

Mech 2481

Chapter 2481: Generational Loyalty

An army of tailors were working in an expansive studio specifically set aside for them. Numerous different garments and fabrics were being worked with by hand rather than with machines.

Though there was nothing wrong with tailoring clothes with modern machinery, the products they produced lacked a personal touch.

For something as important as their wedding, Gloriana did not want to make this mistake!

In the studio, hundreds of different clothes were being made. The Wodin Dynasty expended quite some effort in hiring the top tailors, creative directors and other professionals from the Hegemony.

At a work table separate from where most of the tailors were working, an eager Gloriana and a hapless-looking Ves were looking at the projections of their wedding outfits.

"Why am I here?" Ves tiredly asked.

"I told you, Ves. I need you to bless our clothes! My dress has to be as unique as possible and your suit must increase your stature to the maximum possible extent. I won't allow anyone to think you're an unworthy husband!"

Ves inwardly shook his head. He accomplished many more feats than her in the time they were together.

Without him, the Larkinson Clan wouldn't exist. Without him, the LMC wouldn't have been able to sell so many mechs. Without him, the clan wouldn't have welcomed 5 new expert pilots!

She slapped his arm. "Hey! Stop daydreaming! You need to help make our new clothes. I've taken the liberty of bringing out your Pride of Dusk. We can use it as the foundation of your suit!"

"Wait, what? That's mine!"

"It's too crude and barbaric. While the craftsmanship is decent, what can you expect from a third-class tailor working on a tourist planet?"

"Even if I don't wear it anymore doesn't mean I'm okay with tearing it apart! It's a part of my history, Gloriana!"

"How can we make a fitting suit for you if we can't make use of that outfit?"

"There are plenty of other options. I've progressed a lot since I was gone. I can empower our outfits to a much greater degree than before. I have much more control over the process as well. Whatever you want, I can deliver."

"Really?" Gloriana's eyes sparkled.

"Uhm, within reason."

"GREAT!"

While Ves didn't have a great understanding of fashion, he didn't have to go outside of his comfort zone. Gloriana and the tailors prepared the clothes. Ves just had to be involved in order to turn them into totems of sorts.

Fortunately, she only insisted on applying this treatment to their own outfits. If Ves had to empower the clothes of all of the Larkinsons attending the wedding, he would need at least a year to finish all of that work!

Once Gloriana let him go, he dragged his tired body out of the studio and returned to his office.

Lucky was gone. He probably sneaked off with Clixie again. Fortunately, Ves had another pet to keep him company.

"Benny. I'm not used to seeing you in the flesh. It feels strange for me to get back to this routine."

Gavin gestured to the woman standing next to him. "Do you remember offering me to become the president of the Living Star Club?"

"I do. You rejected it if I recall. Very curious."

"Calsie would like to become the president if you'll allow it. I think she is suited to manage the club on your behalf."

Ves raised his eyebrow.

Neither Gavin nor Calsie were students anymore. Their age was already beginning to show how mature they looked. Ves was well aware that they had made use of the resources of the Larkinson Clan to acquire more competences and develop more skills.

That was good. Both of them were ambitious and they did not want to be supplanted by the talented or experienced newcomers who were joining the clan in droves.

"I'm not too sure about this." Ves said. "Calsie, your experience so far has been rather mixed, but overall you have largely played a supervisory role. Even though you held my seat for some time, you don't have a lot of executive experience."

The woman in question did not look deterred. "I have done my best to catch up. I have never stopped taking classes and I have done a lot of learning by doing. In my current position, I have worked hard to make sure that all of the LMC branches abide by our directives and make good use of the loyalty medallions you've made. Now, even if no one is in charge, the branches will still pass on the medallions to the next directors."

While it was difficult to determine how much of a role she played, she wasn't wrong. So far, the various branches had never produced a problem that required him to intervene in person. He never wanted to pay attention to them because he wasn't interested in managing these tedious matters.

As long as the branches ensured that third-party manufacturers produced LMC mechs without impairing quality or embezzling money, Ves could care less what they did. The holders of the Larkinson Loyalty Medallions weren't really Larkinsons anyway. The only reason to connect them to the Larkinson Network was to ensure they stayed loyal.

Ves leaned back in his chair. "Tell me your vision for the Living Star Club. What do you think it is and where do you want to take it? While I originally set it up in haste in order to solve the Doom Guard Scandal, it can be so much more."

"I agree." Calsie grew a little more confident. Since Ves did not reject her out of hand, it meant she had a chance. "It's not unusual for mech companies to organize member clubs. It's an excellent means to increase retention. Customers are rewarded for their loyalty while companies can develop closer relationships with the people who buy most of their products."

"I know all of that. What I would like to know is what you plan to do to make the Living Star Club an asset to the LMC. It can easily become a burden if you're pursuing the wrong strategy."

"While I can't guarantee that my plan will succeed, I believe it best fits your vision."

"Okay then. Explain."

Calsie began to outline her plan. "No one has worked longer for you than Gavin and myself. We know what kind of mechs you design and what you aim to accomplish with them. We can use the Living Star Club as a means to ensure the longevity of our products. In my opinion, membership should not be tied to an individual. Instead, it should be a family."

Now this was new. Ves sat up straighter in his chair. "A family?"

"Yes. We can also implement other means for mech pilots and owners to pass on their rights to a chosen successor. The point is to make sure that the benefits of membership aren't lost upon death or retirement once it has upgraded its membership tier or accrued a lot of Star Points. If you're afraid that the club will be stacked with 10-Star members, we can impose a tax on transfers."

This sounded very intriguing to Ves. He had to admit that Calsie knew him well. He hadn't formally introduced the concept of legacy mechs to the LMC, but already Calsie was thinking about developing a mechanism of converting the successors of their existing customers!

"What is the purpose of establishing an inheritance mechanism?"

"Developing generational loyalty." Calsie forcefully stated. "The son should inherit his father's fascination towards LMC mechs. The daughter cannot bear to buy her mechs elsewhere when she can inherit her mother's hard-fought privilege to purchase LMC mechs at a discount."

"LMC mechs are already notable for their high customer retention. This is one of the aspects that I have always concentrated on. Even before the Living Star Club came into existence, we already built up a lot of repeat customers."

"This is different, sir. While it is true that our existing customers are likely to become lifelong fans of our products, it isn't necessarily the case that their successors will follow suit. While our mechs offer a lot of value, much of it is tied to individual user experience. It's very hard to translate that value into numbers. Not only that, our products are sold at a hefty premium. They're considered luxury products. Since not every customer is that well-off, we need to provide them with an additional incentive to enter our system."

She proceeded to elaborate on her development strategy. What stood out was that she wanted the LMC to invest heavily in the Living Star Club. It needed to build up a reputation and reinforce its prestigious image as aggressively as possible.

"Right now, sales are going well, and they're projected to get better in the future. Instead of turning the LSC into an additional revenue source, we should put more money into it in order to increase its desirability. Once others hear about the amazing benefits its members have access to, a lot more people will try to become a member."

"What should the criteria for membership be?" Ves questioned. "Right now, aside from the victims of the Doom Guard Scandal, only people who have bought more than a thousand of our mechs can enter."

"I think we should open up more opportunities to become a member. I want to lower the barrier to a more reasonable standard so that regular customers can become a Star Member if they work hard enough. I believe the Living Star Club should orient itself

towards the smaller players rather than the major clients. The requirement to buy 1000 mechs may send the right message, but it attracts the wrong sort of buyers."

That was quite interesting. Calsie wanted to target the bottom end of the market. Ves had difficulty seeing why. Smaller customers may be a lot more numerous, but their buying power was a lot worse.

She smiled. "I'm not talking about the poorest consumers who can barely scrounge up the money to purchase an economy mech. The private sector is dominated by small-to-medium-sized outfits. In most states, mercenary corps and security companies comprise the biggest market segments. If we can engage them with the Living Star Club, we can establish continuity of sales when times are good and when times are bad. Even if the LMC falls into a slump for whatever reason, the considerable amount of Star Members that we have built up will not easily switch brands."

"And what about the major clients who are used to purchasing mechs by the hundreds?"

"We can adopt a separate approach to reel them in. You know as well as we do that major clients are less loyal by nature. They're used to mixing and matching mechs from multiple brands. There are some cases where they commit to a single brand to simplify logistics, but this is rare as it exposes them to specific counters. Unless you're willing to provide them with permanent discounts for major orders, it won't be as easy to keep them in our pocket."

There were good reasons to charge a high price for his products. Frequently offering discounts or making them too accessible was no different from devaluing them. He might as well lower their base prices if he wanted to attract more customers.

As Calsie continued to outline her intentions, Ves eventually raised his palm. "I've heard enough. While I'm not entirely sure whether your vision is feasible, I'm inclined to give you a chance. Please work with Marketing to flesh out your plan. I need to know what others think about steering the LSC in this direction."

"Thank you, sir. I will get back to you after the wedding."

Ves smiled encouragingly at her. "Personally, I like the way you think. Developing generational loyalty is exactly what I want to achieve. The LMC is in it for the long run. I've always been interested in meeting the needs of average customers. They are in most need of good mechs."

He had never forgotten about his purpose. Mech designers existed to serve mech pilots. Of the latter, those who worked for the military or well-funded organizations were spoiled for choice.

Instead, it was mercenaries and company grunts who most needed a living mech!

Chapter 2482: Excess Expert Pilot

The Cinach System became more and more boisterous. As passenger ships carrying distinguished guests and tourists kept pouring in, the more and more eyes became captivated by the presence of the captured pirate warships.

Even with the MTA pouring all over the ship for some reason, the visitors couldn't get enough of viewing the Gravada Knarlax in all of her splendor. Not even the holes in her bow and starboard side detracted from the power of the heavy cruiser.

Humanity's fascination towards warships was hard to shake off. Though many local citizens were scared beyond belief that a huge warship orbited over their heads, plenty of other people gazed longingly in the Gravada Knarlax's direction.

What would have been like to live in humanity's most glorious era? From starting off in a small corner of the Orion Arm of the galaxy, human civilization expanded explosively. It was with ships such as the Gravada Knarlax that humanity succeeded in beating off the established alien races!

Though most considered the Age of Mechs to be their golden age, it was undeniably less grand than the past. The existence of the Big Two suppressed every state and limited their warmaking potential.

If the prohibition on warships and weapons of mass destruction didn't exist, the Komodo War could have easily led to at least a hundred times more deaths in the same span of time!

If such casualty figures became common in every corner of the galaxy, then the human race would soon wipe themselves out!

Many people understood this logic and supported the bans for this reason. Yet what made sense to their minds did not necessarily mean their hearts followed suit.

Locked inside the emotions of every human was a seed that craved for dominance. Humanity had done it once. The pressure to resume their civilization's glory's days and renew the conquests had grown worse over the centuries.

Perhaps this was why the Big Two opened up the Red Ocean with so much fanfare. The beyonder gates leading to the dwarf galaxy served as a release valve.

Once the most ambitious, adventurous and bloodthirsty powers of the galaxy left the Milky Way, everyone would be happy. Profiteers and warlords eagerly contested against each other to harvest the riches of the new dwarf galaxy while the calmer and steadier leaders held the fort.

As Ves mused about the future of human civilization while sitting behind his desk, he received a surprising set of visitors.

"You may enter." He spoke.

The doors opened up. Nitaa shifted in her heavy armor as she felt two distinct pressures acting on her mind.

One of them was familiar to her. An invisible protective blanket fell over her body.

The entire situation looked absurd to Ves. A highly-trained Kinner soldier and bodyguard did not need any protection. Nitaa was taller and much more heavily-armed than the expert pilot who thought it was his mission to defend every woman!

Another woman entered his office. Ves looked up in surprise as he saw someone he quite frankly forgot about.

With the emergence of five expert pilots, the Larkinson Clan was no longer short of them. In fact, as far as Ves was concerned, getting so many at once was too much!

For this reason and more, Davia Stark no longer fit in his plans. He could care less of what happened to her. If she wanted to enjoy her retirement and share her trauma with the other retired Larkinsons, then that was fine.

