

## Mech 2521

### *Chapter 2521: Indigo Tremor*

The Parma Imago's observation chamber served as a large and spacious venue for Ves and to interact with his in-laws. Since Ves and his new wife might not ever have the opportunity to meet with the Wodins, Constance insisted the newly-weds to accompany her for an entire day.

Gloriana enjoyed spending time with her mother. She acted deferentially and listened to almost every word her mother said. She also grouped up with her older brothers and sisters who each wanted to pamper the youngest for one last time.

As Gloriana giggled at the teasing of her sisters, Constance had brought Ves and Brutus to a quiet garden that featured a tranquil three-dimensional lake.

Similar to what Ves had seen in the Ubiquitous Force, the Hexers installed sophisticated antigrav modules that precisely kept several large bodies of water suspended in the air. Fish swam from one body to another by passing through moving tunnels. Luminescent exoplants drifted lazily in the water, causing portions of the floating ponds to look like sparkling jewels.

As the three sat down on some floating chairs, Constance gazed thoughtfully at her son-in-law and her youngest son. Her elegant dress made out of multi-layered black fabric featured moving purple hexagons of different sizes. Their moving patterns were a little distracting to Ves. Her status and stature made it difficult for him to look at her in the face.

"Brutus, my boy. Are the Glory Seekers prepared to accompany the Larkinson Clan in its journey?"

"We are ready, mother." Brutus answered with a prim and proper voice. "Even if an emergency occurs that forces us to depart straight away, we have everything we need to sustain ourselves for years."

"You will have to prepare some more. Matriarch Xiaphna has approved the transfer of the Parma Imago to the Glory Seekers. In order to represent the might of our dynasty, we cannot have you and your fellow Glory Seekers limit yourselves to sub-capital ships. As the Larkinson Clan acquires its own capital ships, our people must also possess a bulwark!"

Both Brutus and Ves looked shocked at her announcement!

It was not a trivial matter to transfer an entire capital ship from one unit to another. Their great value and enormous cost meant that they had to be treated very carefully.

"Which vessel?" Brutus asked.

"The Indigo Tremor. She is one of our newest fleet carriers. We are already in the process of refitting and resupplying her so that she can keep up with any long expeditions."

Ves raised his hand. "Can I see her specs?"

His mother-in-law obliged. She transmitted a single document that contained a summary of the fleet carrier's properties.

The Indigo Tremor was indeed a fairly recent acquisition. Bought in preparation for the Komodo War, the Wodin Matriarch instead decided to transfer her to the Glory Seekers shortly after the wedding.

With a length of 2.5 kilometers, her long and fairly broad hull was not as unwieldy as the Hemmington Cross, nor as fast and nimble as the Antonio Cross.

The Indigo Tremor possessed balanced properties and could carry up to 600 mechs or even more in an emergency. This was not an exceptionally high amount considering the large internal volume of the fleet carrier, but Ves had recently learned that these capacity numbers were guidelines more than anything.

For example, a 1.8 kilometer-long vessel such as the Antonio Cross was nominally rated to carry 240 mechs, but she offered plenty of additional space in her hull. Normally, that space was taken up by cargo bays, fuel tanks, spare parts, ammunition and even internal fabrication units.

If Patriarch Reginald Cross wanted to stuff more mechs in the slender fleet carrier, then the crew could remove ship components, cargo goods and supplies to make room for more than a hundred mechs!

They wouldn't be stowed as safely and securely as the standard complement of mechs, but at least they got in, which was better than nothing!

However, under normal circumstances, the fleet carriers were designed to accommodate other functions related to supporting a fleet or mech force. The Indigo Tremor was a decent example of that as she featured a good amount of cargo space for supplies and higher-than-usual mech workshops and even some fabrication facilities to produce new parts!

As Ves studied the schematics of the new flagship of the Glory Seekers, he realized that she was quite suited for frontier expeditions. She carried a good amount of mechs and her rounded capabilities enabled her to service her mechs without relying on logistical ships.

Overall, the Indigo Tremor formed a powerful addition to any fleet. If such a capable fleet carrier joined his expeditionary fleet, its safety and security would definitely receive a powerful boost.

It was just...

"While I appreciate this kind gesture, the beyonder gate..."

Constance bore deeply into his eyes. "I am sure that a lovely son as you would not object to our dynasty's kind gesture. With the addition of the Indigo Tremor, you can spare the cost of acquiring another capital ship, which will certainly help you in the long run. Though our Glory Seekers will run the Indigo Tremor, she is meant to safeguard my daughter, and by extension you and the rest of your clan. It is only proper for you to include her in the quota of any eventual beyonder ticket."

Though Ves appreciated the addition of a fleet carrier, especially at the earliest stage of his expedition where he could only count on a factory ship, the fact that he had to surrender one of his quotas was very upsetting!

If he didn't earn any more MTA merits in the following years, he would only be able to count on a quota of 7 or 8 capital ships. Ves already formed some plans on how to allocate those slots.

The surrender of one of them to welcome a fleet carrier that was not under his control meant he might have to scrap a fleet carrier of his own. He originally planned to obtain two or three of them, but in light of this development he would have to settle for less.

The only way to compensate for this loss was to try to earn more MTA merits in order to increase his clan's quota!

Ves wasn't sure whether he would have the opportunity to do so. He had already learned how hard it was for Journeymen to earn millions of MTA merits in a short amount of time. He had already sworn off performing any further high-risk missions such as the ones that lured him into the Nyxian Gap.

Without an easy way to make massive contributions to the MTA, Ves would likely have to accept that he wouldn't be able to bring more capital ships to the Red Ocean.

"Ma'am.. thank you for the offer, but our Larkinson Clan is already capable enough to build its own fleet."

Constance peered at Ves in a familiar manner. Gloriana stared down at him like this as well when he was being obstinate.

"The Glory Seekers must have a strong base of operations in your fleet. Their combat carriers cannot adequately serve this role. After all, once you reach the inter-galactic

beyond the gate, it is not worth it to bring these sub-capital ships to the Red Ocean. Considering the difficulty of acquiring new ships in the new frontier, we cannot allow you to leave Gloriana's honor guard deprived of ships and mechs."

Damn. That ruled out one possibility to neuter the Glory Seekers.

Ves coughed. "A high-quality fleet carrier such as the Indigo Tremor must be an expensive vessel to maintain."

"Our dynasty takes full responsibility over the Glory Seekers. You do not need to concern yourself over the funding and management of the Indigo Tremor. The crew we intend to provide for her is fully capable of running a Hexer fleet carrier."

Constance shut down any opportunity for Ves to reject the Indigo Tremor's addition to the Glory Seekers. She verbally cornered Ves until he had no choice but to gift the Wodins one of his precious ship quotas!

She smiled in satisfaction once she secured his commitment. "You have made the right choice, my son. Make no mistake. Our two organizations are bound to each other. No matter how far you go, our dynasty will always support you. Each of us hope that my youngest daughter will be able to succeed alongside you and rise up to become a pillar for our dynasty in the new frontier."

"We don't need a lot of help." Ves replied in a feeble tone. "We can take care of ourselves."

"We shall see. Know that you can always turn to us should you require funding, technical assistance or any other help that we can supply to you from a distance."

"Thank you for the offer. I will keep your generosity in mind."

"Speaking of generosity, I hope that you will keep your second family and mind and give us some due consideration." Constance leaned forward. "For example, your clan has developed some unique and exceptional products that cannot be obtained from any other source. We have produced a good amount of Valkyrie Redeemers and variants ever since we received the right to field them from the Hex Army."

"I hope those Valkyrie Redeemers will serve your dynasty well. They are great mechs. Gloriana and I made sure of that."

"Before you go, we would like you to pay a visit to this vessel's hangar bays and draw the Superior Mother's blessing upon them. Our new mechs could dearly use any support they can get before we deploy them to the frontlines."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "As long as they are authentically made, every version of the Valkyrie Redeemers already carry the Superior Mother's blessing. That should be clear from the glows they project."

"We expect more out of them. Since our dynasty is allied to your clan, it is in poor taste to withhold your secrets from us. Gloriana has already told me that you have a tendency to leave your best innovation to yourself and your clansmen."

There was no way Ves could deny that!

"That's true, but..."

Constance raised her palm to interrupt his excuse. "As soon as Gloriana married you, she became a Larkinson in the truest sense. At the same time, your union with my precious daughter has made you a part of the Wodin Dynasty. Whether you acknowledge that or not, we deserve to be treated as your family as well."

What kind of twisted logic was this?! Didn't Ves agree with Gloriana that she was explicitly marrying into the Larkinson Clan without requiring him to reciprocate?

Even though this was legally the case, it was very hard for him to deny the existence of an invisible bond between him and the Wodin Dynasty.

"Gloriana will be sad if you do not help us in our time of need. Several of her cousins will be piloting your Valkyrie Redeemers in battle in the coming months. As you are the main reason why these mechs have glows, it is only right for you to maximize their performance and bring forth what you have withheld from the public."

In the end, Ves acquiesced to Constance's request. Venerable Brutus brought him down to the hangar bays of the Parma Imago so that he could call upon the Superior Mother to enhance the spiritual foundations of the brand-new Valkyrie mechs.

This was a fairly quick process that did not need much effort on his part. In fact, he was able to do this procedure by remote if needed.

The hardest part to him was to call the Superior Mother's attention and prompt her to donate some of her strength in order to empower the mechs in question.

Surprisingly, the Superior Mother easily accepted his request. Love flowed through their spiritual connection while the Superior Mother gently empowered every Valkyrie mech he designated.

She even listened to his instructions and capped the strengthening to 25 Ves!

In order to give the Wodins the impression that he was actually doing something, he boarded each and every mech and tinkered with some random settings in the operating system.

"It's done." He said as the Superior Mother receded.

Venerable Brutus appeared doubtful. Though he sensed some elevated activity in all of the mechs, he expected something more.

"Is that it? You hardly did anything."

Ves shrugged. "I didn't withhold much from the mechs. I just had to raise some limits. You Wodins will discover the difference in time."

Hopefully, his new mother-in-law would be happy with this little contribution!

#### *Chapter 2522: Tearful Farewell*

Having met his obligation to his new in-laws, Ves returned to the observation chamber and rejoined Gloriana's side.

Despite their ages, she and her fellow sisters were smiling and giggling like teenagers for some reason.

"You're back again." Gloriana kissed him on the cheek. "Did you do what my mother asked you to? It's crucial to give our Wodin Warriors as many chances as possible to excel in the battlefield."

He stared dourly at his wife. "What did you tell your mother, exactly?"

"Not much." Gloriana blinked. "I just told her it's not that much of a coincidence that your Larkinson Clan obtained so many expert pilots and expert candidates. I didn't tell her how you were able to accomplish that. I know how to keep a secret!"

"Gloriana... "

"Don't be like that." She whined as she pressed against his side. Her intoxicating perfume filled his nose with pleasant floral scents. "I still care about my relatives. My mother and my dynasty raised me to become a Master so that I can design the most suitable mechs for them. As it stands, I won't be able to fulfill this mission to the fullest extent because you'll be bringing me away. It's only fair for you to help my dynasty out every once in a while. Otherwise, our matriarch wouldn't have supported you so much."

"I get that, but I don't like it when I'm being pushed in doing something. Even if it's your mother, I hope our cooperation won't proceed like this. If I want to help the Wodin Dynasty, then let me do it on my own terms."

"I know." She placed her hand on his own. "I will make sure to tell my mother to respect your terms. She was just in a hurry today because she and the rest of the Wodin Warriors barring a small guard force will be making their way back to the Hegemony very soon. Please don't ruin my final moment with my mother. I don't know if I'll ever be able to be with her in person again."

Even though she had a lot of time to prepare herself, Gloriana still looked emotional. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she came closer to bidding farewell to her family!

