring money to them was the most direct way to solve this problem, but in fact anything that provided enough value sufficed.

Hence the club. Started up on a whim, the LMC's Marketing Department had already done a lot of work to set up its structure and fill it up with various activities and exclusive benefits.

In order to make the Living Star Club desirable, the LMC had to show some sincerity. Offering discounts was one way to do it. Offering rare, limited edition mechs was another way to excite the members.

There wasn't actually much to these so-called limited edition mechs. They were merely standard mechs with a different product number and some cosmetic changes. In order to increase their perceived value, the LMC strictly limited their production runs.

After all, owning just one out of a hundred copies of a limited edition model sounded a lot more impressive than owning one out of a million copies!

Though it had only been a few days since Ves instructed the LMC to set up the club, the Living Star Club already offered several dozen different variants.

For example, one limited edition model of the Doom Guard came in premium pink coating. It looked absolutely horrendous to Ves, but the fact that it looked so different was enough to make them valuable!

Another exclusive reward came in the form of an Aurora Titan that carried a round shield instead of a tower shield. The surface of the shield was coated with elaborate, decorative markings that the LMC's artists had hastily drawn.

None of these changes burdened the LMC. By simply applying some cheap and effortless cosmetic changes, the Living Star Club was able to offer 'rare' and 'exclusive' mechs that would surely excite its members!

It didn't matter that anyone with the right tools could modify an existing mech so that they looked identical to the exclusive products.

It just wasn't the same if the mech did not roll off the production line different from the start. Each exclusive mech came with some fancy documents, certificates of authenticity and a personal signature from the chief technician in charge to legitimize its provenance.

That was something of value that no third-party was able to provide!

In short, the Living Star Club was basically a vehicle for the LMC to create value from nothing. By manipulating customers into thinking that mechs that came in pink were somehow worth twice as much as mechs sold in standard coating, Ves ultimately believed the Club would be able to generate extra money from the same quantity of customers!

"If all goes well, the Living Star Club will become self-sustainable in a couple of months." He told Gloriana.

Ves deliberately hinted to his audience that the Club would become the only channel for the most desirable LMC mechs. Namely, the machines that assisted mech pilots with their breakthroughs.

Of course, without making an arrangement about these types of mechs with Master Willix, Ves did not dare to offer any of them to his customers.

This meant that the Living Star Club had to find other ways to keep its members engaged. So far, any member who logged in the LSC's virtual portal would be greeted with a number of activities where they could earn Star Points.

Star Points was the exclusive currency of the Club. They were necessary to redeem various rewards. They were also necessary to upgrade someone's membership status.

Ves already stipulated that only 10 Star Members were eligible to purchase so-called 'Living Star Mechs'.

This was just a marketing label for the mechs that Ves intended to make in the future that possessed varying degrees of spiritual saturation.

Due to the nature of this exchange, the LMC did not have to certify any mechs offered to people through this channel. The Living Star Club did not sell its products through the open market, after all. As long as the Club clearly stated that the mechs were not certified to its members, the MTA didn't have much grounds to complain if some mishap ever took place.

Another reason why Ves put up so many barriers was because he could not mass produce the Living Star Mechs. It cost spiritual energy to enhance their spiritual foundations, and his design spirits would definitely decline if he forced them to empower thousands of mechs!

Therefore, in order to offer his Living Star Mechs to the public without getting crushed by demand, Ves had to make it ultra-exclusive. Outside of commissions and internal use, only his most loyal and engaged customers should be able to obtain this kind of mech!

"By the way, Ves, what are the regular criteria to become a member of the Living Star Club?"

"So far, we have only put up one requirement. Any individual, owner or commander who purchases and actively makes use of more than a thousand LMC mechs through official channels is eligible to join the Club."

"That sounds harsh." She frowned.

"This is just the start. We'll think up some alternative requirements later in order to open the door to other committed fans. The requirements have to remain high in order to maintain the club's air of exclusivity. We have to make sure that all of its current members feel satisfied that they managed to become a part of it. In the future, these dedicated customers will become our fiercest supporters. I'm even thinking about granting the highest-tiered members the opportunity to become an external member of the Larkinson Clan."

All of these were very distant considerations. It wasn't necessary to arrange too much when the Club was only a few days old.

Chapter 2432: Mech Colonel Alexandria Wodin

Just as Ves anticipated, public opinion completely turned around after the dramatic press conference.

A day later, Gavin reported the good news.

"I knew you would turn our situation somehow." He lavished his superior with praise. "Even though you're called the Devil Tongue, it still surprises me how receptive the public can be towards your speeches. No matter if they are aware of your moniker, they still think that you are completely sincere when you address the public."

Ves threw a pointed look at his assistant. "I am always sincere, Benny. That's part of my charm."

"Sure thing, boss." Gavin coughed. "Anyway, after the press conference, the news cycle has completely changed. We flooded the galactic net with too many newsworthy announcements. From capturing the Gravada Knarlax to achieving nineteen breakthroughs in a single battle, all of the news portals and opinion makers are buzzing with what we've accomplished. In addition, the introduction of the Living Star Club couldn't have gone any better. The rate of customers who opted to accept membership in lieu of receiving cash compensation has exceeded 90 percent."

"There are still customers who are stupid enough to reject our goodwill?"

"According to our investigation, these customers have already lost faith in our products. They don't believe our claims. They would rather obtain hard cash than fall for another scam."

Ves didn't blame them. He would have likely made the same choice if he was in their position. If the LMC broke their trust once, it could do so again. There were plenty of alternative mech companies in the mech market that still maintained pristine reputations.

Fortunately, the ratio was fairly small. The scale of defections wouldn't affect the LMC's overall market standing.

In fact, with the tremendous publicity generated by his press conference, he expected his mech company to enjoy a massive boost in sales!

No wonder Gavin looked so excited. It was a blessing for the LMC to be led by such an excellent speaker! Ves was so good with crowds that he could single-handedly resolve a crisis with some clever words and theatrics.

"Is the Living Star Club doing okay? We only set it up a few days ago. First impressions are important."

"We didn't have much time to organize the club, so plenty of issues have emerged. None of them are serious enough to require your intervention. We've already assembled a special team to build and manage the Club. While the initial member experience is somewhat barebones, it's not awful. We'll see some drastic improvements in the next two weeks."

"That's the best we can hope for, I guess. Make sure to stare at the Club closely. In fact, would you like to be in charge of it? You can be its very first club president."

The offer completely took Gavin by surprise. He frowned a bit as he forced himself to take his time. If there was one thing he learned from spending so much time around his boss, it was that Ves sometimes had other motives in mind.

Was Ves trying to get rid of him or something?

"Erm, your offer sounds interesting, but I am comfortable where I am now. I don't think I'm suited to be a leader. I can't handle that much responsibility. I'm used to playing a facilitating role. Helping you make decisions and ensuring that your intentions are carried out is much more fulfilling to me. I wouldn't know what to do if the buck stops with me. Please don't change my role."

An odd silence ensued after Gavin made his plea. Ves looked at his assistant with an odd expression.

"I guess I shouldn't have expected more from you, Benny."

As time continued to pass, the excitement surrounding Ves, the Larkinson Clan, the LMC and the Living Star Club only grew. The reputation of each of them soared, causing even people who never paid attention to these events to learn about their astonishing deeds!

The press had left the Doom Guard scandal far behind. In any case, despite the odd events surrounding the Doom Guard model, Ves and the LMC already apologized and offered adequate compensation. Hardly anyone retained any interest in following up on the root causes of the incident.

This was exactly what Ves wanted to see. Now that the crisis had passed, he handed over the follow-up matters to his subordinates and waited for the reinforcements to come.

The Wodin Warriors finally reached the survivors after arriving half a day later than scheduled.

The moment the long-ranged sensors of the Gravada Knarlax and the scout mechs detected a huge amount of energy signatures, the Larkinsons initially sounded alarms.

It was only a few minutes later that the Larkinsons confirmed that the incoming energy signatures consisted of friendly mechs.

When thousands of Hexers flew into visual range, each and every Larkinson felt a wave of relief that was so profound that they could fall to sleep right away!

Before the arrival of the Wodin Warriors, the Larkinsons were truly concerned about whether they could still make it out. Now that over 5000 Hexer mechs had showed up, the clansmen no longer had to worry about fending off any ambushes!

Even if some powerful pirate faction dared to attack them, the Hexers were more than strong enough to take care of any threats.

To most of the Larkinsons, it didn't matter whether they were willing to let a bunch of women fight their battles. Every survivor of Task Force Predator had already given them all in the previous battle. Aside from the expert pilots and expert candidates, the clansmen all needed a lot of time to recover from their traumatic ordeal.

When the magnificent combat carriers and support ships of the Wodin Warriors followed after the main wave, Ves already prepared himself to meet with the highest-commanding officer of the friendly fleet.

Since he was meeting with Hexers, Ves thought it prudent for Calabast to accompany him. Who knew if he would commit some kind of egregious faux-pas without his knowledge.

Calabast looked annoyed at his summons. Both of them wore their regular uniforms this time. Her black uniform contrasted strongly with his customary red-and-white outfit.

"Where is your cape?" She asked.

"I thought it was best to leave it in my closet. It looks a bit too ostentatious for my tastes. It's not necessary to puff myself up like a pirate lord this time. The Wodins already know my worth and our tremendous gains speak for themselves."

It was hard for the arriving Wodin Warriors to remain calm when they witnessed an actual warship up close. The huge primary turrets and the vast array of secondary gun batteries all possessed enough power to threaten the Wodin Warrior fleet!

The newly-arrived Hexers did not dare to move around excessively. Their mechs adopted a cautious posture around the captured warships.

Even if the Larkinsons claimed that the armed vessels did not pose any threat to them, it was difficult for the Hexers to shake off their suspicion. This was especially so when they found out that many of the Larkinson officers in charge of the captured warships happened to be male!

"I warned Major Verle that he shouldn't have put men in charge. Now look at how the Wodins are acting around your ships. They're hardly paying any attention to external threats. Most of them look ready to launch an attack on our vessels!"

Ves grimaced, but he did not take it too personally. "Everyone will probably react this way when they get close to ships like these. Too many people think that warships are just one step away from launching devastating attacks on innocents."

For their part, the Wodin Warrior mechs no longer adopted a highly-guarded posture after some time. They continued to hover protectively around the Wodin Warrior vessels.

A lot of communication took place between the two fleets. Various pieces of data flowed back and forth for some reason or another. Ves didn't fully understand the elaborate protocols.

"You should invite the ranking officer of the reinforcing fleet to the Scarlet Rose." Calabast suggested.

"Huh? Will the Hexer in charge even accept that?" Ves looked uncertain. "From what I heard about them, they always insist that boys should go to them instead of the other way around."

"That's only the case with average boys. You're different. Your status and the status of the entire Larkinson Clan has undergone huge changes. The Wodins have already shown signs that they are willing to disregard your gender. You should feel honored for earning this distinction."

"Are you trying to rile me up, Calabast?"

"Hehe." The older woman chuckled. "I'm just telling you the truth."

He did what she suggested. Surprisingly, the Wodins accepted. They were already readying a shuttle to meet with Ves at his comparatively tiny frigate.

"See? I told you so." Calabast clapped his back. "You're not only valuable, but also family."