An aggressive and resentful force of will pressed onto his mind. Ves found it difficult to keep his emotions in check. A small part of him wanted to submit. Another part of him wanted to stand up and counterattack.

Ves kept himself in check. Venerable Davia Stark's force of will was one of the most oppressive he had ever felt. She could even give Venerable Foster a run for her money!

"Ves." The male Hexer began. "Venerable Davia has successfully regained her strength, though as you can see, she is... different."

"I can see that. She's no longer an empty shell. That's certainly an improvement, though she might temper herself a bit. I can't imagine she's a pleasant person to be around."

That was an understatement. Ves felt as if he was being pressed directly by someone similar to Venerable Foster! The noteworthy aspect of it all was that he did not sense that Davia held any specific malice towards him. This was just her passive state!

The older woman in question finally opened her mouth.

"Let me be frank. I have no love for the way you treated me. You should have left me to recover at the refugee settlement on Cloudy Curtain."

Well, that was certainly a way to start a discussion. Ves knew that Venerable Davia probably didn't mean to provoke him. Expert pilots were generally straight shooters, and an aggression-oriented one like her was incapable of exercising much restraint!

"I think it's a waste to allow expert pilots like you to wallow in your own pity." He responded. The best way to handle expert pilots like her was to remain in control while holding his ground. "You weren't fully cognizant in your previous state. You were damaged. I decided to take it upon myself to bring you back. While that may have been a presumptuous decision, I only had good intentions in mind."

Good intentions for himself, actually. Ves had a feeling that Davia saw right through his intentions.

A sardonic smile appeared on her face.

"Well, your good intentions have led to this result. Are you happy?"

"Of course! You look much.. livelier than before. I don't think anyone wants to live like an emotionless husk. Now that you are better, what are your intentions?"

Venerable Stark briefly turned to Brutus before looking back at Ves. She did not hide her evaluating gaze. She acted as if she was shopping for groceries!

"I do not want to take up arms again. I have seen more than enough death and tragedy when I fought in the Sand War. However, human society is too decadent and corrupt. The smallest and weakest citizens all too frequently suffer the brunt of the mistakes of those at the top. They need a champion who can stand up on their behalf."

"And you hope to become that champion?"

"Yes." Stark's eyes grew intense. Her force of will heated up, causing the office to become more and more oppressive! "There are too few people in power who are willing to show any regard to the lowest members of our race. I detest this galaxy. Too many so-called 'space peasants' are left to fend for themselves whenever damnable alien races launch an attack on the periphery of human space."

Ves somewhat agreed with her. The Big Two painted themselves as the protectors of humanity, yet they were so locked in their ivory towers that they exhibited no sympathy at all when the sandmen slaughtered trillions of innocent people.

This kind of callous regard underscored the cruel reality that the major powers of human civilization were more concerned with their own machinations than dutifully fulfilling their noble mission.

To be honest, Ves understood the perspective of the Big Two. They were in charge of protecting humanity as a whole. That did not mean they were supposed to be

everyone's nanny. If the humans who were sheltering under their umbrella became too dependent on the MTA and the CFA, then they wouldn't be able to stand up for themselves once they were left to fend for themselves.

Ves faintly guessed that the Big Two deliberately let the sandmen rampage through the border states of the Komodo Star Sector.

With the strength displayed by the alien invaders, there was no way they could threaten the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony. As long as that was the case, the damage the sandmen were capable of inflicting would always be in a tolerable range.

At the cost of ruining numerous inconsequential border states and allowing trillions of worthless space peasants to be swept by sand, the surrounding states and star sectors received a dire warning.

They shouldn't count too much on others to protect themselves. If they wished to be safe, then they either need to show their worth or bolster their defenses!

Of course, a former space peasant like Venerable Davia didn't think this way. As one of the direct victims of the Big Two's disregard, she looked like she held a vendetta!

Ves grew a bit concerned about her volatile state. The last thing he needed was Venerable Davia entering into a fistfight with Master Willix!

Of course, the former stood no chance against the latter. An MTA Master Mech Designer was not only accompanied by a slew of visible and hidden bodyguards, but was also armed to the teeth with self-protection measures.

Shield generators, personal teleporters and maybe a few custom-made gravity modules all ensured that not even the Gravada Knarlax would be able to deprive the MTA of one of its top mech designers!

Ves spoke up again.

"While I sympathize with your cause, I am not sure why you are here."

"I want to join the Larkinson Clan." She came straight to the point.

He frowned. "The Larkinson Clan is.. not aligned with your goals. We are mostly interested in lifting ourselves up. We do not serve other people. We have not accepted any noble missions."

"I know. Your clan is not completely fit for my purposes, but you are the only viable choice for me. As self-serving as you are, your clan is made up of honorable soldiers and warriors. I trust them. I do not object to fighting alongside your Larkinsons as long as your cause is just."

"Why us? No offense, but we are rather stuffed with expert pilots for the moment. Welcoming you into the fold will mean we have less resources to spend on other priorities."

She snorted. "I do not believe that your wealthy clan is at risk of going bankrupt anytime soon. While I may not be willing to fight all of your battles, an additional expert pilot such as myself will provide added security to your fleet. I promise to defend your Larkinsons against any unprovoked attacks."

"That is.. a rather vague criteria. Not every attack is as clear cut as you think. What if the circumstances are more complex?"

"I will follow my conscience."

Her answer did not endear her to him. If the Larkinson Clan didn't have any expert pilot, then he would have embraced her in an instant.

As for now, Ves felt that dealing with Davia Stark's baggage wasn't worth adding another expert pilot.

He turned to his other visitor. "Venerable Brutus. What do you think?"

The male expert pilot looked a bit subdued. "Davia is ill-suited to join most states and organizations. While I have attempted to offer her a place in the Hegemony, she refused."

"The Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony are just as bad as the Big Two. I do not trust you and who you represent. I would rather take my luck with the Larkinson Clan. At least the Larkinsons started from the bottom as well. They understand our plight much better than you elitist Hexers."

Ves palmed his face. "You are not making it easier for me to accept you into our fold. If you merely want to join the Larkinson Clan because you want to use us as a vehicle to take revenge on the Big Two, then please go away. It's suicide to even think about that. I will not let the men and women of my clan suffer because I decided to let in an unguided warhead."

Though Davia Stark radiated with a stronger will than any of his newly-advanced expert pilots, it was largely moot if Ves couldn't exercise any control!

Not only that, the problem of providing her with a suitable expert mech was another headache. Master Willix only agreed to help with the development of 5 expert mechs.

Seeing that Ves remained unmoved, Venerable Stark did something that he didn't expect from an expert pilot.

She took a step back.

"Let us make a deal."

Chapter 2483: Atypical Expert Pilot

People often held a lot of desires. They wanted to get rich. They wanted to lead an army of millions of mechs. They wanted to become a Galactic Mech Councilor.

It was unfortunate that reality couldn't accommodate so many wants and needs. Scarcity of money, power, resources and opportunity forced many humans to settle for less. This was a universal rule that applied to everyone regardless whether they were humans, aliens or exobeasts.

Human society developed in a direction that wasn't able to fulfill every person's desire. However, in most corners of the galaxy, society offered them enough opportunities to work towards their goals.

Compromising with others was an essential mechanic that drove people forward. As long as they held something of value, they were able to trade that with someone who possessed what they needed.

Right now, Venerable Davia Stark exhibited a rare moment of restraint. Different from a number of other expert pilots, she appeared to be capable of recognizing her shortcomings.

Maybe spending some time at the lowest a human could possibly be had given a good dose of perspective. If she was like Venerable Jannzi who never suffered a serious setback, her head would have probably swollen from all of her arrogance.

"For the next century, I agree to serve the Larkinson Clan in good faith." Venerable Stark proposed. "I expect to receive the same treatment that you afford to the other expert pilots of your clan. This includes providing me with training resources, expert mechs and relevant support. As long as you and your clan do not neglect me, I will bear arms against any of your enemies unless you ask me to violate my conscience."

Her compromise sounded intriguing. She did not open up with an outrageous set of demands. In fact, Ves was quite surprised by how reasonable she sounded. Obviously, just because she was willing to take a step back didn't mean she had turned into a skilled negotiator!

Ves coughed a bit. "What do you mean by the last point?"

"I am willing to fight against any manner of evil." The female expert pilot elaborated. "If your fleet is waylaid by pirates, I will help you put them down. If an alien force bars your way, I will slaughter them all. However, if you are thinking about launching an

unprovoked attack against a group that does not deserve it, I will not be a part of it. If you ever cross the line by engaging in piracy or slaughtering innocent people, then do not blame me for turning my arms against your forces."

His face grew grim as Venerable Stark set her terms. She did not avoid the worst outcome. By stating her willingness to become an enemy of the Larkinson Clan should it cross some sort of line, she was not doing herself any favors!

"You're not making it easy for me, Venerable Stark."

"I do not see why. My strength is at your disposal as long as you do not commit any evil."

"I understand that, but the line between good and evil isn't always clear. What might be okay in our book may be highly reprehensible to you. How can we know what is allowed and not allowed?"

"I will warn you first if I foresee any possible conflict." She stated. "So far, I do not believe this will be a grave concern. An honorable clan such as yours would never stoop so low."

"That is good to hear. We Larkinsons may have separated from our previous service, but we still aim to uphold the ideals of our predecessors. The problem is that not every conflict is a straightforward clash between good and evil."

"What are you talking about?"

"What if we are competing against a rival to harvest a deposit of phasewater in the Red Ocean? Both of us entered the Nyxian Gap in pursuit of riches. Backing off just because someone is eying the same treasure as us just because we don't want to harm anyone is not very practical. Would you allow us to fight against such people, or will you force us to miss this opportunity in order to avoid hurting your feelings?"

She frowned. This was indeed a troubling example.

"In neutral circumstances such as these, I will not afford your opponents any sympathy. If you can make them back off without a fight, then that would be best. If they persist despite knowing they will come to blows with us, then they can fault no one but themselves if they lose their lives. Just make sure you do not bear your arms against civilians whenever possible. It is enough to defeat the combatants. Show some mercy to those who do not pose a threat to you and your clan."

"That is.. acceptable." Ves conceded. "However, don't forget that many spaceborn powers have a tendency to live aboard the same ship they work. This means that there will be instances where we will encounter vessels that pose a threat to us but also carry the families of mech pilots and other combat personnel. Will we be forced to fight with

our hands tied behind our back even if that will give our enemies a chance to wipe out the entire Larkinson Clan?"

Venerable Stark scowled at him. "Cease these incessant attempts! I will not allow you to muddle my mind, Devil Tongue. As I have stated before, I will listen to my conscience. If casualties cannot be avoided, I may exercise some flexibility. However, as long as the remaining enemies pose no further threat, then I hope you will be able to stop."

This was the most she was willing to go. She already made it clear that she was on guard against his Devil Tongue!

What a headache. Ves hated his moniker. If he wasn't called the Devil Tongue, then he was confident he could manipulate Venerable Stark in compromising even further!

Still, the terms she had already set were not that bad. At the very least, Ves gained a powerful asset that was bound to increase the security of his fleet.

The two talked a bit further about what they were willing to do in order to uphold their end of the deal.

The expert pilot did not gloss over what she sought from Ves and the Larkinson Clan.

"There is a reason why I agree to sign up with you for 100 years and no further. If I am still alive at that time, it is likely that I have reached a level of strength that allows me to begin with furthering my actual goals. Whatever I have experienced over the course of my service to your clan will also help me navigate through society by myself."

Oh boy. Venerable Stark was no different from a revolutionary in his eyes. She was bound to stir up a lot of trouble once she got loose!

While he and his clan might not have anything to do with her agenda, once she started making enemies, her past affiliation with the Larkinsons meant that the clan might attract a lot of heat as well!

If Ves wanted to avoid any possible negative repercussions, then he had to resolve this problem.