He felt sorry for her. While he was actually glad to distance himself from Gloriana's manipulative mother, he had to act like her dutiful husband and companion for the remainder of her last day with the people she grew up with in her youth.

Once evening came, the entire family moved to the hangar bay where a shuttle already waited for the couple to depart from the Parma Imago.

"My daughter..." Constance moved to hug her youngest. "I will miss you so much."

"Mommy..." Gloriana cried.

Despite her low state, her emotions were far too strong to let her mental exhaustion get in the way of pouring out her sadness!

Ves felt a bit awkward as mother and daughter tearfully hugged each other for the last time.

He could not offer any consolation to them. There was no way for him to predict that his Larkinson Clan would ever return to the Milky Way if they managed to enter the Red Ocean.

Even though most people predicted the price to pass through the beyonder gate would drop in a century or so, the Gate Consortium would definitely continue to charge a fortune to pass through!

It simply wasn't worth it to pay millions of precious merits just to go back to a galaxy that was much more stagnant and solidified. Unless humanity resumed the great war against the aliens that occupied the other half of the galaxy, there wouldn't be many opportunities for his clan to rise to greatness.

This was especially the case in the furthest reaches of the galactic rim. The Komodo Star Sector where the Hexadric Hegemony and the Wodin Dynasty were based didn't even have a fraction of the wealth and potential of a phasewater-endowed zone in the Red Ocean!



Even though Gloriana loved her birth family a lot, it was impossible for Ves and the rest of the Larkinson Clan to acquiesce to her wishes and return to the old galaxy at great cost just so she could enjoy her reunion.

Both of them would probably have to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer before it became somewhat affordable for Gloriana to take a trip back, but that wouldn't happen for a very long time.

"Don't let anything happen to my baby sister, you hear me?" Kellandra walked up to Ves. "I don't care how many beyonder gates or light-years away you are. As long as something happens to her, I promise to do everything possible to travel to you so that I can squeeze your neck and snap it in half with my very hands!"

Ves raised his hands. "Hey! I love her as well, you know! I won't let her come to harm. You can trust me! The moment I married her is the moment I will cherish her life and happiness for the rest of my life."

Constance's second daughter did not think much of his promise. "I don't expect you to take care of her. Your only job is to allow the Glory Seekers to continue to guard my baby sisters. If and when your Larkinson Clan eventually drops the ball, I hope the soldiers arranged by our dynasty can succeed where you have failed and bring her safety. Is that understood?"

Amarithna Wodin walked up as well to stare Ves down in an eerily similar fashion to her mother and her younger sisters. "I don't trust boys, but you're apparently different. As the much-hailed son of the Superior Mother, I hope you can continue to pass on her blessing to our adorable sister."

The two oldest Wodin siblings instructed Ves on what he should do for a couple of minutes. While he wanted to leave right away, it wasn't polite for him to turn away from the two older women.

As Gloriana was done with her emotional farewell, Constance turned to Brutus.

Their goodbye was significantly shorter. The two merely exchanged some words before the woman patted her son on his shoulder.

"You know what you must do." Constance stood firm against the expert pilot. No matter how much Brutus had grown, she was still his mother! "Protect Gloriana with your life. Do not let her fall into the hands of those who seek to exploit her. Be prepared to throw away your life if need be. If you ever survive while your sister perishes, then your life has no meaning."

Venerable Brutus looked back at his mother with a solemn expression. He pressed his fist against his chest.



"If such a tragedy ever takes place, I will avenge her as best as possible before sacrificing my life. This I swear!"

"Good boy. Never forget your roots as a Hexer. The Milky Way and the Red Ocean is filled with misguided people who do not recognize the superiority of our culture. Make sure not to take too much after the Larkinsons and other foreigners. The Glory Seekers shall be your true home from this day forward."

"I understand, mother. In my heart, I am always a Hexer!"

With these farewells, Ves along with Gloriana and Brutus finally departed from the Parma Imago.

Hours later, much of the Wodin Warrior fleet including the light fleet carrier that bore Gloriana's closest family left the Cinach System.

The star system became a lot less oppressive now that hundreds of Hexer vessels and thousands of Hexer mechs embarked on their journey home.

Ves felt a huge weight lifted off his shoulders. Even though he knew that the Glory Seekers would soon receive a huge new ship in the form of the Indigo Tremor, a thousand Hexer mechs did not equal the oppression of Gloriana's mother in his eyes!

At least Gloriana was able to share one last intimate moment with her family. She didn't have too many regrets that would weigh her down in the future. That was worth every discomfort that Ves had just experienced.

As Gloriana spent some time by herself to process the separation, Ves met with the Larkinson Clan's new shipwright the next morning.

While Vivian Tsai was just starting to set herself up under Major Verle's auspices, she had already recruited or transferred a few lesser shipwrights, naval engineers and other technical experts.

The Larkinson Clan already has a number of relevant talents hanging around. Now that the Larkinsons were finally getting serious about systematically developing their fleet, the new Naval Design Department served as the main authority with regards to its management.

It was still a skeleton so far. Ophelia Kronon and Vivian Tsai had a lot of work to do before the Larkinson bulked up their staff. The amount of attention the clan had devoted to its ships was quite paltry.

Hopefully, that would change. The Larkinsons should no longer be centered around mechs all the time.

"Vivian, congratulations on becoming the Chief Ship Designer of the Larkinson Clan!" Ves greeted the woman as he entered her office.

Lucky was already floating around while sniffing for interesting curiosities.

The woman in question looked rather overwhelmed. "My title isn't as impressive as it sounds. I am just starting to organize my department. It will take a long time to hire enough experts that meet my standards."

"Take your time." Ves spoke as he sat down in front of her desk. "We can't be too careful when it comes to recruiting new people."

"I take it you did not visit to check up how well I am adapting to my new job."

"You're right. There are two new developments that require your attention. First, The Glory Seekers will be receiving a fleet carrier from the Wodin Dynasty. I'd like to hear your take on their new vessel."

He transferred over the files that he received from Madame Constance. Vivian didn't even need to project the data as she was fully capable of processing it through her cranial implant.

As a prominent shipwright, she already possessed substantial augments. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to reach this level at her relatively young age!

"Hmm." She smiled. "Hexer ship design is quite distinct from the regional norm. That said, the Indigo Tremor is truly a good fleet carrier. She is not any worse than the fleet carriers that my father has designed and built. Her capabilities are on par and the Hexers have even updated some of her tech. She is a ship that can easily roam the stars for at least three decades without requiring any overhauls or deep maintenance."

"Is that impressive?"

"Certainly. Part of it is due to her design. The Indigo Tremor is a fairly rugged fleet carrier. She was actually designed to be in the thick of action against formidable enemies. She can offer a lot of defense, though her mobility is lower than average. She carries a good amount of mechs for her size, though she can always accommodate a couple of hundred more."

Much of her judgement matched with his own, but she also started to mention some insights specific to her area of expertise.

"The Indigo Tremor can actually serve as the base of a fixed colony."

"What?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"Look here." Vivian projected a diagram of the Indigo Tremor and began to move some of her exterior sections. "If you strip off the outer layers, detach some of her outer modules and install some specific components, she becomes capable of making a safe and controlled landing on any planet with standard gravity."

"That's remarkable for a ship this big! Most capital ships will break apart if they get sucked into the gravity well of a planet!"

Vivian nodded. "The Indigo Tremor is only capable of doing this after stripping most of her heavy hull plating. Anyway, once the fleet carrier makes her landing, she won't be able to lift herself up under her own power, but it shouldn't be necessary. Once the crew anchors her to the ground and repurposes her separated hull plating and other sections, she can essentially turn into a solid fortress that can support the formation of an entire settlement!"

This was remarkable! It turned out that the Wodins may have built the Indigo Tremor with this purpose in mind from the start!

#### *Chapter 2523: Juicy Upgrades*

Ves did not know whether the Wodin Dynasty intended to found a colony in the Red Ocean. If they ever wanted to do so, then they already had a ready-made colony ship at hand in the form of the Indigo Tremor!

"There are better colony ships that can serve as the administrative and industrial center of a new colony, but the defenses of a headquarters based around the Indigo Tremor's hull is hard to surpass." Vivian explained.

"While that's true, once she is anchored on the ground, she's a sitting duck. As long as the Hexers lose orbital supremacy, it's hard to withstand sustained bombardment."

"You'd be surprised. There are surface-to-orbit weapons that can threaten any enemy ship that hovers too closely to a planet and there are other defensive measures that can stall an enemy attack. Besides, the main purpose of this defensive center isn't to resist major invasions. The landed fleet carrier mainly has to cover the growing settlement in its weakest period against raids and other opportunistic attacks."

"What happens to the Indigo Tremor once the colony doesn't need her anymore?"

"It depends." Vivian responded. "While it is very difficult to do so, it is possible to reconfigure her into a starship and bring her back into space. She's too heavy to lift herself up, but a fleet of specialized tugboats can provide sufficient assistance in this regard. If this solution is not available, then her owners can always disassemble her entire hull, move the parts into space and reassemble the Indigo Tremor without requiring to fabricate all of her expensive parts from scratch."

Though these measures sounded quite troublesome, it was better than acquiring a brand-new fleet carrier from scratch.

Aside from this extra purpose, the Indigo Tremor didn't possess any remarkable functions.

"Mind you, these schematics are not complete." Vivian warned. "I am missing plenty of details as the ship diagram does not point out how the Hexer plan to fill their compartments. Still, from my understanding of fleet carriers, the Indigo Tremor is mostly a dedicated fleet carrier with a modest emphasis towards defense."

"I see. She has two FTL drives, right?"

"Correct, but it puts an immense strain on them to engage in FTL travel one after another without any extensive breaks in between. She's a bit worse than our upcoming factory ship in this regard."

Just because a starship was theoretically capable of activating one FTL drive after another on an alternating basis to avoid realspace did not mean it could continue forever.

FTL drives were complicated, finicky devices. The larger the ship, the more complicated they were. While they were built to exacting and robust standards, there were too many elements that could go wrong, especially when the engineers only had a few days to service these enormous beasts.

This was one of the reasons why Ves prized the addition of a third heavy-duty FTL drive to his factory ship.

By alternating between three FTL drives, the inactive ones received enough downtime to ensure they remained in good condition. Even if one of them fizzed out and required a month-long reconstruction, the factory ship could still rely on the remaining drives to remain elusive to any enemies waiting in realspace!

After Vivian finished giving her opinion on the Indigo Tremor, Ves brought up the new changes and upgrades to his upcoming factory ship.

"These upgrades are quite generous!" She noted with surprise.

"How so?" Ves looked puzzled. "The Hexers gave us an additional budget of 800 billion hex credits, but a significant portion of it is already spent if we accept the recommended upgrades."

"Much of these upgrades consist of proprietary hardware and materials. We're talking about military-grade solutions. The Hexers are offering you some the best of what they have to offer. While they are probably withholding plenty of sophisticated tech that they

do not want to leak to their enemies, their list of choices contain many powerful functions that are even better than what my father has used back in our home state!"

The Hexers were quite sincere if they made so much tech available to them. Vivian pointed out some very useful functions such as specialized anti-stealth detectors and advanced autonomous repair bots.

Of course, all of this tech did not come for free. The Hexers charged a pretty penny for all of these goodies. The Hegemony was waging a war, after all. The state couldn't afford to waste too much money.

Ves looked at Vivian with an expectant expression. "Please help me upgrade the design of the factory ship. Aside from the 800 billion hex credits that the Hexers have rewarded us with, I'm willing to throw in 400 billion hex credits out of our own pockets."

"That is a lot of money! Is the Larkinson Clan able to spend that much? I recall that you plan to acquire at least six more capital ships. If you commit this much money, we might have to delay our other acquisitions."