"I'm not marrying into the Wodin Dynasty."

"I know, but the Wodins might not entirely see it that way. No matter what, as Gloriana's future spouse, the Wodins expect to receive some of the same treatment you bestow to your own clan. In fact, expect the commanding officer to beg you to supply them with some of your secret expert pilot-making mechs at some point."

While Calabast continued to pass on her theories to Ves, the Hexer shuttle eventually arrived.

Ves looked appreciatively at the elegant vehicle. Sleek and ornamental, Ves could instantly tell that its performance was very high compared to average second-class shuttles.

After landing in the hangar of the Scarlet Rose, a number of Wodin Warriors stepped out and looked around the small and cramped chamber.

As a former Fridayman vessel, the Scarlet Rose still bore too much evidence of her original ownership. Some of the Wodin Warriors sneered, but the older woman with epaulets on her shoulders and other distinctive markings looked elsewhere.

Upon Calabast's advice, he moved the second statue of the Superior Mother to the far side of the hangar bay.

As the Hexers proceeded forward, they soon felt the unusual nature of the replica statue. They ignored Ves and Calabast and automatically changed their course.

"So this is your handiwork." Someone uttered.

The glow of the Superior Mother released by the statue was stronger and purer than the glow of any Blessed Squire!

As the Wodin Warriors were technically the household troops of the Wodin Dynasty, they didn't have permission to field any Blessed Squires. Secretly, they still retained the prototypes, but the glows of those early copies simply couldn't compare against the original source!

Ves looked amused at their reaction. He did not mind that the Hexers initially passed him over. He found it much more important to know that the glow of the Superior Mother already exerted so much control over the Wodins.

"Ah. Mr. Larkinson. We could not help but appreciate your work." The commanding officer eventually pulled herself back from her mesmerized state. "I am Mech Colonel Alexandria Wodin. I am in charge of the Wodin Warriors sent to relieve your forces."

The two shook hands. The older woman applied a very strong grip, but it was too bad that Ves had plenty of strength to spare.

"Pleased to meet you." Ves put on his best diplomatic demeanor. "Thank you for coming here. Let's head somewhere comfortable to discuss business, shall we?"

Alexandria looked wistful at the statue, but she eventually nodded. "Very well. Lead the way."

As they moved to the conference room, Ves briefly took in the mech colonel. For a Hexer, she wasn't as tough and unyielding as he initially feared. That said, he sensed plenty of strength and steel within her. While it was difficult to estimate her age, he guessed that Alexandria belonged to the same generation as Madame Constance.

Ves didn't know where Colonel Alexandria stood in the Wodin Dynasty, but hopefully she wouldn't pull him into any factional rivalries.

"We've arrived. Please step inside."

Chapter 2433: Future In-Laws

When the Hexer officers sat on the opposite side of the oval table, they curiously studied Ves and Calabast.

For some reason or another, the Wodins immediately recognized that Calabast was a fellow Hexer. Yet the smirk the spymaster showed to them signalled that she was not on their side.

As for Ves, he looked quite unassuming outside of his public addresses. The Wodins should have watched his latest press conference. There, wearing his Unending Regalia, he came across as larger than life!

Now, wearing his relatively plain clan patriarch uniform that was devoid of any ostentatious medal, it was hard to place him as a brilliant mech designer and a notorious warlord.

Only Mech Colonel Alexandria retained her composure. Ves had already secretly accessed some archives through his implant. He found out that Alexandria was a member of a side branch of the Wodin Dynasty like Ranya Wodin.

What was special about this 90-year old mech officer was that she had continually proven herself. While she was actually rather mediocre at piloting mechs, she had proven to be a competent and steady officer.

It was no wonder that the Wodins put her in charge of the reinforcement fleet. A Hexer commanding officer that was not as aggressive as her peers was the most suitable choice to lead a force in a notoriously dangerous region.

Ves grew tired of this staring game.

"Thank you for coming." He broke the silence. "Please forgive our lack of amenities. We are still operating under wartime conditions. We've learned the hard way that we can never let down our guard in the Nyxian Gap."

"Understandable." Alexandra lowered her chin. Her blond hair tied in some martial Hexer pattern shifted a bit. "We have received orders to escort you and your men back to the Cinach System promptly. The sooner we bring you out the Nyxian Gap, the lower the risk of any further complications."

Ves smiled a bit uneasily at them. "I agree. There is just one minor issue. It's not enough to bring us out. We would also like your help in escorting our captured warships back to civilized space."

The faces of some of the Hexer officers grew ugly.

"That sounds preposterous!" One of them burst out! "Such destructive machines ought to be scuttled as soon as possible!"

Unspoken was the fact that the Hexers probably thought it was extremely dangerous to leave the warships in the hands of boys.

Ves remained unyielding. "We have already made the necessary arrangements with the relevant authorities. Truthfully, the MTA is quite interested in the pirate-built warships that have fallen into our hands. We will eventually hand them over to Master Moira Willix after we are done with using them as props for my upcoming wedding."

He mentioned two important reasons why they should help bring the ships back.

First, he deliberately mentioned Master Willix's first name. Since a powerful woman was involved, the initial resistance from the Hexers instantly halved.

The mention of the wedding also caused the Wodins to lower their objections.

"Is it a good idea to parade savage warships in your upcoming wedding?"

In some way, she was right. Weddings were usually prim and proper occasions. Parading warships, especially the huge and heavily-damaged Gravada Knarlax, was no different from displaying the corpses of his defeated enemies.

It was unseemly!

Yet despite this fact, Ves did not change his mind.

"Nothing impresses the prestigious guests that we have invited more than parading these prizes. Wedding or not, both of us will be able to project an immense amount of strength. This is ultimately helpful to our stature."

"We shall see. With your permission, we will dispatch some of our officers and engineers to your prize ships." Alexandria offered.

Ves hesitated a bit. He did not look forward to Hexers crawling over his possessions, but the Gravada Knarlax was in such bad shape that she truly needed all the help she could get. In her horrendously-damaged state, numerous systems glitched and malfunctioned with every passing day.

"Please do. Make sure to dispatch your best engineers to the Gravada Knarlax. She's a half-crippled mess that urgently requires repairs that we are not able to perform with the equipment and supplies we have left. We expended too many resources on the pirates."

"Understandable."

This was just an initial discussion. The Wodin officers could discuss the details with the Larkinson officers later.

They discussed some other matters, such as how much time it would take to bring them out and how much medical support they could offer to treat the most severely-injured soldiers.

Ves did not encounter any hostility or rejection from Colonel Alexandria. This was quite refreshing as he expected to put up with the usual biased behavior he had come to expect from her kind.

At some point, Alexandria displayed an increasing amount of interest in the final battle.

"So you call it the Battle against the Abyss? That is quite the name."

Ves shrugged. "It's just what my clansmen have come up with. As far as they knew, they fought the toughest opponents the Nyxian Gap had to offer. The enemies we've faced were unquestionably strong and evil."

"Can you elaborate, Mr. Larkinson?" Alexandra leaned closer. "What exactly happened that caused so many of your mech pilots to break through?"

"I am not at liberty to say. When I reported to Master Willix, she commanded us to keep much of the details confidential." Ves lied.

That instantly shut her down. While Hexers did not exactly hold the MTA in the highest regard, they recognized the power it held over the galaxy. No sane Hexer dared to defy the Association.

Though Ves expected such a reaction, he didn't realize how convenient it was to wave the MTA's flag until now. Perhaps he should take more advantage of the MTA's notoriety in these kinds of situations!

"Say, may we speak with your expert pilots and candidates? We would like your permission to take a look at their mechs as well if possible."

Ves shook his head. "I'm sorry, but Master Moira's instructions are very clear. Please do not disturb our honored expert pilots as they are acclimatizing to their newfound powers. As for their mechs, you can take a look at them if they deploy in space, but make sure to keep a distance."

"Very well."

In the following minutes, Colonel Alexandra sounded a bit less engaged. It seemed that she was truly disappointed that her Wodin Warriors wouldn't be able to study the mechs that played a pivotal role in the battle.

Ves silently glanced at Calabast. She nodded back with her characteristic smirk.

It seemed his spymaster was right. The Wodin Warriors were mostly interested in the mechs that had made a lot of people excited lately. Colonel Alexandria gradually turned cold as Ves continually denied her requests to poke around.

Even if Ves used the MTA as an excuse, the Wodins still felt snubbed.

He decided to offer her an olive branch. "Progress can be slowed but not stopped. The MTA may slow some matters down, but eventually they will recognize that the benefits outweigh the costs. Naturally, the first beneficiary of our exclusive enhanced mechs is our own clan. Second on the list will likely be the MTA if it ever has an appetite for our modest work. Third-in-line is doubtlessly your dynasty. We have not forgotten all of the support your Wodins have offered to us. My future wife and I will be happy to fulfill some of your needs."

"It pleases us that you acknowledge that we are allies." Colonel Alexandria smiled again. "Miss Gloriana has chosen well. I predict that both the Wodin Dynasty and the Larkinson Clan shall rise to greater heights. It is a pity that you are determined to bring your clan away from this star sector."

"You have seen my talents. Together with Gloriana, we are capable of designing revolutionary mechs that are highly desirable no matter where we go. The Komodo Star Sector is my home, but eventually every son must depart and live on his own." He said.

"Not in the Hegemony."

"It's just a metaphor."

"Please consider settling in our grand and well-run state. While we are in the midst of a war at the moment, crushing the Friday Coalition is only a matter of time. If you prefer to settle your own planet or star system, I am sure we can arrange one for you after the

war. Once we have swallowed up the territories of the former Friday Coalition, there is plenty of available real estate that needs redevelopment."

Not again! Colonel Alexandria sounded a lot more reasonable before she uttered this spiel. What was it with Hexers and their constant disregard of Fridaymen?

Right now, the Komodo War was no longer swinging in the favor of the Hexers anymore. With the appearance of more and more targeted counters, the Blessed Squire no longer granted the Hexers as much help as before.

"Our plans are already set in stone. It is too late to change our course." Ves replied in a firm tone.

As the discussion grew a little awkward, they eventually decided to end the meeting.

The Wodins stood up and headed back to the hangar bay. Ves had already passed on the contents of the meeting to Major Verle in order to get the ball rolling.

"You were right." He told Calabast after the guests had left. "The Wodins are truly greedy for my latest innovation."

"This is why it's important to keep it close to your chest. I don't know how effective it is, but don't pull out all of the stops from now on, okay? We can still muddy the account of the Battle against the Abyss by putting the blame on other factors such as the abnormal circumstances of the Nyxian Gap, but if expert pilots start popping up left and right, we'll attract far more scrutiny than we can handle."

"You don't need to remind me. I'll be very cautious about spreading my enhanced mechs. The problem is that we can't deprive other people of them entirely."

The cat was partially out of the bag. He needed to satisfy everyone's curiosity, so he already intended to release some weaker mechs.

He wanted to see how many more breakthroughs took place if he filled a mech up to 1 percent saturation. If that was too much, then Ves would probably pare it down to 0.1 percent.

As long as the actual result turned out to be a lot more subtle than people initially thought, Ves would probably lose some of the heat.

Of course, Ves had to convince his audience that he wasn't deliberately holding back for some reason.

