

## Mech 2471

### *Chapter 2471: Death Has Come*

While it wasn't unheard of to deploy aerial mechs in larger numbers at the same time, it was not conventional.

Aerial mechs were more fragile than landbound mechs, and flying high easily exposed them to enemy fire. The greater their numbers, the more enemy fire they attracted.

This was why they generally tended to shy away from the areas where the heaviest fighting took place.

With potentially hundreds of not thousands of rifleman mechs and artillery mechs on the field, a significant proportion of aerial mechs would get chewed up before they managed to deal any damage.

Even if the aerial mech units outnumbered the enemy, enough of them would still get shot down to make any victory bittersweet!

However, at this stage of the Komodo War, neither sides wanted to back off. The emotions of the Hexers had always run high, and the fervor they drew from the Blessed Squires only exacerbated their aggressive tendencies!

The Fridaymen also fought back harder. The constant defeats in the initial stages of the Komodo War seriously damaged their morale. If the Fridaymen kept fighting cautiously, public confidence in the soldiers of the Coalition might drop to a precarious level!

Not only that, many of the Fridaymen mech pilots had begun to lose confidence as well. If they developed an impression that the Hexers were truly superior in battle, then it would only be a matter of time before the Hegemony won the war!

For these reasons, even if it cost the Fridaymen dearly, they decided to ramp up their aggression.

The confrontations between the two sides became more heated. The Konsu Clan's mech forces no longer tried to cover as much terrain. Instead, they grouped their mechs more and more until clashes involving thousands of mechs at a time became a regular occurrence!

At the scale of these kinds of battles, expert mechs always showed up. Due to the slight numbers advantage of the Fridaymen, the Hexers always suffered a disadvantage!

During one engagement, a mech regiment of the Hex Army came under assault of the Oni Guard!

The Fridaymen prepared well. They not only brought at least 1000 more mechs, but also gained the assistance of a foreign expert pilot.

As the Hexer mech pilots on the ground desperately fought to fend off the enemy mechs, in the air three mechs were tangling against each other!

The Hexer expert mech desperately fended off the Konsu Clan's two mechs through various means. The outnumbered mech managed to hang on by relying on its resonance shield and energy shield to block the enemy attacks, but both of them were already reaching their limits.

Once the Hexer expert pilot lost the protection of those shields, her opponents would make quick work of her mech!

Though the regular Hexer mech pilots deeply wanted to help one of their heroes, the 3000 Oni Guard mechs advancing on their positions didn't give them any room!

"Hold, sisters!" A Hexer commander shouted. "Reinforcements are on the way! Don't let these Konsu boys break through our lines!"

Artillery shells exploded in mid-air as they were intercepted. Laser beams and positron beams raked the shields of the defensive mechs up front. Auxiliary mechs threw off the aim of the enemy ranged mechs. Blessed Squires all endured focused attacks as their glows infused friendly mech pilots with determination. An increasing amount of craters and downed machines complicated the terrain.

As the losses on the Hexer side mounted, a large cloud rapidly approached the battlefield.

"Help has come!"

"Take heart, sisters! Command has not abandoned us! Fight on and keep these Fridaymen in place!"

Over 500 Hexer mechs approached. As they neared the battlefield, the Oni Guard commanders became confused.

According to the observations of their scout mechs, the approaching aerial mechs consisted almost entirely of Valkyrie Redeemers!

No one had ever seen so many copies of the new mech model in one place!

"Where did they get all of these Valkyrie Redeemers?"

"That's not important! We must shift our ranged attacks against the incoming threat. The Hexers in front of us are already flagging. It's this new threat we need to guard against!"

Many Oni Guard ranged mechs no longer assaulted the beleaguered Hexer mech regiment. The damage they managed to inflict on the landbound Hexer mechs was already significant.

Instead, the Fridaymen mechs began to turn their guns towards the approaching cloud and fired!

A large number of Valkyrie Redeemers came under attack. Owing to their shields and armor, they initially managed to hold on. The small number of auxiliary mechs in their midst also helped foil the enemy attacks, but with so many mechs, their effectiveness was limited!

"Focus fire! These aerial mechs are tougher than the other ones!"

The Fridaymen ranged mechs each received specific targeting instructions. With ten ranged mechs aiming their weapons at one Valkyrie Redeemer each, a small number of aerial mechs quickly became overwhelmed!

Individual mechs fell out of the sky. Many times, their mech pilots managed to eject without problem, but there were some cases where the cockpit had already been breached!

With the sheer amount of firepower the Oni Guard had at its disposal, the rate of losses for the Hexer reinforcements quickly mounted.

Aerial mechs were aerial mechs after all. In order to make them fly, all sorts of compromises had to be made. Aside from imposing limitations on their mass, much of their capacity was taken up by their flight systems and numerous other auxiliary components such as energy cells and heatsinks.

Yet despite this fact, the Valkyrie Redeemers still did not drop as fast as the Oni Guard liked. After losing a hundred mechs, at least 400 of them had arrived close enough to begin their attack run!

"Watch out! Those witches will dive on us! Disperse and prepare to meet their charge!"

Even though the Oni Guard ranged mechs intensified their fire, the Valkyrie Redeemer mechs did not relent!

As the swarm of aerial mechs swooped downwards, their third eyes each emitted a narrow beam at the ranged mechs!

Several hundred Fridaymen mech pilots became discomfited.

Ordinarily, they should have been able to continue their attacks somewhat, but the rapid descent of so many aerial mechs cast a growing shadow on their hearts. Their fire slowed as they felt personally targeted by the diving Hexer mechs.

Shells burst in the middle of the diving swarm. Several Hexer mechs spun out of control, yet the remaining ones showed no sign of relenting. As the diving machines were just about to reach ground level, each of them simultaneously launched all of their Starburst grenades throughout the enemy formation at once!

"Teach them humility!"

In the final descent, the Valkyrie Redeemers each broadened their glows until they encompassed almost the entire enemy formation!

Each Oni Guard mech pilot paused for a moment. Just an instant later, the Starburst grenades exploded!

At the same time, the Valkyrie Redeemers simultaneously unleashed their shock pulses!

The combination of three different disruptive effects finally overwhelmed the famed determination of the Konsu Clan. Almost every affected Fridayman mech pilots blanked out for a couple of seconds.

Such a pause was fatal!

"DEATH HAS COME!"

Over three-hundred spears ran through three-hundred Oni Guard mechs!

Whether it was melee mechs or ranged mechs, hardly any of them were able to resist the force of a diving mech. If the struck mechs weren't downed in a single hit, then the follow-up attacks quickly took care of them permanently!

As the combined effects of the broadened glows, Starburst grenades and shock pulse slowly wore off, the Valkyrie Redeemer mechs rapidly lifted up into the air, thereby preventing the recovering Fridaymen mechs from mobbing them from every direction!

"Damn!" A Konsu mech commander cursed. "Our lines are disrupted!"

The dive attack dealt a devastating blow to the order of the Oni Guard mechs. Many of the mech pilots were still trying to regain their wits, all the while the besieged Hexer regiment gained some valuable room to breathe!

What was worse was that many of the Valkyrie Redeemer mechs were still intact! Even though hundreds of aerial mechs had already fallen, the remainder still posed a considerable threat, especially when they were already diving in for another charge!

The Valkyrie Redeemers didn't give the Oni Guard enough time to reorganize their defenses. While they hadn't climbed high enough, their dive still came across as threatening.

Having seen numerous friendly mechs getting impaled without being able to muster up a resistance, the Konsu mech pilots became more and more apprehensive.

As the glows of the Valkyrie Redeemers enveloped the entire formation again, the shadow in their hearts grew even more!

"Shock them again!"

Just before the aerial mechs struck their opponents, they released yet another pulse. With so many mechs releasing all of these pulses, not even the most prepared Konsu mech pilots were able to hold themselves together.

The shock attacks were too strong!

Due to the reduced force of this second dive attack, only around 200 Oni Guard mechs suffered a fatal hit. The Valkyrie Redeemers did not linger a second longer and immediately pulled out their spears and launched into the air.

The Konsu Clan mech pilots became incredibly frustrated by this hit-and-run attack.

This time, the Hexers specifically targeted the enemy ranged mechs, thereby reducing the Oni Guard's ability to shoot down any aerial targets!

"Protect our ranged mechs! Don't let us lose our means to shoot them down!"

It was hardly any use. When so many Valkyrie Redeemers swooped down in unison, there was no way to avoid any damage!

Spears continually impaled into hapless mechs whose mech pilots couldn't fully concentrate.

Though the Valkyrie Redeemers eventually exhausted their capacity to release their Shock And Awe Pulses, their glows were already sufficient to disrupt their enemies.

More than a thousand mechs had fallen in rapid succession! This was a devastating loss to the Oni Guards!

Not only that, the Hexer mech regiment that used to be under siege had suddenly surged forward again.

Despite their battered and exhausted state, the Hexer landbound mechs ferociously assaulted the ragged Oni Guard mechs!

More casualties fell among both sides, but the Fridaymen were by far the worse off as they constantly needed to watch for attacks from above!

Though only 200 Valkyrie Redeemers were left by the time the Oni Guard sounded the retreat, not a single Hexer among them believed that they had lost!

The only tragedy that caused them to pause was that their side had lost their expert pilot. Another Hexer had sacrificed her life in order to stall the enemy expert pilots.

Though the two victorious Fridaymen expert mechs could have unleashed a slaughter, it was a bit precarious for the two of them to attack so many intact mechs.

The Valkyrie Redeemers had made too much of an impact for them to feel any confidence in taking down the Hexers entirely!

This was not the only engagement where the Valkyrie Redeemers were deployed in greater numbers. Across multiple planets, many Hexer commanders experimented with grouping them together in larger and larger numbers.

To their utter surprise, it was considerably more effective than they thought.

The suppressive glows they emanated was not only versatile, but also extremely effective when employed in large numbers. Though there were some instances where the Fridaymen mech pilots managed to resist the heavy suppression, these cases were too few and far in between.

As long as the Valkyrie Redeemers combined their glows with their Starburst grenades and their pulse ability, hardly any prepared defense managed to hold together!

The Hexers became more accustomed to the Valkyrie Redeemer's capabilities. After using them in many different scenarios, the Hexer commanders eventually concluded that they were much more useful in the thick of battle!

When large groups of Valkyrie Redeemers were paired together with other units, the combination often resulted in overwhelming victories!

The Friday Coalition's momentum slowly stalled again. Despite the help of so many foreign expert pilots, the Hexadric Hegemony finally regained their optimism!

### *Chapter 2472: Third-Party Variants*

In just a short span of time, the Komodo War experienced a number of rapid shifts.

The Friday Coalition's expert mech advantage along with the full commitment of the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan continually drove the Hexers back from their conquered territories.

However, the Hexadric Hegemony managed to slow down the enemy assault and stave off a rapid collapse on the battlefield by employing the Valkyrie Redeemer in increasingly more dramatic ways.

The Hexers no longer employed them as traditional harassers anymore. Several properties unique to the Valkyrie Redeemer allowed it to affect the course of larger battles when employed in larger numbers.

As long as enough Valkyrie Redeemers attacked an enemy unit, their combined disruptive abilities were bound to disorient their targets!

What frustrated the Fridaymen who faced this new mech model was that they couldn't muster up an adequate defense against the Valkyrie Redeemer's infamous shock abilities.

The Starburst grenades were not strange to both sides. The Oni Guard were already adjusting their mechs to shield them better against EMP attacks. They also began to deploy more auxiliary mechs that were capable of mitigating the effects of such attacks.

Yet when it came to countering the Valkyrie Redeemer's glow and related pulse ability, the Konsu Clan was largely helpless!

Neither the Glow Crusher or any other first-generation mech was useful. Even if the Glow Crushers were capable of breaking the glow of the Valkyrie Redeemer, when the latter began to show up by the hundreds, it was impossible for the Fridaymen to prepare hundreds of counters as well!

If the Oni Guard truly dared to deploy hundreds of Glow Crushers, then the conventional mechs dispatched by the Hex Army could make quick work of them. Due to various constraints, none of the counter mechs excelled against fighting normal mechs!

Many Fridaymen generals and officials grew concerned. Some were even ready to tear their hair out due to this new complication!