Ves did not look concerned.

"It's fine. The finances of our Larkinson Clan will be a little tight after spending so much money, but we will soon release a bunch of mech models that will relieve this pressure. Besides, I don't think we will have to delay too much. The Wodin Dynasty has promised to extend favorable loans to us so that we can hurry up with ordering other capital ships."

This was quite a useful favor! While the Larkinson Clan could apply for loans elsewhere, its supposed ally would probably offer the most favorable terms.

Even if the Wodin Dynasty wasn't capable of lending him trillions of credits on short notice, his in-laws could act as a middleman to other Hexer institutions that were more than capable of transferring so much funds.

A long as the Wodins abided by their promise, Ves should be able to borrow enough money to fund the construction of several capital ships at a time!

That was a topic for another day. For now, he cared more about investing in his factory ship. Having observed several different capital ships, he became a bit worried about the size of his future flagship.

"Is two kilometers too short?"

"Not necessarily." Vivian shook her head. "Your factory ship is rather long and narrow, but she features plenty of decks. Her mobility and defensive capabilities are above average compared to a more traditional industrial vessel of this type and she possesses

ample production capacity. If you wish to increase the productivity of this vessel, then I highly advise you to upgrade her fabrication facilities. Of course, we will also have to upgrade her power reactors."

The two began to discuss how to spend their entire budget. While it would take at least several days for Vivian and her staff to revise the factory ship in conjunction with the Hexer shipwrights who were in charge of building the vessel, Ves only needed to convey his preferences. It would be up to the ship designers to incorporate as many of them in the ship design as possible given the financial and technical constraints.

Ves was often at the other end of this relationship. He found it quite nice to play the role of a client for once.

As he possessed a related engineering background, he was well-versed in how far he could go. From the moment Constance informed him that he could add something extra to his factory ship, he was already considering several possibilities.

After exchanging some of his ideas with Vivian, they eventually settled on a specific plan.

"Since your highest priority is upgrading the industrial capacity of your factory ship, then acquiring higher-end production equipment and upgrading her power reactors is of utmost importance. Of course, there are also many related systems that need to be upgraded in order to cope with the higher stresses."

Spending hundreds of billions of hex credits on these areas was extremely costly, but it was the only way to increase the factory ship's efficiency without expanding her size.

Ves wanted to expand the factory ship's production capacity because it played an important role in equipping his clan with Larkinson-exclusive mechs. It was also one of his strongest means of earning money in the Red Ocean.

This way, if his business empire in the Yeina Star Cluster ever collapsed for some reason, his clan would still be able to pay the bills by relying on selling mechs produced within the fleet!

When it came to upgrading the production facilities of his flagship, Ves split them up into two categories.

First, Ves wanted to expand his ship's mass-production capabilities. His ship should be able to output sophisticated and complicated second-class mechs at a faster pace than before.

This meant that it should be much less of a burden for his factory ship to churn out difficult mechs such as the monstrous Transcendent Punishers!

In order to increase the output of his factory ship even further, Ves also opted to invest in more compact machines that took up less overall space. After Vivian rearranged the interior of the production halls, they managed to squeeze in a bit more hardware!

"Twenty production lines is the limit." Vivian eventually spoke after she drafted a new layout. "While there is still some room to spare, it is not wise to occupy more space."

"It's enough." Ves replied. "Each additional production line will add more burdens to the rest of our fleet. We need additional cargo vessels to carry the raw materials needed to produce the mechs and we also have to reserve more space to store the finished products."

Increasing his factory ship's mass-production capabilities wasn't his only focus. He also wanted to increase his vessel's high-end fabrication capabilities. For this reason, he invested billions of credits to acquire some of Hegemony's best production equipment to outfit not one, but two luxurious mech workshops!

Though they weren't as extravagantly outfitted as Master Olson's personal mech workshop back on Leemar, Ves was pretty confident he could rely on them to fabricate his expert mechs. Aside from the inability to process materials that were as hard as Unending alloy, the 3D printers, forging machines, alloy compressor and other machines were very capable.

Plenty of Hexer Seniors and Masters utilized the same models that he had chosen! Ves wouldn't have to upgrade the equipment for a very long time!

Vivian frowned at the extravagant expenditures. Ves could have spent his money on many other useful upgrades.

"I don't quite understand why you insist on upgrading both mech workshops. If you need to fabricate an expert mech, then upgrading a single mech workshop is enough. It is unlikely that you will end up in the situation where you are required to fabricate multiple expert mechs in a hurry."

"You're right. It may be a bit overkill when you consider our current state. Only Gloriana and myself are able to make full use of such a powerful workshop, and we are often working closely together. However, I'm looking towards the future. Ten or twenty years from now, our clan will definitely welcome some new Journeymen. All of these emerging talents might wish to engage in their own projects."

What he didn't mention was that Ves was sick and tired of working with Gloriana's production equipment all of the time.

While the two mech workshops both contained identical Hexer hardware, Ves wanted to claim one of them for himself so that he could personalize it to his own tastes. He could



precisely tweak the configuration of all of the production machines so that they were completely tuned to his methods!

As for Gloriana, she could add as many hexagons as she wanted in her own workshop as long as she left his man cave alone!

Though Vivian disapproved of his decision, she tried to work with it. He was the boss, and she was his subordinate.

"Since our factory ship possesses so many upgraded power reactors, we should make good use of it." She said, changing the topic. "We can add some heavy-duty shield generators to add some active defenses to the factory ship. In battle, those 20 production lines will have to be locked down. Since they aren't consuming any power, your factory ship will have a lot of excess to spare. Diverting this idle power into shield generators makes a lot of sense."

"That sounds like a good idea, though these shield generators aren't cheap."

He agreed with her recommendation anyway. Increasing the defense of his factory ship was always worthwhile!

#### *Chapter 2524: Shuffling Personnel*

The Larkinson Clan entered into a calm period of time.

With all of the excitement surrounding the wedding over now, the Larkinsons all readied themselves for the most important event of their lives.

The grand expedition.

The dream started by Ves had become an obsession for the entire clan. Hardly any clansmen did not look forward to escaping the corner of the galactic rim and venture out to explore what the rest of the multiverse had to offer!

Reaching the Red Ocean was a dream to many, but the Larkinson Clan already possessed enough confidence to reach it. With the enormous amount of MTA merits in the patriarch's pocket, there was no way they were missing this ride!

As Ves busied himself with managing the upcoming deliveries of second-class ships, mechs and other assets, many other Larkinsons got busy as well.

For example, ever since the Larkinsons set up the Hall of Heroes, every expert pilot became occupied with establishing themselves as a semi-autonomous unit.

This was quite rough for a number of expert pilots. Commander Rosa Orfan and Commander Dise were no longer allowed to lead the Flagrant Vandals and Swordmaidens.

It took quite a lot of placating to make them accept the new reality.

Lieutenant-Commander Abis Firelight took over as the new leader of the Flagrant Vandals. He already ran the Vandals for the most part as Venerable Orfan wasn't known for being a diligent administrator.

In the meantime, Venerable Orfan set up an elite spearman squad within the Hall of Heroes. She recruited some of her closest Vandals and a few other Larkinson mech pilots who excelled in piloting spear-wielding mechs to join her Radiant Hoplites.

Lieutenant Sendra took over for Venerable Dise as the new commander of the Swordmaidens. Despite her promotion, everyone knew that she was merely a stand-in for the true leader in the hearts of many Swordmaidens. Venerable Dise's prestige was secondary to the legendary founder of their mech force!

As the spiritual leader of the Swordmaidens, Venerable Dise still favored her sisterhood very much. To fill up her new Blade Mistresses squad, she hand-picked a handful of younger Swordmaiden mech pilots and also snatched up some other promising swordsman mech pilots from the Avatars of Myth. She initially didn't want to, but the Hall of Heroes awarded plenty of Larkinson merits should she succeed in mentoring more mech pilots into powerful warriors.

Venerable Davia Stark was a rather odd existence within the Hall of Heroes. She had emphatically refused to join the Larkinson Clan, yet she promised to fight on behalf of the Larkinsons.

Clansmen or not, Venerable Davia was not only a powerful expert pilot, but also one of the few within the Hall of Heroes who excelled in piloting ranged mechs!

Under Commandant Cristoph Larkinson's urging, she reluctantly set up the Lost Soldiers to mentor other Larkinson mech pilots in improving their marksmanship.

Unlike the other expert pilots who either sought companions among their own circle or from the elites, Venerable Davia solely recruited Living Sentinels.

Perhaps she took pity on them or thought they shared something in common with her, but the Sentinels were highly enthused that such a powerful figure was willing to shower them with attention!

The Sentinels experienced a lot of changes lately. Commander Magdalena resigned her leadership position within the beaten and demoralized mech force and moved on to work directly under Major Verle.

Unlike the other mech forces that went through a leadership change, the Sentinels did not have a strong and proven officer at hand who were immediately suited to become the next commander.

Whoever took over the Sentinels had to clean house and right the ship. No average leader would be able to infuse some vitality in a mech force that had just lost a horrendous amount of mech pilots in the Nyxian Gap!

Some people even suggested that the Sentinels needed to look outward in order to find their new commander. Various suggestions circulated within the Larkinson Clan. After being led by an old and grizzled war veteran, many Sentinels actually favored being led by someone younger.

They wanted to be led by someone with a fresh perspective and who wasn't rigid. The Sentinels considered various options ranging from Commander Melkor to Lieutenant Dietrich Krotz.

Neither of those choices were suitable. Melkor had been with the Avatars from the start and would be like a fish out of water if he suddenly took charge of the Sentinels. Lieutenant Dietrich Krotz had only just received a promotion and was too unproven to lead thousands of mech pilots.

As Major Verle became increasingly more distressed about finding a suitable leader, a surprising figure volunteered to turn the Sentinels around.

Captain Casella Ingvar of the Avatars of Myth applied to take over as commander. As soon as this news became known, everyone was floored!

She led the Second Spaceborn Mech Company of the Avatars. Not only that, she had just advanced to expert candidate and was expected to dedicate herself to training in order to become an expert pilot as fast as possible.

For her to take on the difficult and time-consuming work of leading the largest mech force of the Larkinson Clan made little sense!

The hopeful new commander met with Ves and Major Verle in order to explain her decision in person.

Two people along with two pets entered the conference room of the Scarlet Rose.

Ves was already familiar with the Ingvar siblings. He paid more attention to the pets they decided to adopt.

Captain Casella opted to adopt a small goldfinch. The little bird rested happily on the female expert candidate's shoulder.

However, as soon as the little bird spotted the two cats in the compartment, she flapped her wings in a warning manner.

"Meow?"

"Chirp!"

"Ah, sorry about that, sir. Mirrie isn't used to all of the cats in the Larkinson Clan."

"It's okay." Ves waved away the issue. "Being surrounded by so many natural predators can make any bird nervous."

Nothing would come to harm to Casella's pet. Every pet in the Larkinson Clan was sentient, so they shouldn't go out of control.

"Woof!"

An eager-looking hound padded forward. Imon Ingvar had come as well along with his wagging dog.

"You are not invited to this conversation." Major Verle remarked.

As one of the Senior Larkinsons within the clan, he too sought to adopt a pet as soon as he returned from the Nyxian Gap.

"Meuw."

A cat that resembled a traditional British shorthair lazily laid on the desk next to Major Verle's data pad. Hayden was a rather docile cat. Just like almost every other cat adopted by the Larkinson, he was a high-end designer cat who originated from Felixia.

Ves clapped his hands. "As lovely as it is to bring your pets to work, let's get to business."

Each of the animals behaved and restrained themselves. Just because the Larkinsons allowed people to bring their pets to work didn't mean they were allowed to run wild!

Once Casella and Imon sat down, Major Verle went straight to the point.