The first option was to find a way to hook her into the Larkinson Clan. As long as she earnestly turned into a Larkinson, she wouldn't jeopardize her fellow clansmen in order to pursue her vendetta.

This was very difficult. Expert pilots couldn't be manipulated like regular people. Their iron will and steely convictions meant that external influences such as the Larkinson Network simply had no effect!

In hindsight, Ves should have forced her into the Larkinson Clan when she was at her weakest. In her broken state, her mind should have been susceptible to indoctrination. Now, it was too late. Not only had she healed, but she even managed to temper mental fortitude in the process!

To be honest, if not for her unreasonable purpose, Ves actually favored an expert pilot like her. The extremes she went through turned her into an expert pilot that was both unflinching but also flexible.

In other words, she was a bit more human.

Maybe Ves should force recalcitrant expert pilots such as Venerable Jannzi through the same experience. Only by getting confronted by the consequences of failure would expert pilots like her truly understand that their power did not make them invincible.

Several more minutes passed as Ves and Venerable Stark slowly set the terms of their contract.

One of the stumbling blocks was the matter of providing her with an expert mech.

"I want an expert mech that comes from you." She stated. "I want to receive the same benefits that you intend to provide to your other expert pilots. I have heard the rumors. From what I have observed from your clan, they are likely true. If you are capable of designing a mech that can accelerate my growth, then do not withhold this benefit from me. I need to grow as much as possible while I am in your service."

Ah. This must be the primary reason why she applied to fight on behalf of the Larkinson Clan. She could have approached other organizations, but she specifically came to him because he offered her the best growth opportunities that she could get! No one else managed to facilitate as many breakthroughs as Ves! Even if the rumors were a bit exaggerated, she still appreciated his living mechs!

"Uhm, I can do that, but... right now it is very difficult to fulfill your needs. You may have to wait a number of years for us to prepare your expert mech."

He needed at least an entire year to design and fabricate his first expert mech in his estimation. An expert mech was such a complex machine that their optimization often continued after they were made!

His answer did not make her happy.

"That is too long. I cannot waste any time in improving myself. I need an expert mech as soon as possible in order to make the best use of my hundred years of servitude."

"You're not the only expert pilot on the waiting list. I have five other names and it is very hard to justify letting you go first."

"If I may interject, I may be able to offer a solution for that." Venerable Brutus butted into the negotiations. "You do not need to fund the project or provide the necessary materials to fabricate the expert mech. The Wodin Dynasty can cover these needs. We can even seek out a Master from the Hegemony to provide you with the necessary technical support."

"That's a generous offer. However, I can hardly imagine that you're doing this for free."

"You are quite astute, Ves." Brutus smiled. "The reason why we are willing to cover for the development of Davia Stark's expert mech is because this will be your payment for developing my next expert mech."

Ves sat up straighter in his chair. "Are you serious?! You already have an expert mech! Your Star Dancer is quite an impressive expert mech. I can easily imagine it serving you well for one or two decades."

Brutus shook his head. "The Star Dancer is an excellent mech, but it is not a living mech. If I continue to pilot it, I suspect your Larkinson expert pilots will gradually leave me far behind. I do not want to become irrelevant. In order to protect my sister to the greatest possible degree, I need greater strength just as my fellow expert pilot here. As long as you design my expert mech to the best of your ability, the Wodin Dynasty will take care of the cost."

This was quite a generous proposal. To be honest, this was exactly what he needed if he wanted to add two additional expert mechs to his fleet.

Though Venerable Stark wouldn't be sticking around forever, the Larkinsons needed as much help as possible when it was still in its infancy. A century from now, a single expert pilot like her probably wasn't as critical anymore.

As for Brutus, while he wasn't a Larkinson, his inclusion in the Glory Seekers effectively meant that he would be fighting alongside the Larkinson Clan for the long haul. Empowering him was no different from empowering his Larkinson Clan in that case.

As Ves thought about how he could take advantage of this deal, Brutus issued a warning.

"Oh, before you think of withholding some of your best inventions, Gloriana will be watching you like a hawk. Don't think about cutting any corners."

Damn.

Chapter 2484: Uplift Plan

Though the proposals put forward by both Venerable Stark and Venerable Brutus foisted a lot of obligations onto Ves and his clan, the payoff was considerable.

Even when the Larkinson Clan suffered from the rare problem of having too many expert pilots, obtaining the strength of two additional demigods was still an attractive prospect.

When Ves considered his upcoming grand expedition, he knew that no matter how much he prepared for the Red Ocean, the other pioneers who had already arrived would certainly be stronger than him. The requirements of accessing the dwarf galaxy were so onerous that only those with strength with ability were able to take part in the scramble for phasewater and virgin territory.

Perhaps Ves might be confident in the strength of his forces when he only had to fight compete against other powers from the galactic rim. The pioneers from the local star cluster such as Hexers, Fridaymen, Vicious Mountainers and Majestic Tealers were pretty much on the same level as him. At most, they might be able to bring more manpower, ships and resources, but their foundation shouldn't differ as much.

Of course, those who emerged from the more prosperous parts of the galactic rim such as the Winged Serenade Star Sector enjoyed some advantages in tech, talent and capital. Ves didn't believe the gap was insurmountable, though.

It was a different story when it came to the pioneers who originated from the galactic heartland or the galactic center.

The second-class powers who emerged from the more developed parts of the galaxy possessed much better foundations. Their mechs were stronger. Their mech pilots were better trained. Their vessels were more numerous and more resistant against damage. Their tech was simply unheard of in the galactic rim.

When both sides brought an equal number of mechs, ships and other support, Ves did not expect the Larkinson Clan to gain the upper hand.

The disparity was too big!

"Maybe every hopeful pioneer from the galactic rim will endure a lot of bullying once they enter the Red Ocean.

Ordinarily, this wasn't a problem. The immense geographic separation between powers coming from the different galactic regions meant that it was difficult for one of them to bully the others.

All of that was changing now that the Gate Consortium was building up a far-reaching network of beyonder gates.

In the Red Ocean, people from every part of human space would converge in a tiny galaxy that was only a fraction the size of the Milky Way. However, once the old galaxy

got used to the gates, Ves guessed that neglected regions such as the Yeina Star Cluster might receive a considerable number of distant visitors in the coming decades!

As long as people were able and willing to pay the price, humans from the galactic rim could instantly reach the galactic center and vica versa. It no longer took entire generations to cross hundreds of thousands of light-years. The instance where the Temple Protector of the Five Scrolls Compact reached the Komodo Star Sector a decade ahead of time was just the start of a new era!

In any case, once the Larkinson Clan entered the Red Ocean, it would certainly start off as one of the weakest second-class powers among the crowd!

Of course, by harvesting the riches of the Red Ocean and trading with powerful groups, his clan should quickly be able to catch up. This was what Ves was really after. The Red Ocean was a melting pot filled with weaker and stronger pioneers. By designing mechs with advantages that appealed to these wealthy organizations, his clan would be able to uplift itself at a much more rapid pace than if it remained in a relatively barren and underdeveloped place like the galactic rim!

This was his central plan. Though it was fraught with danger, Ves was confident he could navigate the challenges!

"It's not enough to become a Master Mech Designer within a century. There are many Masters in the galaxy, but they aren't necessarily powerful. Only a small subset of Masters are ahead of their other colleagues."

At a minimum, he should reach the same stature as Master Willix before he could even think about contending against the Five Scrolls Compact!

She was 170 years old according to her public record. Ves couldn't wait that long. He and his parents would always live under the shadow of the Compact until he finally became strong enough to survive the exposure of the Mech Designer System.

"Not that I intend that to happen." He muttered.

That would take a lot of time. Until then, Ves needed to build up as many advantages as possible before his fleet passed through the inter-galactic beyonder gate.

Aside from leveraging his living mechs to grant unique advantages to his Larkinson mech pilots, he intended to lean on his expert pilots to make up the difference.

It was unheard of for a spaceborn fleet of the Larkinson Clan's current scale to enjoy the protection of seven expert pilots!

That was an insane proportion considering that the Larkinson Clan only had a couple of thousands of mech pilots at its disposal. Most of them also consisted of newly-recruited talents who still needed to be integrated in their respective mech forces.

As long as a handful of expert candidates broke through, he might very well be able to command up to ten or twelve transcendent mech pilots!

With so many expert pilots at his disposal, most people would never think about attacking the Larkinson Clan!

"I guess I'll need to put a much greater emphasis on designing expert mechs in the next few years."

This was not ideal for Ves. Both he and Gloriana were still Journeymen who were unable to design expert mechs by themselves. They needed to reach out to third-party Seniors or Masters in order to deliver proper expert mechs.

"Well, if I need immediate access to a Master Mech Designer, I can always knock on the doors of the Wodin Dynasty."

Venerable Brutus Wodin readily arranged the services of a Master. That told Ves that he could probably ask the dynasty to find a cooperative high-ranking mech designer whenever he wanted.

Normally, he would celebrate this opportunity. Yet the thought that he would have to collaborate with a Hexer mech designer who was far worse than Gloriana instantly spoiled his mood.

"Two times is enough. I don't think I can tolerate anything more."

For the sake of gaining two powerful helpers in the form of Brutus and Stark, Ves was willing to grit his teeth and suffer whatever a Hexer Master Mech Designer threw at him. It wasn't necessary for them to become friends to design an adequate mech.

There were other ways to expand his clan's ability to survive the Red Ocean.

"We can partner up with other powerful allies."

He couldn't help but stray his thoughts towards the Cross Clan. As ragged as they appeared, they should have at least something going for them. While he looked down on them to an extent, he knew that the Crosser mech pilots could probably beat his mech pilots in any even fight!

His men simply couldn't catch up to the impressive martial traditions of an established power that once ruled a portion of the mighty Garlen Empire. It took decades to accumulate a comparable degree of skill and experience.

Since the Cross Clan had entered the Cinach System in strength, the foreign exiles were clearly aiming to cooperate with the Larkinson Clan.

Ves wasn't in a hurry to meet with the Crossers. He didn't want to appear too eager. Against such a powerful clan, he needed every advantage that he could get in order to guarantee the rights of his clansmen.

Once he finished his musings, he decided to get some advice on the matter. He already sounded out Calabast, so he decided to stop by Major Verle.

As Ves exited his office with Lucky, he walked through the temporary base, greeting several passing Larkinsons as he approached the building taken up by the expanding Military Bureau.

Different from half a year ago, the Larkinson Clan adopted a lot of pets!

"Maw maw maw!"

"Wuuu.. wuuuu.. wuuuu."

"Chirp!"

"Hsss... hssss..."

Scores of well-behaved animals were making the base livelier. The cats, dogs, lizards, birds and other pets each showed signs of intelligence.

If they weren't sentient, they were liable to get in the way of a passing mech.

Ves slowed his steps and looked bemused at the row of cats looking at Ves, Lucky and the Larkinson Mandate with worship.

To his surprise, every single pet was connected to the Larkinson Network!

"That's not right! Goldie! Did you let them into the network?"

Nyaaa.

A grim expression appeared on his face. He only took humans into account when he designed the Larkinson Network. He envisioned the Golden Cat influencing the people connected to the network and vice versa. While the former was technically a cat, Goldie was such a formidable lifeform that she transcended her species!

The same was not the case for the pets that Ves encouraged his clansmen to adopt. What if the army of cats passed on their cattiness to his clansmen? Would they begin to

go crazy as soon as they sniffed catnip? Would Ves have to worry about them developing a habit of licking each other?

As Ves peered at the pets some more, he became a bit less concerned. Connected they may be, their minds and spirits were very weak. They couldn't compare against actual humans. This meant that they shouldn't be able to exert any meaningful influence through the Larkinson Network.

In fact, rather than worrying about the animals influencing humans, he should instead worry about pets taking on human-like traits!

"Well, they're just a bunch of designer pets. Even if they grow smarter, at most they'll be able to count to ten. Goldie will keep an eye on them as well to ensure they won't pose a threat to the clan."

He tossed aside this problem and continued to walk until he entered Major Verle's office.