"Well, if you don't require my assistance anymore, I'll be heading back." Calabast spoke. "I've got to keep a close eye on the Wodin Warriors, after all. Just because Colonel

Alexandria said she would leave your special mechs alone doesn't mean she won't try anything underhanded."

An ugly possibility came to mind. "Do the Wodin Warriors have any stealth vessels?"

"It's a possibility." She admitted. "The Wodins might not employ them against your forces, though. The consequences are very severe if they get caught. In fact, if I ever detect any impropriety, I will likely warn them off silently."

Ves frowned. "I'm in charge here. You should ask for instructions before you make such a decision. What if I want to confront the Wodin Warriors?"

She reached out and pinched his nose with her long and sinuous fingers. "Don't be silly, kid. You're about to marry Gloriana soon. The last thing you want is to ruin her wedding by entering into a spat with her relatives. Let auntie Calabast watch over your household for you so that your marriage proceeds smoothly."

"Stop that!" Ves angrily swatted her finger away. "Whose side are you on?"

Calabast chuckled and swayed her hips as she headed for the exit. "I'm on your side Ves. That has never changed."

Why did Ves feel as if that was never the case?

Chapter 2434: Lost Capabilities

After a day of preparation, the two fleets finally moved back to civilized space. The Wodin Warrior fleet carefully escorted the surviving ships of the Larkinson Clan, including the various prize ships.

It did not take too much effort to get the captured warships and pirate carriers moving again. Due to the abnormal way the Battle against the Abyss ended, the Larkinsons managed to capture a lot of ships intact.

Aside from the warships, the other prize ships were fairly worthless. Certainly, the Allidus Alliance invested a decent amount of resources in their construction, but they paled in comparison to proper combat carriers.

What was worse was that only a portion of the ships possessed FTL drives.

The main reasons why the Larkinsons wanted to bring back these extra vessels was because they needed room to accommodate extra mechs and salvage.

Task Force Predator truly lost too many ships. The Penitent Sisters alone sacrificed all of their combat carriers including the Surly Cockatrice.

None of the Penitent Sisters regretted the loss. The aged combat carrier had played a pivotal role in damaging the Gravada Knarlax. As far as everyone was concerned, the Surly Cockatrice met a glorious end.

The initial departure of the combined fleet proved to be a bit problematic. Major Verle and Colonel Wodin argued about the necessity to keep the main armaments of the Gravada Knarlax and the surviving escort ships on standby.

The Wodin Warriors believed that their mechs were sufficient to guard the entire fleet.

The Larkinsons did not like to be at the mercy of others. They had lived through too many reality-defying battles to assume the normal rules applied.

Ves had to step in and offer a compromise. The Gravada Knarlax's surviving turrets would remain active, but he allowed the Hexers to disable their automatic feeding systems.

This meant that the six powerful cannons would remain unloaded. If a situation ever came up when the combined fleet needed to borrow the Gravada Knarlax's might, a mixed crew of Wodin Warriors and Larkinsons would manually feed the rounds to the main guns.

While it sounded messy, the solution placated the Hexers. It did not escape anyone that the Hexer vessels and mechs conspicuously stayed far away from the firing lines of the heavy cannons.

Despite the numerous precautions, the Wodin Warriors still did not want to put themselves at risk in case of an accident!

Some of the Larkinsons found their behavior kind of funny.

"These Hexers aren't as tough as they look." An Avatar grinned. "We rushed straight at a pirate armada without any hesitation. These supposedly superior second-raters don't even dare to get within a thirty-degree angle from the muzzles of the big guns."

It was hard not to feel proud at the amazing accomplishments the Larkinsons had made. Together with the speeches and addresses conducted by Ves, Major Verle, the individual mech commanders and most importantly the expert pilots, a lot of the hard feelings began to fade.

Only the Living Sentinels remained problematic. Ves wisely kept his distance from their contingent. He trusted Major Verle and Calabast to soften their discontent.

With the remnants of Task Force Predator steadily heading back to civilized space, Ves put down his worries and resumed his old routine.

With the LMC getting back on track after introducing the Living Star Club, Ves could finally spend his time on mech design and other matters.

Before he committed himself to completing some of the six mech design projects, he first checked in on some other matters.

"How are you, Lucky?"

"Meow."

His cat still looked a bit lethargic. Ves grew a little bit worried at Lucky's lack of progress in digesting B-stone.

"Are you making progress. If this goes on, I think we need to find a way to make you regurgitate the contents of your stomach?"

"MEEEEOOOW!"

Lucky reacted with such fright at his suggestion that he instantly jumped in the air! With a scared expression, the gem cat quickly padded away to the other side of the stateroom.

"Hey, I'm not that bad! I managed to treat your earlier condition!"

Well, since Lucky was healthy enough to move around, Ves did not pay any further mind to his pet.

He moved over to his display rack. He had messily piled up some trophies taken from his defeated opponents.

"I'll need to sort this pile. My record speaks for itself. I don't need to preserve too much garbage."

Of all of the Nyxian pirates he fought against, only the Crona Lords, the Dry Snakes and the Allidus Alliance deserved his respect. He threw out every trophy from the weaker pirate groups such as the Rust Grinders and the Mountain Kings. There was no glory to be earned from bullying weaklings.

He glanced at his grandfather's Prosperity Tree and noted to his pleasure that it was showing considerable signs of life now. While Ves did not believe in the superstition surrounding this stupid plant, he nonetheless felt inordinately pleased that it behaved correctly this time.

"You better keep growing, or else." He ominously hissed.

Checking up on the Prosperity Tree reminded him of the assets he no longer possessed.

"I lost three important components of my strength." He grimaced as he paced through his stateroom. "I can't make up for their absence."

Losing Nyxie, the Grand Dynamo and the potency of the life-prolonging treatment serum all at once dealt a crippling blow to his spiritual ambitions.

He already made his peace with the loss of the former. He always knew that the ancient alien tyrant was immensely powerful. After realizing that Nyxie could have been a dark god, Ves did not regret his decision to sacrifice the recovering spiritual entity.

The impact to the Doom Guard model had troubled him a bit, but it only took a single speech along with some other initiatives to smooth over this repercussion.

What truly depressed him was the fact that he had lost a powerful source of free spiritual fragments. Ves had become accustomed to harvesting potent spiritual fragments that were filled with energy from Nyxie's body.

Now that he had lost the Ancient Sarcophagus and its unruly prisoner, Ves needed to tap into another source of energy to create another spiritual product or design spirit.

"There's no way I can obtain another imprisoned dark god." He muttered.

The loss of the Grand Dynamo presented a more serious reduction in capabilities. He initially obtained it as a reward for making his first masterwork mech. The exquisite spiritual machine not only inspired him to pursue spiritual engineering, but also produced a horrendous amount of native spiritual energy in his mind.

With all of the spiritual energy he produced, he frequently transferred the excess to his P-stones in order to build up a considerable energy reserve.

Those days were mostly over now. Without the Grand Dynamo, his mind churned out only a miniscule amount of spiritual energy every day. If he drained his mind of half of his energy, he would probably need at least half a year to climb back out of his low state!

That was an agonizing long time! Time was precious to Ves. Entering in a low state made him more rational, which meant he was effectively impaired in his work.

Designing mechs just wasn't the same if he couldn't get fired up! His style of mech design was intricately tied to his passion.

"Who can understand my sorrows?" He dramatically sighed.

The chances of winning another Grand Dynamo Elixir should be minimal. He only obtained the first one after he used up his first radiant lottery ticket.

So far, the only reliable way for him to earn this premium lottery ticket was to make another masterwork mech.

"Yeah, that's not going to work."

It was still a matter of chance for him to accomplish this feat. What was worse was that he had to make an earnest contribution in order to win a radiant lottery ticket!

Due to the unusual circumstances surrounding the production of the Quint and the Little Angel, the System judged that he hadn't been worthy enough to earn this reward.

"Well, I'll have to try my best once I complete the six ongoing design projects."

Every completed mech design granted him a good opportunity to earn another masterwork certificate. After three successful attempts, his mech affinity should have risen considerably, thereby increasing his odds by a small but significant margin.

Combined with the quantity of projects he was working on at the same time, it would probably take a few years before he got lucky again.

"Even then, there is no guarantee I'll obtain the prize I want from my next radiant lottery ticket."

The whole point of lottery tickets was that the prizes he could draw were variable. The Grand Dynamo Elixir was probably just one out of hundreds if not thousands of prizes!

Ves shook his head. "Instead of pining over the Grand Dynamo, I should just accept this loss and move on with my life."

A part of him wasn't reconciled, though. As he ached over its loss, he tried to figure out alternatives.

He soon came to the idea of replicating it. What if he could build his own Grand Dynamo?

"It's way too complex!"

He had already thought about reverse-engineering the Grand Dynamo a thousand times in the past, but he always gave up because it was simply too complex!

Yet... didn't he develop a solution for that as well recently? When faced with his mother's work, Ves had gotten so stubborn about it that he came up with a growth-based production method!

That said, back then he possessed a complete design that outlined every essential parameter.

While Ves had studied the Grand Dynamo extensively and stored a lot of notes in his implant, he never got to penetrate its inner workings. Many properties remained a mystery because his spiritual energy failed to perceive anything solid.

He decided to take a step back.

"What if instead of recreating the actual Grand Dynamo, I instead start with something simpler?"

He judged that this idea was a lot more feasible. It was just like his inability to design expert mechs.

Instead of forcing himself to design the genuine article, he could instead settle for something simpler and design a standard mech instead.

Certainly, there was a huge gap in the performance of the two. There was no way that any regular mech could defeat an expert mech in the same class in a fair duel!

Yet having at least something was better than nothing. With no other means of producing extra spiritual energy, he was already happy if he could cobble something together that was just 1 percent as effective as the Grand Dynamo!

Ves became more and more intrigued at this possible solution. "I know how dynamos work, but only in a physical sense. I have no idea how the Grand Dynamo was able to tap into the forces of a spinning galaxy. Figuring that out is one of the biggest challenges to this project."

Not only did he have to find a way for his replica dynamo to leverage a galaxy, he also had to convert this input into spiritual energy.

One of the other fantastic traits about the Grand Dynamo was that it produced spiritual energy that was identical to his own. The spiritual imprint and spiritual attributes matched.

"Ah well, I'll solve this problem in my own way somehow."

He wasn't in a hurry to produce this second dynamo. His theoretical foundation in spiritual engineering was so shallow that he had to develop the individual mechanisms first.

Over time, he believed he could make up for the loss of the Grand Dynamo.

It was different for the serum. Ves slowly drew out the vial from his pocket.

Just like before, he sensed no activity from its contents. His mother had tyrannically stripped the exceptional serum of all of its life-attributed energy.

Without it, the liquid was pretty much dead!

"Argh!"

Chapter 2435: Catching Up

Inside the secret biolab aboard the Scarlet Rose, a woman wearing a lab coat meticulously adjusted her lab equipment. Numerous sensors and scanners thoroughly screened a sample of the serum taken from the vial.

"How is it, doc?"

The woman raised herself from the screens and frowned for a time. She idly adjusted her odd green hair as she recorded a few notes.

"It's bad." She eventually replied. "Every single sample of the serum is identical to the depleted ones you've given me before. While it doesn't make sense, they're all inert. None of the biological components exhibit any signs of activity. While I cannot make any solid conclusions, I think it is highly probable that it can't be used to extend anyone's life anymore."