"Captain Ingvar, I admit that I am surprised at your request. You have fought well in the Nyxian Gap and managed to become an expert candidate along with your brother. Most people in your place would choose to lessen their burdens so that they can devote more time towards training. Why do you want to become the commander of the Living Sentinels?"

"I am a leader." The Avatar Captain replied. Her confidence and aristocratic bearing conveyed a lot of certainty. "Before all of this, I have led the household troops of my former house. I have to admit that I was not the best at leading my troops back then. With the collapse of House Ingvar, my own subordinates rebelled and took over everything."

Her failure caused her and her brother to become stranded in Kinner space. They were in their lowest moments at the time.

"I know what it is like to fail. I am very grateful to our patriarch for giving my brother and I a chance to pick ourselves up. I worked tirelessly to learn from my lessons and relearn how to lead a unit when Commander Melkor entrusted a mech company to me. While leading 40 mech pilots is incomparable to taking charge of every Living Sentinel, my prior experience as a mech officer of House Ingvar is still helpful for me. The Sentinels may be larger than anything I have ever touched, but I am confident that I can inspire them to regain their battle spirit."

Both Ves and Major Verle sensed determination from Captain Casella. She was serious. She did not think about taking over the Sentinels on a whim, that was for sure!

Ves turned to her brother. "Mr. Imon Ingvar, what do you think about your sister's choice?"

"To be honest, I think she's stupid for running off the Sentinels. She's too good for them!" Imon bluntly said.

"Brother! We talked about this! This is what I'm meant to do. I need to prove that I can lead!"

"You just want to make up for the fact our old household troops mutinied on us! Damn it Casella, haven't you gotten over this old wound yet? We aren't nobles anymore!"

Major interrupted their argument. "Please be honest. While I agree that the Sentinels will doubtlessly welcome an expert candidate as their new commander, your brother's remarks are concerning. Is this personal to you, captain?"

The female Ingvar nodded. "It is, sir. I won't hide this from you. I feel I need to make up for my regrets. My past as a failed leader is haunting me. No matter how much I try to move on, I am still weighed down by my memories. I don't think I can achieve apotheosis with so many doubts. Venerable Jannzi told me that expert pilots must have absolute certainty in their purpose and life. I have decided that taking on this challenge is the best way for me to move on from my past and prove once and for all that I am meant to lead mech pilots into battle!"

Ves and Major Verle looked at each other. Both of them possessed some understanding of expert candidates and expert pilots.

Though the major still looked doubtful, Ves was more optimistic.

"I think most expert pilots such as Venerable Dise or Venerable Orfan aren't suited to run a large mech force." He said. "However, there are a few exceptions among high-ranking mech pilots who are driven by responsibility. My uncle, Venerable Ark Larkinson, is a good example. I see something in you, captain. Let me be clear. The Larkinson Clan doesn't want you to sacrifice your chance of reaching the rank of expert pilot. We can find more Larkinsons to lead the Living Sentinels, but we don't have as much choice when it comes to nurturing new expert pilots."

Captain Casella remained confident. "I share your concerns, but I won't slow down because of this. In fact, I will be better off once I succeed."

After a lengthy discussion, Ves and Major Verle finally decided to approve her application. From now on, Commander Casella Ingvar became the new head of the Living Sentinels!

Though Imon was regretful that his sister would be moving out of the Avatars of Myth, Casella exuded a sense of purpose once Major Verle formally promoted her to her new position.

"The Living Sentinels will turn around. I will make sure of that, sir."

"Don't be too eager yet." Verle carefully warned the mech commander. "You have a lot of problems on your hands. Don't move too quickly. While I am willing to put my trust in your decisions, it is best if you sound out your ideas to me first."

"Understood." Commander Casella replied with a serious expression. "I will keep you in the loop. I may need to draw upon additional resources in order to transform the Sentinels."

"You will have all of the support you need. We will try to oblige your requests as long as you produce results."

#### *Chapter 2525: Life of Joshua*

The entire clan was truly shocked when Casella Ingvar won the contest to become the next Sentinel Commander!

No one actually expected that Ves and Major Verle would put an expert candidate in charge. Wasn't that counter to the Larkinson Clan's policy that expert candidates and expert pilots should shed their distractions?

Regardless, the announcement had immediate effect. While most clansmen were bewildered, the Living Sentinels were all ecstatic!

"We finally have a commander who understands our plight!"

"Casella is so good!"

"Will her brother be coming over as well?"

"Damn, I look up to every mech pilot that managed to break through in the last battle. We're the only mech force that is still led by a hero!"

"I'm looking forward to her first actions. She has lived through the same horrors as we did in the Nyxian Gap. I would trust her over any outside officer who thinks he can turn us around just because he used to lead a mech regiment in the past!"

Even though Casella Ingvar used to be Avatar before she took up her new position, the Sentinels largely overlooked this detail. They immediately embraced the new Sentinel Commander as one of their own on the very first day!

This was the power of an expert candidate!

Though not as prestigious as an expert pilot, the admiration the clansmen held towards these exceptional mech pilots was quite considerable.

Confidence and morale in the Living Sentinel immediately doubled. Even though Commander Casella hadn't even passed any reforms as of yet, the expectations of her subordinates were so high that they already took it for granted that she would become their true savior!

For her part, the new Sentinel Commander wasn't shy about taking advantage of her reputation. Deserved or not, she aimed to do her best in restoring the Sentinels as a proud and strong band of soldiers within the Larkinson Clan!

While it was too early to tell, she was doing quite well for herself in the first few days. She regularly consulted with Major. Not only that, she secretly corresponded with her predecessor in order to grasp the requirements and responsibilities of her enormous position as soon as possible.

With Commander Magdalena bringing Commander Casella up to speed, Ves had no further concerns about the new changes. He had never lost confidence in the former in the first place. With a younger and stronger face as a conduit, Magdalena should still be able to exert some influence without upsetting her former subordinates.

Of course, this was only acceptable in the short term. Once Commander Casella no longer needed any assistance, she needed to make her mark as a leader and exercise her own judgement. Otherwise, she would become perpetually dependent on other people to make any decisions. This was not conducive to her goal of overcoming the demons of her past.



With Commander Casella taking up her new responsibilities, other Larkinsons changed their routines as well.

Ever since Joshua Larkinson entered the Hall of Heroes, he tried to get used to all of the autonomy he obtained.

Perhaps others might think that being able to make your own decisions was nice, but Joshua was overwhelmed by how many matters he needed to take care of. Back in the Avatars, Commander Melkor and the staff officers arranged almost everything on his behalf.

Since Joshua had no stomach to take care of all of these tedious matters, he began to expand his staff and recruited another Bright Companion with administrative and command ability to act as his secondary.

"Lieutenant Chette, thank you for coming aboard." The expert pilot greeted.

"It is an honor to be selected by you." Chette Larkinson replied.

The trueblood Larkinson had come a long way since the Larkinson Family initially transferred him to Ves. Raella had moved on while Jannzi explosively progressed to expert pilot. Meanwhile, Chette steadily matured himself and even managed to pass an officer course.

Though some of the original Larkinson still found it strange to take orders from outsiders who only became Larkinsons later on, Chette did not harbor these thoughts.

Even if Joshua Larkinson wasn't an expert pilot, Chette was still willing to respect his superiors no matter the blood that flowed through their veins.

This was what the Larkinson Clan was all about. Every single Larkinson was a fellow brother and sister.

Joshua placed his hand on Chette's shoulder. "I'm not good at all of this commanding stuff, so I will leave it up to you to manage the Bright Companions. Are you up to the task?"

"I am. I wouldn't have accepted your offer otherwise."

The two young Larkinson mech pilots discussed what needed to be done. Chette may not be taking over a force as large as the Living Sentinels, but he needed to solve many problems in order to establish the Bright Companions as a strong group of elites under Venerable Joshua.

Not only that, Chette was also expected to keep up with his training and fight alongside the expert pilot in battle. He would never be able to enjoy a free moment of time in the coming years.

Nonetheless, as long as Chette overcame these challenges and proved he could handle the pressure, he would become a very desirable mech officer in the future!

This was one of the goals that Ves and Major Verle had in mind when setting up the Hall of Heroes. Every mech pilot who had the privilege to serve under an expert pilot would be shaped by their experiences!

As Chette went off to take charge of Joshua administration, a surprising guest sought out the expert pilot.

A lot of clansmen wanted to get close to the expert pilots. However, letting everyone take up their time would only distract the demigods from their true purpose.

For this reason, every person had to have a very good reason to meet with one of the heroes of the Larkinson Clan.

Ketis happened to have no problems getting through these checks. She not only offered the gatekeepers a plausible excuse, but also enjoyed a high status within the Larkinson Clan!

As a favored student of Ves and someone who was rumored to be close to advancing to Journeymen, many Larkinsons respected her, especially those who served in the armed forces.

"Miss Ketis! What brings you here?" Joshua turned to the mech designer. "Did the patriarch send you here to tweak the Quint?"

"No." She spoke. "I'm here to instruct your swordsmanship. You may have learned how to wield a blade in that fancy mech academy of yours, but your teachers have never had to rely on their swords as much as the Swordmaidens."

"What? No one told me about this! I don't need your help, Ketis. I'm an expert pilot. I'm beyond human. While I fight at my best when I'm piloting a mech, don't underestimate me. I'm better in every aspect."

Ketis snorted contemptuously at Venerable Joshua. She took no notice of his lively force of will.

"I've beaten people who were 'beyond human' before. There is more to swordsmanship than skill and superhuman reflexes. Come! Accept my challenge!"

Though Venerable Joshua did his best to send her off, she wasn't having any of it. She practically dragged the expert pilot to the nearest sparring ring in the temporary base!

"Piss off!" She shouted to the other mech pilots and soldiers in the training hall. "Expert pilot, coming through! Give him some privacy!"

The other Larkinsons quickly vacated the hall in order to give Venerable Joshua all the space he needed.

After changing their clothes and wearing some high-tech protective equipment, the two faced each other in a sparring ring.

Both of them wielded sword-shaped rods made out of composite materials. Their weight and balance was identical to that of a real sword. The only difference was that they instantly softened whenever it hit somewhere. No matter how much force their wielders employed, they wouldn't even be able to crack an egg so long as the practice weapons did their jobs!

However, upon Ketis' urging, the two sparrers switched the safety setting of their faux-swords to a harsher level. The rods held their stiffness longer before softening up, ensuring that anyone who got struck would receive a painful lesson!

"Ketis, I know you're a Swordmaiden, but isn't this too harsh? I don't want to hurt a fellow Larkinson."

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH! I fought exobeasts and crazy mutants with nothing but my body and my sword! I can break measly expert pilots like you with a hand tied behind my back!"

Before Venerable Joshua could continue his pleas, Ketis swept over as if she was at the forefront of a storm!

She lifted her weapon over her head and struck down with a swift and powerful chop that was too fast for Joshua to dodge!

To his credit, Joshua reacted appropriately and blocked Ketis' strike in a way that caused her weapon to slide to the side.

Yet before Joshua could take advantage of the apparent opening, Ketis rapidly threw out a punch that hit Joshua's thinly-padded stomach!

"Oof!"

Not expecting such a furious assault from a mech designer, Joshua failed to defend himself against Ketis' next attack.

She brutally kicked out at his crotch!

"AHH! That's a foul!"

"There are no rules in combat! Besides, you're wearing a codpiece!"

Every standard sparring uniform provided comprehensive protection against attacks from every direction. The thin but sturdy smart clothing normally remained soft to provide maximum flexibility to their wearers, but stiffened up to the point of being able to withstand considerable force!

Though these training clothes weren't cheap, the Larkinson Clan could easily afford these suits.