"Sir, what brings you here today?"

Ves threw Lucky in the air and sat down at a nearby chair. "Tell me about the Cross Clan."

"Meow!"

As he spun around in the air, Lucky quickly stabilized his flight. He grumpily landed on top of Ves' head and began to mess up any hair within reach.

Both Ves and Major Verle ignored Lucky's antics.

Once Major Verle pulled up some data about the Cross Clan, he began to share his thoughts.

"We don't know the actual state of the Crossers. While we can infer a lot of clues by observing their ships and mechs, the Vicious Mountainers have proven to be surprisingly good at hiding secrets. Some of my analysts think that this is an indication that the Cross Clan is hiding something valuable. This may be something that the foreigners intend to use as a bargaining chip in their negotiation with us. So far, we don't know what it is, and we don't dare to press too close. It is unseemingly to engage in subterfuge when there is a strong MTA presence in the star system. We can't explain ourselves if we get caught."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "You made the right choice. Even without an active MTA presence, there are too many other visitors who are keeping an eye on us. We'd have to be stupid to do something to one of our guests. Let's get back to the Cross Clan. Aside from their combat strength, what makes them special?"

Major Verle did not answer instantly. Instead, he manipulated his desk terminal until he came across the right file.

A large projection appeared in front of Ves. It depicted a thick, physical book.

"What am I looking at, major?"

"The personal journal of Lord Hemmington Cross."

Ves widened his eyes. "What does it contain?!"

"Lord Hemmington left this journal behind so that the expert pilots of his clan can learn from his experiences. While the book doesn't contain a concrete formula on how to advance to ace pilot, the insights it contains are doubtlessly invaluable to anyone looking to reach this exalted rank."

The Cross Clan became a lot more interesting now that it had shown its willingness to share such a treasure!

Chapter 2485: Autonomous Expert Pilots

Several expert pilots came together.

Despite their commonalities, they rarely sought each other out. Expert pilots possessed their own convictions and weren't afraid to convey them. When two expert pilots with different perspectives gathered together, some level of friction always took place.

Though the Larkinson expert pilots weren't specifically opposed to each other, having their domains rub against each other was not entirely comfortable. This was one of the reasons why high-ranking mech pilots generally did not congregate in larger numbers.

Today was an exception. Every expert pilot of the Larkinson Clan entered a meeting room. They were quite familiar with each other, so they did not speak too much.

Some form of friction was immediately evident. The air became charged with competing domains. None wished to admit defeat. Eventually, a balance formed where each expert pilot claimed a small piece of territory.

Venerable Joshua stood furthest away from his former girlfriend. He looked towards his girlfriend with hope, only for her to turn around to chat with Venerable Rosa Orfan and Venerable Dise.

At least someone kept him company.

"Girl problems?"

"Don't start. What about you?"

"We're expert pilots, buddy. We don't need to hook any fish. They come swimming towards us as if we're made of bait. Once we get tired, we can throw our catch aside and grab another one from the water."

Joshua frowned. "That's not for me. I'm looking for a relationship that lasts. I thought I had something with Jannzi, but we've grown too far apart."

Venerable Tusa snorted. "I don't know why you want to shackle yourself to a woman so soon. We're still young enough to enjoy the pleasures of life. Family life can wait until we've grown older and overcome our initial years as expert pilots. Right now, we may be demigods, but we're the weakest ones around. Any seasoned expert pilot with the right mech can beat us into the ground."

"I think that's an even greater reason to commit to a relationship. If I ever go, at least a part of me lives on. The patriarch will take good care of my family."

"More like the patriarch will find every way possible to milk your kids like he is milking us. Sheesh, Joshua. It's fine if you drool all over our mechs, but don't let that blind you to the shady stuff that is taking place. The last battle..."

Joshua made a warning gesture. "Let's not talk about that."

"Haven't you ever wondered why Ves really entered the Nyxian Gap and almost drove us all to our deaths? Gaining experience, my butt. No amount of live combat is worth losing so many of our comrades. The way I see it, the so-called dark gods that showed up at the Battle of Ulimo Citadel and the Battle against the Abyss might be his actual mission. Defeating the Gravada Knarlax was just icing on the cake for him. Haven't you ever asked yourself why a random portal showed up? What is the patriarch's relationship with the Dark Cleaver? Why is he so friendly with that humanoid alien god?"

Though every expert pilot had been ordered to move on from the battles, Venerable Tusa hadn't been able to do so. Too many abnormalities had taken place ever since he joined the clan. It was completely opposite to the old Larkinson Family which had always been incredibly stable.

Before Tusa could spread his views further, the entrance to the room slid open. An old man along with a few young adjutants passed through.

The staff officers immediately felt as if they entered a room with elevated pressure. Different emotional fields crashed against their minds, causing them to slow their steps.

"Restrain yourselves, please. We are all Larkinsons here. Give my subordinates some reprieve."

The old man's voice did not have much force behind it, but something about it commanded respect.

The expert pilots no longer let their force of wills run around unabated. They actively retracted their presence.

The oppressiveness inside the room quickly dimmed. The staff officers quickly regained their breath.

Once the old man stood at the head of the stable, he gestured to every expert pilot to take their seats.

"I am Cristoph Larkinson. Patriarch Ves Larkinson and Major Quinlist Verle have invested me as the head of the newly-founded Hall of Heroes. As your commandant, I am not your boss. Few people within the clan have the right to issue commands to Venerables. You should see me and my office as your stewards. We handle the paperwork. We take charge of your logistics. We crew your ships and service your mechs. Are you clear about my role?"

Venerable Tusa raised his hand. "Sir, does that mean I can refuse any orders or suggestions you issue?"

The new commandant nodded. "Correct. My men and I do not presume to control you. We don't have the right. You have been granted a lot of autonomy for the clan because certain people believe that is the best way for you to develop your strength."

"Why take us away from our units?" Venerable Dise resentfully asked. "The Swordmaidens are mine. I belong there, not in this stupid hall."

"Ditto." Venerable Orfan uttered.

"Too much hand holding won't do the Swordmaidens and the Flagrant Vandals any favors. While we don't prohibit you from interacting with your former subordinates, we advise you to keep some distance. This will enable them to stand up for themselves. Requesting your aid should be a measure of last resort, not a routine choice whenever they are in trouble. Do you understand?"

The former commanders shook their heads. They had strong ties to their former units. They never imagined that the clan would pull them out and dump them into the 'Hall of Heroes'.

To say that they were pissed was an understatement!

Despite facing the ire of two expert pilots, Commandant Cristoph kept his composure. As a veteran of the Bright-Vesia Wars, he had experienced worse in battle. Facing down a pair of expert pilots hardly phased the war veteran.

"It's understandable that you are upset, but I think you will understand the merits of this approach in time. Just give it a few years. If you are still opposed, then you may bring your complaints to the clan patriarch."

That settled issue, for now at least.

Tusa asked another question.

"Sir, how does the Hall of Heroes fit within the force makeup of our clan? What is our role?"

The commandant smiled. "That is mostly up to you. While our Hall can issue requests or offer advice, we do not intend to force you to do something that you object to. Don't want to tutor any mech pilots? That's fine. You want to take every weekend off? You can skip your duties as long as your presence isn't required. As I've stated earlier, you can choose to go anywhere you like and spend time with any clansmen you want."

The expert pilots each looked mollified after hearing that. The Hall of Heroes truly did not intend to subject them to any rigid discipline. It was up to themselves to choose how they wanted to spend their time.

"Isn't this a bit too.. Loose?" Venerable Jannzi puzzlingly questioned. "How will the Hall of Heroes benefit the rest of the clan if we are not obliged to do anything?"

"We will reward you for every contribution you make." Commandant Cristoph answered. "One of our roles is to track your efforts and determine how many Larkinson merits you are owed."

"Larkinson merits?"

"They're still relevant to expert pilots such as you. We are not in the Mech Corps or the military anymore. Your mech regiments won't automatically take care of all of your needs. If you do nothing, you will still earn a salary and obtain some decent benefits, but if you want more, you will have to work for it. You can exchange any merits you earn for any of the regular rewards offered by the Larkinson Merit Exchange such as augments and such."

"Is that all?" Venerable Orfan frowned.

As expert pilots, they had already transcended their humanity to an extent. Even without possessing any implants or modified genes, their piloting skill had already exceeded the standard of elite second-class mech pilots who enjoyed all of the latest gene mod templates and implants.

While their minds and wills had experienced the greatest transformations, their bodies were no longer normal either, though their physical changes were fairly modest.

Some high-ranking expert pilots even eschewed modifications entirely! It was entirely possible for baseline humans to evolve all the way to god pilot!

Therefore, augments no longer held the same attraction to the expert pilots. What were they supposed to spend their merits on instead?

Cristoph already understood that regular rewards no longer attracted them. They needed something else to keep them motivated.

"Don't worry. We haven't neglected your wants and needs. The main reason why you want to earn Larkinson merits is because the Larkinson Merit Exchange will open a list of rewards exclusive to expert pilots."

He gestured his hand. A projection of a list appeared into view.

While the list didn't contain many items, many of them immediately aroused their interest!

"These are... rewards relating to our expert mechs!"

"Exactly." Commandant Cristoph smirked. "One of the benefits of having a pair of excellent mech designers in our clan is that they can provide a wide latitude of services to you. While we are still in the process of preparing your initial expert mechs for you, once you have them, you'll want them to get better. As long as you are useful to the clan, you'll earn enough merits to make use of the services on the list."

The list already offered the expert pilots a number of desirable options. They ranged from modifying their expert mechs, upgrading their expert mechs, obtaining additional weapons or modules and so on. The most extravagant reward on the list was to obtain a second expert mech!

The expert pilots were pleased at this arrangement. While the Larkinson Clan didn't provide them with a lot of welfare, none of the expert pilots were lazy or self-entitled. They all intended to contribute to the clan regardless, but with this special merit structure in place, they knew exactly what they could get. They weren't subject to superiors who held the final say on when to upgrade their expert mechs and how many additional loadouts they should have.

As long as the expert pilots wanted more, they would never rest. Each of them were driven people. Just because they gained the opportunity to shed their mortality didn't mean that they had reached their end goal.

Becoming an expert pilot was just the start! The road to god pilot was unimaginably long, but each Venerable dreamed of reaching the end. Those who gave up easily never possessed the fortitude to undergo apotheosis in the first place!

Commandant Cristoph answered some additional questions. The expert pilots wanted to know what contributions earned them merits and what would be the best way to harvest them quickly.

"Aside from defending our clan in battle, training your fellow mech pilots is the next-best way to earn merits." The older Larkinson said. "You will be judged by how much the mech pilots you have tutored have improved beyond the norm. If any of them happen to break through to an expert candidate or expert pilot, then you'll be rewarded with a hefty amount of merits."

This made every expert pilot thoughtful. Perhaps they should spend more time with the existing expert candidates of the clan. If they managed to help any of them advance, then that would mean they could strengthen their expert mechs!

"One more thing. While it is true that we do not foist too many demands on you, we do insist that each of you obtain a retinue. Venerable Joshua, Venerable Jannzi, and Venerable Tusa already have one, so only Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise must set this up. Just recruit some mech pilots you like. Allow them to stay close to you. Let them learn from you and keep you company. Once you let your attendants go, we hope they will grow into exceptional elites."

In fact, the Larkinson Clan hoped that some battle companions might break through as well in the future!

Chapter 2486: He's A Good Boy

"I'm telling you, Raella! Some good old-fashioned mech duels are indispensable to a good show!"

Director Raella Larkinson shoved Vincent aside. "Your suggestion is noted. I will make sure to consider your input carefully before I throw it in the trash."

"Come on! Why don't you agree? The mech athletes in our clan are jumping at the opportunity to impress the wedding guests!"

"I SAID NO, OKAY?! Many of our guests are Hexers or visitors from other second-rate states. They'll laugh at us when we try to entertain them with duels between third-class mechs."

"Then why aren't we duelling with second-class mechs instead?"