"These Valkyrie Redeemers are disrupting our ground operations!"

"They're beginning to affect our operations in space as well."

Though the Valkyrie Redeemers were primarily designed to fight under atmospheric conditions, they were also spaceworthy. It was just that their effectiveness in space battles was a bit less dramatic at the moment.

Despite its various shortcomings, the Valkyrie Redeemer successfully captured the hearts of the Hexers. Many of them clamored to pilot the new model in order to take advantage of its unique abilities.

Even if the casualty rate among the reassigned mech pilots was high, the enthusiasm surrounding the Valkyrie Redeemer had not abated!

It was a bit unfortunate that the introduction of a single new mech model failed to affect the overall trend of the war. Unlike the Blessed Squire, the Valkyrie Redeemer did not lead to many major paradigm shifts.

Still, the war would have turned for the worse if not for the Valkyrie Redeemer mechs sowing fear and uncertainty among the Fridaymen.

As the original designers of the Valkyrie Redeemer, Ves and Gloriana received detailed reports about the mech's performance. They called each other to discuss the various developments.

"How long until you've arrived?" Gloriana asked.

Ves rolled his eyes. "I'll be back in a day. You don't need to ask that question all the time."

"I just want to make sure that you're not delayed! The wedding is scheduled to take place next week and I don't want to see any further mishaps."

"It will be okay. Don't forget that I'm travelling with the MTA. there's absolutely no chance that anything will go wrong with Master Willix watching me like a hawk."

They discussed a few routine matters before turning to the main topic of discussion.

"Our Valkyrie Redeemer is a success. The Hex Army loves it and intends to utilize it on a wider scale. It's just..."

"The Hex Army is too inexperienced at war." Ves did not mince words. "I don't know what all of those 'wise' Hexer generals and matriarchs are thinking, but even I know that taking over so much territory at once is hubris. It's not that easy to maintain your grasp on occupied territory."

Gloriana sighed. "I feel as if we failed, Ves. The Blessed Squire quickly allowed our side to gain a considerable advantage. I thought our Valkyrie Redeemer would have an even



bigger impact, since it's a female mech. It's just that the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan committed their forces at the worst time!"

The Valkyrie Redeemer's suppressive glow was very effective against most opponents, but the caliber of the two strongest Coalition partners were not for show!

The Oni Guard mech pilots may not be immune to the new glow, but they had amply proven that they stood a far better chance.

If the Fortune Legionnaires fought in their place, then the Valkyrie Redeemers would have swept their foes away at an unprecedented scale!

Even the Sundered Phalanx mech pilots managed to cope with this new development. While their mental fortitude was a bit laxer, the Valkyrie Redeemers simply weren't as effective in space.

Overall, the Miracle Couple's second Hexer mech design failed to surpass the one that came before! This caused Gloriana to feel upset!

Ves felt she was being melodramatic. "Hey, there are always hits and misses in mech design, and it's not settled whether our Valkyrie Redeemer is a loss in my book."

"WE FAILED!"

"We succeeded." Ves insisted. "Just not as much as you hoped. There's a difference. We still have 6 more Hexer mechs to go, so there are plenty of opportunities to do better."

She was being unreasonable. Ves really couldn't understand why she thought the Valkyrie Redeemer's current level of success was inadequate.

It took some time for Gloriana to stop whining about her disappointment for the Valkyrie Redeemer. She truly thought that it would have led to a sea of change.

"The biggest factors to the Friday Coalition's success is not contingent on their mech models. The movements of the Gauge Dynasty and Konsu Clan play a far greater role. Before, the Hex Army only fought against the Fortune Legion and the Blue Cavalry. I thought that the mech militaries of every coalition partner was very close, but it turns out the differences are massive. Carnegie and Vermeer don't know how to raise proper soldiers."

The Friday Coalition never fought a large-scale war until recently. Though the Fridaymen were very clever and accounted for a lot of variables, no amount of preparation covered every aspect.

The Fortune Legion and the Blue Cavalry partially suffered from their lack of experience.

In contrast, the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan seemed to be better prepared. Of course, this was also because they sat on the sidelines for more than a year. This gave them enough time to update their strategy books, adjust the training of their mech pilots and alter their mechs.

As far as Ves was concerned, the Hex Army hadn't really fought against proper Coalition forces. Now that they faced the strongest Coalition partners, the war should not be going smoothly anymore!

It was too bad that Gloriana failed to comprehend this point. She continued to look down on the Coalition, but at the same time she was afraid of the threat the Fridaymen posed to the Valkyrie Redeemer.

"By the way, the Hex Army recently issued a request to us. High command want us to help design some variants."

"The Hexers aren't satisfied with the base model?"

"It's not that, Ves. The Valkyrie Redeemer is still being used. It's just that it's design isn't suited for every scenario. For example, Some Hexer leaders want to obtain a variant with better mobility that is suited for battles in space. Others want a variant that boasts considerably better frontal armor in order to facilitate large-scale dive attacks."

She continued to list out a couple more variants. Ves grew confused at the requests.

"The Hex Army doesn't have a strong habit of fielding a lot of variants."

"This is different. The Valkyrie Redeemer is not suited to be a one-size-fits-all solution. Since the mech is so popular and unique, the Hex Army can't just commission another aerial marauder mech since they won't have glows."

In other words, the Hex Army had to turn to Ves and Gloriana again.

"I don't know, Gloriana. We don't have the time to spend on so many variants."

"We don't have to do anything, Ves. The Masters of the Hegemony have already poured over our design. Some of them have already completed some variants. They just want us to give them a passover in order to make sure they're up to standard when it comes to their glows."

Ves blinked. He hadn't expected the Hexers to be so eager. Their Master Mech Designers were already making a move!

To be honest, Ves felt as if they encroached on his territory yet again. It wasn't enough to optimize the base model of the Valkyrie Redeemer. Now they were developing variants without bothering to ask his opinion first!

He knew he didn't have much room for complaint, though. Though the credit of the design remained with the Miracle Couple, the ownership and all of the rights towards its usage had fallen into the hands of the Hegemony.

This meant that the Hexers were able to decide for themselves whether to design variants.

In this case, they opted to do so and handed over responsibility to some of their Masters.

Before Ves made any further conclusions, he first wanted to study the variants.

"They look better than expected."

The variants actually confirmed quite closely to the original design. Ves could immediately tell that the Masters worked exceedingly carefully in order to avoid breaking their variant's glow. They rationed their alterations carefully and found many clever ways to transform the performance of the Valkyrie Redeemer without overhauling the design entirely.

The problem was that each and every action of a Master Mech Designer inevitably introduced massive changes to a design. Since these changes went far beyond optimizing the Valkyrie Redeemer, Ves could clearly tell that the Masters unavoidably left their marks behinds.

"These variants may be cleverly-designed, but their glows can't be restored to full." Ves concluded.

"Why not?"

"It's not entirely our mech design anymore. These Masters are too overbearing."

This was one of the downsides of having two mech designers of different ranks taking part in the same design. While the disruption wasn't too big if the collaboration involved a Journeyman and a Senior, it was a different story when a Master got involved.

They were too strong!

"Can you still correct these variants?"

Ves tentatively nodded. "I can. It's just that I can't get rid of the strength of the Master without changing the design back. Since that's impossible, you just have to accept that

the variants will be a bit worse off in terms of glow. Its Marked For Death and Shock And Awe Pulse abilities won't be as good."

"How much will their effectiveness drop?"

"Not much, but that is mostly due to the restraint the Masters have shown. While I still have to work on these variants, the drop in effectiveness will probably be around 10 to 20 percent."

"That can make a substantial difference on the battlefield." Gloriana frowned even deeper.

"Well, I can't help it. My design philosophy doesn't interact that well with third-party variants. This is something that I can't change."

There weren't many ways to make it better without spending a lot of time on the designs. Though Gloriana wanted Ves to spend his time on designing some proper variants, he rejected her request yet again.

"I am not working for the Hegemony!" He pushed back. "I merely agreed to design 8 different mechs for them, and that is what I'll do. I'm only agreeing to do a pass on these variants because it doesn't take much time, but that's it. I have many other plans in store and I can't dedicate my time entirely on this single pursuit!"

#### *Chapter 2473: Different Concepts*

Just a few months ago, Ves never thought he would work alongside actual Master Mech Designers.

Journeyman generally weren't supposed to be able to work with them. Masters were so powerful that their design philosophies radiated like beacons. It was too easy for them to spiritually contaminate any mech design they worked on. Weaker mech designers simply didn't stand a chance of leaving their own mark under the shadow of their betters.

This was why collaborations between the two ranks were very rare. At most, Journeymen were only able to assist Masters, thereby earning no real sense of ownership in the final product.

The only exception was if the Master in question deliberately adopted a minimal footprint in order to give as much play to the Journeyman as possible.

As Ves familiarized himself with the variant designs developed by the Hexers, he understood that the Masters truly tried to 'respect' his vision.

"It must have frustrated them so much to restrain their own tendencies in order to appease the work of a boy."

The grin on his face indicated that he held no sympathy to those Masters at all. The lack of any names or mention of credit on any of the design schematics suggested that those accomplished Hexers still considered it to be a shame to be involved at all. The Hex Army must have employed a lot of persuasion in order to get these Masters to cooperate.

"Well, the war isn't going so well now for the Hegemony that the Friday Coalition has finally gotten serious."

Ves had discovered that while the Hexers could be quite dogmatic about their principles, they were surprisingly capable of bending to reality if they faced adversity.

When they had to choose between letting the Hexadric Hegemony fall or collaborating with a boy, the latter choice sounded much less severe!

There was no way the Hexers would allow their state to fall! Once they lost all of their territories and most of their people, their proud Hexer culture would no longer possess a foundation!

If Ves hadn't tied his mother's existence to the continued existence of Hexers, he wouldn't have cared about this outcome.

Yet because this was the case, Ves had to make sure his choices didn't negatively impact the Hegemony.

"Well, let's get this over with then." He grumbled.

Though he still felt somewhat affronted that a bunch of stuck-up female Masters developed a number of variants without his input, he could not help but admire their work.

"Even if they're Hexers, they're still bona-fide Masters. Their skill is the real deal!"

Once Ves put down his hard feelings and put on his professional hat, he quickly became engrossed by the transformations of his base model.

Each of them seemed to give him a glimpse of what he could do with his design in the future.

The Masters may have tried to minimize their footprint as they modified the original design, but they tried to make the best out of it. Every single change, no matter how small, induced significant changes in the performance and handling of the mech.

If Ves had to achieve these changes by himself, he wouldn't have been able to do so at his current level of ability. He lacked the profound knowledge and experience to come up with these kinds of solutions.

Yet if other mech designers had already paved the way, Ves could simply study the solutions and slowly deduce the underlying principles.

"So it turns out I could have done this instead..."

Each and every profound change enriched his understanding. Not only did he gain a deeper grasp on the Valkyrie Redeemer design, he also filled up his toolbox with additional solutions that he could apply to his future mech designs.

While he still lacked the high-level foundation to develop these advanced solutions by himself, Ves knew that he could probably increase the performance of his future mech designs by at least 1 percent!

"This is an unexpectedly welcome gain!" He grinned.

Of course, Ves also made sure to not get overly caught up in trying to learn the solutions of other mech designers.

A true mech designer and engineer excelled in solving problems. There was hardly any meaning to their jobs if they did not continually develop their capacity to compose original solutions to novel problems.

The only reason why Ves did not restrain himself this time was because the amount of solutions he could derive from the variant designs was limited.

It couldn't be helped. Many Masters thought on a completely different level than him. Though he could understand the end result of their design choices, he couldn't figure out the process.

"Well, now that I had my fun, I should get on with my job."

Ves received five variant designs in total. That would mean the Hex Army would soon have access to six versions of the Valkyrie Redeemer in total.

[Valkyrie Avenger - VR-AA-01]

The Valkyrie Avenger was quite simply the elite variant of the base model. The overall design of the mech hadn't changed aside from one major element.

"The armor system is a lot better."

The Valkyrie Redeemer already boasted a high-quality armor system, but the Hexers wanted a mech that was even more resistant against damage. Whoever worked on the Valkyrie Avenger design did not hesitate to switch to more expensive materials that weren't as easy to obtain.