When Venerable Joshua finally realized that Ketis was being very serious about beating him, he adjusted his mentality and began to fight back.

He employed his transcendent nature and began to react faster while employing more strength. He took advantage of his greater battle instincts and his uncanny intuition.

However, Ketis still kept up! She turned into a wildcat as she went on the offensive and unleashed continuous slashes.

Even if Joshua was able to keep up with the attacks, he could barely do anything except to block the incoming strikes!

He couldn't overpower her with his strength. While he was a demigod, he was also a baseline human. He possessed no physical augmentations while Ketis had gone through multiple rounds of genetic modification that were mainly geared towards strengthening her physique!

While Joshua was quite good at swordsmanship, Ketis amazingly showed more technical skill! She performed the same moves as he did with much better fluency. She was able to string her attacks with as little wasted movements as possible and she was able to muster up an appropriate response whenever Joshua threatened to turn the tide.

The only advantage he enjoyed was his noticeably faster reaction speed. Their reflexes might be similarly as good, but he possessed an edge in how fast he could think.

Expert pilots didn't need to be strong in body. They only had to improve their minds, because their expert mechs were supposed to be their true bodies!

Yet even if Joshua was able to outthink Ketis, she never fell for his ploys!

"Ouch!"

One of his gambits failed, causing her to whack her rod against the side of his head! While his collar rapidly extended upwards in order to cushion the force, the expert pilot still experienced a hefty tap that caused him to release more sweat.

She was unstoppable!

"Can't you ease me in a bit? You're too good!"

Ketis gripped her weapon with both of her hands and overpowered his block!

Before her could back off, she slammed her horned head against his own nogging!

Though their sparring uniforms shielded both of their heads, Joshua became so overwhelmed that he fell onto his back!

Ketis fell with him, causing her to land on top of his body. Their padding didn't engage, causing both of them to feel each other's body warmth without too many barriers.

"Uhm. Could you get off?" Joshua asked as he huffed his breath.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Do you know how to wrestle?"

*Chapter 2526: A New Learning Machine*

Lanie Larkinson was puzzled as one of her instructors pulled her out of her training session.

The teenage mech cadet's training results were pretty good, though she was far from matching the best. She brushed aside her brown hair as she waited for the shuttle she had boarded to reach its destination.

It did not take long for the vehicle to land inside an enclosed mech hangar. Her instructor, an older trueblood Larkinson and war veteran, strapped herself off her seat.

"We're here. Follow me, cadet."

"Yes, ma'am."

The straps holding her in her seat retracted as soon as she pushed herself to her feet. She obediently followed her teacher as they entered into a huge but largely empty hall.

They moved forward until they approached another Larkinson.

"You're here. Good. My name is Cherie Tovar-Larkinson. I am an assistant mech designer serving in the Design Department. Is this Miss Lanie Larkinson?"

The instructor nodded. "Yes. I have brought Cadet Lanie as requested."

"I have already studied her academy records. Just to be sure, can you give me your evaluation on her training progress?"

"Cadet Lanie is a diligent mech cadet and never misses class. She gets along well with her fellow cadets but has shown no special aptitude in leading them in battle. While she has performed decently in piloting different mech types, she has shown a greater affinity for ranged combat. She performs a bit better on land than in space, but that is normal for every mech cadet. Overall, her training progress is on par for her genetic aptitude of B-, though she has peers who managed to perform better."

There was an implicit tone of criticism in the mech instructor's tone. Lanie felt a bit disappointed, but she had no one else to blame but herself.

While she was eager to become a good mech pilot, there were other Larkinson potentates who spent their every waking moment training or studying!

Their drive to become an elite Larkinson mech pilot was insane. They tended to be outsiders who joined the clan after their parents got in. Recognizing the golden opportunity in front of them, these new mech cadets worked so hard that the academy had to step in to prevent them burning out too quickly!

The mech designer soon brought up the reason why Lanie was here.

"Cadet Lanie, our Design Department has recently completed the design of a very specific mech. Our Patriarch wishes to invest in the future mech pilots of our clan and has devised a new model that is specifically geared towards improving your training results. We have chosen you to be the first to pilot the completed version of our Chiron!"

Though Lanie hadn't heard about this development, the instructor already guessed the reason. The older woman had already been involved in the testing of the prototypes.

"Miss Tovar, while Cadet Lanie has achieved good results, our academy has other young potentates who deserve this honor."

Cherie shook her head. "This is not a matter of honor. It is a matter of observation. We predict the difference in performance is more drastic if the cadet in question has more room to improve. The Chiron does not make much of a difference if the mech pilot is already good. Besides, the patriarch personally assigned the first production copy to Cadet Lanie."

That finished this little discussion. Lanie moved on to undergo a quick physical before changing into a special piloting suit. Soon enough, a couple of mech technicians guided her to a mech that looked different from any other machine she had witnessed.

"Is this.. the Chiron?" She asked with an impressed tone in her voice.

"Yup." A mech technician grinned. "It's a training mech that is specifically made for kids like you. It has some special features that you'll be testing today."

As she came closer to the prepared mech, she already felt its glow. The feeling the Chiron gave off was very familiar. Her hearts tugged with warmth and her affection for the Larkinson Clan increased. She also thought about hugging cats for some reason.

"Why is it called the Chiron?"

"Beats me. According to the galactic net, this Chiron fellow was a big centaur who taught a lot of heroes. I guess that's as good a name as any for a training mech."

"The Chiron is not a centaur mech, though. It's humanoid." Lanie pointed out.

"You should tell that to the big boss."

Soon enough, Lanie entered the cockpit. She settled into the piloting seat and waited until she received to activate her mech.

"You may activate your mech now, cadet."

She did as instructed. Once she pressed the activation button, she tried to keep her excitement under control as her mind slowly connected to something greater.

It was hard for her to keep calm!

Every Larkinson cadet looked forward to piloting an LMC mech. The adult mech pilots all raved about how pleasant it was to pilot the so-called living mechs. If not for the fact that the current LMC mech models couldn't keep up with second-class machines, the Larkinson pilots wouldn't want to part with their Bright Warriors!

Now, Lanie would be the first one to pilot the completed version of the Chiron.

Though the initial startup procedure was longer than usual, Lanie slowly felt the mech unfold in her mind.

The mech that connected to her mind was truly different from any training mech she interfaced with before.



The other machines were small, weak and limited in strength. In class, she learned that the neural interfaces of training mechs were deliberately constrained in order to minimize as many risks as possible for the mech cadet.

Due to their youth, their minds were more adaptable, but that meant that it was easier for them to be distorted by outside factors.

In order to raise them into proper mech pilots, mech academies tried to make sure they did not get exposed with faulty or extreme mechs.

While the Chiron possessed similar limitations, Lanie perceived something completely different.

The new training mech was warm. The new training mech was alive. The new training mech pulled her in deeper than any other machine!

"Is this what it is like to pilot an LMC mech?"

She finally understood why so many Avatars and Sentinels didn't want to part with their LMC mechs. The experience was so much better compared to other mechs.

Before she interfaced with the Chiron, she had already grown accustomed to piloting training mechs that made her feel as if she was donning a heavy suit. Each movement required her to exert her mental strength.

The worst part was that exercising precise control was a major challenge. If she put in too much effort, her mech would overshoot its movements. If she tried to be more careful, the mech wouldn't move as fluently.

What was even worse was that training mechs often possessed a very difficult body structure from what she was accustomed to. Every parameter was so different that Lanie had to learn how to control a completely different body.

Yet she was about to experience something a lot different this time.

[Cadet Lanie.] Cherie Tovar spoke over a comm channel. [The telemetry suggests that you have successfully interfaced with the Chiron. Are you experiencing any problems of any sort?]

[No, ma'am.]

[Good. Just to be sure, let us go through a checklist and test your initial performance with the current state of your training mech.]

Lanie began to perform some basic tests with considerably more ease than before. Normally, she wouldn't have been able to move so comfortably with a training mech, but

this was different. Though the Chiron was still a mech that was fairly difficult to pilot for a cadet, the comforts it provided allowed her to adjust to the mech with remarkable speed.

The mech just felt too good! If she had a choice, she didn't want to go back to the stiff, cold mechs she practiced with before. The difference was like night and day!

Once she performed some basic movements with the Chiron, Cherie Tovar announced the next phase of the test.

[Very well. We have established a suitable baseline. We shall proceed with the body adjustment and archetype switching. We will be initiating this transformation while you are still piloting the Chiron. This may be uncomfortable for you. Make sure to warn us if you ever feel uncomfortable.]

"Wait, ma'am. The mech hasn't been adjusted yet?" Lanie asked.

The Chiron received a command that caused it to initiate some pre-planned procedures. Its entire frame began to morph as numerous mechanical parts began to shift.

The arms began to contract, the legs grew shorter as well. The torso contracted and narrowed. Thousands of adjustments took place at the same time or in quick succession as the Chiron slowly but surely began to conform to Lanie's modest and slender physique!

All the while, Lanie remained connected to her mech. She could feel it changing in a way that caused it to become more synced with her own mind!

This was a magical experience for the young mech cadet!

She experienced no discomfort of any kind. The mech worked exactly as designed and changed shape to such a drastic extent that she felt as if she was back in her own body!

Once the transformation process came to an end, the mech cadet waited patiently until the others confirmed that nothing went wrong.

[Alright. Cadet Lanie, as you have noticed, the mech has transformed to adapt to your physique. Please run through the same tests as before. We need to determine how much your performance has changed.]

She performed the same movements as before.

The differences were obvious straight away. Though the difficulty of controlling her mech hadn't dropped as much as she hoped, the challenges became much more manageable.

Lanie never thought that piloting a mech that matched her physique to a much greater extent would make such an enormous difference! Compared to before, she performed 40 percent better on average!

This was a huge jump, especially when Lanie was just starting to get accustomed to piloting such a sublime training mech!

[We are releasing a laser rifle to you. Please take the rifle and fire at the projected targets.]

She commanded her Chiron to grasp the rifle that was brought in front of her mech. The rifle fit the Chiron's grip in a familiar fashion. It was almost identical to how she held an infantry rifle in her real arms.

Once her Chiron began to shoot some low-powered beams at some static and moving practice targets, she became increasingly more caught up in the activity.

Her accuracy had practically doubled! Firing a rifle with her mech in her current conditions was so familiar that she could replicate her actual technique without worrying too much about inaccurate translations.

"This is amazing!" She gasped.

By the time the test had ended, Lanie begged to pilot the Chiron for a couple more hours. She did not get her wish.

She emerged out of her mech feeling both satisfied and regretful. She was so addicted to piloting the Chiron that she just wanted to throw everything else aside so she could spend all day with her new training mech!

Cherie Tovar greeted the mech cadet as she reluctantly lowered herself onto the ground.

"Have you been enjoying yourself?" She asked with a knowing smile.

"The Chiron is amazing, ma'am! It's already comfortable to pilot in its normal state, but once it adapted to my body, it's twice as good!"

"That's what this model is all about. We not only aim to make it easier for its mech pilots to perform maneuvers, but also enjoy the sessions while they are at it. As far as I'm concerned, the Chiron is one of the most powerful trump cards of our clan!"

Lanie wholeheartedly agreed. If every mech cadet in the clan received the opportunity to pilot the Chiron, they would probably get addicted as well!

Still, as much as she enjoyed her session, the young potentate still remained sober enough to form some concerns.

"Is it alright to pilot the Chiron further? Don't get me wrong. I like piloting it. I just don't encounter the problems that I regularly face with other mechs. Won't I be able to get accustomed to piloting real mechs if I pilot with a handicap all the time?"

The mech designer shook her head. "It's not that simple. While you are right, don't forget that the Chiron's frame is infinitely adaptable. By adapting its layout to your body shape, you are able to practice many advanced skills such as marksmanship and swordsmanship through targeted training ahead of time. However, once you have to practice other forms of mech handling, the Chiron can automatically adjust to an adult shape or even take on abnormal forms in order to train your adaptability."