"We're not good enough yet! Rather than embarrassing ourselves, we should impress the guests in other ways. Parading around the captured warships and showing off our expert pilots is enough to earn their respect. There is no need for us to paint ourselves as clowns by showing off our weak and pathetic mechs."

"The Adonis Colossus is not weak and pathetic! He's a masterpiece!"

Raella glared extra hard at Vincent. "My decision is final. Besides, even if you managed to convince me, you still have to go through Gloriana. Let me tell you that she thinks even less of our mech games circuit."

With all of the focus towards the military side of the Larkinson Clan, the leisure side received relatively little attention.

The more serious clansmen still saw Raella's efforts as trivial, but she knew her investment would eventually pay off in the future.

The main reason why the Larkinsons didn't yearn too much for in-house entertainment was because they had easy access to an entire planet. Off-duty Larkinsons frequently took a shuttle ride to the cities of Cinach VI. There, they could attend much grander arena matches or go out at some amazing venues.

Yet once the grand expedition truly started, every Larkinson needed to get used to living most of their lives aboard ships. The carriers, transports, logistical ships and so on provided much less venues for entertainment.

At that time, Raella believed the Larkinson Championship Series would become the primary form of group entertainment for her fellow clansmen. Compared to most forms of virtual entertainment, a competitive circuit that not only took place in realspace but was rooted in the clan should be able to capture the imagination of many Larkinsons!

"Am I right, Minxie?"

"Nyeow~"

The elegant white cat resting on her lap squinted her eyes and rubbed her furry head against Raella.

As Raella laid some plans for the future while ignoring Vincent's complaints, elsewhere another Larkinson contemplated his future.

After presiding over an exhaustive meeting that dealt with the reorganization and expansion of the Avatars of Myth, Melkor Larkinson wandered off to a large mech workshop. After passing through the mandatory security checks, he entered the enormous hall.

A large number of heavily-damaged mechs that Task Force Predator hadn't been able to restore were being reconstructed by hundreds of industrious mech technicians. A handful of low-ranking mech designers diligently planned out the repairs while the chief technicians made sure their men followed their instructions.

Off to the side, a team of Braves and Erudites were personally caring over a special mech.

While the Quint was still in fighting shape when it returned to Cinach, its condition had deteriorated. A lot of smaller issues and microcracks had formed that might not impact its performance now, but would lead to severe problems in the future.

In order to make sure the mech retained its masterwork quality, the clan had to provide it with excellent care.

Several teams of notable mech designers such as Rina Orion, Felicia Slenn and Oscar DiMartin reverentially disassembled the exceptional machine and serviced its parts.

"How is the work proceeding?"

"It's going well, sir, though we're running behind schedule." Merrill O'Brian answered. "The Quint is not a regular Bright Warrior mech. We would rather err on the side of caution than ruin one of the Miracle Couple's best works."

The majestic mech that was still assigned to Venerable Joshua deserved the best treatment that the Larkinson Clan could offer. Strictly speaking, Ves and Gloriana should have been working on the mech in person, but they were far too busy to perform this kind of work.

The lead designers entrusted the responsibility of maintaining the mechs assigned to the expert pilots to their assistants.

While Melkor wasn't able to judge the quality of their work, so far the Quint did not appear to have suffered. That was good.

"Excuse me, commander, but this is the third time you have come to inspect the Quint in the last three days."

"So?"

Melkor raised his eyebrow. It was too bad that his large visor hid this gesture.

"The Quint is no longer under the purview of the Avatars of Myth." Merrill flatly stated. "Venerable Joshua Larkinson and his Bright Companions have been transferred to the Hall of Heroes. Frankly speaking, the condition of the masterwork mech is none of your business anymore."

The Avatar Commander smiled wryly. "I am aware of that. I still can't stop myself from coming back. I'll be seeing this mech a lot less once Venerable Joshua settles on another berth. Hopefully, once he obtains his expert mech, the Quint will become free."

"Are you.. hoping to become its next mech pilot?"

"I can't hide it from anyone, huh? Your guess is right."

"It's not much of a guess when everyone here can see how much you yearn to pilot it. Even I get amazed at how this mech just comes together in a way that none of the other machines can match. You're not a mech designer, so you don't fully understand the brilliance of what we see. It's a privilege to work on such a sublime mech."

"I hope you will take good care of it, because I will fight to be its next mech pilot." Melkor spoke with determination. "I've saved up all of my merits and refrained from spending it anywhere else. I hope Ves will grant my request even if my Avatars haven't performed fantastically well during the Nyxian Gap Campaign."

After spending years on establishing the Avatars of Myth as the premier mech troop of the Larkinson Clan, his personal development as a mech pilot had suffered. It was impossible for him to match the training intensity of every other Avatar mech pilot when he had to be in charge all the time.

Yet in his heart, he still hadn't forgotten his identity as a mech pilot. Whenever he encountered Venerable Joshua or Venerable Tusa, he wanted to be like them. He would eagerly give up his position as Avatar Commander if he was able to become an expert pilot!

"You should wait before you make any hasty requests." Merrill advised. "The clan patriarch has made it clear to us that the Quint is no longer a mech to be piloted lightly. He is personally in charge of deciding who gets to pilot it, and he has already told us that only expert candidates are eligible."

Her words instantly collapsed half of Melkor's dreams!

"Why?"

"You would have to ask our patriarch about that. From what I see, the Quint and a number of other LMC mechs that have survived the Nyxian Gap Campaign are.. different. They are stronger and greater than the mechs that have always been in use here in Cinach. I think that these machines may have been the reason why our clan has welcomed the likes of Venerable Joshua."

Her views only fueled Melkor's desire to pilot the Quint! Wasn't it good that the masterwork mech facilitated Venerable Joshua's rise? What if he received the opportunity to pilot this great machine?

Though Melkor understood the logic of letting the expert candidates pilot the Quint instead, the selfish part of him wanted to seek out Ves right away!

"Hold your horses, commander." Merrill grasped his arm. "The Quint is a fine mech, but its design doesn't completely fit a mech pilot such as you. It's better off in the hands of someone who is skilled in more aspects of mech combat. Our clan will soon have something better in store."

"Such as what?"

"The successor to the Crystal Lord."

Melkor frowned. "I've heard about that. I'm no longer interested in piloting third-class mechs."

"I think you'll find the second version of the Crystal Lord to be a lot more impressive than you think. Besides, just like the Quint and the other mechs of the expert pilots, you can ask the Miracle Couple to customize a mech that fits your needs."

That sounded a bit more interesting to Melkor. "Tell me more."

As the two discussed his potential options, some Wodins were gathering some distance away.

Constance Wodin greeted her oldest two daughters as she studied a projection of the hexagonal-shaped wedding platform.

Every single detail had to be as precise and flawless as possible to do her youngest's wedding justice!

"Mother." Amarintha Wodin spoke first. "We have studied the changes taking place in the Larkinson Clan ever since the boy returned."

"Report." The imperious woman spoke.

"The Larkinson Clan is accelerating its preparations to embark on a grand expedition. Their current focus lies in recruiting high-skilled mech pilots and other personnel as well as accumulating supplies suited for extended journeys."

The three Wodin women were disappointed at this development.

"So Ves Larkinson truly intends to leave." Constance wearily remarked.

"He's too rebellious for his own good." Kellandra gritted her teeth. "Gloriana hasn't done a good job at restraining him. In fact, she's letting him run free!"

Constance raised her hand, causing her second daughter to fall silent.

"We have talked about this. We cannot apply our standards to the boy and his clan. They are foreigners, not Hexers. It may be difficult to accept this truth, but for the sake of our daughter, let us not spoil our relationship with the Larkinsons."

Amarintha reluctantly nodded in agreement. "Mother is right. We're not used to this, but we aren't dealing with other Hexers anymore."

Dealing with foreigners on an equal basis was something new to the Hexers. To them, foreigners either meant Fridaymen or lessers. In both cases, the Hexers were used to issuing demands.

"Kellandra, what have you learned from the movements of their high-ranking mech pilots?"

"They're trying out something different. Rather than keeping their expert pilots attached to their units, the Larkinsons have set up a Hall of Heroes where they will preside from now on. Strangely enough, control over them is very loose. They can do as much or as little as they want, but if they want to obtain rewards such as upgrading their expert mechs, they have to earn merits like the rest of their clansmen."

"How.. Fridaymen of them." Her sister reacted with contempt. "This is straight out of the playbook of the Fortune Legion. Rather than keeping his expert pilots under control, the boy intends to incentivize them as if he were a merchant."

"He's a mech designer and a businessman. You can't expect anything better from such a greedy boy."

"His greed played an essential role in his success. While we Hexers are accustomed to taking orders from those who are older and wiser than us, the debased people of the rest of the galaxy can only be manipulated by acting on their material desires." Constance lightly rebuked her daughters. "Now, what is the state of our Glory Seekers?"

"They are fully ready to accompany the Larkinson Clan." Kellandra answered. "We have made sure to add plenty of civilian personnel to their ranks. Once they reach the Red Ocean, they can establish a Hexer colony in the new galaxy whenever they find the right opportunity. Gloriana will have her kingdom if she so desires."

"Gloriana has always been ambitious. If the Larkinson Clan cannot keep her safe, then the Glory Seekers cannot fail."

"We know, mother. While there are limits to what the Glory Seekers can bring, Brutus will make sure that Gloriana is well-cared for. He's a good boy."

"That he is." Constance smiled.

Chapter 2487: Dreaming About Ships

The vigorous preparations for the grand wedding continued apace. With the final days counting down, the last guests authorized to attend the wedding had just arrived in time.

Those who arrived after the deadline had passed were not allowed to go any further. There was too little time for them to reach the inner system and undergo a thorough background and security check.

While hardly anyone believed that someone would disrupt such an important wedding, it was better to be safe than sorry.

As more and more visitors converged from as far away as the Winged Serenade Star Sector, a lot of noteworthy people came as well.

Mech designers, exobiologists, weapon developers, shipwrights, infantry commanders and other distinguished professionals arrived to attend the highly-anticipated social event.

Even if the wedding hadn't already started, it was already worth it for them to travel to the Cinach System.

Aside from admiring the brutal majesty of the Gravada Knarlax, the guests also socialized with each other. The wedding attracted such a wide and diverse crowd that the visitors eagerly took the opportunity to expand their networks.

In the meantime, the Larkinson Clan quietly approached some of the professionals it most desired. Lately, Ves decreed that they should increase their focus towards recruiting shipwrights.

Of course, he didn't want any casual ship designers. He needed qualified, senior professionals who possessed an abundant amount of experience in designing and building capital ships!

The Larkinson Clan didn't have much luck in attracting them. Shipwrights at this level were usually attached to their companies or states for life. It was extremely rare for any of them to get fired or voluntarily retire from their positions.

Even if it became untenable for them to remain with their established employer, they often received immediate offers from organizations they were already familiar with. There was no need for any of them to jump ship to a volatile clan that might very well crash and burn in a couple of years.

There were always exceptions, though. The Larkinson Clan persisted in its efforts. Finally, the recruiters managed to gain the interest of someone who did not immediately respond with a polite rejection.

The only snag was that the senior shipwright in question wanted to speak to the clan patriarch in person. He would not settle for anything less until he could talk to Ves in person.

So Ves took some time off his busy schedule to meet with the foreigner.

A man who appeared to be middle-aged entered Ves' office. The man did not step on the floor but hovered over it like many other elitist second-raters tended to do. This was a powerful man.

"Mr. Erander Tsai." Ves began as he shook the senior shipwright's hand. "My people tell me you requested a meeting with me. Are you interested in joining the Larkinson Clan or do you wish to make other arrangements?"

"I am here for the latter."

Ves couldn't help but feel disappointed. Tsai had been a bit ambiguous about his needs, probably so that he could meet with Ves. Now that he was here, he no longer needed to play coy.

"I see."