The result was that the Valkyrie Redeemer effectively became 35 percent more resistant against damage at the cost of doubling its production cost!

"It costs 800 million hex credits to fabricate a single copy!" Ves widened his eyes.

This was a prohibitive price tag even for Ves! Even for elite mechs, it did not make sense to fabricate the Valkyrie Avenger at a moderate scale.

Sure, being able to field a couple of hundred Valkyrie Avengers would likely lead to considerably better results in battle, but the effect of deploying twice as many Valkyrie Redeemers was much more dramatic!

There were two reasons why resorting to the Valkyrie Avenger variant made sense.

"First, the Hexers probably stockpiled a huge amount of the materials needed to produce this mech."

The Hexers had centuries to prepare for the Komodo War. It was impossible for them to launch an attack on the Fridaymen without accumulating enough reserves.

"Second, the mech pilots assigned to the Valkyrie Avengers are worth the investment."

Ves believed the Hex Army might have reserved the Valkyrie Avengers for one of their top elite mech regiments.

"Well, it's their choice."

He tried his best to smooth out the altered and partially-contaminated spiritual foundation of the variant. During the process, he failed to remove some of the stains that the Master had left.

In the end, the glow of the Avenger weakened by a factor of around 17 percent.

This was a rather steep drop in efficiency. If Ves had been involved in the development of the Valkyrie Avenger from the start, he would have been able to minimize the contamination so that its glow only lost half as much efficiency.

"Not that I'm going to tell anyone that." He muttered. "I have too much work in store to waste my time on these variants."

He stopped considering this matter entirely and moved on to the next variant.

[Valkyrie Brunhild - VR-B-01]

If the Valkyrie Avenger was the luxury version of the base model, then the Valkyrie Brunhild was the limited edition version!

It was clad with an armor system that Ves found extravagant in a standard mech design. If his estimates were correct, then the production cost of the Valkyrie Brunhild amounted to around 1.6 billion hex credits!

"That's half the price of a serviceable second-class combat carrier!"

Not only that, the Brunhild's armor system also incorporated a modest amount of Rorach's Bone!

It had been quite some time since Ves found traces of this strategic material again. It had been a long time ago since Ves took part in the Glowing Planet Campaign. Back then, he was just a trivial low-ranking mech designer.

He remembered that the Fridaymen and Hexers fought quite vigorously to break open the Glowing Planet and claim as many chunks for themselves as possible.

It was impossible for both sides to forget about all of the Rorach's Bone and other valuable exotic minerals they harvested. This was the first time he directly came in touch with a design that explicitly drew on the bounty of the Glowing Planet.

"This means the Hex Army is already becoming a lot more serious."

The Hex Army specifically ordered the development of the Valkyrie Brunhild for a single purpose. They wanted to use it to nurture compatible expert candidates.

"Are the Hexers trying to take advantage with this extravagant variant?" Ves frowned.

This was a very real possibility in his opinion. A month ago, he held a bombastic press conference where he published the breakthroughs of numerous mech pilots.

How could the public not be interested in the means in which so many of them advanced at once?

One of the consequences was that the Larkinson Clan received an insane amount of applications from mech pilots eager to become a hero.

Ves suspected that the Hegemony was trying to see if they could benefit from whatever he did to produce so many expert pilots. After all, the Friday Coalition performed a brilliant diplomatic move by borrowing a lot of expert pilots from the surrounding lesser states. For various reasons, the Hexadric Hegemony wasn't capable of keeping up, so the Hexers had to obtain additional expert pilots from another source.



"Tough luck. I'm not doing anything special to this design."

There was no way he was going to play along!

First, recklessly releasing a variant that was guaranteed to help mech pilots surpass their limits would only paint a bigger target on his back.

Second, there was no way to enhance the spiritual foundation of each copy of the Valkyrie Brunhild without the active cooperation of the design spirit.

The Superior Mother was still in slumber, so even if Ves wanted to give the Hexer mech pilots some opportunities, his hands were tied.

In the end, Ves only did the minimum of what was expected of him. He cleaned up the spiritual design of the Valkyrie Brunhild. Due to the fairly radical changes to its armor system, its glow efficiency had dropped by 20 percent.

"This time the tradeoff is worth it. Losing a bit of glow intensity is not a big deal if the survival rate of the expert candidate is doubled."

Ves envied the treatment the Hex Army provided to its expert candidates. Perhaps the Larkinson Clan should begin to issue upgraded mechs to its own expert candidates as well.

After dealing with these expensive variants, Ves moved on to working on the next three variants.

[Valkyrie Interceptor - VR-I-01]

The Interceptor variant excelled a lot more in space combat than the multi-environmental base model. It lost the capability to fly and fight efficiently in gravity wells in order to gain a substantial boost in mobility. It accelerated considerably faster and it was also a bit more maneuverable to boot.

Ves could have easily imagined designing this kind of variant himself if he wasn't so swamped with work. Of course, since a Master Mech Designer who excelled at mobility had developed this variant, the Interceptor's speed boost was much more considerable than if it came from his own hands.

Since the scope of the changes was relatively smaller, its glow efficiency dropped by only 12 percent when Ves had done what he could. This was very acceptable to him. Hardly anyone would notice the difference.

[Valkyrie Huntress - VR-H-01]

The Huntress variant altered the fighting style of the base model. It eschewed melee combat entirely and completely dedicated itself towards ranged combat. Armed with a powerful rifle, it was designed to leverage its Marked For Death Ability to debilitate an enemy at range.

As long as it worked, the mech pilot of the Valkyrie Huntress could easily shoot down its target and gain an advantage in ranged duels!

"What a clever application!"

Ves was very inspired by this variant. He even felt he should borrow this concept so that his Larkinson mech pilots enjoyed the same advantage.

#### *Chapter 2474: Changing Stance*

Ves appreciated the Valkyrie Huntress variant quite a lot. Whoever developed it provided him with a ready-made concept. If the Hex Army succeeded in leveraging its potential, then he would have all the information he needed to design something better for the Larkinson Clan.

The potential power of the Valkyrie Huntress was quite considerable. While the Valkyrie Redeemer was a lot more flashy, swooping straight down into a large formation of Fridayman mechs was bound to cause some attrition! The Huntress variant was a lot safer because the lethality of ranged combat was not as high.

The potential value of the Valkyrie Huntress made him reconsider his stance towards variants.

Designing an original mech was incomparable to designing a variant. Mech designers gained much more out of doing the former than the latter.

Yet that did not mean that variants were worthless. On the contrary. Sometimes they might even surpass the original mech model.

When it came to mech designs with fairly common traits, it was common for competitors to copy the works. Sometimes, they were worse, but the ones that mattered either represented sidegrades or upgrades.

Sidegrades weren't necessarily better than the original design, but they were still worth developing due to the different options it presented.

The Valkyrie Huntress was an excellent example of one. By changing the offensive capabilities of the Valkyrie Redeemer, the ranged variant presented Hexer mech pilots with a very useful alternative.

"Now, even a ranged specialist can pilot a Valkyrie mech!"

Best of all, Ves didn't have to spend more than a small portion of his day to stabilize the spiritual foundation of the mech.

This was a very cost-effective transaction in his book.

"My design time is limited. If I want to keep progressing, I can't waste too much of my time on reinterpreting the same mechs over and over again."

He considered designing variants and designing successors of his existing models to be too time-consuming. Yet they were too valuable for him to give up on entirely.

It would be great if he could completely off-load their development to other mech designers, not just his assistants but also external mech designers!

Perhaps in the future, he could start some kind of program whereby third-party mech designers were allowed to present their variants to the LMC. As long as their variants were useful enough, Ves would spend his time on them to restore their spiritual foundation to the best possible condition so that they would still retain much of their glow!

"If the drop in glow efficiency doesn't exceed 20 percent, hardly anyone will notice I think."

This way, he could benefit from more situations like the one he was in right now. The modern mech industry was fairly open and largely revolved around sharing knowledge, know-how and designs.

By adopting a possessive and overly-insular stance towards his own designs, Ves missed out on this interaction. Now that he started to interact with both Fridayman and Hexer Master Mech Designers through his designs, he realized he may need to open himself up to the wisdom of other mech designers.

Of course, Ves knew that he was in a rather exceptional circumstance right now. It wasn't every day that a Journeymen got schooled by a bunch of Masters!

What was even more important was that his interaction with these high-ranking mech designers was both cooperative and competitive.

Hostile mech designers such as Master Olson and Master Katzenberg drove him to remedy the flaws of his design philosophy.

Friendly mech designers were able to point out several areas of improvements while simultaneously taking over the burden of developing variants.

In either case, Ves derived numerous benefits that he wouldn't be able to obtain so easily by himself.

As his thoughts on this matter shifted, he directed his attention to the final variant developed by the Hexers.

[Valkyrie Hurricane - VR-HU-01]

The final variant gave up space combat capabilities in order to improve its fighting performance in the air. While the base model was already decent at tussling against enemy aerial mechs, the Valkyrie Hurricane excelled at dogfighting.

Ves admired the way the designer of the Valkyrie Hurricane vastly improved its aerial maneuvering capabilities. The mech also gained some minor tweaks that considerably improved its ability to fight up close against other aerial mechs.

The drop in glow efficiency for this variant was 15 percent, which was rather moderate.

In total, each of the 5 variants the Hexers came up with were impressive in their own right.

He found it interesting that the Hex Army demanded variants that excelled at fighting in a single environment. The Valkyrie Interceptor and the Valkyrie Hurricane straightforwardly gave up their versatility in order to obtain a moderate boost when fighting in a single environment.

"It makes sense for the huge Hex Army to pursue this degree of specialization."

The performance gains from specialization trumped the logistical advantages of relying on flexible mech designs.

Only smaller forces with limited manpower and carrier capacity preferred to adopt the latter approach. Ves always found it rather annoying that he had to split his own mech forces up into landbound and spaceborn forces. In most cases, this meant that the Larkinson Clan could only effectively deploy half of its total combat strength in any given battle!

Therefore, Ves still hadn't given up on his goal to provide his clan with multi-environmental mechs.

"Our circumstances are different."

That said, he still recognized the value of mono-environmental mechs. They were cheaper, less complex, offered more capacity and were easier to pilot. Customers obtained substantially more value for their money if they employed the mechs correctly.

Once he reviewed the work he performed for a final time, he transmitted them back to Gloriana.

Hopefully, the Hex Army would begin to field the new variants soon. Ves genuinely looked forward to seeing whether the reduction in glow efficiency materially impacted the performance of the new mechs. He also wanted to see whether any of the variants lived up to their promise.

"They should, since they're clearly developed by the best." Ves guessed.

Witnessing the work of Master Mech Designers fueled his yearning to reach their level. He knew he still had a long way to go before he was able to realize his design philosophy, but that day would certainly come.

His eyes burned hot with ambition.

"I can't slow down!"

In the final moment before the combined fleet reached the Cinach System, Ves quickly checked whether he had missed anything.

Ves took out the finished wedding rings he prepared a few days ago. He smiled as he admired his craftsmanship.

The rings no longer looked as bare and plain as before. Ves weaved in some layers of Unending Alloy and other exotics. The elegant curves and the distinguishable metals gave the rings a sophisticated look. It looked pleasing without making it seem it was trying too hard.

Three small jewels were recessed in each ring. These were the portions of the Unstable Chaos Essence gems he successfully split up some time ago. He made sure to perform this experiment remotely on another ship.

It turned out that the gems didn't necessarily explode when they were parted. At the very least, the Unstable Chaos Essence gems were actually a bit more stable than he thought.

This was good, as Ves did not believe they would blow up anytime soon.

It was also bad because it was harder than he thought to draw out the energy locked within the pieces. So far, the gems only served an ornamental purpose.

While Ves was fine with this outcome, he was greedy for more. Fortunately, he developed a possible plan to make the gems useful. He just had to reunite with Gloriana first so that he could proceed to harvest a small portion of her spiritual energy.

His only regret was that he failed to turn his rings into masterworks. While the base quality level of the wedding bands were already high after he borrowed some of Master Willix's production equipment, he was not a professional ring-maker.

"Well, I hope Gloriana won't mind that much." Ves hoped.