Ves looked crushed. Ranya's verdict matched his own judgement. If the mysterious life-prolonging treatments relied on life-attributed energy to achieve their intended effect, then a serum with no energy couldn't even add a single year to anyone's lifespan!

The loss was especially considerable when he considered that his vial contained a high-grade serum. If he saved it all up and used it at the right time, he could have lived up to four centuries old!

A lot of powerful people would literally kill to obtain this benefit! It took way too many merits to redeem such an advanced serum from the Big Two. Ves found it difficult to accept that he had lost all of the precious universal life energy.

While Ves felt very upset that his mother did not spare any of it, he knew he shouldn't blame her too much. She truly needed all of the strength that she could get. Not only did she manage to beat up the Unending One at his peak, she also exerted just enough strength to bring the material realm and the imaginary realm within touching distance.

He would have lost everything if he didn't sacrifice so much.

Besides, it was not as if all of the highly-potent energy disappeared. His mother retained much of it in the form of permanent growth. She had become more powerful than ever. None of the dark gods lurking in the Nyxian Gap should pose a threat to her anymore!

His mother had probably become the top predator of the Nyxian Gap with this power boost. Aside from some ancient hazards, she mainly had to watch out of the Five Scrolls Compact.

Ves was not sure how the Ruined Temple would respond once it found that Temple Protector Dista encountered a mishap.

Would the Ruined Temple dispatch another Temple Protector? What if they sent someone stronger?

One of his worst fears was encountering another Holy Son!

There was no way that Ves stood a chance against his nominal 'peer'. Compared to an actual Holy Son, Ves was probably worse off in so many ways. The Metal Scroll largely dictated their relationship and Ves also suspected that it was defective.

This was why he was in a hurry to leave the Komodo Star Sector! There was no way that he wanted to be within reach of the Compact's inevitable follow-up parties.

Fortunately, it should take a while for them to arrive. The new Milky Way Galactic Gate Network may have shortened travel times enormously, but the amount of gates was still sparse.

As Ves kept musing about how much time he had left in this star sector, Ranya slowly halted her examination.

"All of my attempts at inducing activity have failed." She spoke with a disappointed tone. "It's a huge shame we haven't preserved a single intact drop. I could have kept researching it even if the rest of the serum is ruined."

He heard a small hint of reproach from her tone. She still felt pissed that Ves did not entrust her with an active sample for more than a couple of hours every week.

It wouldn't have mattered. With the might displayed by his mother, she would have reached into this compartment as well in order to absorb any loose ends.

When it came to sucking energy, she was absolutely rapacious!

He coughed. "Let's not waste our time on recriminations. The serum has lost potency, but it should still have a lot of research value, right?"

She reluctantly nodded. "While it's not as good as a proper sample, we can still make use of the inert serum in several ways. We can separate each biological component and trace where they came from. We can feed some of the residue to other organisms in order to affect their growth. We can partially derive how the serum is synthesized and

figure out how it affects the human body. In short, there is enough work to keep me occupied for decades."

"I'll leave the vial in your hands, then. I have no use of it anymore. Just make sure you don't waste any of the remaining serum on destructive experiments without my permission. I still have hope of reviving it someday."

He already tried to insert his spiritual energy into the serum. Alas, even if his spiritual energy was also based on life, it followed a different direction. There was no way for him to restore the serum's life at the moment.

Perhaps that might change in the future. Until then, there was little point carrying it on his person while it remained dead.

He proceeded to talk about other matters with Ranya. He hadn't paid as much attention to her in the last couple of months as fighting the pirates came first. Now seemed like a good time to make up for his neglect.

"How are the treatments of our injured Larkinsons faring along?"

"They're doing much better now that we've transferred them all to the Wodin Warriors." She replied. "We have been doing the best we can, but our medical specialists and treatment facilities are not up to par. The reinforcements can provide the wounded with much better care. I still envy the facilities aboard the Parma Imago."

The Parma Imago was the flagship of the Hexer reinforcement fleet. Classified as a 'light fleet carrier', the large sub-capital vessel packed up to 120 mechs in her hull.

He heard that the Wodin Warriors possessed even larger fleet carriers. It was a bit inconvenient for them to bring these proper capital ships in a region filled with asteroids, though.

"We'll solve both of the inadequacies you've mentioned." Ves promised. "Right after the previous couple of battles, we were unable to provide adequate treatment to hundreds of injured Larkinsons. They died unnecessarily because we didn't have the manpower and facilities to perform proper triage."

This was one of the areas he hadn't paid enough attention. Despite investing considerably in Ranya and the Larkinson Biotech Institute, a lot of the funding went towards expanding its augmentation capabilities.

"We'll be much better off once we return. Our institute has already recruited a lot of medical experts back on Cinach VI. The new Hexer vessels we've ordered should also come with much better treatment facilities."

"That sounds good, but don't go crazy. Once we begin our expedition, we'll stop by the Life Research Association. You can recruit as many doctors and biotech researchers as you want there. Don't be afraid of hiring more than we need. Our clan will continually expand as we go, but we can only stop by the LRA once."

"Understood, sir. We will make sure our Institute is filled with an abundance of doctors. With everything that has happened lately, it has become a lot easier for us to attract talented personnel."

They talked a bit more about what they expected to gain by visiting the Life Research Association. The unique second-rate state from Majestic Teal was a popular destination for many organizations looking to hire a large quantity of biotech experts.

"The LRA also offers other excellent services." She noted to Ves. "For example, we've often scratched our heads at the various mysteries that take place within your body. Your Jutland organ is especially mystifying. If anyone can help you decipher its bioprogramming, I believe some of the top researchers might be able to offer some insights."

"The CFA has already scanned my Jutland organ long ago."

"Did they ever get back to you about their findings?"

"..No."

Ranya chuckled. "That's the CFA for you. The fleeters only care about themselves. Look, your physique has changed drastically since that time. All the upgrades, augmentations and optimizations have turned your body into a puzzle from my perspective. While I haven't detected any serious concerns, it is truly best if you can consult a master in this field."

"Is it that serious?"

"Well, you can disregard my professional advice if you'd like. Just don't blame me if your Jutland organ spontaneously releases so much heat that all of your body tissue burns up in an instant one day. This is just one of the many accidents that can happen."

"...I see your point. I will put it on my list. I'm not sure if we can approach the LRA's top specialists. They're the equivalent of Master Mech Designers."

"I'm sure you'll manage somehow. Our Larkinson Clan is so famous these days that many powerful entities are willing to entertain us. Just make sure you offer something that is valuable enough to merit their attention."

She probably referred to his spiritually-enhanced mechs. It was not that much of a secret within the Larkinson Clan that Ves truly grasped a means of increasing the chances of breakthroughs.

Even if it had proven dangerous in some cases, Ves daily entertained requests to provide these specially-treated mechs to his mech pilots!

The surviving mech pilots who still retained their enhanced mechs attracted a lot of jealousy from the rest. Even after a month of reaping the benefits, the lucky mech pilots were still improving their skills and piloting acumen at a steady rate!

Even if these mech pilots never became expert candidates, they should still be able to become the premier elites of the Larkinson Clan!

Ves was not concerned about the Larkinsons who still lacked access to these precious mechs. It was too difficult to meet their demands without access to proper production facilities. He might as well wait until he returned to civilized space and produce a large batch of LMC mechs to placate his men. They all deserved to enjoy some of the best of what his design philosophy had to offer.

"How much progress have you made in your personal research?" He curiously asked as he looked around the lab.

He noted plenty of strange plants, some of which he hadn't seen before.

"Oh, if there is one benefit to this crazy trip, it's that I've managed to get my hands on a lot of rare and unique plants!" Ranya suddenly grinned. "You can't believe how much biodiversity the Nyxian Gap offers. I've found several interesting collections at Ulimo Citadel. I've found even stranger flora in the Gravada Knarlax. While I still have to sort through all of the new samples, I have already made several breakthroughs. I will probably proceed with the next stage of my self-augmentation after we have concluded our trip to the LRA."

"That fast?"

"I'm not getting any younger."

As Ves caught up with Ranya, he asked one more question before he left.

"Do you know Colonel Alexandria Wodin?"

Ranya nodded. "Of course. Every Wodin knows her. She's one of the most successful Wodins of her generation."

"Tell me something I should know about her. Is she related to Constance Wodin?"

"I don't know. I am not very familiar with what goes on at their level. I don't think they're close, though. Minister Constance is mainly preoccupied with internal matters while Colonel Alexandria mostly pays attention to external affairs. What I can say about the latter is that she's eager to take part in the Komodo War. I don't think you'll have to worry about her for long. Once she has completed her mission, she'll surely bring her troops to the frontlines."

"Ah." That explained the colonel's interest in his enhanced mechs.

Chapter 2436: Hall of Heroes

Commander Melkor Larkinson stood quietly as he waited next to a hatch. Its tight seal ensured that no sound escaped from the other side.

That did not hinder him from listening in through other means. He raised his hand and tapped the side of his visor a few times.

[I have had enough, Joshua.] A female voice spoke with emotion. [Ves is not the right leader for the Larkinson Clan! Your constant excuses for him ring hollow whenever I think how many Larkinsons ended up in graves due to his decisions!]

Melkor felt some of her rage impacting his mind through the bulkheads! She was a lot angrier than she sounded!

[Come on, Jannzi, don't be like that! I know his leadership is controversial, but if you take the big picture into account, it's not as bad as it looks. Each of us isn't happy with how small we are. While I agree that the clan patriarch may be a bit too aggressive, our clan has continually grown stronger with his help. Without him, we'll never be able to obtain the second-class mechs and ships we need to travel the galaxies. Without him, we have no hope of becoming first-raters in our lives.]

A warm, soothing wave displaced the uncomfortable sensation from Melkor's mind. He always felt much more comfortable in Joshua's presence. The younger man was easy to get along with. Becoming an expert pilot hadn't changed his disposition that much.

Soon enough, the wave of righteous fury returned with twice the intensity!

[I cannot tolerate your presence any longer! Leave, and never return! We are over. Joshua. You are not the Larkinson who I thought you are. The more you express your admiration towards Ves, the more I can't stand your presence. Just face it. We aren't meant to be together!]

[You can't say that! You haven't given me a chance yet! I have worked so hard to get up to your level. A week isn't enough to show you how much I love you. Can't you think about the good times we had together? Just look at Ves and his girlfriend. They're two completely different people, but they managed to get along fine!]

Two minutes later, the hatch slid open. Jannzi firmly pushed Joshua through and kicked his butt for good measure!

"We're done." Venerable Jannzi hissed as her body radiated such an intense vibe that Melkor was forced to take some steps back! "Unless you stop worshipping the ground that Ves walks upon, I don't want you back."

A wave of alarm spread from Joshua.

"That's impossible! The clan patriarch is the greatest Larkinson in history! He's the only successful Larkinson mech designer, and he has already accomplished more with his mech designs than any of the expert pilots of the old family. Why can't you admit the truth that his mechs will make us all great?"

Jannzi was too infuriated to engage with her former boyfriend any further. She silently turned around and stormed back into her cabin.