Mr. Tsai lowered himself to his seat and smiled gently. "You misunderstand my intentions. It has never been my purpose to lead you on. I am aware that your Larkinson Clan seeks a shipwright who is experienced in capital ship design and ship construction. I can already tell you that no one else than I will respond to your requests, at least from the local star sectors. Our circle is very tight and I know that everyone at my level is content with their current lot. None of us old bones have any desire to throw away everything we worked for to go on a dangerous adventure."

"If you are not considering our job offer, then what am I mistaken about?"

"I traveled here with my protégé, my daughter Vivian. I have taught and guided her ever since she earned her degree in naval engineering. While she does not have my experience presiding over the design and construction of over fifty unique capital ships like myself, I have imparted the nucleus of my wisdom to her. She may lack the necessary experience, but she is still capable of designing a capital ship from the ground up, provided she has both time and a complete team of assistants. Unlike mech design, capital ships cannot be developed by a single designer."

"As a fellow engineer, I understand." Ves respectfully replied. Deceiving bastard as he was, Erander Tsai was still an incredibly accomplished shipwright. "Tell me more about your daughter, then. Is this your idea or hers? Why haven't you brought her here if you intend to push her forward?"

Mr Tsai's demeanor dampened a bit. "To be honest, it is not her idea to apply to your clan. I am exploring options on her behalf."

"How old is she?"

"Thirty-five."

Ves frowned. "She's old enough to make her own decisions. We don't engage in slavery here. If you are trying to press her into employment with us, we can't accept her in good conscience."

"I am sure I can persuade her that joining you is the right choice." The older man confidently stated.

"Ugh..." Ves rubbed his face. "I don't quite understand. Why are you so eager to dump her onto my lap? While I am not opposed to recruiting a bright shipwright recommended by someone as capable as you, I feel there is a story behind your actions."

"It's not too complicated. Let me begin by explaining our background. As you may have doubtlessly learned, my daughter and I are citizens of the Harmony Association in Majestic Teal. The HA is equivalent to a small second-rate state."

"I am familiar with how Majestic Teal is ruled."

"Good, then that saves me some trouble. I won't waste your time by explaining what the Harmony Association does and what it excels at. It's difficult for us to explain our philosophy to outsiders. Let me state something clearer. I believe the Harmony Association is under threat. While there are few signs of this, the information that I have access to hints at something greater."

Okay, that was better. Ves returned to familiar ground. "I see. So you're afraid the Harmony Association might come under attack, so you want to send off your daughter so that she can avoid the coming storm. While I understand this rationale, surely you could have sent your daughter to a safer destination. I believe that many employers from Winged Serenade should be eager to take on a woman with her qualifications."

"That is true, but she would be joining an organization with few friends, many rivals and competitors, and no strong backers. She will not be able to develop herself as freely and quickly as she has under my wing."

Ves could understand that as well. Mech designers faced these situations all the time. Unless she became her own boss, Vivian Tsai would always have to devote her time on other people's projects.

He decided to play devil's advocate.

"Sometimes, structure isn't necessarily bad. I have heard that shipbuilding is an incredibly time-consuming profession. The amount of knowledge you must learn and the practical experience you need to build enormous ships is astounding. Most people who are capable of designing a capital ship tend to be older than 50 or 60 years old from what I've learned."

Mr. Tsai sighed. "You are well-informed. That is mostly correct. Talent, upbringing and augmentations can do much to shorten the time. While I am confident in my daughter's abilities, she cannot offer you proof. However, you have my word that she is fully up to the task. May I ask what you seek? Normally, most organizations do not engage in shipbuilding. It is too difficult to design ships in-house. It is much more convenient to approach a shipyard."

That was what Ves and the Larkinsons were used to, but he wasn't content with that anymore.

"As a mech designer and craftsman, I have more faith in the products we make ourselves than resorting to products made by others. Starships are one of the most vital assets of a spaceborn power. To entrust their design and construction to third parties is rather precarious. Any enemy can approach the shipyard and steal or buy the full schematics of our vessels."

Mr. Tsai became affronted. "You think too little of us. We have integrity, Mr. Larkinson. We would never betray the trust of our customers!"

"I believe in your integrity, but what of that of your managers? What of your company president, or the owners? Are they as committed to their principles as you are? Greed can sway many people."

The senior shipwright pressed his lips. "I cannot discount that possibility. However, let me tell you that I have not come across a situation where any of our people betrayed anyone's trust."

"Perhaps the company you are working for is honest, but you cannot say that about others. Look, even if the chance of foul play is low, I think it is better if we rely more on ourselves."

"I do not see how that is possible. Capital ships can only be built in capital-grade orbital shipyards. A moving fleet such as yours cannot provide the conditions necessary to build a ship larger than a frigate."

"I'm aware. I don't intend to expand into the shipbuilding industry. What I need are shipwrights who can design the ships our clan needs. Whether we need capital ships or smaller craft, our clan must have a department that is dedicated towards developing these vessels according to our own requirements. As for building the ships, I suppose we can rent out a shipyard from an existing shipbuilding company."

Mr. Tsai was not unfamiliar with this model. "I shall be honest. My daughter may not be entirely suited for such work, but she can grow into the role. The main difficulty is that she will not be able to preside over a shipyard in the long-term. However, I will make sure to be in frequent communication with her so that I can continue to guide her and pass on my wisdom."

"I have no objections to that so long as nothing sensitive is shared over the galactic net."

"You do not need to remind me about confidentiality, Mr. Larkinson. Both of us know what we can say over unsecure channels."

Both of them knew what they wanted from each other. The Larkinson Clan wanted to gain ship design capabilities. While Mr. Tsai had too many commitments and attachments to the Harmony Association to consider any offers, his daughter might be able to take his place.

Ves didn't entirely like this arrangement. He wanted someone who he could fully entrust with the matter of designing new ships for the clan. Rather than getting someone who was the equivalent of a Senior Mech Designer, he would be receiving a younger woman who was akin to an Apprentice Mech Designer.

The gulf between father and daughter was quite vast, and there was no guarantee that the latter might climb her way up anytime soon.

Still, unlike the supply of mech designers, the supply of competent and capable shipwrights was like water in a desert. Their profession was a lot harder to get into. At the same time, many science and engineering students would rather study something cool like mech design.

In the Age of Mechs, the amount of students who wanted to become mech designers was at least a thousand times more than those who wanted to become shipwrights!

This was unthinkable if they were living in the Age of Conquest. Everyone was mad about starships and warships at that time.

At the end of the meeting, Ves had not decided yet whether he should take Vivian on. He had to consider this matter further.

"I will need to meet Vivian before I'm ready to evaluate her. You need to talk to her as well and convince her to join us. If she isn't willing, then we won't take her. Am I clear??"

"You do not need to be worried about this." Tsai confidently stated. "My daughter will see the light soon enough."

Chapter 2488: Saint

With just one day left until the wedding commenced, the entire Cinach System grew tense.

The locals had long become engrossed in the mania surrounding the grand occasion. It didn't matter whether Ves was a former Brighter. The Sentinels even put down their disgust towards Hexers in order to take pride that their state had been chosen as the venue for this enormous event.

Many Sentinel nobles had arrived long ago. Even King Barameth XXIV, the monarch of the Sentinel Kingdom, had arrived a few days ago in a slightly more noteworthy fashion.

Of course, forget about the counts and dukes, even the king couldn't secure a meeting with the Miracle Couple!

Though the Larkinson Clan still needed time to replace its third-class ships and mechs with second-class equivalents, everyone already knew it had effectively reached this level.

Ever since the survivors of the Nyxian Gap Campaign returned with the Gravada Knarlax in tow, only fools doubted the combat prowess of the Larkinson Clan! With at least five expert pilots serving under its wing, the upstart clan had already risen far above other attempts to gain independence!

If that wasn't enough, then the rising fortunes of the Living Mech Company greatly caught the imagination of those who valued the power of money. With an estimated revenue that surpassed that of many companies led by Seniors, the money pouring into the coffers of the Larkinson Clan was more than enough to make even Hexers green with envy!

All of these reasons and more aroused the interests of many distinguished guests from many different second-rate states.

Managing all of these guests was difficult. Rivals and enemies came in close contact with each other. Fortunately, the Hexers brought troops to give anyone second thoughts about starting up trouble.

Still, incidents did take place regardless, giving the security guards a lot of headaches. Ves thought that people at this level were supposed to be calm, thoughtful and rational like Senator Tovar.

In actuality, the wedding drew envoys ranging from hotheads, intellectuals, introverts, militarists, believers and more. Part of it was because many organizations and states

dispatched representatives rather than their heads. Another part of it was that successful people tended to possess forceful personalities.

In order to climb the ranks, it wasn't enough to be quietly competent. Faced with brutal competition, those who wanted to rise above their station had to be proactive.

As Ves spent some time with meeting some of the more important guests, he gained a better sense of high society.

Personally, he did not particularly enjoy entertaining these snobs. They all wanted something from him. Of great importance was whether they could get their hands on his rumored expert pilot-producing mechs. No matter how much he denied their requests, the people who approached him always seemed to think they had a chance.

"Do they think they're special or something? Do they really think the rules don't apply to them? How dare they demand something as controversial as this under Master Willix's nose!"

Aside from this, the visitors also made other inquiries. Some wanted to invest in the LMC. Others wanted to obtain easy passage to the Red Oceans. A few sought to partner up with the Larkinson Clan.

Ves rejected all of them. The offers simply weren't sincere enough. While the benefits they promised might be interesting to the current Larkinson Clan, what about the future?

A decade from now, most of these local tyrants wouldn't be qualified anymore to approach him! Unless they put up something that would interest him in the future, Ves politely rebuffed the greedy bastards who thought they could take advantage of his supposed lack of awareness.

Just because he was an average third-rater a decade ago didn't mean he was easy to fool!

"The hardest person to scam is another scammer!"

One of the hidden advantages he possessed was his spiritual perception. Every prominent guest who met with him possessed strong personalities. This made it relatively easy for Ves to read their overall moods. Even if he couldn't get a precise read on their dim spiritualities, he could get a faint impression of their emotions.

Far too many of the distinguished men and women either felt smug or looked down on him. While they respected his accomplishments, they thought he had risen far too fast to fit into their circle.

Ves wasn't interested in partnering up with those who lacked sincerity. Trust was in short supply, so establishing mutual benefits was necessary to make any deal work. If the people who approached him ignored even that, why should he entertain their offers?

Only a handful of visitors were different.

The Cross Clan was willing to put in 25 million MTA merits to partner up with the Larkinson Clan. Not only that, they brought out the personal journal of an ace pilot as a bargaining chip.

This was enough to catch the Larkinson Clan's attention!

Talks had already begun some time ago. Before any of the leaders met, their underlings cautiously explored each other's stance. They slowly learned what they sought from each other and what they truly needed.

An hour before Ves was scheduled to meet with Patriarch Reginald Cross, Ves studied some documents as a pair of cats claimed a third of his desk.

"Meow~"

"Miaow~"

Lucky and Clixie hardly stayed apart these days. The two cats had taken their months-long separation hard. Now that they were able to keep each other company, they often sought each other out or snuck off to boss around the new pets!

"Nyaaaaa!"

Of course, Goldie couldn't be left out either. Though she couldn't manifest herself for long, the spiritual cat eagerly played with Lucky and Clixie.

In some way, the ancestral spirit could be regarded as their offspring. Ves had created the Golden Cat by using the two older cats as her model.

It was a bit more complicated than that, though. He threw in several other ingredients as well.

Ves wasn't inclined to explore this topic any further.

A few minutes later, Calabast entered his office in order to bring him up to speed.

"What have you discovered?"

"Nothing much. The talks between our two clans haven't been too revealing, and our inability to snoop on them is rather vexing."

"Did you manage to accomplish anything, then?"

She grinned. "Just because we can't investigate the Crossers in this star system doesn't mean we are prohibited from looking elsewhere. I've been contacting some information brokers based in Majestic Teal. They offered me some juicy intel for a price. Don't worry. I didn't go over budget. Some of them had the gall to ask for your special mechs."

"Ugh. This is going to be a recurring phenomenon, right?"