Once he completed his check, he was satisfied that he hadn't missed anything.

As long as no further problems emerged, Ves expected his wedding to proceed smoothly.

Since Gloriana told him that a large number of guests had traveled to Cinach, Ves decided to meet with Calabast in order to get any insight on them. He knew that many of the foreign visitors probably wanted something from him. Perhaps he might be able to make some new deals.

"So what do I need to know first?" He asked after summoning Calabast to his stateroom.

His spymaster sat down on his coach. "Ever since you conducted your last press conference, you've gained the attention of a lot more powerful forces. I'm sure you know why. What's important is that we have received numerous offers to form an alliance or cooperative relationship."

"Our clan is independent." He said. "I have no intentions of forging too many lasting bonds in this part of the galaxy. We'll be leaving in the near future anyway."

"I know. I'm not talking about that. These offers are different from the ones that only aim to take advantage of you. They come from powers or organizations that are also aiming to travel to the Red Ocean."

Now that caught his attention!

"Tell me more."

"It's no secret that you have earned an astronomical amount of merits through your recent exploits. Just bringing back the Gravada Knarlax and her escort warships is enough to signal that you're tens of millions merits richer. This means that you have become a very attractive choice to those who also desire to travel to the Red Ocean."

Ves somewhat expected this to happen, but not so quickly and to this extent. "Are these potential partners worth our time?"

"Some of them are, or I wouldn't have brought up this topic. There are different family clans, companies and even noble houses who are all accomplished in their own right. For different reasons, they also wish to climb up the ladder by scrambling for gains in the Red Ocean. It's just that earning 100 million MTA merits is a tall order for any second-class organization."

"Even the Wodin Dynasty?"

She grinned. "Yes. Some of these powerful individuals or organizations propose to bring in additional partners. By splitting the burden at least five ways, every partner only has to contribute 20 million MTA credits at most. Of course, if you can contribute more, you'll get more say in the partnership."

"This.. doesn't sound very attractive to me. You know I don't like to surrender control."

"How else do you plan to earn more merits, Ves? Will you take on another high-risk mission like now? Our clan won't easily jump into the abyss the next time. Not after suffering such traumatic losses."

"This..." Ves grimaced. "I'll find a way. There are peaceful means of earning a lot of merits, you know."

Calabast obviously didn't have faith in this course of action. "It doesn't hurt to try, but the clock is ticking. I believe it is worth reaching the Red Ocean sooner by joining forces with other powerful partners. You won't have to work yourself to bone to earn a huge amount of merits."

He could see the logic in her suggestion. With almost 40 million MTA merits under his belt, it was already viable for him to partner up with at least two roughly-equal partners. Not only would he be able to skip a lot of effort, he might also obtain other benefits from cooperating with a strong ally.

When it came to trying to explore a completely unknown frontier like the Red Ocean, traveling together with others might be better!

Of course, Ves had to be able to trust his potential partners. This was always a big hurdle to him. He didn't want to expose himself and his clan to betrayal.

"Tell me about the most interesting offers."

#### *Chapter 2475: Cross Clan*

"So far, quite a few powers have made offers to us, but only one of them is truly worth your consideration at the moment." Calabast explained.

She waved her hand. A projection appeared that displayed a broad map of the Yeina Star Cluster.

Ves was very familiar with this map, though he never really paid too much attention to what lay beyond Komodo, Vicious Mountain and Majestic Tael.

A single point shone somewhere in Vicious Mountain.



"First up is the Cross Clan. As you know, the massive Garlen Empire is not very cohesive. Warlords in the form of ace pilots carve out their own territories and occasionally fight against each other in order to earn glory. You can consider the tribes of Garlen to be the actual states of this star sector."

"I know that. I think it's stupid. People who spend all of their lives trying to improve their fighting skills are in no way qualified statesmen. Even if these warlords usually delegate the decision-making to competent officials, they're still prone to irrational decision-making."

Ace pilots could be just as bad as expert pilots when it came to sticking to their guns. The thought of letting extreme personalities such as Venerable Ghanso be in charge of a territory sounded awful!

It was too bad that Vicious Mountainers worshipped martial strength. While scholars and intellectuals still had their place in this star sector, their status and regard were considerably more muted.

Calabast poked at the projection, causing it to zoom in on a group of stars that appeared to be governed by the Becker Tribe.

"The Cross Clan used to hold a prominent position in the Becker Tribe. In fact, the warlord who led this tribe was actually a Cross clansman."

That sounded quite impressive! Ves had never come in touch with an ace pilot before. To think that the Cross Clan managed to nurture one while the old Larkinson Family never succeeded.

"It sounds like the situation of the Cross Clan isn't as optimistic as before."

She nodded. "Lord Hemmington Cross led the Becker Tribe to prosperity by picking fights against neighboring tribes. For a long time, the Becker Tribe continually grew as Lord Cross proved himself to be an excellent duelist. Hardly any other ace pilot wished to faced him in battle."

"Do you know what kind of mech he piloted?"

"A versatile lancer mech. It carries multiple weapons, but most of the time it's capable of winning challenges after performing a single charge."

Ves looked quite impressed. "I can't imagine anyone wanting to stare down a lancer mech empowered by an ace pilot."

"The good times didn't last for the Cross Clan. Lord Cross achieved so many wins that he grew arrogant. After initiating one aggressive expansion too many, two neighboring tribes decided to band together and attack the Becker Tribe in unison. The conflict not



only resulted in heavy losses for the Beckers, but also caused Lord Cross to lose his life when he had to fend off against two enemy ace pilots at once."

This sounded quite alarming to Ves!

"The Garlen Empire actually allows their ace pilots to die like this? Such a death is too cheap for mech pilots of their stature!"

Calabast didn't hide her contempt for this practice either. "I don't disagree with you, but the ace pilots of the Garlen Empire aren't content with peace. Since Vicious Mountain doesn't have any state that can contend against the Empire, the warlords mostly turn against each other. While fatalities are actually rare, they can't be avoided."

How barbaric! Ace pilots were extremely difficult to come by, and the loss of each and every single one of them presented a massive loss to the state in question.

"Since Lord Hemmington Cross abruptly died, the Becker Tribe and the Cross Clan must have lost a lot of strength, right?"

Correct." Calabast nodded. "The fall of Lord Cross immediately allowed the enemy tribes to conquer large swathes of the Becker Tribe's territory. Eventually, the Becker Tribe is only a shadow of its former self. The clans and other groups that make up the tribe have suffered enormous losses."

"Let me guess, the Cross Clan attracted a lot of animosity from them, right?"

"Hehe. You are getting better at politics. You're right. Though the Cross Clan under the leadership of Lord Hemmington enriched the entire Becker Tribe, the clans only remember all of the losses they suffered after their warlord sparked a disaster. After suffering heavy losses, the Cross Clan eventually decided to abandon all of its territory and most of its people and depart."

A hasty evacuation under these circumstances doubtlessly caused the Cross Clan to suffer stupendous losses. What was left of the rag-tag refugee fleet probably amounted to less than 1 percent of the clan's original strength!

Even so, the remnant of a second-class ruling power was still considerable! As long as the Cross Clan successfully brought out some of their most valuable possessions, this homeless and exiled clan probably held onto some very fancy toys!

"What is the current state of the Cross Clan?"

"Their strength is better than ours. The Cross fleet is considerably powerful. The exiles are also able to field tens of thousands of mechs piloted by veterans."

"How are they able to fund such a massive fleet when they have lost all of their territories? Do they have a mech designer that is keeping them afloat?"

:"No." She shook his head. "The Crossers used to employ some talented mech designers. They even enjoyed the services of a Master Mech Designer. All of this ended at the death of Lord Hemmington. The high-ranking mech designers affiliated with the clan were some of the first to jump ship."

Ves sneered. "What gutless cowards."

"They made a smart decision. They would have suffered considerably if they stayed. This is not the first time this has happened."

The immense brain drain that took place as soon as one of the tribe fell into decline exacerbated rise and fall of many tribes.

"This Cross Clan took the initiative to propose a partnership with us, right? What do they have then that makes you think they are worthy partners? Do they even have enough MTA merits to enter our sights?"

"They do, Ves. In the heyday of the Cross Clan, several prominent clan members took the initiative to earn a large amount of merits. Patriarch Reginald Cross, the son of Lord Hemmington Cross, is willing to commit at least 25 million MTA merits to a potential partnership."

That was quite a sizable amount of merits. While that wasn't enough to allow the Larkinson Clan and Cross Clan to enter the Red Ocean by themselves, they only needed to find at least one more partner.

Of course, Ves could also follow his original plan and work hard to accumulate more merits by himself.

"Okay. They have enough merits to enter our sights. What do we get by joining hands with these foreigners, then?"

"The Cross Clan has retained at least some of the foundation of a complete state. It is much more developed than the Larkinson Clan in almost every area. The Cross Clan's military, governance, diplomacy and intelligence gathering are much further ahead."

"We can learn that as well. We're doing fine on our own so far. I don't see the need to look at other clans."

Calabast shook her head. "I don't agree. The way we run our clan is still very much rough. It would do us a lot of good to study the model of the Cross Clan up close."

"No thanks. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. Another reason why you should contemplate partnering up with the Crossers is because they are quite accomplished in raising expert pilots. Just the fact that they once succeeded in producing an ace pilot is certainly of great value to us. The Cross Clan can teach our expert pilots what they should focus on in order to take the next step."

While Ves was a little more convinced of this argument, he didn't consider it a necessity.

"Our clan is in no hurry to produce ace pilots. We haven't even begun to equip our expert pilots with proper expert mechs."

"You need to learn this sooner or later. Look, even if the Cross Clan isn't able to hand over any useful information to you, there is still another benefit. You can be a little more open about your ability to facilitate the breakthroughs of mech pilots if you pretend that the insights of the Cross Clan played a pivotal role in any success. Isn't this good?"

Now he was beginning to see why Calabast pushed the Cross Clan forward. It was because she was eyeing its ace pilot heritage!

Ves seriously doubted whether he would be able to partner up with another power that once produced an ace pilot. This opportunity was exceedingly rare and exceptional as organizations associated with ace pilots rarely ever left!

He began to consider the matter more seriously.

"How are they holding out in terms of funding? They lost most if not all of their revenue sources."

"They still have access to various income streams such as stocks and other miscellaneous investments. It's not enough, even if only a fraction of the Cross Clan is left. From what I can gather, the clan mostly subsidizes off a very sizable cash reserves. In the short time, they aren't at risk of running out of funds."

This was an unsustainable strategy that would eventually deplete the remnants of the Cross Clan.

"They don't have any mech designers who can stem the bleeding?" Ves asked.

"Nope. Well, I suppose there are still a few loyal Apprentices and maybe Journeymen, but competition is very fierce. They can't come close to earning money."

This was one of the main benefits the Larkinson Clan could provide to its possible partner. It was terrible for any major power of this scale to lose so many capable mech designers.

Money was the root modern society. Everything cost money. This meant that even if the Larkinson Clan was inferior to the Cross Clan in many aspects, Ves could still dominate this partnership by virtue of his earning capabilities!

Ves saw an opportunity to absorb the Cross Clan in its entirety. Forget about partnering up. He wanted to annex these defeated Garlaners! Not only would he be able to obtain a large number of powerful second-class mech pilots, he might also gain effective control over the 25 million MTA merits held by Reginald Cross!

As he shared his ambitious idea with Calabast, she did not immediately react.

"This... is quite greedy, Ves. While it is possible to pull this off, we will have to convince the Cross clansmen that their current identity and heritage is not worth keeping. Do you think that is likely to happen? The Cross Clan is much older, much more established and immensely proud for producing an ace pilot. The Larkinson Clan simply can't compare."

"I don't know. We have some points of pride as well, though I admit that the clan's short existence will likely work against us. While I think the Cross Clan is worth looking into, I'm not entirely willing to partner up with these beaten dogs. They don't bring anything truly beneficial aside from their martial strength and traditions. This is something the Larkinson Clan is already cultivating on its own. I would rather partner up with a power that excels in some other area. Teaming up makes more sense in that case since there are more reasons to cooperate than to compete."