Lanie understood what she meant. The Chiron's ability to transform opened up a lot of extra possibilities!

If used correctly, the Chiron could produce an army of excellent graduates!

#### *Chapter 2527: Rise of the Valkyries*

The Komodo War raged on with greater intensity than ever!

Though half of the territories of the Carnegie Group and the Vermeer Group fell into the hands of the Hexers, the Fridaymen took them back at a steady pace!

Starships exploded, mechs fell by the thousands and an incredible degree of ordnance was being consumed with each passing second!

The Hex Army fought hard, but the different militaries of the Friday Coalition hit their enemies back with vengeance and desperation!

"Don't let these Hexers catch a breath! As long as we let up, these witches will go on the attack again!"

"Take revenge for Carnegie and Vermeer! Don't let the sacrifices of our brothers be in vain!"

Hundreds of star systems that had become the site of Hexer invasions just months ago suddenly dealt with another wave of invasions.

The Sundered Phalanx and the Oni Guard both advanced relentlessly despite the opposition in their way!

The Hex Army's overreach and the lack of time spent on fortifying the conquered star systems meant that the Fridaymen could take them back on the cheap!

The Fridaymen encountered significantly less resistance in taking them back than their counterparts!

This was a given, as the Hexers pretty much had to dismantle all of the centuries of accumulation spent fortifying the Fridaymen star systems. Once the conquests succeeded, there was no way the female supremacists were able to entrench their new gains in a short amount of time.

Even if they were capable of doing so, they might not even want to do so! To the Hex Army, its resources were better spent on strengthening their main mech units than building up some marginally useful fortifications.

One of the categories of mechs that recently received a lot of attention from the Hexers was the expanded Valkyrie product line!

No longer were the Hexers forced to work with a one-size-fits-all solution. The introduction of five additional variants brought enough variety to the mech divisions of the Hex Army to form Valkyrie mech units with a greater degree of specialization!

While the Blessed Squires still served a very vital role to the Hex Army, the Hexers naturally gravitated towards the LMC mech dedicated to female mech pilots.

The mech just called to these aggressive and bloodthirsty women like no other machine designed by the Hexers had ever accomplished!

Other aerial mechs may feature greater optimization, offer more varied modules and so on, but the truth was that the Komodo War was fought by people, not machines.

The latter only served as an extension of the former!

Therefore, the original Valkyrie Redeemer model had already captured the hearts of many Hexer military mech pilots.

Now, the release of several new variants made the mechs accessible to many more female soldiers!

In an answer to the onslaught unleashed by the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan, the Hex Army decided to bet big on the Valkyrie product line.

High command had little choice.

"Only the Superior Mother can help us now. We must ask for her blessing to pull us through this war!"

Too many Hexers fighting on the frontlines demanded the powerful new mech models. Restricting the supply of Valkyrie mechs would have a major impact on their morale. Yet

as soon as the mech regiments received their new toys, they fought harder and with less complaint!

The Hex Army had also lost the initiative. The Fridaymen constantly pushed them back, causing many plans and movement orders to fall through. The Hexer planners and strategists constantly had to readjust their deployments because the frontlines collapsed faster than they could cope!

What high command noticed about the Valkyrie mechs was that they slowed down the Fridaymen aggressors after deploying them en masse. The mechs were having a very telling effect as they seemed to egg on their mech pilots to do more!

While the Valkyrie mechs succeeded in hindering the Fridaymen forces to an extent, the casualty rates among their mech pilots tended to be higher than usual.

One of the downsides of the mental influence that LMC mechs exerted onto their mech pilots was that they were less willing to retreat and more willing to take risks!

The Valkyrie Redeemer and its variants were offensive mechs by nature. They featured above-average defense for their mech type, but that did not mean their margin of error was huge.

One mistake might doom an entire mech company of Valkyrie Redeemers!

Despite this hefty cost, the Hex Army still went through with deploying the Valkyrie mechs in greater numbers. Slowing down the Fridaymen mattered more than anything else because the Hexers needed time to adjust to the sudden shifts.

Whether on land or in space, the female mech pilots who were lucky enough to be assigned to a Valkyrie unit all fought with the blessing of the Superior Mother!

In one battle above orbit, several hundred Valkyrie Huntresses sped up while firing their modified short-capacity gauss rifles at an incoming formation of Fridaymen mechs.

The Sundered Phalanx deployed a mix of lancer mechs, space knights, spearman mechs and rifleman mechs.

This balanced unit was very hard to deal with, yet the Hexer mech pilots harassing them utilized their mobility advantage to the fullest. The Valkyrie Huntresses nimbly stayed out of the range of the enemy melee mechs while focusing their fire on the rifleman mechs.

It was quite difficult to get through the protection offered by the space knights, but the Valkyrie Huntresses split up into smaller squads and spread out in order to assail their targets from multiple angles!

No matter how hard the Fridaymen space knights tried to cover for their ranged mechs, the Valkyrie Huntresses only had to concentrate their Marked For Death ability on them for an instant to produce an opening!

Hardly any Fridaymen mech pilot was able to keep their cool when being subjected to multiple simultaneous death glows of the dreaded Valkyrie mechs.

While several kilometers of range was fairly short in space battles, it was more than enough for the ranged variant of the Valkyrie Redeemers!

"We're out of ammunition!"

"Pull back and resupply. Don't let these brutes take advantage of us. Our mechs aren't as good up close!"

Their non-standard issue gauss rifles gave the Valkyrie Huntresses a lot of punch, but the mechs weren't able to carry a lot of ammunition. This was fine, as the nimble and mobile ranged mechs all turned around and flew back to the safety of their own lines before the Fridaymen could entangle them in place, leaving over fifty broken Fridaymen mechs behind!

In another part of the battlefield, a different variant of the Valkyrie Redeemer eschewed hit and run tactics and dove straight into the Fridaymen formations!

Hundreds of Valkyrie Interceptors bore their spears and shields with steady grips as they flew into a barrage of enemy fire!

Various auxiliary mechs in the midst of the Hexer elements all projected various shields, ECM and other forms of assistance.

Yet various Valkyrie Interceptors, some of them issued to their mech pilots just days ago, continued to fall off or explode due to the focused fire coming from their targets.

"Don't slow down, sisters! We will pay them back at least three more times for all of the good Hexers that fell. Ready your spears and mark your targets!"

As the Valkyrie Interceptors charged forth, their third eyes all began to shine hundreds of spotlights at the Fridaymen mechs that were in their way.

Though the Sunderers already knew what to expect from the Valkyrie mechs, no amount of preparation could truly prepare them against the sensation of being stared at by a mother who was much greater than they ever thought!

The Fridaymen mech pilots began to quail in their piloting suits.

"I can't hold still!"



On the other hand, the Hexers who piloted the Valkyrie Interceptors each felt as if the Superior Mother blessed them more than usual!

The commander of the Valkyrie mechs felt inspired. She transmitted an order that caused all of the Valkyrie Interceptors to activate the small projection modules built onto their frames.

As the Hexer mechs rapidly closed in, a huge projection began to appear in the middle of their formation.

A giant representation of the Superior Mother came into existence! The projected illusion held a spear and began to thrust the giant weapon into the Fridaymen formation at the same time just before the Interceptors slammed into their targets!

"GIVE THEM DEATH!"

The Valkyrie Interceptors expanded their glows, causing them to overlap across the entire Fridaymen lines!

The Sunderers weren't able to adjust to the sudden changes!

Crash!

Hundreds of silent collisions occurred within a span of a dozen seconds as a succession of Interceptors ran their spears through shields, armor and other delicate components!

A large number of Fridaymen mechs coasted backwards as they were either downed or damaged to the point where they couldn't regain control!

Of course, the Valkyrie Interceptors didn't come out unscathed. Dozens of them got struck by instinctive or lucky counterattacks. Others botched their attacks and collided head-on against an enemy mech, thereby concussing their entire frames!

"Push through their lines! Initiate Shock And Awe!"

Before the Fridaymen could recover and take advantage of the relatively static Valkyrie mechs, the latter simultaneously fired their Starburst grenades which quickly overwhelmed any nearby sensor systems.

"Hah! Did these witches think that would work? Think again!"

Surprisingly, the Sundered Phalanx mechs withstood the Starburst grenades! The Fridaymen had modified and hardened their machines to resist the interference generated by these grenades!

However, at the same time the grenades exploded, the Valkyrie Interceptor mechs also unleashed powerful pulses that never failed to shock the minds of any nearby enemy mech pilots.

Yet despite unleashing these powerful pulses, the Fridaymen mechs seemed to take no notice and continued to launch their counterattacks, if with a little less fluency than before.

Many Valkyrie Interceptors were caught by surprise! They either suffered crippling damage or received blows that would take days to repair.

"Retreat! Shock them again!"

The Valkyrie Interceptors performed the same as they receded, but the Fridaymen mechs continued to stick to them as best they could, downing more Hexer mechs before the two sides finally separated.

"Damn!" The Hexer commander cursed. "The blasted Fridaymen have adapted!"

In order to counter the Shock And Awe Pulse of the Valkyrie mechs, the Fridaymen not only hardened the sensors of their machines, but also added some automation!

Whenever their mech pilots blanked out, the Fridaymen mechs would automatically hand over control to an AI that had been tracking the entire battle in the background. Once the AI gained control of the mech, it could automatically form the correct response in theory!

Though letting AIs take over control was not the most ideal solution, against a measure that often succeeded at incapacitating mech pilots, it was better than nothing!

No longer were the Valkyrie Redeemers able to force the enemy mechs to lose control either.

After a few days of recording successful results, the Fridaymen expanded the scope of this counter to more measures.

Now, even when the Valkyrie mechs managed to paralyze an enemy mech pilot with several focused death glares, the AIs always kicked in whenever a mech pilots lost a certain degree of attentiveness in battle.

As the Hexers increased their use of the Valkyrie mechs, the Fridaymen weren't sitting still. Aside from developing methods to mitigate the latest toys of the Hexers, the Coalition also began to deploy an increasing number of expert mechs in battle.

This was the real killer to the Hex Army!

The more time passed, the more expert mechs the Fridaymen were able to muster. Every third-rate that was at least somewhat aligned to the Coalition were 'persuaded' into lending their expert pilots.

With the Fridaymen Masters and Seniors developing hastily-customized expert mechs as fast as they were capable of outputting, not even glows could dent the increasing damage these powerful mechs inflicted on the Hex Army!

"We can't go on like this! We need to put a stop against these endless enemy expert mechs!"

*Chapter 2528: The Protector's Concerns*

"When can I start to have babies?"

"Theoretically, you can start this month. However, I would advise against that. It is well worth the wait if you hold off for a year."

"Why?"

Ranya sighed and turned away from her current experiment. "With the current situation between you and your new hubby, we can only fertilize your egg with Ves' baseline human genes. The baby that results from this union won't have any of his advantages. While we can still tailor the genes of your baby before conception and modify the fetus throughout the gestation process, the results won't stand out. Do you want your first children to be average?"

"No! Absolutely not!" Gloriana firmly shook her head.

"Miaow!" Clixie echoed as she sat on a table.

"This is why we need to perform a new research group that is solely dedicated to developing the optimal designer babies based on the genetic material of you and your partner. There is a lot of untapped potential in your genes. I'm particularly interested in understanding how Ves' weird organs and genes actually work."

Gloriana frowned. She was rather impatient to proceed with the next phase of her life. Perhaps other women might wish to take it slow, but she was different!

"What will it take for us to get ready to birth a beautiful and perfect baby girl?"

"I can't do it myself." Her cousin admitted.

"Don't you have hundreds of biotech experts working in your org?"