An air of malaise spread from the fallen expert pilot. Melkor tried his best not to get affected by Joshua's depression and steadily moved forward.

He offered his hand. "Come on, Venerable Joshua. An expert pilot should never show any shame."

Joshua grabbed the hand and hauled himself up with a single pull. "Thanks. I... well, you've seen what happened. Jannzi doesn't want to be with me anymore."

"Welcome to the vagaries of life. You might be a hero, but you're still a human. Not every challenge can be overcome through fighting."

Melkor guided Joshua back to his stateroom aboard the Redfeather. Once the expert pilot made himself comfortable, the Avatar Commander studied the dejected young man with his visor.

A part of him felt envious at Joshua's great success. The adopted Larkinson not only possessed a lot of talent, but he possessed a special relationship with Ves.

Both of them came from Cloudy Curtain. This shared background tied them together. Apparently, Joshua not only became an early fan of Ves' work, but the clan patriarch also showered his fellow Cloudy Curtainer with attention.

While Commander Melkor recognized that Joshua ultimately deserved his treatment, a lot of other Larkinsons could have benefited instead.

What if Melkor piloted the Quint? Each time he studied the mech up close, he could feel some of its might.

As the commander of the Avatars, Melkor technically possessed the right to reassign the Quint.

For example, he could claim it for himself.

In fact, he didn't really need to resort to such an extreme. He could hop into its cockpit and take the masterwork mech out for a spin whenever he liked.

Yet whenever he felt tempted to do so, the Larkinson within him warned him that this was not a good idea.

It was dishonorable to pilot a mech that was exclusively assigned to a mech pilot!

The Larkinsons were especially sensitive towards this principle. Due to the influence of Ves, every Larkinson mech pilot slowly came to believe that their mechs were alive.

Piloting a mech on a consistent basis was similar to marrying it. How could Melkor possibly justify piloting Joshua's wife?

He shook his head. This was not the time to obsess over piloting the Quint. He knew he wouldn't be able to bring the most out of the mech. Unlike Joshua, he wasn't proficient in piloting multiple different mech types.

Joshua regained his composure. He calmed his roiling emotions and faced his superior.

"Thank you, sir. I needed a moment."

"No problem."

"What now?"

"That depends on what you want." Melkor gently responded. "This is why fraternization is so messy. I've tolerated it as long as it doesn't happen within the chain of command, but your case is a bit trickier. Tell me honestly. Will Jannzi be able to stand your presence?"

"...I don't think so. As long as we disagree on the clan patriarch, she'll continue to hate my guts."

They discussed Joshua's options.

"Maybe it is best if you transfer to another ship." Commander Melkor judged. "You can train the Ingvar siblings while you're at it. They're fresh expert candidates who aren't very familiar with their growing abilities."

The Gravada Knarlax blew up the Greenfeather in a single volley in the previous battle. The Second Mech Company had to adopt a new home for their surviving mechs along with some other scattered units.

While Joshua looked reluctant, he nodded. He showed none of the decisiveness expected of an expert pilot.

"I'll keep the Ingvars company. Is there something else?"

"Yes. Major Verle recently invited all of the senior officers to discuss an important matter. It's about you and the other expert pilots."

"What's the matter?"

Commander Melkor hesitated for a moment. "We discussed how to place you within our lineup. So far, we have followed the model of the Mech Corps and other military organizations. However, we don't believe that blindly copying the military is the right solution for every problem. Our circumstances are substantially different. When it comes to expert pilots and their entourages, we decided that they should serve the Larkinson Clan as a whole rather than a specific mech force."

Joshua tried to figure out what that meant. "Does that mean.. I'm not going to be an Avatar anymore?"

"The Avatars of Myth will only limit you. We chase after myths. We emulate them. You're better than us. You have already become a hero that is equal to a myth. You need to follow a different development trajectory, and I'm not sure that any of our mech forces can accommodate you. Also, unlike the Mech Corps, we trust our expert pilots. We don't believe in shackling you and surrounding you with an excessive amount of structure. Major Verle and the rest want to do something different."

"I'm being transferred, commander?"

"Correct." Melkor nodded. "Once we return to Cinach, we'll perform an extensive reorganization. Aside from consolidating our units and supplementing our ranks with fresh troops, we will also transfer every expert pilot to a new mech force that is dedicated to them. You and your Bright Companions will serve with greater autonomy."

"What's this new unit called?"

"We call it the Hall of Heroes."

The Hall of Heroes. This new and looser organization within the Larkinson Clan gathered every expert pilot and provided them with a lot of space. Joshua had never heard of expert pilots receiving this kind of treatment, but according to Commander

Melkor, various other states and organizations adopted the same model with varying degrees of success.

One of the reasons why the Larkinson Clan decided to set up the Hall of Heroes was because the distribution of expert pilots would always remain unfair if the current situation didn't change.

There were also deeper reasons why the Larkinsons wanted to set up the Hall of Heroes, but they weren't relevant at the moment.

Venerable Joshua silently took in the news. He felt a bit floored since he had gotten to know many Avatars outside of his Bright Companions. Once he transferred to the Hall of Heroes, they probably wouldn't be able to hang out as often.

"What do you think? Do you have any objections?"

"I.. I don't know. I'm not an officer. I'll try my best to make it work."

"Don't be afraid to make your own decisions. If you don't want to assume more responsibility, then the clan will provide someone who can manage your unit in your stead. You just focus on what you need to take the next step. None of us want you to halt at your current stage."

Joshua shrugged. "The only thing I need to improve is an expert mech designed by the clan patriarch. I don't care about anything else."

That sounded simple, but Melkor didn't think it would remain that way. With power came ambition. One of the more hidden reasons why Major Verle wanted to transfer the expert pilots away from their current units was because they possessed way too much influence.

If the clan kept Joshua and Jannzi in their place, the Avatars of Myth would definitely take after their heroes!

The situation was a bit trickier for Commander Dise and Commander Orfan. Due to their dual positions, they had become the pillars of the Swordmaidens and the Flagrant Vandals.

While this transfer was never meant to isolate the expert pilots from their battle comrades, there were still good reasons to distance themselves from their current responsibilities. If the two mech commanders got bogged down by too much paperwork, how would they ever have enough time left for practice?

In any case, even if the two older expert pilots served under the Hall of Heroes, that didn't stop them from spending time with their original units. They just had to devote a bit of attention to the other mech forces.

For example, Venerable Dise would likely be able to provide a lot of assistance to swordman mech specialists. It was a waste to keep her in the Swordmaidens.

Joshua scratched his head. "What about Colonel Ark Larkinson? His example proves that expert pilots can still be successful while remaining in charge."

"He's an exception to the rule. Rarely do expert pilots ever reach this rank. It's simply not possible for most of you. If Venerable Ark didn't possess the foundation of a Larkinson and if he wasn't so good with people, he never would have become more than a mech captain during his time in the service. However, if any expert pilot proves that he can follow Venerable Ark's footsteps, we are willing to make an exception."

This had nothing to do with Joshua. He barely commanded the Bright Companions anyway as he wasn't cut out to be an officer. Whenever he got excited in battle, he only paid attention to himself.

"Okay. I think I get it, commander. I'll get ready to join the Hall of Heroes and assume my new responsibilities. I hope we all know what we're doing."

Chapter 2437: Retraction

"We've managed to secure sufficient support to establish the Hall of Heroes. Once we are ready to reorganize, we'll transfer all of the expert pilots and their retinue to the new mech force."

"Who will lead the Hall of Heroes?" Ves asked as he leaned back on his chair.

He attempted to grab Lucky from his desk, but the gem cat quickly jumped away.

"Meow!"

Major Verle's projection paused for a bit. "We are still in the process of determining that, sir. The Hall of Heroes is unlike the other mech forces we've established. It is best to see it as an umbrella organization for expert pilots. We need someone in charge who can command respect from them without coming across as controlling. To emphasize this distinction, the officer in charge will carry the rank of commandant."

"Ideally, the commandant should be a former expert pilot." Ves thought about it. "Since those are hard to come by, we should choose an old and retired mech pilot. The older, the better."

"We still have a number of highly-respected trueblood Larkinson retirees who can fulfill this position." Verle grinned. "We'll just have to pick the least-crotchety among them. The duties of the commandant are fairly light anyway. His main role is to manage the personalities of the expert pilots so that they don't butt heads against each other or towards our clan. The staff can handle the rest."

The two went through a list of candidates and quickly settled on some older Larkinson. While most of the trueblood veterans desired peace and chose to stay with the Larkinson Family, there were several older men and women who opted to follow their younger and much more ambitious children and grandchildren.

"What about Cristoph Larkinson? He served for over forty years. He fought in two wars and reached the rank of mech captain. While he did not distinguish himself through piloting skill or command ability, he possesses the right social traits."

Ves studied Cristoph's profile carefully. The old man was part of his grandpa Benjamin's generation.

According to the record that he had access to, Cristoph was noted to be modest, calm under pressure and easy to chat with. On the other hand, this grandfatherly figure also became a bit more plodding as he grew older.

This was not someone who acted decisively. This was okay to Ves. It was not the commandant's job to direct the expert pilots in battle. That was up to Major Verle or whoever was in charge.

When Ves extended an offer to Cristoph, the old man only hesitated for a brief moment before he accepted.

"I thought I could enjoy my remaining years in peace, but I don't mind holding another desk job." Cristoph's projection remarked. The man resided on Cinach VI with the rest of the retirees. "If you need me to wrangle the new expert pilots, I'm your man. Just don't expect too much from me. I've served alongside their kind before. I know how they can be if they think they have to do the right thing."

"This is exactly why we must establish the Hall of Heroes. I'm hopeful that you'll be able to earn their regard. Don't be afraid to ask for assistance from myself or Major Verle. Keeping our expert pilots happy and occupied is essential. The Military Bureau will help set up your new office and transfer some capable staffers. "

"Understood, sir. I'll get right on it. It is an honor to assume responsibility over our strongest mech pilots."

The newly-appointed commandant saluted to Ves before he began to talk to Major Verle in private. Setting up a special unit centered around expert pilots could not be done in a day.

With these matters taken care of, Ves ended the calls and returned his attention to his other priorities. "It's high time to finalize some of my mech designs."

Several projects were already close to completion. The mech designs were no longer purely theoretical as Gloriana fabricated several prototypes to test their performance in reality.

Backed up by this data, Ves gained a very thorough understanding on how the mechs performed.

"Gloriana has done a good job in my absence."

While he wasn't truly absent in the last month, he spent far less time on the design projects as he wished. He wanted to make up for that now by finishing the spiritual components that only he could take care of. He didn't want to know how badly Gloriana waited for him to address this neglected area.

He waved his hand and called up an overview of all six projects.

"The Cat's Paw Project still needs more work. The Valkyrie Redeemer needs more hardening against the counters introduced by the Friday Coalition. The Chiron needs more finetuning in light of my latest innovations. I'll probably have to adjust my plan for the Ferocious Piranha as well now that Nyxie is no longer alive."

That left out the Sanctuary and the Crystal Lord Mark II.

Of the two third-class mech designs, the Sanctuary was a very simple and boring knight mech design. This meant that Gloriana and the erudites easily achieved their milestones on this project ahead of time.

If not for its exceptional design spirit, they would have finalized it already.

"Well, Lufa is pretty much ready to take on his role." He muttered.