Calabast acknowledged his point. "This is why partnering up with the Cross Clan is just an option. We will receive more offers in the future. Depending on the development of our clan, those offers might be better. If we do even better than now, we'll attract the attention of stronger and more useful organizations. It's possible that some of them are already at Cinach, but are taking a wait and see approach."

"I see. As long as we prove ourselves, we'll attract much better offers, is that right?"

She nodded. "Correct. Just remember that they may not be as good as you think. If we partner up with stronger organizations, we risk becoming subordinate to them. They may be eying to take us over just like you are thinking about absorbing the Cross Clan."

*Chapter 2476: Return to Cinach*

A large fleet of ships transitioned back into realspace.

"We're back!"

After a month of travel, the remnants of Task Force Predator finally returned to the Cinach System!

In just half a year, the star system changed immensely. As the ships that arrived at the edge of the star system stabilized, their sensors detected several thousand active energy emissions!

While the Cinach System was no stranger to trade and commerce, the traffic in space had multiplied explosively.

Perhaps the most impressive single object floating in place was the wedding venue. A giant, hexagonal-shaped space platform measuring several kilometers long floated in high orbit of Cinach VI.

It was by no means a simple platform. With a transparent 'roof' that was covered with thick transparent alloys and an extravagant amount of energy shields, anyone who stepped on it would have a magnificent view of open space above their heads.

Work on the altars, gardens, kitchens and several halls had already been completed some time ago. Due to the Miracle Couple's rapidly-rising prominence, the Wodin Dynasty continually upgraded the venue in order to fully reflect the splendor of those involved.

The other half of the Wodin Warriors that initially arrived at Cinach hovered protectively around the giant platform. With all of the visitors arriving these days, the Hexers had to display enough deterrence to suppress any unfortunate incidents.

Nobody was allowed to get close to the wedding platform and the nearby Hexer fleet!

Fortunately, every visitor respected the Wodin Dynasty's house rules.

While the Cinach System was technically ruled by House Evenson, House Gin Tefa and House Dinta, the exceptional circumstances caused the Wodin Dynasty to take over direct control over security matters.

Everyone travelling to Cinach VI had to undergo very stringent checks. Since many people across the star sector wanted to join the Larkinson Clan, incoming traffic hardly abated despite these harsh conditions. Only by entering the recruitment offices set up by the Larkinsons would these ambitious talents be able to showcase their ability.

Of course, the most important visitors of the Cinach System did not consist of the hopefuls who wanted to join the Larkinson Clan, but the delegations from various local powers.

The leaders or envoys of many states, companies and other organizations gathered in the Cinach System to take part in one of the most noteworthy social events of the decade.

Many of them wanted to get close to the Larkinson Clan or the Miracle Couple! The spectacular accomplishments of the Larkinsons indicated that the soon-to-be-married couple were destined for greatness in the future. Being able to get close to them or establish some sort of cooperation with the Larkinson Clan when it was still relatively young could pay enormous dividends in a couple of decades!

There were hardly any downsides but many upsides to attending the wedding. Anyone clever enough would do their best to get on the guest list!

The Hexers who rejected the initial invitations sent by Gloriana regretted their short-sightedness. They lost the opportunity to socialize with powerful guests and get close to the designers of the famed Blessed Squire and Valkyrie Redeemer.

In contrast, the Hexers who had the foresight to accept the invitations and received generous treatments. Not only were they allowed to park their ships closer to Cinach VI, they also gained plenty of opportunities to meet and socialize with Gloriana in person!

Through these social events, Gloriana struck many favorable agreements on behalf of the Wodin Dynasty. As long as the Komodo War did not end in defeat for the Hexers, the Wodins stood to gain immensely!

Aside from the expansive and cohesive presence of Hexers around Cinach VI, several other noteworthy fleets had arrived.

The most eye-catching among them was the refugee fleet of the Cross Clan. Due to its considerable size and threat, the Wodins commanded the large and powerful fleet to orbit a planet far away from Cinach VI.

"Wow." Ves gasped as he observed the Cross Clan's fleet composition. "That's a huge fleet carrier!"

It was no wonder Calabast brought these people to his attention. Aside from boasting over 70 combat carriers and 200 other vessels, the Cross Clan also retained two fleet carriers.

One of them was 1.8 kilometers long. While this wasn't the longest vessel that Ves had ever seen, the Antonio Cross stood out for her thick armor and her tall hull. She boasted considerably more decks than other capital ships, which meant that she was able to hold more mechs.

According to the data gathered by the Wodin Warriors, the Antonio Cross was able to hold up to 240 mechs and enough supplies to service them for a considerable number of years!

"She's quite an impressive expedition vessel." Ves concluded.

Yet no matter how much the rugged Antonio Cross impressed him, the larger fleet carrier was even more imposing!

Stretching across 3 kilometers, the Hemmington Cross was not just a fleet carrier, but also an ark ship of sorts. She functioned as a city and a military base of the Cross Clan. Such a ship was impressive regardless how much the Crossers suffered in recent years.

"Still, naming their flagship after the leader who arguably led them straight into ruin is not a wise choice."

It seemed the Cross Clan still celebrated their deceased ace pilot.

Though the Hemmington Cross was an impressive capital ship, Ves didn't think it was a good idea for the Cross Clan to retain her. Sure, she was able to hold even more mechs than the Antonio Cross, but the vessel looked incredibly slow.

All of that size and volume came at the detriment of armor and mobility. Ves didn't believe the Hemmington Cross was suited for the Red Ocean due to her lackluster survival ability. There were so many potential threats in the dwarf galaxy that the ability to run away quickly was an essential requirement!

"This is a prestige project. Maybe it makes sense for the Cross Clan to commission such an extravagant vessel, but now that they have degenerated into homeless wanderers, she's more trouble than she's worth."

The cost of operating and maintaining such an immense vessel was not cheap! Larger ships exponentially cost more to build and maintain.

As far as Ves was concerned, numerous smaller vessels could easily perform the same functions of the Hemmington Cross.

Though he wanted to supplement his fleet with additional capital ships, he never thought about getting his hands on vessels longer than his upcoming factory ship.

At two kilometers or less, a decent capital ship still scored adequately in terms of acceleration and maneuvering. If Ves wasn't satisfied with that, he wouldn't settle for a larger ship. He would get multiple modestly-sized ships instead.

His journeys through the frontier and the Nyxian Gap taught him that nothing mattered more than the ability to move. A more mobile fleet allowed his clan to outrun many dangers and waste less time in transit.

Aside from the formidable Cross Clan, no other fleet came close to matching its might. There was absolutely no reason to do so. Bringing too many carriers would only make the wedding hosts more nervous.



Many guests either traveled to the Cinach System on commercial superliners or modestly-sized frigates or yachts. Some of the more powerful organizations may have dispatched larger vessels escorted by numerous combat carriers, but their presence was hardly threatening due to their lack of unity.

The Wodins forced many guests to park their vessels in the orbit of other planets and moons. Keeping them far away ensured that none of them would suffer an 'accident' that just happened to drive them straight into the hexagon-shaped wedding platform or something.

Just as Ves and the arriving Larkinsons studied his guests, the guests studied the incoming fleet as well.

From the meager number of surviving Larkinson vessels to the large but fearsome bulk of the Gravada Knarlax, there was much to observe!

Escorted by General Alexandria Wodin's force and accompanied by several MTA vessels, the returning Larkinsons and their prize ships practically paraded their way to the inner system.

"Look at the size of that warship's guns..."

"Where are their expert pilots?"

"Who are those other Hexers?"

Due to the slow speed of the Gravada Knarlax, it took several days for the combined fleet to reach the orbit of Cinach VI.

Once there, Task Force Predator had officially returned!

As the arriving vessels slowly halted in their designated places, a large wave of heavy-duty passenger shuttles picked up most of the Larkinsons serving aboard the vessels.

Aside from the personnel who were still needed to keep the ships stable, a large amount of mech pilots, mech technicians, ratings and officers eagerly boarded the passenger shuttles!

Once the shuttles filled up their seats, they smoothly separated from the starships and descended to the surface of Cinach VI.

After landing on a broad field next to the temporary base of the Larkinson Clan, a huge number of clansmen and mechs who remained home enthusiastically welcomed the survivors home!

Cheers filled the air as family and friends each hugged and celebrated the returns!



The jubilation didn't last. Once the living returnees finished pouring out their emotions, it was time for the dead to emerge.

A large amount of coffins, most of which were empty, were steadily carried out of the shuttles by bots. Each and every Larkinson grew silent and maintained their utmost respect as the coffins floated past.

"So many coffins..."

"It could have been worse. Be glad that I didn't end up in one of them. It was very close at the end."

Though the homecoming ceremony ended on a rather subdued note, there was no other choice. The dead deserved to be remembered. Showing their coffins also reminded the Larkinsons that each struggle was accompanied by sacrifice.

As all of these reunions took place, Ves finally returned to the embrace of his soon-to-be wife.

Though he regularly remained in contact with his fiancé, no projection could ever replace the real deal.

"Ves!"

Gloriana, who wore a deep blue dress that was bedecked with dark jewels, eagerly walked up to Ves and pulled him into a hug. The two shared a passionate kiss. Their love hadn't abated at all during their separation!

"I'm finally back." Ves grinned as his lips parted from her own. "I won't be leaving anytime soon."

"You better." She giggled.

Her flowery scent intoxicated his nose. Her perfumes were so much more poignant when he met her in person.

While the Darkbreak module produced an excellent facsimile of Gloriana, physical projections lacked souls.

When he was close to Gloriana, he could sense and feel her love and devotion towards him. With the help of the spiritual fragment in her mind, Ves gained a much better read on her emotions. This allowed him to place a lot more trust in her than other people.

While the two lovers enjoyed each other's presence, their cats greeted each other as well.

"Meow!"

Lucky ran up to Clixie and nuzzled his nose in her fur.

"Miaow?"

Clixie looked confused at Lucky's changed appearance. Her paw lightly padded his darker metallic exterior. It no longer felt like bone.

"Meow meow!"

While the two cats familiarized themselves with each other again, their owners started to move towards a Hexer shuttle.

"Before we go home, let's visit my family. My mother has been dying to see you!"  
Gloriana happily spoke.

Ves briefly paused. "Wait, what? I'm not ready to meet her yet! Can we wait until tomorrow or something?"

"Don't be silly, Ves. You hardly need to make an appointment to meet her. Just go and talk with her, okay?"

She did not leave him with any choice. Ves slumped his shoulders. "Fine."

It would be rude not to meet her relatives. That said, his lack of enthusiasm caused him to enter the Hexer shuttle and take a seat as if he was on his way to his execution.

Though Gloriana did her best to cheer him up, Ves hardly felt reassured. After so much time, he was finally going to meet the Wodins in earnest!

#### *Chapter 2477: Meet the Wodins*

The Wodins set up a much more elaborate base next to the plot rented by the Larkinsons.

The hexagonal-shaped base used to consist of prefab buildings, but the Hexers weren't satisfied with that. They slowly imported other materials to set up a sizable settlement that was a cross between a town and a military base.

As the shuttle that carried the Miracle Couple slowly flew over the base under heavy escort, Ves peered over the window to look at the mechs and structures below.

"How many of your relatives am I meeting today?"

"All of them." Gloriana answered with a grin.

"What!?!"

"Don't be silly. I'm just talking about my immediate family. You'll be meeting my mother and all of my direct brothers and sisters today!"

"They're all here?"

Gloriana happily nodded. "Yes! While they normally hold important positions back in the Hegemony, it's no problem for them to attend our wedding. Don't worry about any misunderstandings. I've told them plenty of stories about you. You've already met Brutus, but the rest think highly of you as well."

Ves hoped her relatives were in a pragmatic mood. He had no illusions about their dislike towards 'untamed' boys, but there was no way that he would bend to their customs.

If his meeting with Gloriana's mother and relatives turned into a disaster, then he wasn't going to apologize. He already told Gloriana plenty of times about his likes and dislikes. While he didn't want to act like a diva, he still had his limits.

It did not take long before the shuttle landed in a guarded enclosure. Security was so tight that Nitaa wasn't allowed to come along. He could only command his bodyguard to wait in the vehicle.

Fortunately, nobody said a word about Lucky. Despite his small and cute appearance, his most recent meals turned him into an even deadlier commando cat than before.