"The Larkinson Biotech Institute mainly consists of medical doctors and augmentation specialists. While we have expanded our recruitment scope in recent months, we haven't been able to snag the second-raters we need to handle a project as difficult as yours."

"Why are you constantly behind on everything!"

"Hey, it's not my fault! We had to start from scratch in the Larkinson Clan. I think we have been doing quite well for ourselves in so little time. It will take at least a decade for the biotech division of the clan to get up to par with the other divisions."

"That is way too much time! I don't want to start with having my first baby when I'm forty."

"You won't have to wait that long, cousin. Do you remember our first stop after we leave this star sector?" Ranya grinned. "I bet we can hire all of the talented and capable geneticists and pediatricians we need at the Life Research Association. It won't be easy to attract the best, but as long as we put in the effort, we might arguably be able to snap up some of the best biotech experts in the star cluster."

"I see."

Though Gloriana wasn't happy, she knew she had little choice but to wait until the Larkinson Clan reached the LRA and recruited the necessary professionals. Even then, it would take some time for them to figure out how to match Ves and her abnormal genes together to produce a healthy and wonderful baby.

As Gloriana daydreamed about her first daughter, Ranya issued a warning.

"Even if we acquire the necessary experts, don't expect us to produce the perfect outcome. Unlike mechs, living organisms are much more varied in their expression. We can set up the starting conditions and guide their growth along the way, but we cannot change as much as you think. The difficulty of keeping a growing child's development on track is much more complicated when you factor in alien and artificial genes."

"Our children won't be average. I will do whatever it takes to make them special." Gloriana vowed.

The direction she chose for her offspring was fairly controversial. It was much safer, cheaper and more convenient to create a child from the baseline human genes of the parents.

While Ves had left his pure human self behind a long time ago, he still left behind plenty of DNA records for Ranya to reconstruct his past genes.

It was a bit complicated when it came to Gloriana as she essentially started off as a designer baby as well, but the genes from her early life were still 'normal' enough to allow for natural procreation without too many complications.

Of course, this was not the end of the story. There were many other variables at play that parents needed to take into account before they tried to have children.

This was one of the downsides to ubiquitous augmentation and genetic modification. Humans were not only moving further away from their baseline genes, but also ventured into countless unique directions!

This pattern of human gene scattering presented a lot of reproduction problems that ordinary people didn't have to deal with. Even if their genes were modified, as long as the masses all received the same treatment, they still maintained the ability to reproduce naturally without too many messy outcomes.

"Is there any other way we can make my babies stronger and better?" Gloriana queried.

"There are many peculiar aspects about your husband's physique that can't be replicated through genes. His implanted Jutland organ along with some of the abnormalities in his brain are very difficult to pass on. If you want any hope of replicating them and passing them on to your babies, then we need to hire or obtain the services of a top-tier augmentation specialist and exobiologist."

"How hard is it to reach these experts?"

"Very hard." Ranya immediately replied. "People like me can only look up on them. These are the authorities of their respective fields. In the Life Research Association, these doctors have not only earned a lot of renown for their research, but are also part of the ruling class in the state. It will be incredibly difficult to reach out to any of them and lure them over to our side. However, as long as we can recruit at least one of them, the Larkinson Biotech Institute will be able to solve all of your problems!"

A growing intensity burned in Gloriana's eyes. For the sake of her future children, she needed to do her best to poach these senior biotech researchers!

Ranya turned her back to her cousin and resumed her experiment. A small grin grew on her face as she imagined how far Gloriana would go once she had a goal in mind.

Poaching some of the top researchers of the Life Research Association not only advanced Gloriana's child-rearing plans, but also her own ambitions.

She had collected plenty of interesting research material during the Nyxian Gap Campaign, but she and her fellow researchers were unable to make heads or tails of them. As long as her institute obtained someone qualified enough to decipher the alien

tissue samples, she would be able to advance a lot of her research projects, including some of her more personal ones!

Her gaze fell on the extraordinary plant life submerged in a special nutrient solution within a containment tank. The shape of its spindly green limbs conformed exactly to a human nerve system!

Elsewhere on Cinach, Venerable Jannzi supervised the live training of her Shieldbearers.

Twelve Aurora Titans attempted to defend against projected attacks launched from every direction. The defense mechs moved like clockwork in space and constantly angled their shields or moved their mechs in a way that mitigated much of the incoming damage and ensured they would last much longer than someone who piloted a space knight without special training!

Though the Aurora Titans were slow, unwieldy and rather outdated, they still made for good training in Venerable Jannzi's eyes. As the mech pilot who was most in tune with this mech model, she had mastered nearly all of the tricks needed to maximize the survivability of this unique mech model.

Once the training session wound down, the mechs slowly flew back to their carriers. Venerable Jannzi met the hopeful mech pilots one by one and gave them individual feedback before allowing them to retire.

Her second, Lieutenant Syra Kronon-Larkinson, stayed behind a little longer.

As her name suggested, she used to be an Ylvainan citizen. Unlike the majority of Ylvainans who joined the clan, she was not a part of the Ylvaine Dynasty. Though Syra shared much of the beliefs in the Great Prophet as the True Believers, she did not recognize James as the prophet reborn.

That made her a relatively existence within the Larkinson Clan. James Ylvaine was a very persuasive man. He not only managed to convert many loose Ylvainans into his cult, but also attracted a growing number of clansmen with other backgrounds!

Not everyone within the clan was comfortable with this development. However, the Larkinson Clan did not explicitly forbid the spread of beliefs. While the core of the clan remained secular, there were still members who turned to faith for one reason or another.

"More and more veterans of the Nyxian Gap Campaign have turned to the Ylvainan Faith in recent times, Venerable." Lieutenant Syra reported to the young female expert pilot. "Many mech pilots and other personnel are still burdened by their traumas. The 'Living Prophet' is one of the few people in the clan who can provide substantial answers to these wounded soldiers."

Venerable Jannzi frowned. "Why haven't our soldiers turned to our counselors and medical health professionals? The Larkinson Veteran Foundation offers a lot more help in the past. Director Clinton has done a good job expanding his organization to meet the growing need for help."

The Larkinson Veteran Foundation was the evolution of the Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans.

Now that Ves didn't have to bother with putting up a charitable pretense, the foundation under the lead of Director Clinton reoriented itself to serve the needs of the entire clan.

However, its role had to change yet again as the Larkinson Biotech Institute became the main medical service provider to the clansmen. After receiving a modest cash infusion, Larkinson Veteran Foundation steadily turned into an organization that specialized in mental health.

"The LVF is good, but the Ylvainans are better." Syra stated. "The prayer sessions centered around worshipping the Bright Martyr and the Living Prophet are somehow able to settle the traumatized soldiers. I haven't taken part in these blasphemous sessions myself, but I fear for my devotion should I attempt even once."

"These True Believers are gaining more influence by the day!" Jannzi gritted her teeth.

As the self-proclaimed protector of the Larkinson Clan, she paid attention to any potential threat. Ves was not the only one who caught her attention.

The slow and silent encroachment of the Ylvainans concerned her as well.

"The True Believers may be following a false idol, but they present real solutions." The lieutenant of the Shieldbearers explained. "Unless the LVF or someone else can provide better solutions, the Living Prophet will keep gathering more adherents. Conversions have spiked whenever the clan has gone through a major battle or crisis. This will keep happening until a viable alternative has emerged."

This was easy enough for Jannzi to understand, but the problem was that she had no idea how to offer a better solution. If the Larkinson Veteran Foundation wasn't up to the task, then where else could her clansmen turn to if they required healing?

"Don't tell me we have to start a faith ourselves..."

Seeing that she wouldn't be able to come up with a viable solution, the expert pilot turned to another point of concerns.

"What have the Penitent Sisters been up to lately?"



"The former Hexers have been keeping to themselves for the most part, ma'am. They are avoiding the Glory Seekers by the plague. Instead, they're focused on deepening their worship of the Superior Mother. I think this is one group where the Ylvainan Faith won't find another purchase."

Venerable Janzi frowned even deeper. Her force of will reacted against the mention of yet another potential threat.

She was very wary towards Hexer beliefs!

"Make sure to keep a close eye on both groups of Hexers. Whether they are inside or outside of our clan, their views on boys are detestable. I won't allow our clan to put women above men. Every Larkinson matters!"

#### *Chapter 2529: Unsolvable Problem*

Though Ves and Gloriana had fallen into their low periods for a time, that did not make them useless...

The biggest downside to their current states was that they weren't able to design mechs with their usual passion.

That was not a serious problem.

They just had to devote their attention to something else that did not require as much creativity and imagination.

Aside from studying, tutoring their assistants and managing their subordinates, the newlyweds also laid the groundwork of their second round of projects.

They had already made the first decision when they met aboard the Stellar Chaser.

"We should devote all of our time to designing second-class mechs for this round of projects." Ves declared to his wife. "We are way too slow in fulfilling our obligations to the Hegemony and meeting the demand for second-class mechs to our own clan. We need to deliver at least diverse mechs for each target audience within half a year to alleviate the pressure."

Gloriana nodded in agreement. "I approve. The Hegemony truly needs more mechs. As for the needs of the clan, I don't think the pressure is too great. The mech forces have recently ordered large batches of second-class mechs from the mech market, right? Our mech pilots will be fine with piloting commercial mechs. We should devote all of our time on designing as many Hexer mechs as possible!"

"Denied!"

Ves flatly shot down her proposal. He would go crazy if he spent months on doing nothing else but work on Hexer mech design projects. This was a form of torture than no man should go through!

Naturally, Gloriana did not agree with him, but he put his foot down on this issue. For his sanity and confidence in his manhood, he needed to work on some non-Hexer mech designs as well.

Once he managed to get his way, he relaxed. He held Lucky in his lap and tickled his head.

"Meow."

Clixie was present as well. She rested on top of the Larkinson Mandate that was placed on a nearby desk as if she was brooding an egg.

"Miaow."

The Golden Cat hasn't come out at this time. Ever since the LMC started to churn out Chirons, Goldie had become fascinated by the latest mech model that allowed her to form a deeper connection to some of the Larkinsons.

She especially enjoyed exploring her bond with younger Larkinsons!

As Clixie became confused why her 'daughter' didn't show up, Ves and Gloriana shared their thoughts on what their next projects should address.

"I've been thinking about whether to design a successor to the Bright Warrior model." Ves began. "The way my clansmen are using the modular mech platform is now how I originally envisioned. While there is still value in designing a mech that possesses an adaptable configuration, I'm not sure whether it is better than designing a bunch of specialized mechs instead."

Gloriana snorted at him. "You don't have to bother with explaining any further. You've already decided to design a Mark II version of the Bright Warrior, right? It not only solved the urgent need for second-class mechs for our clan, but also provides a comprehensive upgrade framework for the Quint."

She knew him too well.

"You're right. I care too much about the Quint. While we can treat it as a unique mech and upgrade it on an individual basis, that is not what the original Bright Warrior model is all about. At its heart, the Quint is supposed to be the prime example of what a Bright Warrior mech should be. If we want to stay true to our masterwork mech, then we should develop a second-class version of the Bright Warrior and use that as a baseline for the Quint's upgrades instead."

Gloriana did not have too many objections to this plan. The Bright Warrior's modular nature had provided her with a lot of intellectual stimulation during its design process. She looked forward to solving the issues that came up when they attempted to translate the same concept to a higher tech level.

There was one question, though.

"Will you still keep making use of Breyer alloy for this mech model?"

"Probably. I haven't decided yet. I am willing to resort to a more accessible armor system as long as it's resilient enough. The only issue is whether we can afford the alternate materials."

Ves was actually a bit dissatisfied with needing to continue keeping the Bright Warrior model in development. If not for the extreme value of the Quint, he would have felt more inclined to devote his design resources to more specialized mechs.