The only question was whether he wished to impart any triggered abilities and other quirks onto the design.

Considering that the mech was designed to offer relief against the glows of his other products, he didn't believe it was necessary to empower it that much. The only alteration it needed was a spiritual construct that regulated what glows it was allowed to impair.

It did not take much effort to specify the list as he had already formed it beforehand.

In general, the Sanctuary was strictly limited to negating the glows of other third-class mechs. It would have been incredibly cheap if it was capable of impairing the glows of superior mechs.

There should be no way for the Fridaymen to employ this model against the Blessed Squire and other Hexer-commissioned mechs!

The final instruction he programmed in the design was that its glow was completely ineffective against any mech piloted by a Larkinson. This rule only became invalid when the Sanctuary was piloted by a Larkinson as well.

"With all of the glows in my clan, I think a mech like this is very necessary to give my men some relief."

That was one of the main reasons he designed the Sanctuary after all. Even he got tired of playing with glows all the time.

Just before he was about to call it a day, he suddenly stopped and remembered something important.

"Wait, I need to take the counters to my glows into account as well!"

While the Sanctuary was designed to counter glows, Ves predicted that the counters developed by his competitors such as mechs leveraging O-K alloy would definitely disrupt this function.

While Ves did not care so much if the Sanctuary was not able to leverage its strength all the time, that did not apply to his other mechs.

What if he published the Valkyrie Redeemer with great fanfare, only for the Fridaymen to develop a method that largely blocked its signature Marked For Death ability?

"It's not just my upcoming mechs that need strengthening. The Blessed Squire is also due for an update!"

He devoted some time to studying the current situation of the Blessed Squire. Gloriana frequently transmitted some internal documents and battle footage to keep him up to date.

So far, more counters have emerged onto the battlefield. Each new model only showed up on a couple of battlefields. This indicated to Ves that the Fridaymen were still in the process of iterating more effective solutions.

"Nonetheless, most of the counters they've come up with work on the same principle."

The Glow Crusher and other comparable mech models each attempted to disturb one energy field with another energy field. It was like crashing a concert by playing a different song over another song.

Ves had considered how to handle this situation for several days. He came up with various solutions, but most of them were rather convoluted and depended on conditions that he could not accomplish.

For example, one of the most direct ways to counter the Glow Crusher's motion energy from overriding glows was to force his mechs to output a stronger aura than usual.

Yet increasing this output could not be done without a price.

His mech needed a source in order to strengthen its glow. So far, he came up with the concept of a reservoir. If Ves found some way for his mech to capture and store some of its own glow, the pilot should be able to release the accumulated glow whenever a Glow Crusher came close.

Ves tried to create the capturing and storing mechanisms without success. He needed to advance his spiritual engineering, and that took time and effort that he couldn't spare at this moment.

"I'll get back to this after the wedding."

Right now, Ves wanted to come up with a faster and more convenient solution. The longer the Glow Crushers oppressed the Blessed Squires, the more likely the Hex Army lowered the priority on his mechs.

This was not what he wanted! He needed the Hexers to adopt his Hexers mechs wholesale in order to spread the gospel of the Superior Mother.

Fortunately, he had another idea that didn't require so much effort.

"Much like any energy field, glows follow the inverse-square law. The greater the distance, the weaker the glow."

Before the appearance of specific counters, Ves always aimed to maximize the range of the glows of his mechs. There was no threat to them, so why shouldn't he aim for maximizing the coverage?

However, doing so turned the glows into a huge and vulnerable target. It was like comparing an apple and a cheap balloon.

If Ves held a needle and poked the balloon, it would probably pop in an instant.

If he did the same to an apple, then all he accomplished was releasing a small amount of juice.

Though the analogy wasn't accurate, the Glow Crusher pretty much played the role of a needle.

"If this is the case, then I just have to turn the balloon into an apple."

He had to compress the glow of his mech designs. As long as the glows clung a bit together to their mechs, enemies wouldn't be able to collapse them so easily anymore.

It was remarkably easy for Ves to implement this solution. He already possessed a fair amount of experience in manipulating the glow of the Valkyrie Redeemer design.

The only bit of uncertainty was that he hadn't actually tested it out. While he was confident in his theory, he needed to verify it before he was ready to expand it to his entire mech catalog.

"Once counters to my glows become ubiquitous, a defensive function like this is essential!"

The downside to retracting the glow was that it didn't cover as many friendlies and enemies around it. Yet Ves believed it was worth it in order to make his glows tougher and more intense!

He contacted Gloriana after he made some refinements to this solution.

"What is it, Ves? Are you ready to complete some of our designs?"

"Not quite. I need your help. Can you contact DIVA or the Hex Army in order to perform a little trial? I've just come up with a potential stopgap solution that should mitigate the effectiveness of the counters to our mechs."

"I can do that." She replied. "I've established a closer relationship with the Hex Army lately. I can contact some commanders who can provide us with the opportunity to test some updates or variants. Just make sure you've put enough effort. We'll be responsible if anything goes wrong."

"Don't worry, Gloriana. I'm always sure about my work!"

Chapter 2438: Mech Lieutenant Monroe

While Ves invested his time on coming up with a set of universal glow instructions, the Komodo War continued to rage in the center of the star sector.

To the warring Fridaymen and Hexers, the events that took place in the Nyxian Gap did not even come to their attention.

The war already consumed all of their attention! Who cared what the designer of the Blessed Squire was up to these days. The military mech pilots weren't even able to access any news aside from what their superiors wanted to know.

"Come on! The Hexers are getting battered! Let's push them out of the city while their reinforcements are still on the way!"

After successfully conquering and pacifying the Marrakath System, the Wrathful Doves only needed a few months to complete its reorganization. The Hex Army provided the victorious army group with a large amount of recruits, mechs and supplies over the course of a couple of months.

While the Wrathful Doves still needed time to return to its old level of strength, the war waited for no one. With the fall of the Crestfallen Stars, the interior of the Carnegie Group and the Vermeer Group became vulnerable.

The Hex Army decided to act boldly and launched several bold offensives. Each of them thrust deeply into the territories of the two Coalition Partners. The Hexers wanted to attack strategic and critical interior star systems before the Fridaymen took everything of value away.

One of the star systems that the Hexers just happened to attack was the Leemar System!

This academic star system used to be one of the Carnegie Group's centers of power. Many leaders, scientists and other notable figures studied at one of its many renowned universities.

Right now, the Hex Army was determined to conquer the Leemar System! As the home of the Leemar Institute of Technology, the Hexers wanted to send a strong message to Master Olson and Master Katzenberg.

Since the two Fridaymen Masters dared to target the Blessed Squire mechs with their Glow Crusher design, the Hexers were determined to hit back twice as hard by razing their cherished institution!

Of course, the Masters, the teaching staff, the students and almost everyone else had already evacuated the vulnerable star system. What troubled Leemar's administration was that it took a lot more time to transfer all of the expensive hardware and material stockpiles.

Since the LIT was home to at least five Master Mech Designers and many more Seniors, the LIT had built up an elaborate high-end infrastructure centered around research, development and production.

Leemar had been responsible for fabricating numerous expert mechs and high-end mechs for the Fortune Legion! Naturally, the infrastructure needed to produce the best mechs of the Fortune Legion was very considerable.

Now, much of it was under threat!

Hundreds of shells launched by distant artillery mechs smashed onto the tropical lands where the LIT was based!

A couple of explosive shells even impacted Master Olson's guest estate! Powerful explosions rocked the grounds, causing numerous new craters to appear.

While the mansion was made out of better materials than many other homes, the Hexers didn't give up. Dozens of other shells hit the mansion, collapsing its roof, several rooms and even entire wings!

Fortunately, Master Olson already took away everything she cared about months ago. Not even her private workshop contained any traces as the bombardment finally breached the underground chambers!

The destruction of Master Olson's mansion only served as a minor distraction for the Battle of the Leemar System.

"Crush this school and everything it has left! Don't let a single building stand!"

Both Fridaymen and Hexer mechs fought numerous different skirmishes across the Leemar Institute of Technology's expansive campus grounds.

Mechs from both sides hotly contested against each other in the air and land. With each passing second, an aerial mech crashed into the ground. Landbound mechs constantly fired and collided against each other.

"Watch out for the shore! Those amphibian mechs can sneak attack us at any time!"

Since the LIT was built on an archipelago, the combatants contested in the seas as well! Tens of thousands of aquatic mechs and amphibian mechs clashed against each other at various depths in order to secure the crucial waters surrounding the famed institution.

Little of that had anything to do with Mech Lieutenant Niklas Monroe.

As a native of the Leemar System and a mech officer of the Fortune Legion, Lieutenant Monroe received the distinct honor of piloting one of his unit's Glow Crusher!

Not every Fridayman mech pilot looked forward to piloting the new mech model. Due to the necessity of charging straight into an enemy formation in order to break the Blessed Squire's glow, the Glow Crushers that charged in regularly never made it out intact!

What was even worse was that the Hexer mech pilots developed an intense animosity towards the Glow Crushers. No Fridaymen mech attracted more fire from the maddened women than the mech that had the potential to ruin their parade!

The Fridaymen were human as well. Who would want to accept the 'honor' of piloting this necessary mech if it only turned them into the biggest target on the battlefield?

Lieutenant Monroe was not one of them. In order to defend the planet he grew up in, he eagerly embraced the only mech that could neutralize one of the Hex Army's trump cards!

Several mech companies advanced forward while enduring an increasing amount of fire. One of the downsides of defending the LIT was that it featured a lot of open space. The cities built around the institute mostly consisted of smaller structures.

"Come on! We only have one chance at this! We have to take out those artillery mechs!"

Up ahead, the Fortune Legionnaires finally reached a wide street where at least two Hexer mech companies escorted half-a-dozen artillery mechs as they slowly lumbered forward.

The huge, lumbering six-legged mechs each boasted a plethora of cannons. The artillery mechs continually fired heavy shells after receiving accurate targeting data from scout mechs and spy drones.

Occasionally, the Fortune Legion attempted to bombard the Hexer artillery mechs, but their targets either intercepted the incoming rounds with their secondary armament or projected a large shield to block whatever managed to slip through.

Even if a couple of rounds succeeded in passing through all of these obstacles, the heavy artillery mechs just accepted the blows before resuming their attacks!

"These big mechs are rare even for the Wrathful Doves." A Fridayman commander noted. "The Hexers will definitely feel pained if we manage to take them down. Get ready!"

Everyone received tailored instructions as the Fridaymen mechs came close enough to initiate a charge.

"Monroe, you know what to do. We'll open up a path for you as much as possible."

"Got it, sir! For Freedom and Fortune!"

"FOR FREEDOM AND FORTUNE!"

Due to the crucial role of the Glow Crusher mechs, the Fortune Legion no longer positioned them up front. Instead, the lancer mechs occupied the second row. Several offensive mechs adjusted for speed and frontal defenses covered them from the front.

After completing the final preparations, the commander issued the pivotal.

"Charge!"

Over a hundred mechs thundered forward! The avenue they were walking on quickly cracked due to all of the stresses it endured!

Soon enough, the slow-moving Hexer formation halted and opted to dig in as its ranged mechs began to fire at the vanguard of the incoming enemies.