Ves did not expect any trouble from his in-laws, but he felt a bit more confident with Lucky by his side.

As they walked towards what could only be described as a palace, Ves grew increasingly more uneasy.

The Wodin Dynasty's ground base was completely Hexer in nature. The architecture, guard mechs and soldiers on foot all gave him the illusion that he had entered the territory of the Hexadric Hegemony.

Hexagons were everywhere, and many objects came in multiples of six. What Ves found notable was the religious iconography.

Ves never regarded hexism as a real religion. It was so obviously contrived, yet none of the Hexers around him thought so. Numerous Hexers prayed in front of the shrines. He had seen enough religious nuts to recognize that they were absolutely sincere in their beliefs!

The only consolation was that Ves spotted plenty of idols of the Superior Mother. The Supreme played such a prominent role in the Miracle Couple's work. How could the Wodins not take notice?

Inwardly, Ves was grinning. At least something had gone right with the Hexers. Hopefully, Gloriana's relatives mellowed out as well as they started to worship his mother.

The group eventually entered the palace. After passing through some halls and corridors, they entered a salon where Gloriana's closest family were already waiting.

Five adult Wodins were flanking a tall, regal-looking woman. The family resemblance to Gloriana was clear as day. Not only did they possess similar facial features, their hair was all black.

Curiously enough, just like Brutus, the other two male siblings were tall as well. Apparently, Constance Wodin had done an admirable job in their upbringing. Since Gloriana's brothers were all good boys, they shouldn't pose any threat to Hexer women.

Gloriana passed by Ves and moved until she took her place.

"Welcome to my abode. We have anticipated your arrival for quite some time." A matronly but stern voice spoke.

Ves grew a bit nervous. He attempted to smile. "I am eager to meet you as well."

Actually, he didn't want to be here at all! He would rather be back in the Nyxian Gap than spend another second in this Hexer stronghold!

Unfortunately, the Wodins wouldn't let him go so soon.

Constance Wodin beckoned him forward. "You may approach."

He did so. His footsteps echoed softly across the tiles. He moved forward until he reached a close but respectful distance to his future mother-in-law.

Though Constance Wodin hadn't done anything but stare at him, she possessed a bearing that was awfully similar to that of his mother.

In fact, it was more correct to say that Constance Wodin took after the Superior Mother!

His heart sank. He already had his hands full with his birth mother. He didn't need a second mother!

Of course, he did his best to keep his true thoughts and emotions in check. He bowed.

"I am honored to meet you, ma'am. I have long admired the family that managed to raise a woman as lovely and capable as Gloriana."

Constance smiled. At least she was open to flattery.

"Children, please introduce yourselves."

Gloriana's siblings approached Ves in a line.

The eldest walked up to him. She stretched her hand to shake his hand with a firm grip.

"Amarintha Wodin. I am the Director of Land Management of Scimitar II. If you ever decide to abort your expedition to the Red Ocean, there will always be a place for you in the Hegemony. I have already taken the liberty to reserve an entire islet for you and your clan."

Ves strained to maintain his smile. "Thank you for the offer. That is very kind of you. My ambitions lie elsewhere, so it is unlikely that I will travel to your home planet."

Gloriana's eldest sibling continued to maintain her polite demeanor.

"We will continue to reserve this territory for you. I hope you will remember the kindness we have shown to you. No matter where your travel leads you, please consider the family you have left behind."

What a calculating woman. Amarintha was a senior official in a planetary government. It shouldn't be a surprise that she was adept at politics. Though she hadn't spoken a lot of words, she was clearly trying to make him regard the Wodins as his second family.

This not only showcased her adaptability and tolerance, but also revealed a good understanding of his personality. Family was very dear to him. Amarintha wanted to take advantage of this character trait to harvest more benefits for the Wodin Dynasty.

Ves did not dare to reject her underlying meaning outright.

"The widening distance between us will make it difficult to share anything good with your dynasty. Still, if there is anything you need, I would be happy to extend a favor."

Amarintha nodded in satisfaction and returned to her mother's side.

Kellandra Wodin, the second-born, walked up next.

Her straight spine and rigid posture screamed military. She wore a uniform that greatly resembled that of Alexandria Wodin.

Both of them were mech colonels, yet there was a huge gap in age. Colonel Kellandra Wodin was only half as old!

Whether Kellandra gained her position due to nepotism or raw talent, Ves didn't know. He cared little about the Wodin Dynasty's internal affairs. All he knew was that it was best not to make enemies with Gloriana's siblings.

Though Gloriana's second sister didn't smile, she didn't come off as aggressive either.

"I am Mech Colonel Kellandra Wodin. I appreciate your contributions to the Hex Army. Many brave and noble Hexer soldiers are depending on your work to survive and win against the foul Fridaymen."

"I do my best."

She frowned. "That is not enough. You need to do more to strengthen our state. Please continue to do your duty by working with my sister to supply more mech designs to our military."

His duty?

"My commission with the Hegemony is far from ending. Gloriana and I still have many more mech designs in store for the Hex Army."

"We are waiting." Kellandra said with an expectant tone. "If you fail, our Wodin Dynasty shall be no more. Do not let Gloriana down."

Nothing like a little emotional blackmail to keep him motivated. After Kellandra said her piece, Gloriana's oldest brother finally stepped forward.

"Marcus Wodin." A smooth and gentle voice spoke. "I am a projection painter. I take after our father."

Ves always felt uncomfortable around Hexer males. Compared to the proud but friendly Larkinson men he interacted with on a daily basis, people like Marcus somehow come across as.. lesser.

The difference between Marcus and her two older sisters was like night and day. Ves felt that Marcus couldn't even hurt a fly.

"Pleased to meet you." Ves shook his hand. There was no force to Marcus' grip. "I have a considerable interest in art as well."

The older Wodin's eyes lit up. "The artistic style encapsulated by your mech designs is quite expressive. I am impressed with your ability to produce flamboyant works. The

statue you have made is truly divine! I would love it if you could show me how you make your art so vivid."

"We can exchange with each other on another day." Ves responded.

Gloriana's second brother came next. Tarkus Wodin shook hands with Ves in the same feeble grip as the one that came before.

"My name is Tarkus Wodin. My passion lies in avian lifeforms. As an exo-ornithologist, I can provide you with many suggestions should you look to adopt some interesting birds as pets. It is regrettable that you and your clan favor cats instead."

"I've encountered quite some interesting birds recently." Ves casually said. "The Nyxian Gap has spawned some interesting lifeforms. One bird was so big and aggressive that some of us got hurt."

"How unfortunate! What happened to this fine avian specimen?"

"We... regrettably had to put it down."

"How tragic! Couldn't you have avoided conflict by staying away from this exobird's habitat?"

Ves coughed. "Preserving biodiversity did not rank high in our list of priorities back then. We were more concerned about staying alive ourselves."

There was no need for him to greet Venerable Brutus. The Hexer expert pilot merely nodded at Ves while keeping his hands folded behind his back.

At least Brutus resembled an actual man. His two older brothers were completely spineless in comparison.

Each Wodin became accomplished in their own jobs. However, Ves could not help but recognize that the women pursued impactful careers while the boys were relegated to much less impressive pursuits.

In fact, if Brutus hadn't coincidentally advanced to expert candidate and expert pilot, he would have been as meek and unassuming as his brothers.

Clearly, Constance Wodin didn't really care about what her sons would do when they grew up. As long as they didn't aim for any leadership roles or something, their jobs were largely inconsequential.

In contrast, she probably steered her daughters towards specific trajectories.

The eldest daughter went into government service. She might become a minister or take up an even higher position in the central government in the future.

The second daughter entered the military. Unlike Brutus, Kellandra was no common grunt. Becoming a colonel at around 40 meant that she was bound to become a general!

The youngest daughter became involved in industry and commerce. By becoming a high-ranking mech designer, Gloriana was probably expected to benefit the Wodin Dynasty in many ways once she matured.

Too bad Ves was about to take her away. While she could still contribute to the Wodin Dynasty in many ways, Constance might be peeved that he had ruined her best-laid plans.

Still, with how much Ves and Gloriana had already accomplished, Constance should not be too opposed to their union.

"Sit with us, Ves." Constance spoke in a slightly warmer tone. "We have much to talk about. I would have preferred to meet you sooner, but you were not available for the past six months. If you wish to become a proper spouse to my daughter, you must restrain your undesirable tendencies. I will not look favorably upon you if you wander off into hazardous regions again."

Oh boy.

#### *Chapter 2478: Mother-In-Law*

For a family meeting, Ves hardly felt comfortable. The salon he was in was so spacious that he felt like he was in a prison hall.

The seat that the Wodins offered to him was opulent but not very comfortable. Ves had to make sure to keep his back straight and keep his movements in check.

Though Constance offered Ves some refreshments, the light tea and biscuits he received was so light and airy that his altered taste buds received no stimulation at all. Clearly she didn't bother to look up or ask her daughter what he preferred to eat and drink.

Ves look to the sides. Constance's sons and daughters dutifully sat in their own seats while they lifted their saucers and drank their cups of tea at an agonizing pace.

While Amarintha, Kellandra and Gloriana acted restrained around their mother, they did not restrain any of their confidence in themselves.



In contrast, Marcus, Tarkus and Brutus turned invisible. They did not speak a word and did their best to blend into the background when none of the women addressed them directly.

They were no different from children who were told to behave!

Even Venerable Brutus bottled up most of his force of will!

Ves suspected that this was an automatic response.

Whenever the mech pilot was in the presence of his mother, he ceased to be Venerable Brutus Wodin, expert pilot of the Glory Seekers. He instead turned back into Constance's youngest boy.

This was one of the most pathetic displays that Ves had ever seen from an expert pilot.

While Brutus wasn't exactly one of the most masculine expert pilots that he had ever met, Ves did not think that it would be so bad.

Just because the expert pilot was in the presence of his mother didn't mean he should drop his pride! Couldn't he man up a bit? Show some spine!

"Ves." Constance spoke, addressing him by his first name as if he was already her son. "I have heard from my daughter that you do not have a high regard for our state."

"That is.. correct."

"Is that not contradictory? How can you love her when you do not take kindly to her home?"

Ves offered Constance a polite smile. "We do not need to have much in common to appreciate each other's presence. Please do not think that I am a Hexer or that I have embraced your culture. As a foreigner, it is.. challenging for me to accept your norms and values. I was born a Brighter and our Larkinson Clan still takes after my home state in many aspects."

Constance maintained a neutral expression as she weighed him with her eyes.

"The Hexadric Hegemony is not as hostile towards males as you think. We offer numerous opportunities for them to express themselves. You have met my sons. Each of them are content and accomplished in their own right."

Yeah right. It was probably fine if a boy wanted to become an artist, just like Constance's husband.

Ves wondered why Petrus Wodin wasn't here. Though Gloriana's father was probably another pushover, he must have possessed at least one redeeming feature to meet Constance's standards.

Several minutes passed by as Constance explained the many virtues of the Hexadric Hegemony. She clearly wanted to change his mind and bring him back to her home state.

It was too bad that Ves remained unmoved. While he didn't dare to express his annoyance at her misleading sales pitch, he made sure to adopt body language that stated that he was not being swayed.

To her credit, Constance Wodin didn't persist. She was a politician, after all. She recognized futility when she saw it. Ves guessed that she merely wanted to try her luck.

If she failed, then she could easily brush her attempt aside.

If she succeeded, then she would not only be able to bring back an asset to the Hegemony, but also empower the Wodin Dynasty more directly.

Mother-in-law or not, Constance Wodin was constantly seeking for advantages. If Ves wasn't backed by Master Willix or became so prominent, she might have resorted to tougher means!

This realization caused Ves to raise his vigilance even higher. Constance did not stray far from his expectation. Anyone who raised a hard-working daughter like Gloriana was not someone who ignored benefits out of feelings!

"My daughter has told you that you are blessed by the Superior Mother." Constance changed the topic. "She says you have a method to prove it. While I believe she is sincere, I would like to receive confirmation. Could you show me whether you have an undeniable connection to Hexers?"

What the hell? What did Gloriana say to her mother?

He directed his gaze towards his fiancé, only to be met by her happy and completely unapologetic smile. He did not find any indication that she was sorry!