"Yes, so get used to it." Calabast smirked as she leaned her hip against his desk. She casually brushed her hand in Clixie's fur while eying the Golden Cat. "That's new. You're lucky that I'm already used to all of the oddities that happen around you, but you should do a better job of hiding this golding cutie."

She cautiously ruffled the Golden Cat's body. The sensation was unlike anything she had ever felt. The warmth of the Larkinson Clan flowed directly through her touch!

"Nyaaaaa." Goldie licked her fingers.

"It's fine. Anyone who glimpses her will merely mistake her as a physical projection. I'm not stupid enough to show her off in public."

They went back to the main topic. After handing over a data pad that contained her report, she began to explain the highlights.

"There's a problem with their former warlord and ace pilot."

"Every Vicious Mountainer has a problem in my opinion."

"It goes beyond their cultural obsession for war. While I don't have any insider knowledge, outside observers have studied Saint Hemmington extensively and noted some abnormal clues."

Ace pilots were no longer referred to as Venerable. Instead, they were called Saint, though Ves wasn't sure why the MTA would standardize a term that was normally tied to religion. Was the Association attempting to replace traditional faiths with mech pilot worship?

"Let's hear it, then."

"Before the Saint advanced to ace pilot, he was considerably more reserved. Maybe you can chalk this up to his lacking strength, but the Hemmington back then was much more restrained. He often abided by the recommendations of his council and his inner circle."

"And all of that changed one day?"

"Yes. While Hemmington had always been seen as one of the hopefuls who could make it to ace pilot, once he did, his entire personality had shifted. He became more aggressive, pushing for attacks on other tribes regardless of the state of his own forces. He also became harsher towards his own tribe and clan. He regularly berated them when they did not support his decisions. He no longer became open to compromise. He pushed his men hard so that they could keep up with his ambitions."

That sounded very problematic. From what Ves knew of ace pilots, it wasn't unusual for them to change after they attained this rank. In most cases, this was merely a consequence of reaching their goals and attaining a new level of power. They still retained much of their original personality.

This sounded entirely different. Did Lord Hemmington suffer a mishap when he advanced to ace pilot? Did he progress through improper means?

If this was so, then the value of his personal journal was not as great anymore. Who wanted to follow the footsteps of a Saint who basically destroyed himself? Ves did not want Joshua to lose his pleasant personality!

"Have you found the reason why Lord Hemmington deviated to this extent?"

Calabast shook her head. "No. It's something that the Cross Clan simply doesn't talk about at all. They have far too much respect for ace pilots in general and especially one that came from their own ranks. They're all too willing to overlook Saint Hemmington's flaws in order to feel good about themselves. You should be careful about that when you finally talk to Reginald Cross. He's the second son of Hemmington and worships his father immensely."

He grimaced at this news. It turned out the Cross Clan's problems were greater than he realized. Even though the Cross Clan was apparently secular, Ves suspected they were actually religious with how much they idolized their former ace pilot!

"Well, I'm feeling less and less enthusiastic about cooperating with the Cross Clan. Aside from what we already know, is there anything they can offer to us that is worth tolerating their flaws?"

"You'll have to ask Reginald Cross himself. I'm not sure whether they can make concessions. Their clan has lost almost all of its foundations upon fleeing Vicious Mountain. They may be sitting on an enormous pile of cash, but they aren't doing much to replacing their missing income streams."

This was unsustainable. Once their savings ran out, how would the Crossers be able to operate their enormous capital ships?

Perhaps they had a plan he didn't know about, but the lack of foresight was disconcerting. Ves wasn't eager to partner up with a clan that wasn't able to wipe it's

own butt anymore. If his worst fears came true, then the Cross Clan might actually ask Ves to do the job!

Calabast imparted some more details to him. There weren't any signs the Cross Clan intended to settle anywhere in the local regions. The Crossers were quite eager to travel far away in order to start anew in a completely different environment.

"They're not interested in taking revenge. I'm not sure why."

"Maybe they just want to distance themselves from their greatest shame. Saint Hemmington's death must have dealt a devastating blow to the Crossers."

It was difficult to understand what the Crossers thought. They did not entirely behave as stereotypical Vicious Mountainers. Ves half-expected them to clamor to take revenge. Maybe they made too many enemies for them to believe they stood a chance.

Time quickly passed. Once Calabast finished her briefing, she ruffled Lucky's head one last time before departing. Ves stood up as well. He wouldn't be meeting with the Cross Patriarch in his office.

"Come on, cats. Let's go and see some Vicious Mountainers."

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

"Nyaaa!"

Chapter 2489: A Good Mech

Was it appropriate for Ves to bring his pets to a diplomatic meeting? Probably not. Ves did so anyway. As a famed and extraordinarily successful Journeyman, he could get away with a lot. People like him were always abnormal.

Now that Master Willix saw through him, it was no longer necessary for him to cultivate an eccentric image. He still intended to do so because the MTA and other powerful organizations still posed a threat to him. His current patron within the Association couldn't block everything!

When the meeting was about to commence, Ves entered a hall specifically built to receive foreign dignitaries. He wore a more formal version of his regular outfit that enhanced his stature and made him look a bit older than he looked.

He idly rubbed his smooth-shaven chin as a pair of lovely cats padded behind him. "Maybe I should grow a beard."

Once Ves reached the center of the hall, he awaited the arrival of the Crossers. Lucky and Clixie flanked him on each side while Goldie had dove back into the Larkinson Mandate which he currently held.

The clan heirloom held considerably more energy than before. Goldie had so much that even regular people could sense the Larkinson Mandate was special at a glance.

In fact, now that Goldie reached new heights, Ves wondered whether he should upgrade her with spiritual augments. Her spiritual essence had grown considerably in both quantity and quality. This effectively increased her capacity to bear spiritual constructs.

As Ves speculatively studied Goldie's form, he hesitated. A part of him felt that turning everything that was made of spiritual energy into spiritual constructs wasn't the right approach.

Life was chaotic and fluent. Living entities such as his mechs and his design spirits were more than capable of growing and acquiring new abilities organically.

Relying on growth over time was slower, less efficient and much more time-consuming than resorting to spiritual engineering.

Ves basically had to choose between natural growth and artificial creation. There were deep philosophical implications that he hadn't entirely explored yet. While he favored the control and precision of deliberate creation, life was all about spontaneous growth.

"Maybe I should combine the two instead." He mused. "By engaging indirected growth, I can enjoy the advantages of both."

He already did so once when he created a seed of his mother's construct. While the end product came out differently than he expected, it successfully generated a portal.

As long as Ves didn't mind a bit of variance, he could definitely create a lot of useful products. One of his most anticipated projects he had in mind was the replacement for his Grand Dynamo. Once the excitement of his wedding died down, he planned to work on it right away. Once he gained an additional supply of spiritual energy, he wouldn't have to be so frugal anymore.

The double doors leading into the hall slid open. Ves quickly cleared his head and straightened his back.

A number of powerful footsteps echoed across the space. The Crossers seemed to prefer taking their own steps instead of relying on antigrav clothes to move around.

That instantly increased his respect for the new arrivals. Ves couldn't get used to seeing people hovering around just above the ground all the time. Perhaps it made sense for

people to do so when they lived in vertical cities, but it was pretentious behavior when it happened indoors.

Five Crossers entered the room. Two of them appeared to be lightly-armored bodyguards. Two more seemed to be important leaders within their clan. At the head, a broad-chested man with close-cropped silver hair stepped forward to shake Ves' hand.

The two gripped each other tightly. A small dominance game ensued as they tried to crush each other with their strength.

To their surprise, neither side succumbed at first. Patriarch Reginald Cross possessed enhanced strength. So did Ves.

As their hands employed more strength, Ves slowly discovered that he still had strength to spare. The accidents that caused his body to mutate to its current state had come in handy once again.

He tried his best not to smirk as he steadily increased the pressure exerted by his hand.

To his credit, Patriarch Reginald did not flinch. Instead, the leader of the Cross Clan mobilized his force of will and attempted to establish dominance on another level!

He failed. Ves may not be able to project such a strong force of will, but his mental defenses were more than up to the task. Having confronted reality-defying dark gods in battle, a mere expert pilot hardly posed a threat!

"Patriarch Cross. Let us proceed with our talk."

The pressure abruptly abated. The Vicious Mountainer grasped the opportunity to withdraw from this game without admitting defeat. "Certainly. Time is short."

The two sat at a formal table made out of the finest Hexer wood.

While a bunch of cats kept Ves company, Patriarch Reginald was flanked by his own clansmen.

The contrast was striking. The Crossers were caught off-guard. They thought that Ves would bring his own advisors, but evidently he was confident enough that he could hold his ground by himself.

What the visitors didn't know was that Lucky and Clixie were quite perceptive in their own right. Ves trusted their instincts.

"Patriarch Larkinson, it is a pleasure to meet you." Reginald began. "You are different from every other mech designer we have met. I have never met a Journeyman or Senior for that matter that has earned more glory, honor and prestige than you. You

were born in the wrong star sector. If you rose up in Vicious Mountain, you would have received the respect that you are due. Instead, you are forced to entertain Hexers who constantly look down on men like us as boys."

"Thank you for the compliment." Ves vaguely replied.

He did not think it was fitting for him to badmouth the Hexers when he was relying on them so much right now. If Reginald was a bit more diplomatic, then he wouldn't have brought up such a sore point.

"You're a real man, Ves. You could easily fold any stuck-up Hexer in half with those arms. You have the heart of a true warrior. I'm not surprised you're eager to leave the Komodo Star Sector as soon as possible."

"There are multiple reasons why our Larkinson Clan seeks to enter the Red Ocean."

Ves grew a bit exasperated at this discussion. It had barely started and already the Patriarch of the Cross Clan was talking nonsense!

It couldn't be helped. The Cross Clan used to be rooted in the Garlen Empire. Every leader had to be a high-ranking mech pilot. Regardless of his actual leadership qualifications, the head of the Cross Clan had to be an expert pilot at a minimum.

Ves really wanted to crack open the head of a Vicious Mountainer in order to see what caused them to develop such crooked thoughts. Couldn't the Cross Clan dispatch someone normal for this important meeting?

Patriarch Cross looked more at home in the cockpit of an expert mech!

After some terse exchanges where Ves did his best not to insult anyone, the Cross leader finally addressed his actual business.

"We should join forces." Patriarch Reginald abruptly stated. "We are both in the possession of a substantial number of merits. As long as we seek out one or two groups, we can immediately head to the closest local gate to travel to a star system that holds one of those enormous inter-galactic beyonder gates."

Ves raised his palm. "Whoa there. Let's not put the cart before the horse. Sharing the cost of a beyonder ticket isn't enough. Without an actual grounds for cooperation, our partnership will likely end in ruins. We can't afford to suffer any discord between us when we reach the Red Ocean. Can you start with what exactly the Cross Clan seeks from the Larkinson Clan?"

"Certainly." Reginald forcefully nodded. "We have a list of demands that we would like your clan to fulfil. They're mere details, though. Just leave it up to our underlings to hash

them out. I only have a few overriding demands. Aside from sharing the burden of exchanging a beyonder ticket, I would like your help in one critical matter."

"And that is?"

"Help me become an ace pilot."

"..."

The Crossers all looked absolutely serious when their leader made this request. To them, issuing this demand was already a given!

Of course, what made sense for them didn't necessarily make sense to Ves! How could Patriarch Reginald make such an absurd demand? Just because the Larkinson Clan coincidentally gained a bunch of expert pilots didn't mean that Ves could perform magic!

He cleared his throat. "That is.. quite a request. I'm sorry. I don't think anyone in the galaxy can deliver what you ask. If I had the ability to help anyone advance to ace pilot, I would have spent my efforts on cultivating our own expert pilots."

"Ah, but do you know what trials and challenges an expert pilot must overcome to become an ace pilot?" Patriarch Reginald grinned. "Your Larkinson Clan and the family you came from has never come close to producing an ace pilot."