A huge barrage of fire pushed against the offensive knights! Positron beams, missiles, gauss rounds and other powerful weapons smashed against the shields of the mechs at the front.

Even the artillery mechs directed some of their shorter-ranged mechs against the incoming Fridaymen!

Amazingly, the offensive mechs held throughout the charge. Each of the mechs mounted special shield generators on their backs. The shields they projected not only formed a powerful barrier up front, but also merged with any adjacent barriers.

The result was a large and powerful shield that was collectively supported by all of the mechs that carried this expensive shield module!

It didn't matter if the Hexers concentrated their fire on only one portion of the barrier. With the sharing arrangement enabled by this highly-advanced shielding system, every shield generator endured the exact same burden.

As the Fridaymen formation neared the enemy position, the shield generators were close to reaching their limits!

"Deactivate the shield generators! They've done their job!"

The offensive knights no longer projected their shields. Their modular backpack modules smoked as they worked hard to release an excess amount of heat.

The absence of the shield immediately affected the Fridaymen. The offensive knights traded durability for mobility and increased energy reserves, and now they were finally paying for this tradeoff!

Against the concentrated firepower of the Hexer mechs, the offensive knights quickly fell behind. Their shields only bought a short amount of time before they quickly collapsed.

"Breach an opening for us!" Lieutenant Monroe called as his Glow Crusher became filled with motion energy.

Even though his mech wasn't running at its top speed, Monroe knew it had accumulated a sufficient amount of momentum. Together with the Glow Crushers of his unit, he was confident he could break the enemy's glow!

Crash!

The surviving offensive mechs along with some other melee mechs physically collided against the defending Hexer mechs.

The powerful collisions disordered the Hexer ranks and momentarily opened up some gaps. Other Fortune Legion mechs quickly took advantage of the openings and tried their best to expand the holes.

Every Fridayman mech abruptly fought a little less vigorously as they pressed closer. Each of them had entered the outer range of the Blessed Squire's glow.

"Monroe! The way is open! Kill those damned boy mechs before they nag us to death!"

"With pleasure!"

The Fridaymen mechs had managed to create some openings in the enemy formation at great cost. Once their forward momentum stalled, it became a lot more challenging to reach the well-protected Blessed Squires.

Fortunately, Lieutenant Monroe managed to bypass the occupied Fridaymen mechs and charge forward. The other friendly Glow Crushers managed to press through as well as their comrades did their best to cover their advance.

All of this took place in a short amount of time. Before the Hexers issued their next orders, the Glow Crushers were already accelerating forward!

When Monroe felt the time was right, he activated a mental trigger.

In an instant, the lance of his mechs seemed to shine as it was about to bump into an invisible field!

"SUCCESS!"

The glows of the Blessed Squires abruptly disappeared as the Glow Crushers that managed to pull off their charge had dumped all of their motion energy!

The surrounding air became denser and more energetic as the invisible motion energy spread from the Glow Crushers.

The Hexer mechs simultaneously lost steam as the encouraging presence of the Superior Mother disappeared.

The Fridaymen succeeded in damaging their confidence!

As the motion energy rapidly dissipated, Lieutenant Monroe decisively commanded his mech to throw aside its unwieldy lance. After withdrawing a slim sword, his mech already turned around in order to link up with friendlies.

Yet just as the Glow Crushers took their first steps back, a familiar oppressive sensation overtook the mech pilots.

For a moment, both sides flagged a bit. "What is this..?"

Suddenly, the Hexer mechs became invigorated again! With the resumption of the glows of the Blessed Squires, the crazed Hexer mech pilots fought as if the Superior Mother had personally intervened!

"The Superior Mother is with us!"

"Crush these Glow Crushers!"

Lieutenant Mornoe was devastated! As numerous vengeful Hexers assaulted his Glow Crusher, he couldn't comprehend what had happened. He was sure his mech had succeeded in its charge!

"Why didn't it work! My mech broke their glows!"

He would find no answer as his mech quickly succumbed against the combined assault. The rest of his unit collapsed within minutes as the Fridaymen were forced to fight in the influence of a hostile while the Hexers had regained their confidence!

"The Hexers deceived us! They upgraded their Blessed Squires!"

Chapter 2439: Three Gifts

It did not take long for the test results to come back.

Across several different battlefields, a handful of units received secretive 'upgrades' to their Blessed Squires.

Nothing much had changed aside from some sort of software date and the addition of a new dial in their cockpits.

The male Hexer mech pilots who had the privilege of piloting these blessed mechs received some very basic instructions on how to use the latest addition to their mechs.

"The Miracle Couple has come up with something that will help us thwart the Glow Crushers. Pay attention to this dial and the corresponding neural command. By default, the glow of your mech is unrestrained. If any of the counters to your mech comes close, you need to retract it as close to your mech as possible. To do that, just turn this dial

anti-clockwise or issue a more precise command to your mech through your neural interface."

"Uhm, what is the purpose of doing so, ma'am?" The boy clad in a tight piloting suit asked the tall female engineer.

"Simply put, a Glow Crusher breaks the glow of your mech by throwing motion energy at it. What you need to do is to retract this glow so that the Glow Crusher misses its attack. As long as its motion energy doesn't come close to your retracted glow, it will not do anything aside from making the air feel heavy for a time."

With this small addition, the upgraded Blessed Squires completely gained the upper hand again!

With the ability to control the range of the glows, the rate of glows getting crushed dropped by 80 percent after a few days!

The Hexers had long sought a solution to the counters deployed by the Friday Coalition. Being able to retract the glows when they were vulnerable was an incredibly helpful ability.

Even if the glow no longer blessed the surrounding mechs, it at least remained intact. Once the Glow Crusher mechs completed their charge and released all of their motion energy, the threat against their glows should have passed.

Nothing stopped the Blessed Squires from restoring their glows to their original splendor!

The incredible utility of this little function was so great that demand for it skyrocketed. Other Hex Army units heard about the upgrade as well and began to ask for it as well!

Gloriana quickly called Ves once again in order to discuss this abrupt development.

"I don't know how you managed to implement it, but your fix worked!" She grinned. "According to the feedback from the mech pilots, the new retraction function you've added to the Blessed Squire is a great blessing. In fact, you should have implemented a long time ago. Why did it take so long for you to add it in? Were you saving it up or something?"

Ves sent her a reproachful glare. "I only came up with it recently. You should know that we never really had to worry about the range of the glows of our mechs. Only the Doom Guard posed a serious concern, but even then that wasn't enough for me to intervene."

It was different now that the Friday Coalition had deliberately taken advantage of this vulnerability. For many reasons, Ves needed his Hexers mechs to succeed. He needed to crush anything that threatened their superiority in battle!

The two quickly discussed the performance of the new retraction function. After studying the data and verifying that it hadn't glitched or anything, they decided to recommend that the Hex Army to to embrace the upgrade.

"I'll take care of it." Gloriana promised. "High command will be inordinately pleased with our quick response. The value of the Glow Crushers will certainly drop after the Blessed Squires have incorporated this upgrade."

In truth, the physical and software changes were mostly smoke and mirrors. Due to some obscure spiritual rules that Ves didn't fully understand, every copy of the Blessed Squire was connected to the design.

While the former was still able to grow and develop a unique character, its fundamental identity was still tied to its origin. This meant that any change to the design inevitably affected the existing copies.

In truth, Ves frequently scratched his head over this relationship. A mech design was imaginary while a physical mech was material. For the former to affect the latter in this fashion sounded like magic or very profound metaphysics.

Whatever. There was no reason to look at a gift horse in the mouth. This profound interaction allowed him to push any spiritual changes to all of his mechs without needing to go through their current owners.

The only reason why he bothered to add a dial was to fool the Hexers into thinking that they needed to apply the upgrade to the mech first before they gained access to the retraction function.

Ves would definitely attract way too much scrutiny if the mech community found out that he could alter existing mechs without accessing them! The security implications were considerable. No one wanted someone to have constant access to the core functions of an actual mech.

Once the pair completed their discussion about the upgrade, Gloriana was already looking to the future.

"This is only the beginning, Ves." She warned. "While I expect that this retraction function will shift the advantage back to our Blessed Squires, our opponents will likely find another loophole. Master Olson and Master Katzenberg succeeded first, but I have no doubt that other Masters are readying other mechs that can interfere with the glows of our mechs. It will only be a matter of time before a competitor develops a solution that can cripple a glow from a distance."

That was one of his greatest fears as well. While the retraction function enabled his mechs to concentrate their glow, thereby thickening it and increasing their resistance, it came with a very significant downside.

A Blessed Squire that continually retracted its glow was a mech that did not perform its main role!

What Ves truly wanted was to implement a solution that allowed his mechs to strengthen their existing glows.

He might have to alter his design spirits in order to achieve this goal. The glows of his mechs did not originate from the mechs or mech designs themselves. The spiritual entities that presided over them were the actual source of glows.

He could not mess with them lightly. Each of them were living, powerful entities whose existences directly depended on their spiritual composition. Any change, no matter how modest, directly altered their behavior in some fashion!

"Look, Gloriana, before Master Olson and Master Katzenberg introduced the Glow Crusher, I didn't even know that our mechs were vulnerable to their unique mode of attack. Now that we know, we can account for them. The same will happen again if they come up with another trick."

She sighed. "I know. I can already tell that you look forward to sparring against our opponents. It's just that I'm worried about the brave women and boys who are depending on our work. The Hex Army has already suffered numerous setbacks due to the vulnerability exposed by the Fridaymen. Next time, how many more Hexers will die because we failed to account for the methods of our enemies?"

"What do you want us to do? I have worked to develop my design philosophy up until this point, but I can only do so much on my own. I don't want the Fridaymen to regain the upper hand either, but it's difficult for me to anticipate how they will attack my work."

He knew that Gloriana felt very frustrated by her inability to help. She had waited for Ves to come up with a solution for a month, but because he was preoccupied with defeating pirates, he never implemented this little fix until now! This delay signified that she had a long way to go before she was able to design the perfect vessel.

Before Gloriana ended the call, she brought up one more important matter.

"Are you truly sure you want to upgrade our existing mech models with the same function?"

"We might as well. Let's start by implementing it onto our existing mechs. I'll go over our current designs and revise them a bit. Once I'm done, just let the mech technicians modify the machines we have."

"What about the mechs we sold?"

"I'm not sure. I think it's best if we just make the retraction function standard. Do you agree?"

"Our customers have consistently demanded more control over the glows of their mechs. We should do it, Ves. Adding it to all of our mechs will bring them a little closer to perfection. I expect the value of our mechs to grow as a result."

After agreeing on this point, Gloriana addressed one final issue.

"It's been more than a week since the Doom Guard irrevocably changed. While we have managed to stem the outrage due to our quick action, it's still a problematic mech. Do you want to keep it that way or try and change it back?"

Ves furrowed his brows. "I don't know. The mech has already changed. Doing it again will lead to greater disruption."

"There are many owners who want to regain the old Doom Guards. They're much more effective in buying time and keeping the enemy at a distance. Overall, the battle performance of the Doom Guard has worsened after it gained its new alternating glow."

Ves already predicted this outcome. Sales of the Doom Guard still declined. No matter whether their owners obtained compensation, the new Doom Guard clearly performed worse in battle. Their owners had to adopt more strenuous measures in order to take advantage of its new effect.