"I do not consider myself to possess a special relationship with your state and people." Ves coughed again.

"How do you explain the glows of your works? No other Hexer is able to create something akin to your statue and your two Hexer mech designs. Your connection to the Superior Mother is undeniable."

Was this some underhanded way of convincing him that he was actually a Hexer? Whatever the case, Ves refused to play along. He knew she wanted to see him channel the Superior Mother's glow, but there was no way he was going to do so. He didn't want Constance to get any crazy ideas!

"I'm afraid I will have to disappoint you. I think you'll agree with me that the Superior Mother should not be disturbed."

"A pity. Tell me about your future plans instead. The Red Ocean is an exciting new frontier, but it is filled with threats. We may have succeeded in rescuing you from the Nyxian Gap, but the Red Ocean is too far away to allow us to bring you to safety again. What makes you think that you will be able to keep my daughter safe in this distant place?"

That was a more reasonable question to ask. Ves already anticipated such a query. Any mother would be worried if someone brought her daughter to a region devoid of order.

"My goal is to grow and develop my Larkinson Clan." He began. "At the same time, I am seeking new experiences to provide ample inspiration for my design philosophy. I am not satisfied with staying in the local star cluster. While there is plenty to do here, it's impossible to become a first-rate power with the resources available in the galactic rim."

"Why not travel to the galactic heartland or the galactic center then?" Constance retorted. "Before the Red Ocean became accessible, many ambitious people and organizations have chosen to travel closer to the center of the galaxy. Civilization is much more developed in the heart of human civilization."

"I never thought about traveling to the galactic center. The opportunities there are great, but there is hardly any room for development for newcomers. The local powers and states have already carved out everything that matters over there. I do not want to be crushed under their prodigious weight."

There was another reason why Ves did not want to travel to the galactic center. The Five Scrolls Compact doubtlessly maintained a much stronger presence over there! He did not forget that the Ruined Temple was likely located in that region as well!

In contrast, Ves believed he stood a much better chance of keeping his distance from the cult by entering an underdeveloped region. The Red Ocean may just be a fraction of the size of the Milky Way, but it was largely virgin space that just so happened to be in the focus of the Big Two.

While Ves was not delusional enough to think that the Five Scrolls Compact would ignore the Red Ocean entirely, the most they could do was to send out some spies and maybe splinter organizations. As long as Ves did not bump into a monstrously-powerful spiritual sorcerer such as Aramid Dista, he should enjoy plenty of years of peace!

"The Red Ocean does offer invaluable opportunities. I am concerned that your Larkinson Clan may not be up to the task."

"That is why I have been doing my best to prepare for the challenges that we might face. Our clan has received a lot of tempering during our recent voyage through the Nyxian Gap. We have identified a lot of shortcomings but also found some surprising sources of strength. With all of the lessons we have learned, we can increase our readiness so that we will be in a better position once we pass through the beyonder gate."

Constance nodded. Though she might not agree with him, she appeared to be satisfied with his thorough approach. As long as he remained aware of the potential perils and pitfalls, he wouldn't expose Gloriana to too much danger.

Even if he screwed up somehow, there was always the Glory Seekers. Ves did not doubt that Constance would pass some secret instructions to Gloriana's honor guard.

If worse came to worst, Venerable Brutus could always take Gloriana away from the Larkinson Clan!

"Have you considered allying yourself to other organizations that share the same purpose as you?" She asked. "There are numerous dynasties in the Hegemony that are interested in branching out to the Red Ocean. Ours is no different. It would be better to join forces and present a united front against the foreign threats you might face."

Please no. Ves didn't hide his displeasure this time.

"The Larkinson Clan must rise above the occasion on its own. We cannot rely on the strength of others. We won't be able to develop ourselves to the point where we can gain a solid footing in the Red Ocean if that happens. Our clan is also emphatically not a Hexer clan. Even if I forge a partnership with your dynasty today, our elders will just override my decision with 100 percent of the vote."

Ves never imagined that the power he shared to the Larkinson Clan came in handy this time. He did not believe that Constance was ignorant to his clansmen's intense dislike towards anything Hexer.

Though Constance looked disappointed, she did not push the matter any further.

"Is seeking alliances completely out of the question for you? I am not necessarily doubting your Larkinson Clan's capabilities, but it would reassure us if you travel in a larger fleet."

"I'm not opposed to it, but the premise must be that our Larkinson Clan is in a strong position. I have accumulated almost 40 million MTA merits. That is not a trivial sum. The

fact that I have been able to earn so many merits in a very short amount of time is also proof of our strength. We deserve more."

"That is quite an ambition for a clan that has existed for only a couple of years. You Larkinsons are too eager for gains. This has almost led to the defeat of your entire task force in the Nyxian Gap."

"It is because I am not content with going with the flow that I have become capable of designing mechs such as the Doom Guard and the Valkyrie Redeemer."

Ves and Constance Wodin verbally sparred against each other for a couple more hours. They went over familiar territory to Ves. Each time she pointed out something problematic, Ves rebuffed her demands and stood by his decisions.

While that didn't exactly paint him in the best light, he managed to hold his ground against Gloriana's mother. He already considered it a victory if he ended this meeting without agreeing to become a Hexer or something!

Though Constance Wodin exerted a considerable degree of pressure towards him, she never went too far. Ves didn't develop any sense of hatred towards her. As far as he was aware of, she was just trying to look out for her daughter and her dynasty.

As his first meeting with Gloriana's mother came to an end, Ves actually thought his future mother-in-law wasn't that bad.

#### *Chapter 2479: Physical Manifestation*

Ves enjoyed Gloriana's warmth as she pressed against him. Both of them rested comfortably in the backyard of their mansion.

Further ahead, their cats curiously reacquainted with themselves.

The Larkinson Mandate rested on a quaint little garden table. As Lucky and Clixie sniffed and licked each other, the Golden Cat suddenly emerged out of the book.

"Nyaaa!"

The radiant cat that appeared out of nowhere playfully pounced on Clixie and physically rubbed her head against the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat!

"Miaow?!"

Clixie jumped in shocked!

"Nyaaa nyaaa!" Goldie playfully swished her tail.

"Meow." Lucky vouched for Goldie.

"Miaow miaow?"

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

It didn't take long for Clixie to recognize the Golden Cat. After all, as a pet who Ves had personally inducted into the Larkinson Clan, the organic feline possessed a strong connection to the Larkinson Network.

Soon enough, Clixie no longer questioned how it was possible for Goldie to manifest herself physically. Instead, she teamed up with Lucky and eagerly pounced on the spiritual cat in order to give her a thorough bath!

"Nyaaaaa! Nyaaaaaaaaa!"

Both Ves and Gloriana observed Goldie appearing and interacting with Lucky and Clixie in shock.

"That's new." Gloriana spoke. "Am I looking at a projection or is she really...?"

"She's the real deal."

"As expected of a female proto-god!"

While Gloriana easily accepted the new phenomenon, Ves was still mired in shock. He never expected that the Golden Cat developed the ability to manifest her spiritual body into a physical form!

He concentrated his mind and studied Goldie's form a little further. He sensed significant changes in her makeup.

A month ago, she sustained severe wounds from her battle against the dark gods. Joshua managed to channel her in a giant energy projection. While that allowed Goldie to manifest herself into reality to a degree, she also became exposed to damage.

Now, she not only recovered from her wounds, but also grew stronger!

There were several reasons why. First, she personally took part in a battle against a comparable spiritual entity. Even though she lost, she gained a lot from the confrontation.

She might have stolen the technique to manifest herself from battling the Unending One!

Yet that was not enough for her to be able to materialize herself into a physical form. The gulf between the imaginary realm and the material realm was considerable. The former was where spiritual entities like her were anchored. The material realm operated by different rules and did not support the existence of spiritual entities.

She needed a source of energy.

"The expert pilots." He whispered.

"What?" Gloriana asked.

"The strength of the Golden Cat is directly related to the strength of our clansmen. When we grow our numbers, Goldie gains more energy, but normal people don't really add that much. It's the expert pilots that are key to her evolution. The high-quality energy they produce is a great tonic to entities like her. Half a year ago, we didn't have any expert pilots. Now, we have five all of a sudden! This is a massive upgrade to Goldie and any other entity tied to those expert pilots!"

Ves briefly checked up on Qilanxo and could already sense that she had grown stronger as well!

The difference wasn't as dramatic. Goldie was young and only existed for over a year. Qilanxo was a seasoned sacred god who lived for several centuries. Due to the latter's greater strength, the addition of three expert pilots who formed a bond with the big lizard did not make much of a difference.

This would definitely change once Venerable Jannzi, Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise progressed their force of wills.

Right now, Goldie happened to be the biggest beneficiary out of the design spirits. While her bonds with the expert pilots weren't all that strong, she had equal access to everyone. This meant she gained access to multiple sources of high-quality spiritual feedback that was also supplied in considerable quantities to boot!

Before the Nyxian Gap Campaign, Ves and Gloriana were the only members of the Larkinson Clan who were able to supply her with premium feedback.

The new sources of feedback differed because it did not just consist of spiritual energy. The expert pilots also supplied a small amount of their will!

The addition of will opened several new possibilities for the Golden Cat. While willpower was very hard to work with, being able to leverage it so that she was able to create something similar to an energy projection was very impressive!

Of course, that didn't mean that Goldie suddenly turned into an omnipotent commando cat like Lucky.



When Clixie attempted to bite Goldie in the scruff of her neck, the radiant cat's form couldn't handle the pressure. She exploded!

"Miaow!"

"Meow!"

Both Lucky and Clixie were frightened at the display!

"Nyaaaaa."

Goldie emerged out of the Larkinson Mandate again without showing any discomfort. Nothing happened to her, causing everyone to feel relieved.

It turned out that her physical manifestation was still too weak. Once it sustained too much damage, it popped like a balloon. Goldie simply turned back into a pure spiritual entity and lost a bit of energy.

Even without sustaining damage, Goldie couldn't hold her form for long. Her physical manifestation fizzled out as she reached the limit of her endurance.

Nyaaaaa....

"Miaow..."

Clixie looked upset. Unlike Lucky, she possessed no remarkable spiritual potential at all, which meant she wasn't able to interact with Goldie.

"Meow meow."

Lucky tried his best to console his furry companion.

"They're so cute." Gloriana grinned. "Now that Goldie can appear like this, I can play with her! We can even display her during our wedding!"

"Uhm, I don't think that's a good idea. We can't reveal Goldie's true nature."

The two argued a bit about that. Ever since Ves returned, most of their discussions revolved around the planning for their upcoming wedding.

Both of them held different opinions on how it should go. Gloriana wanted to go all out and make the wedding into the most memorable occasion of their lives.

Ves just wanted it to proceed with as little complications as possible.

While their goals didn't necessarily contradict each other, Gloriana refused to settle for less. It gave him a lot of headaches.

However, Ves also took advantage of that by making a rather presumptuous request.

"Gloriana?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"I.. uhhh.. need to borrow something from you. Could you open your mind for a moment and allow me to grab some of your energy? It will hurt a bit and it will make you tired for a time. I planned something special for our wedding but I need to borrow your strength."

"Okay." She simply said.

That was what he liked about her. She trusted him to a large extent. She didn't even question him any further.

As Ves initiated the procedure he had in mind, he soon came across another surprise.

When he entered Gloriana's mind, he discovered that Gloriana exerted considerably greater control over her mind than before.

Ves sensed no sign of discomfort from her. Her mind did not exhibit any rejection to his presence at all. Before, her design seed always maintained its vigilance towards his spiritual projections, but that was not the case anymore.

"Do you remember the time when you brought the Superior Mother to life?"

"Yes.."

"Your mother taught me a few techniques! Look!"

To his surprise, Gloriana spontaneously formed a spiritual projection of her own! Though it was crude and rough, she was able to exert enough control over it to reach out of her mind and interact with other spiritual entities!

Ves grew a little upset. His mother hardly bothered to teach him anything while his fiancé gained a crash course in spiritual manipulation without doing anything.

This wasn't fair!

Maybe his mother was secretly a Hexer after all. How could she show so much favor to a woman while leaving her own son in the dust?