"There are sources. This is hardly an obscure phenomenon."

The Crossers all sneered in contempt.

"The galactic net is one of the least reliable sources in the galaxy. Do you truly think that expert pilots can transcend by following a ten-step plan?"

Ves frowned. "You're saying that we aren't capable of nurturing ace pilots. Then why are you approaching us in the first place?"

"We want your mechs." Patriarch Reginald plainly stated. "Let me fill you in on a secret to show our goodwill. A good mech is indispensable for any expert pilot looking to break through. An inadequate expert mech cannot sustain the powerful advancement process. At least a Master is required to design a suitable high-tier expert mech!"

Ves was shocked at the revelation! Though he appeared stoic on the surface, he was quite surprised at how much the expert pilot revealed.

Though there was a chance that Patriarch Reginald made a misleading statement, Ves did not think this was the case!

What the Cross Patriarch stated made so much sense to Ves. Third-rate states rarely if ever produced ace pilots. This was despite the fact that they easily retained a hundred or more expert pilots.

With so many demigods, how come none of them ever succeeded in taking a step forward?

The most likely explanation was that their mechs simply couldn't keep up with their growth!

A good mech pilot was unable to express his full strength when piloting a bad mech. This rule applied to everyone, whether it was regular mech pilots, expert candidates and apparently even expert pilots!

This revelation had many implications to Ves. It became even more important to supply powerful expert mechs to his expert pilots!

"Thank you for your guidance." Ves sincerely responded. "That said, it doesn't make sense to approach us. Perhaps we have lucked out in obtaining some expert pilots, but their advancement process is not comparable to that of an ace pilot. Since a good expert mech is indispensable, you should approach an excellent Master Mech Designer instead."

"We have done so already. It is.. difficult to secure the services of a Master we are confident in. While we have gathered the MTA merits needed to attract their services, I dare not spend it all when there is an alternative. You."

"I'm not a Senior, let alone a Master. I can't design expert mechs by myself. You would still need to secure the services of a better mech designer."

The Cross Patriarch nodded. "That is a given, but we have not let off our eye on you. No matter how great your contribution to my expert mech must be, I want you to add whatever is necessary to enable my breakthrough. The Cross Clan cannot be without an ace pilot! It is a disgrace for us to live without returning to our former splendor. Until I correct this injustice, I shall not rest until I inherit the mantle of my father!"

A strong and aggressive force of will swept over Ves and his cats!

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

Chapter 2490: Worshipping Strength

Crazy!

The Cross Clan was crazy!

Ves finally discovered why he felt so ill at ease with the Crossers.

They were nutters! Though the Cross Clan appeared to be made up of militarists, it was actually a cult that worshipped powerful mech pilots!

The strong conviction that Patriarch Reginald Cross showed when he stated his desire to become an ace pilot made it clear that this was the Cross Clan's overriding goal!

Partnering up with the Larkinson Clan and travelling to the Red Ocean were only incidental goals to the Vicious Mountainers. What they truly wanted was to regain the glory they lost when Saint Hemmington Cross died!

Ves wouldn't be surprised if only Patriarch Reginald held this obsession. Yet from the rapt expressions of his subordinates, the entire Cross Clan must be yearning for this goal!

Ves underestimated the importance of ace pilots to Vicious Mountainers. He also underestimated the pain that groups such as the Cross Clan felt when they lost one of their greatest heroes.

Just as Patriarch Reginald said, their overriding goal was to provide the Cross Clan with a new Saint.

Understanding this motivation gave Ves a much better sense of the Crossers.

They were fanatics.

Ves felt very mixed about that.

On one hand, he had many negative experiences with fanatics. They were bullheaded, irrational and devoid of common sense.

On the other hand, he also had a lot of experience in manipulating them. As long as he comprehended their beliefs, he would be able to devise ways to exploit them to his advantage.

It didn't matter if he lied to them. As long as he managed to hack their beliefs, he was confident he would be able to become their new truth!

His attitude towards the Cross Clan changed. Instead of seeing it as a former ruling power, he began to regard it as a collection of desperate and homeless cultists. They were rather pathetic in his eyes.

He completely disregarded the strong force of will spread by Patriarch Reginald.

This wasn't easy to most people. Venerable Reginald was more powerful than Venerable O'Callahan by a noticeable margin. He was not completely groundless in his ambition to become the next ace pilot of his clan.

Ves still managed to shrug off the expert pilot's powerful influence. His apparent ease earned him the respect of the Crossers.

Once Patriarch Reginald was done with his little show, he pulled back his force of will until it was no longer so oppressive.

"Patriarch Larkinson, please work with us. Both of us can help each other."

"I.. am not quite sure." Ves spoke as he furrowed his brows. He stroked Clixie's belly as he tried to parse this situation. "You have made assumptions about my ability to design mechs that may not be true."

"We are confident that you are who we need." Reginald replied. "We have studied your mechs in great detail. While they are not what we are used to, we love them. We appreciate your work and we believe they have potential. Besides, the results speak for themselves. Your clan has produced so many breakthroughs in a single campaign. It is impossible to ignore the role your mechs have played in this. Your Larkinson Clan is centered around your mechs, nothing else. Am I wrong?"

This fellow wasn't easy to fool. He may be the head of his cult, but he wasn't stupid, especially when it came to his core interests!

"The effects of our mechs are currently unconfirmed. We are currently working together with Master Willix to ascertain whether some of our mechs pose a threat to mech pilots. Until this investigation is over, I am not at liberty to say any further about this topic."

"Don't give us that crap. Your mechs are what we need. Work with us to design an expert mech for me, and we will help your clan get stronger. This is what we are good at. Once we join hands, we'll become unbeatable!"

"I'm not sure. I have two problems with your proposal. One, I am still uncertain whether I can meet your expectations. You are seriously overestimating what my mechs can do. Two, the benefits you are willing to provide in turn are vague. Assuming that you're correct about my ability, what makes you think I am willing to be of service to you and your clan?"

Patriarch Reginald grinned. "Aside from giving you tips on how to become an ace pilot, we can whip your men up into shape."

"We're doing fine."

"No you're not. You may have gotten a core of strong mech pilots by running roughshod over the Nyxian Gap, but I've heard the casualties you've suffered are horrendous. What will you do to toughen up your next batch of mech pilots, then? Will you find another high-risk region to traipse through in the hopes of tempering more battle-hardened soldiers? How many lives are you willing to throw away this time?"

"What is your point, Patriarch Cross?"

"Your training method is effective, but crude and unsustainable. You'll only pile up your losses and deprive a lot of families of their parents. It's stupid to go on like this when we are willing to provide you with an alternative."

"And that is?"

Reginald confidently pointed his thumb at himself. "Let us take charge of the training of your men. Our clan has existed for a long time, and we have fought more wars than you have shaved your cheeks. We know what works and what doesn't."

"Our Larkinson Clan may be young, but our heritage dates back to the start of the Age of Mechs."

"With respect, you were third-raters for the entire time. Even now, you still haven't gotten rid of your third-class mechs and starships. Do you truly think that your clan is ready to fight on the same level as our Cross Clan? I can guarantee you that even if your mechs are better, my men will run over your forces. If you don't believe me, you can be that Major Verle of yours. One of my men has already talked to him about this matter."

This was a troubling prospect to Ves. He thought that fighting their way through the Nyxian Gap was enough for his mech pilots to become strong. While he wanted reject Patriarch Reginald's prediction, fighting a bunch of pirates was different than fighting a trained, second-class mech force!

If Ves and the Larkinson Clan arrogantly entered the Red Ocean with the belief that defeating the Allidus Alliance gave them the grounds to push their weight around, then they would definitely be proven wrong!

"Not enough." Ves shook his head. "What you say may be true according to your professional judgement, but we do not necessarily have to turn to you to address this shortcoming. We can approach other second-class groups to bring our mech pilots up to standard. In fact, we can even spend big in order to hire the best second-class trainers so that we can grow stronger by relying on internal means."

"You have to help me become an ace pilot! I do not see why you are rejecting our proposal. Your Larkinson Clan is good at mechs. Our Cross Clan is even better at

training powerful mech pilots. Putting the two of us together makes as much sense as pairing mechs with pilots!"

Wow. Patriarch Reginald was really banking on this deal. Didn't he realize that he was giving his hand away? The greater his desperation, the more leverage he provided to Ves!

Ves shook his head yet again. "The concessions you have made aren't compelling enough to enter into a risky partnership. Our Larkinson Clan has a history of being on the receiving end of betrayal. We do not easily trust others anymore, especially when it comes to covering our back."

"You have my word as the patriarch of the Cross Clan that we will view your Larkinsons as brothers and comrades when we strike a deal."

Verbal promises were worth fart to Ves. Expert pilot or not, he was not going to bank the future of his clan on a casual vow!

The talks between the two eventually fizzled out once they realized they were going in circles. The Cross Clan wanted something from the Larkinsons, but they hadn't brought enough benefits to the table to make it worthwhile for Ves to take their offer seriously.

They were sincere. Ves gave them that. It was just that the Cross Clan in its current form was different from the Cross Clan in its prime.

At its height, the Cross Clan's Becker Tribe was comparable to one one of the weakest partners of the Friday Coalition. While that didn't sound flattering, they effectively wielded the power of a state at the time!

It was too bad the Crossers lost too much in its rapid collapse and chaotic flight from the Vicious Mountain Star Sector. Enemy tribes invaded the territory of the Becker Tribe and took back all of its gains when Lord Hemmington came to power. Rival clans from within the tribe stabbed the Crossers in the back and wrenched away even more assets.

What little the Cross Clan had left was not enough for them to retain the power of a state. They also have much of the wealth and assets of one. Treachery from within the ranks of the Crossers resulted in the embezzlement of a lot of accounts and backup funds.

Seeing that their side wasn't able to sway Ves over, Patriarch Reginald and his men departed the meeting hall with disappointed huffs.

Once they were gone, Ves turned to his cats. "Well. They're certainly different from everyone else. What do you think about the Crossers, Lucky."

"Meow."

"Yeah. The Crossers are very desperate about regaining an ace pilot. It's not necessary if they don't intend to return to Vicious Mountain. We're certainly not in a hurry to obtain one either."

All of the expert pilots under his command had just broken through. It was far too soon to think about their next breakthroughs.

In some cases, it was possible for regular mech pilots to turn into expert pilots after a few years.

However, the road from expert pilot to ace pilot was long. Progress slowed down and expert pilots had to put in a lot of effort to increase their resonance strength. This was not a process that anyone could speed up except for the pilot in question.

"Miaow miaow miaow." Clixie nuzzled her head against his hand.

"They're hiding something? I can believe that. Even if it appears they're willing to do anything to secure my services, it can't be that easy. The Cross Clan used to be a lot more successful. Patriarch Reginald should possess at least some savvy."

Maybe this had something to do with Saint Hemmington's unusual breakthrough. Why had the ace pilot become more aggressive? Why had Reginald's father led the Becker Tribe in so many wars?"

Goldie jumped out of the Larkinson Mandate and pressed up against Lucky and Clixie.

"Nyaaaaa."

"They remind you of our clansmen? I hope not. We Larkinsons are nothing alike the Crossers!"

From what Ves had seen, the Larkinsons may potentially develop in the same direction as the Crossers. In fact, if the Larkinson Clan hadn't set up the Hall of Heroes, perhaps the status of high-ranking expert pilots would have truly reached an astronomical height!

Ves detested this outcome. Expert pilots and ace pilots were destructive forces. They were good at defeating enemies, but not much else. If expert pilots such as Venerable Jannzi took charge, they would definitely run the Larkinson Clan into the ground!

"Only noble creators such as myself are worthy to lead our clan!" Ves self-righteously claimed. "A clan led by mech pilots is no different from a barbarian horde. A clan led by a mech designer is much more civilized!"

This was the end of the first meeting between Ves and Reginald. The two patriarchs had made their intentions known. Right now, the ball was in the Cross Clan's court.

Would the Vicious Mountainers be able to bring up something compelling enough to justify a partnership?