"I think it's best to leave it alone. Ideally, I'd like to restore the old Doom Guard, but the current incarnation is pretty interesting as well. Both are useful under the right circumstances. Ideally, I'd like to retain both of them. While there is a bit of overlap between the two versions, as long as we keep working on them, they'll eventually become two very different mech designs."

"That's.. acceptable. It's not the solution I would have settled for, but it will please the fans of both versions."

What Ves didn't mention to Gloriana was that Ves didn't have any suitable ingredients that could take the place that Nyxie once occupied.

Wait. Didn't his mother...

He recalled something very important. He hastily ended the call, much to Gloriana's chagrin, and raced to the vault.

After going through a security check, he stepped into the heavily-fortified chamber.

Ves began to pull out every P-stone. Just as he expected, three of them were significantly different than before!

"I was right!"

A grin plastered on his face as he realized what his mother had left him. Even though she called them trash, Ves did not care about her opinions.

What mattered was that he obtained three additional spiritual fragments!

Ves carefully probed the spiritual fragments and gained a sense of their principal attributes.

The most powerful fragment contained some very potent devouring attributes.

"The Unending One."

A weaker fragment exhibited some flighty attributes.

"The Inexorable One."

Another weak fragment seemed to be filled with light.

"The Blinding One!"

Ves didn't know how his mother managed to preserve these fragments, but they were extremely helpful to his current circumstances!

Of course, in their current forms, the remnants of the dark gods were polluted with a lot of undesirable attributes. Ves had no use for their evil and alien natures and wanted to get rid of them as soon as possible.

In fact, Ves believed it was best to use them as ingredients in the creation of fresh new design spirits. He did not want to make the same mistake he made with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment and revive someone from the dead!

"The Unending One and the Inexorable One should definitely remain buried. The Blinding One on the other hand..."

Ves grew a little intrigued about the last dark god. Even though the Blinding One was just as evil and hostile as the previous two entities, he was different.

The Blinding One was a humanoid alien, and a member of the luminar race to boot.

Ves always wanted to figure out the mysteries of the luminar race. What if he could tap into the Blinding One's knowledge and figure out the principles behind his race's wondrous crystal and light-based technology?

Chapter 2440: Spiritual Extortion Racket

To Ves, spiritual fragments held a special meaning. Drawn from spiritual entities, the concentrated accumulation of energies inherited some of their character.

When Ves studied a spiritual fragment, he evaluated them by several different criteria.

He first observed their spiritual imprint. To his understanding, an imprint was both a brand and a carrier of someone's fundamental existence. It possessed mysterious properties and served an essential role in ensuring that someone maintained possession of their own spirituality.

When Ves studied the spiritual imprints of the three fragments, he noted that all of them appeared to be strong and vivid. They were harvested fresh from the corpses of the dark gods, though the fragments of the Inexorable One and the Blinding One were a tad weaker.

Considering that the Unending One showed no hesitation in devouring his fellow dark gods, Ves immediately formed a hypothesis.

"The Unending One specializes in devouring other spiritual entities. He likely possesses many means of efficiently breaking down foreign spiritual energy."

He could not help but remember what took place after the Unending One betrayed his fellow dark gods. The tentacled whale grew immensely in both size and power. Although it appeared that his rapid boost in strength produced many repercussions, it was a testament to its powerful digestion abilities that it could power itself up in battle.

Some interesting ideas came to mind as he speculatively regarded the fragment of the Unending One. While the dark god used to be his enemy, a remnant of the tentacled whale's existence had now fallen into his hands.

Considering his track record of what he did with other spiritual fragments, he could definitely find some way of converting it into his own strength!

The second criteria he paid attention to was the spiritual attributes contained within the fragments.

As far as he was aware of, no form of life embodied just a single attribute. Every living entity always possessed a mix of attributes. The purer ones possessed many different related attributes while more complex entities usually possessed a greater degree of diversity.

Each spiritual attribute reflected the character traits and the abilities of the entity in question.

By studying someone's spiritual attributes, Ves was able to understand the true nature of other people and entities to some degree. He didn't dare to look closely at someone whose power far surpassed his own for fear of exposing himself or suffering some kind of backlash.

For example, looking deep into the dark gods when they were at their prime was just asking for death!

"Well, I'm just looking at their fragments now, so it's okay." He muttered.

Each of the dark gods carried an air of antiquity. They had lived for eons and survived through many different ages. Living for so many years caused the dark gods to gain a lot of spiritual attributes, though most of their proportions were miniscule compared to their main attributes.

"It's the equivalent of dust."

Ves wasn't interested in these trivial attributes. They showed up so rarely that it took far too much effort to make use of them. He would rather turn his attention to the major attributes that defined the entities in question.

When he compared the attributes of all three fragments, he noted that much of them were identical.

For example, he sensed a set of attributes that felt dark, malicious and dangerous to him. "The evil within them is strong!"

Personally, he was reluctant to label something as evil, as many people and entities were usually righteous in their own way. Even his bastard of a cousin Ghanso fought for what he thought was right in his own twisted perspective.

Ves found it hard to rationalize the darkness that suffused the dark gods. Whether they descended into evil on their own accord or became contaminated by it, the three fragments posed a considerable threat.

If any of these fragments became conscious enough, he did not doubt that they would find some way to screw him over!

He could not afford to provide them with the same autonomy he granted to his other design spirits.

Different from hostile entities like Zeigra, the dark gods doubtlessly developed a wealth of methods and techniques that bordered on the arcane. Who knew what they would get up to if Ves left them alone.

"I need to process these fragments soon. Leaving them in their current state is just asking for trouble."

This was because unlike Nyxie, Ves did not possess any means of restraining them other than putting them in his B-stone lockbox.

Despite the filth marring the fragments, they possessed plenty of other attributes that attracted Ves like a moth to a flame.

As Ves had previously observed, the Unending One revolved around hunger, swallowing and digestion. The only downside was that the fragment suffered a higher degree of pollution than any other spiritual fragment that he encountered.

Evidently, the Unending One also absorbed some of the traits of its food by retaining a portion of their distinctive attributes. Ves did not see the advantages in this as the pollution probably warped the tentacled whale's personality even further.

"It's no wonder he turned against his fellow dark gods."

The spiritual fragments of the Inexorable One and the Blinding One both exhibited problems as well. Evidently, his mother had salvaged them from the Unending One's stomach as they were being digested.

"They're not in good shape." Ves muttered.

In general, none of the fragments were very pure. This was something that he paid a lot of attention to because it was much easier for him to leverage the advantages of purer attributes.

While Ves developed techniques that allowed him to excise the undesirable attributes from his fragments, the amount of waste was considerable.

Without the benefit of Nyxie, the Grand Dynamo and the serum, Ves had suddenly turned into a pauper in terms of spiritual energy!

Previously, he didn't care about how much spiritual energy he threw away whenever he processed his spiritual fragments.

It was different now. He needed to relearn how to value each and every unit of spiritual energy no matter how much it reeked. He had to adopt a new mindset oriented around efficiency and making the best use out of a limited supply of ingredients!

"My old methods are too wasteful. I can't just throw away potentially usable energy. This requires much further consideration." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin.

He only realized up to this point how much he wasted in the past. As someone who initially started designing third-class mechs with heavy budget constraints, he felt as if he had completely forgotten himself when it came to spiritual engineering.

"Quantity matters."

This was the third criteria he watched out for. His mother harvested a considerably bigger fragment from the Unending One than the other two dark gods. She was quite generous, which Ves found strange because she was not much different from the Unending One when it came to her insatiable demand for juice.

"They're different but also similar now that I think about it. How is this possible?"

Both possessed different spiritual attributes. The Unending One reminded Ves of a hungry super-predator. The aquatic beast was very primitive but effective when it came to devouring and digesting his prey.

In contrast, his mother apparently developed a more abstract domain. It reminded him of the wonder and brutality of nature. Survival of the fittest reigned supreme and the weaker beings were destined to become nutrients to the strong.

Ves couldn't imagine what it took to develop such an elaborate spiritual orientation. It felt high-class to him, and there was definitely more to it than he observed from the surface.

"Despite that, she possesses the same devouring capabilities of the Unending One."

The main difference was that the Unending One digested his food by instinct while his mother likely had to take a more active approach.

In any case, the Inexorable One and the Blinding One did not possess these devouring capabilities. Ves wondered how they managed to grow up to this point if they did not rely as heavily on predation.

"Is it related to their supposed divinity?"

Now that was a can of worms that Ves did not like to open. At the end of the Battle against the Abyss, the distance between the material realm and the imaginary realm had become closer than ever before.

This highly-unusual condition produced numerous anomalous effects. One of them was that Ves gained the capability to peer deeper into the imaginary realm than ever before.

He discovered a facet of the imaginary realm that he had never noticed before. He not only observed the huge and powerful torrents of faith, but also managed to tap into them, if only for a moment.

This faith-based energy was very weird to Ves! There were so many aspects about it that put it beyond his capabilities. The quantity and quality of the faith surrounding the Holy Sons was so immense that his intuition rang alarm bells as he got close.

Back then, he deeply felt he would burn up if he actually embraced the potent faith energy!

"Obviously, it's a form of high-level energy that I'm not qualified to handle in my current state." He concluded after recalling his mother's reminder.

He didn't know whether this faith energy was actually different from spiritual energy. He suspected that they were actually the same thing. It was just that the spiritual feedback flowing through the imaginary realm was so dense and potent that its properties were incomparable to regular spiritual energy.

Perhaps only the entities that were called gods were capable of doing so. It would explain how a tiny luminar alien managed to grow so powerful and huge.

Ves would be lying if he said he was not interested in tapping into this huge energy source. There was so much of it and its quality surpassed the energy he was able to derive from the likes of Qilanxo and Nyxie.

Yet Ves was deeply suspicious of it as well. If embracing this faith energy distorted him to the point where he became as degenerate as the dark gods, he would rather stay away from it. Just because he wanted to harness more energy didn't mean he felt eager to poke his finger into a power socket!

As for deeper implications like whether this energy created or sustained gods, he dismissed these questions. The existence of the immense amount of faith energy flowing through the imaginary realm merely reinforced his views that faith was actually an extortion racket!

Spiritually-powerful entities took advantage of the power and information disparity between themselves and their worshippers to harvest faith.

If the unknowing sheep knew the truth that they weren't devoting themselves to actual gods, they would probably find some way to take power into their own hands!

"I'll never become like them!" He vowed!

Whether the other Holy Sons embraced the powerful faith energy or not did not matter to Ves. He was different from everyone else and always followed his own path. He instinctively felt repelled by anything related to faith and religion.

That said, Ves could not deny that he was a Holy Son anymore. No matter what he did in the future, he would probably come in touch with faith energy sooner or later.

He shook his head. "That's too far away. In normal space, the two realms are too far apart for me to venture into the deeper layers of the imaginary realm."

He turned his attention back to the three fragments. He put two of the P-stones holding the fragments into his B-stone lockbox before stowing it away. He kept the P-stone that contained the fragment of the Blinding One and took it back to his stateroom.

He wanted to delve deeper into it. He had long developed a fascination for the luminar race and wanted to see if he could get something useful out of the remnant.

"Let's see what you are made of, little fragment!"