As Ves studied what Gloriana learned, he realized that her ability to control her spirituality was very rudimentary. The main stumbling block was her dim spiritual perception. She had to borrow the capabilities of his spiritual fragment in order to know what she was doing. This was a rather strenuous process.

Aside from that, Ves noticed that the defenses of her mind had grown more structured as well. This allowed her to resist spiritual pressure a bit better.

It wasn't as if his mother transformed Gloriana into a full-fledged spiritual sorceress.

Time was limited. Ves shrugged off his confusion and proceeded with his plan.

He needed to perform two procedures. Since one of them was bound to damage her mind a bit, he first turned to his spiritual fragment.

It originally came from a spiritual projection that he had sent into her mind in order to snoop on her thoughts and emotions. Once her mind cut it off from him, it eventually turned into a loose existence that was only tenuously tied to its source.

Ves did not inject more energy in it. Recklessly increasing his presence in her mind would only lead to distorting her domain.

Instead, he began to mold a very simple spiritual construct. He already formulated a design beforehand, so it did not take much time until the spiritual fragment changed shape.

The load-bearing capacity of this small spiritual fragment was very limited. Ves didn't want to change the entire fragment either, because that would cut off a lot of useful functions.

He ended up making a tiny visor of sorts. It took quite a bit of trial and error for him to make the visor permanent. He even had to donate a small portion of his spiritual energy in order to stabilize its shape.

Ves lost something in the process that he couldn't easily replace. He figured the tradeoff was worth it because he would be taking something important to her as well.

"Alright, this is going to hurt. Try and keep yourself as still as possible, okay?"

"I'm already used to it. Just do what you need to do, Ves."

Seeing that she had braced herself, Ves made his move. He reached deeper into her mind and scooped out a small but dense amount of her spiritual energy. Because this energy was close to her design seed, it was especially rich. Removing it from her would definitely impact her ability to design a mech until her mind slowly made up for the loss!

"Ouch! What are you doing?!"

Even though she tried her best to keep her mind under control, she wasn't able to restrain it for long!

Fortunately, Ves already deposited his prize into his mind, thereby avoiding any possible retaliation.

The consequences of his actions immediately became clear. Gloriana entered into her low state again. She had experienced it several times and knew how severe it was. She glowered at the culprit.

"What is the meaning of this? We're about to get married soon. I can't go to my wedding when I'm in this awful mood."

"I didn't take too much. As long as you don't miss your prayers, I think you'll recover in time."

Even if his estimates were off, no harm was done. Mellowing Gloriana out like this meant that she wouldn't be as frantic and demanding as before.

Ves disregarded her whining and studied his prize. Though he hadn't taken much, he could already sense the potential of her spiritual energy. Once he processed it into a spiritual fragment and shaped a portion of it into a spiritual construct, he would obtain a mirror of what Gloriana currently possessed.

That took care of one aspect of the wedding. He needed to do much more in order to placate Gloriana's existing demands.

"I want you to work on our wedding clothes."

"What? I'm a mech designer, not a tailor!"

"I don't care. I want you to create something similar to your Pride of Dusk. Our clothes have to be memorable and unique. I'm not settling for anything less."

#### *Chapter 2480: Fall On Her Sword*

Aside from helping Gloriana prepare for the wedding, Ves also had to stay on top of the major developments taking place in his clan.

One of the issues he urgently needed to address was the future of the Living Sentinels.

It was clear to anyone that the Nyxian Gap Campaign dealt a heavy blow to them. Their mechs weren't as good as the ones used by the Avatars of Myth. The quality of mech pilots and their lower training intensity also contributed to the losses they suffered.

The funerals proceeded quickly. Both Ves and Gloriana wanted it out of the way as quickly as possible so that it wouldn't cast a shadow over the upcoming wedding.

Soon after the funerals, Commander Magdalena met Ves in person. She entered his office in his mansion on Cinach VI and stepped forward with obvious gloom.

"We need to talk."

"Yes. Please have a seat."

Once the Sentinel Commander sat down, Ves saw how much the pressure on her shoulders was crushing her. She looked as if she aged at least a decade.

Ves gently spoke. "It's not your fault. Many of the circumstances that led to the deaths of your soldiers were out of our control. We couldn't have done anything to prevent this outcome."

"I could have pushed my mech pilots harder. I could have worked harder to acquire better mechs for them. I could have changed their tactics."

"Don't get caught up in your remorse. There are plenty of Sentinels who still need someone in charge."

"That someone shouldn't be me." Magdalena said. "I need to take responsibility for this disaster."

Ves grew serious. This was one of the outcomes he was worried about.

"You still have my confidence, commander. Nothing ever goes well during battle. The enemies we've faced could have killed us all. While we managed to avoid the worst, we still sustained damage after every battle. Due to the inherent traits of the Sentinels, your troops were always the first ones to suffer."

Magdalena shook her head. "You don't need to make excuses for me. I'm older than you. I know clearer than anyone who is at fault. The family, friends and colleagues of the men who we have just buried all deserve an explanation. When 500 hopeful Sentinel mech pilots enter the Nyxian Gap but only 120 of them manage to return, someone has to answer for this result."

"You want to fall on your sword."

The older woman smiled wryly at him. "The Sentinels have been traumatized. Morale is low and our recruitment from within the ranks of our clan has crashed. Some have even quit."

"You can fix this, commander."

"No. Not me. The Sentinels need venting. Not many dare to question you openly, but I am not held in high regard. While I tried my best to keep my Sentinels together, they still blame me for the losses we've suffered. I lost their trust."

This was an incredibly difficult situation. Once Commander Magdalena lost the trust of her men, she no longer exerted effective control over them. While she could resort to force and coercion to get things done, this was not a desirable way to lead an organization.

In his experience, truly great mech forces consisted of well-trained, motivated mech pilots. The men needed to feel they belonged there. Developing an esprit de corps was essential to unite the entire force.

From what Commander Magdalena described, there was too much negativity in the Living Sentinels to further this development. While Ves could force her to stay, the Sentinels would remain as dead as a random group of conscripts who were hastily thrown together and armed with weapons. There was no way the Sentinels could reach their potential with such a lethargic atmosphere.

Ves bowed his head. "I don't want to do this. As someone who also bears some responsibility, I don't think it's fair to dismiss you. Doing so would only vindicate the mistaken view that you are the primary person responsible for all of those deaths."

"Whether I am truly to blame is moot." She sighed. "What matters is preserving what I have built. I still care for the Living Sentinels despite most of my subordinates turning against me. Let them believe what they will. If that allows them to process the loss of their comrades, then they are welcome to think I'm incompetent. It is better than letting my soldiers wallow in self-pity or committing suicide."

It was actually quite difficult for anyone to commit suicide. Those who pressed their service pistols against their heads wouldn't even be able to pull the trigger. The operating systems of their guns would never allow their own wielders to harm themselves.

As for other means, that was what the monitoring systems were for. Als constantly looked out for problematic behavior. Once they identified a risk factor, they automatically informed an officer or a mental health counselor to prevent the situation from becoming worse.

That said, the Living Sentinels had more problems than that. While Ves still believed that firing Commander Magdalena was as crude as using a hammer to untie a knot, it was one of the most effective ways to change perception.

This was what mattered the most.

"Are you really sure?" Ves asked with resignation in his voice.

"A change of leadership will allow the Sentinels to undergo a reset. This will especially be the case if my successor is very different."

"If you're leaving, we need someone who is capable enough to pull the Sentinels out of their rut."

"I have some candidates in store." Magdalena said. "I will send you their profiles so that you or Major Verle can make a decision. If you're not satisfied with them, you can expand your search."

"I'll look over them later. Do I need to make a decision soon?"

"Not necessarily, but the sooner, the better. I can use the time that I have left to implement some unpopular changes in order to pave the way for whoever you choose."

He didn't like the way she beat herself up. She didn't deserve all of the blame in his opinion. However, he didn't stop her from offering her resignation because he benefited from her actions.

Once she fell onto her sword, most of the resentment should stay with her. The Sentinels would probably direct a lot of blame towards him, which was good because he still needed them to assume their role in the coming years.

The main reason why the Living Sentinels suffered so many losses was because Ves forced them out of their elements. Their training and doctrine was almost entirely geared towards defending the Larkinson fleet.

In other words, they were glorified security guards.

As long as the Living Sentinels were allowed to fight around and fortify themselves in the fleet, they should be fine.

However, throwing them at the enemy was something different. When Ves and Major Verle discussed the Larkinson Clan's combat doctrines, they never accounted for the possibility that the Sentinels might have to perform so many offensive actions.

It was like pulling a fish out of an ocean and depositing it on a beach. There was no way the fish would feel comfortable!

"What will you do once you've put down your hat?" Ves asked.

"My days of piloting mechs and commanding troops are over. I will go back to being a civilian and swap old war stories with the other retired veterans of the clan. There are plenty of them to keep me company."



The habit of Larkinson veterans gathering together every day probably helped them through their traumas. It was not without reason why so many veterans of the family used to hang out at the Larkinson Compound at Rittersberg all day.

Aside from being able to commiserate with those who lived through similar experiences, the old dogs were also able to pass on their wisdom to the younger generation who lived there.

This not only gave the future mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan a head start, but also healed the hearts of those who had endured too much death in their lives.

Ves hoped that this tradition would continue in the Larkinson Clan.

"I think it's a waste for you to retreat altogether."

She looked confused. "Pardon?"

"No matter what people think of you, I think you have done a decent job. You could have made better decisions, but you have hardly run the Sentinels into the ground. Since you have set them up, you know how they work better than anyone. I still need that in order to run them effectively. Besides, the battles you've fought and lived through have given you a wealth of combat experience that is impossible to gain through any other means. This is valuable in itself, and I don't want to waste this asset."

"Are you saying..."

"I still want to keep you, commander." Ves emphatically said. "The Military Bureau under Major Verle is still short of senior staff officers. Your addition to the general staff will ease the major's burdens and allow him to get more work done. This is especially important as our mech forces replenish their losses and expand their numbers."

Commander Magdalena looked at the floor. "I did not expect to receive such an offer. I don't believe it is wise for you to recommend me to this function. The Sentinels might think you are rewarding me with a promotion."

"That's because it is. You know the realities of combat. You know how hard it is to command a large mech force."

"There are many other seasoned veterans in the Larkinson Clan who can fill the same shoes."

"Those old veterans of the Bright-Vesia Wars or other wars aren't as relevant to our clan. Their old wartime experiences are mostly in the context of battles between other states. The Larkinson Clan is nothing like that. The way we fight is very different, and you just happen to possess the deepest and most up to date impression of that. Not only that, I believe you care too much for our men to ever let the previous disaster

happen again. You may not be able to make up for it as the Sentinel Commander, but you will still be able to exert some influence as a general staff officer, just like Ophelia Kronon."

She eventually succumbed to his request. "Very well. If you truly trust me to watch over our combat forces, then I will agree to join the Military Bureau. I hope you don't regret your decision."

The two shook hands. Commander Magdalena looked considerably better now that her career in the military hadn't come to an end.

"Thank you for this. You truly deserve to be the patriarch."

"No problem. I just think you've been dealt a bad hand."

As a trueblood Larkinson, Magdalena valued her honor. Resigning her command under these circumstances was a massive disgrace that would permanently tarnish her reputation.

By shifting her over to a staff position, Ves gave her a lifeline. While her position didn't allow her to exert as much influence as before, she would still be able to restore her honor over time.

This was also a way to assuage his own guilt. Ves knew very well that he was the principal culprit behind the horrendous losses of the Living Sentinels. He shouldn't have brought them to the Nyxian Gap.

On the flipside, he also couldn't have made so many gains if he hadn't brought enough sacrifices. The Sentinels may not have fought as well as the Avatars, but they performed their role as cannon fodder.

"Some critics within the clan think we should disband the Sentinels." Magdalena remarked. "What do you think?"

"I don't agree. The premise and concept of the Living Sentinels are sound. It's just that our execution has fallen short. As long as we learn from our errors and address our shortcomings, the Sentinels shall definitely rise again."

"I look forward to that day."

Ves wondered who Magdalena would put forward as the next commander of the Living Sentinels. The demoralized soldiers needed a strong personality in order to correct their course!