Against other second-class mechs, the Bright Warrior model's shortcomings became more relevant. A dedicated swordsman mech, lancer mech, rifleman mech or space knight would always be able to deliver a better performance given the same cost and material usage.

This difference in performance might be as big as 20 percent!

Even if Ves did not prioritize performance too much, he couldn't afford to ignore such a big gap.

The Larkinson Clan in its current state could not make full use of the possibilities the Bright Warrior model offered.

The only way to solve this problem was if he raised a large number of mech pilots that were just as multi-talented as Venerable Joshua. If all of these mech pilots were capable of piloting multiple mech types with greater efficiency, then the modular nature of the Bright Warrior line would truly be able to provide a lot of value!

Ves sighed inwardly. This was too much to ask from his mech pilots. They were already working hard to master the basics of piloting second-class mechs. Adding these burdens on top of their current goals would only cause them to collapse.

His mech pilots simply weren't good enough. He might have to wait a very long time before he obtained a batch of versatile elites.

After putting the Bright Warrior Mark II on the list of projects, Gloriana issued her own request.

"If you have been following the Komodo War lately, the Fridayman counterattack is pushing back our side. Our Valkyrie mechs have succeeded in giving the enemy some difficulties, but the overall trend hasn't changed."

Though Ves did not want the Hegemony to lose the war, he couldn't help but feel a bit smug.

"Are you realizing now that the Fridaymen aren't pushovers?"

"The Hegemony will still win this war in the end." Gloriana stated with conviction. She still held on to her delusions! "It's just.. The road to victory will be more painful than I thought. We can't allow the Hex Army to hollow itself out after beating the Coalition forces. We need to find a way to allow our side to regain the momentum it had before. I still miss those early days when our Blessed Squires helped our fellow Hexers run over the Fridaymen."

"It won't be that easy to take advantage of the Fridaymen anymore. They know about our glows and have developed numerous measures to mitigate this feature."

Both of them felt rather frustrated about that. The Friday Coalition took their mechs seriously, so of course they developed means to counter their effectiveness.

While there were some measures that Ves could counter with ease, the Fridaymen Masters weren't idiots. They were capable of developing a lot more solutions.

Right now, the addition of AIs to take over temporary control should a mech pilot become incapacitated was very effective. Though Gloriana informed Ves that DIVA and other Hexer organizations were already trying their best to hack or subvert these AIs, this was not something that would yield quick results. The Fridaymen were too thorough.

Gloriana hadn't given up with trying to help her state in any way she could. She mustered up her determination and shared a bold idea.

"Right now, the Fridaymen are relying on one crucial advantage to turn around the war. All of the guest expert pilots they've invited to fight on their behalf are taking a horrible toll on the Hex Army."

"I know. What do you want to do about it? Short of forcing the Hegemony-aligned states to hand over their expert pilots, I don't think there's an easy way for the Hex Army to address this disparity."

This was pretty much impossible. The Hegemony long treated the lesser states around it with disdain, and most citizens who lived there had no love for the Hexers.

Convincing those stubborn, strong-willed expert pilots to fight on behalf of female supremacy was probably a herculean task!

"From what I heard, our diplomats are still working on that." Gloriana vaguely said. "I think we might be able to pitch in as well. Expert pilots are powerful, but not unstoppable. I want us to design a mech that is specially geared to countering expert mechs."

"..."

Ves stared flatly at his wife. He might love her, but that didn't mean he was willing to entertain her delusions!

"Honey.. expert mechs are powerful. Really powerful. Not only are they made from better materials, their resonance abilities also make them extremely deadly to fight. Their resonance shields can block regular attacks with great efficiency while their offensive capabilities are enough to allow them to take down standard mechs as if they are target practice!"

"I'm being serious about this, Ves." She growled.

"Forgive me, but this is a problem that many mech designers have tried to solve, including Master Mech Designers and Star Designers. The most they came up with was designing some lancer mechs or ranged mechs that hit harder than usual. They're only effective when deployed in large numbers, and inevitably hundreds of them will fall in the process of taking down a single expert mech. I bet the Masters from the Hegemony are already at work in developing something similar, if they haven't already have some suitable in reserve."

Gloriana crossed her arms. "That's not good enough, and you know it. While these mechs may be effective at taking down expert mechs when there are many of them, the most troublesome aspect is that expert mechs are too good at avoiding or escaping envelopment. It's too hard to pin them down."

"Since you know that this is true, how do you think we're supposed to be able to do better?"

"With simple logic, Ves. We need to leverage your mother. She's a Supreme who is greater than any god. Mere proto-gods don't stand a chance against her. Now think about what will happen if she directly squares off against a demigod. Who is the greater divinity in this confrontation? Not the latter, that's for sure. Therefore, the more surefire way to counter an expert mech is by forcing its expert pilot into a direct confrontation with the Superior Mother. This is guaranteed to work!"

"..."

Ves had no words for her 'logical' plan. Was this what Gloriana was like when she was a little more rational than usual?

He coughed. "Wifey..."

"Don't call me that." She hissed.

"Uhm, sweetie, as much as you think highly of the Superior Mother and my design philosophy, we can't just snap our fingers and come up with a mech that just happens to succeed where every single mech designer in existence has failed. The willpower of an expert pilot is simply too strong to get affected by external glows. As for trying to force a direct confrontation.. I'm sorry, that will never happen unless you force a Fridayman mech pilot into the cockpit of one of our mechs."

There was no way something as absurd as that would ever happen.

She grew even more upset. Ves wasn't giving her the right answer. "How are we supposed to beat the Fridaymen and their loathsome guest expert pilots, then? We have to come up with something to alleviate this pressing crisis."

"Look, we might not be able to counter expert pilots in one go, but maybe we can develop some applications that can make battles against them a little less lopsided."

"Oh?" She began to look hopeful again. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Not yet. Let me think about it. I have some ideas, but I need to explore them further before I am sure. Don't expect much from me, though. Expert pilots have reigned over many battlefields for centuries. Their strength is for real and it's very difficult to challenge them without bringing expert pilots as well."

Still, Ves believed it was very worthwhile for him to investigate this topic. Encountering enemy expert mech in battle was only a matter of time, and it would be nice to have an extra option in reserve!

He couldn't help but cast his mind back on the instance where an enemy expert mech was able to fight with impunity. Venerable Foster's Belisarius was so overpowering that the entire landbound contingents of Lydia's Swordmaidens and the Flagrant Vandals essentially collapsed in front of its invincible might!

Ves never wanted to live through such an awful tragedy again!

*Chapter 2530: Leveraging Spirituality*

Gloriana was delusional if she thought that they could design a standard mech that could fight against expert mechs in a cost-effective manner.

How many mech designers attempted such a feat?

While there were instances where large amounts of regular mechs managed to overcome expert mechs, the circumstances were always special.

First, the attacking side had to bring a lot of mechs. These mechs also had to be fairly good. They needed to be tough enough to slow down the expert mech's attempts at taking them down. They also had to possess enough firepower to wear down the expert mech's defenses.

Even with these conditions, the expert pilot could always decide to run away. It was very hard to hinder an expert mech's flight. Even the slower mech types such as defensive knights always exhibited above-average mobility due to the immense amount of investment poured into their development.

At the level of expert pilots, mobility was an essential life-saver!

Otherwise, wouldn't it be easy for one side to carpet bomb the coordinates of an expert mech with a couple of hundred artillery mechs?

While it was a bit cold-hearted, if the Hexers or Fridaymen could sacrifice two or three elite mech companies to take down an expert mech, they would take the trade everytime!

This was because a properly-employed expert mech could easily demolish thousands of mechs during a long campaign!

Not only that, but expert pilots also brought a lot of other value to the table. Their presence boosted the morale of their own side and intimidated any enemy in sight. They were invaluable trainers and contributed to a state's prestige.

It was due to their strategic value that research on countering them had never stopped. It was unfortunate that no one had ever come up with a silver bullet that could end their tyranny on the battlefield.

Ves did not have much hope of developing something effective either. From a purely technical standpoint, expert mechs were already cheat-like existences. Their insane build quality meant that they were always bridge mechs by default. Expert pilots were so skilled that it was foolish to expect them to fumble.

Only an insanely huge disparity in numbers could overcome this disparity, but that was not really a solution.

His only choice was to target expert mechs from a different angle. Gloriana clearly had hopes that he could employ his specialty to attack the spiritual qualities of an expert mech.



Was it possible for Ves to come up with a method to disturb the resonance between an expert mech and an expert pilot?

If he could accomplish this amazing feat, then much of the power of the combination would be lost.

An expert mech that leveraged the power of resonance was often invincible against standard mechs.

An expert mech that lost the power of resonance was merely a single super-high quality mech!

However, was it easy to accomplish this seemingly-simple feat?

No!

Expert pilots were incredibly strong in will and spirit. The combination of the two produced a near-tangible force that was incredibly difficult to interfere.

If that wasn't enough, these expert pilots combined their force of wills with their expert mechs.

Even the minds of regular mech pilots became as hard as armor plating once they interfaced with a mech! The melding of man and machine resulted in a combination that leveraged the sentient mind of a living human with the immense processing power of a mech.

Only immensely powerful spiritual entities such as the dark gods and the Temple Protector of the Ruined Temple had managed to overcome this protection!

Glows worked in a similar fashion. They were able to circumvent the protection afforded by the man-machine connection, but their ability to cause direct harm to mech pilots was limited.

Against expert pilots, they basically exerted no influence at all as the interaction was too indirect! Demigods were easily capable of shrugging off both positive and negative glows.

In short, Gloriana's theory was a complete non-starter. Even if Ves designed a mech that was directly capable of channeling the Superior Mother onto an enemy, even she would have a headache trying to defeat one of the most mentally-resilient combinations on the battlefield!

Ves did not entertain his wife's delusions any further. He figured he should just try and find a different way to hinder expert mechs. As for defeating them? No way! That goal was way too far away!

"Let's move on with planning our other projects." He said briskly. "So far, we have come up with two possible projects. For the third one, I want to design a light skirmisher, one that is suitable for the Larkinson Clan. Venerable Tusa has been complaining to me for a long time that we haven't developed a light mech. I think it is time to make up for this oversight."

His wife fell silent for a few moments.

"He's right. We have been remiss in this. However, before you bring up a suggestion, let me make a proposal. Didn't we publish the Ferocious Piranha a short time ago? Instead of coming with an entirely new mech concept, we can save a considerable amount of time and effort by uplifting it into a second-class mech."

"This.."

To be honest, Ves hadn't thought about adapting the Ferocious Piranha.

While second-class mechs were indeed very different from third-class mechs, the concept for the spaceborn light mech was quite good. It utilized the glow of the Doom Guard in an offensive manner without any of the self-harming aspects that plagued the striker mech.

If the clan could pilot a large number of second-class Ferocious Piranhas, then these mechs would be able to terrorize large groups of enemies! Just like the Doom Guard, the light skirmishers that propagated the rapidly-cycling glows of Zeigra and Lufa were simply too intolerable to any but the most firm-minded elites!

This was an incredibly potent ability on the battlefield. The Larkinson Clan simply had to adopt the second-class version of this mech as soon as possible!

"Good idea." Ves eventually nodded. "Let's add it to the list. We'll give it the same treatment as the Bright Warrior."

It was quite clever to look towards upgrading their existing products. They already fleshed out the concept and put it into a form that proved its value. Not only that, but during the design process, the people who took part in the project generated a lot of data. While most of it wasn't relevant, there were plenty of details that remained just as relevant regardless of the class of the mech.

Considering that Ves wanted to tackle six major projects at once, it was vital for him to find any opportunity to save time and effort.

The only point he wasn't sure about yet was whether he should publish the completed mech design.

The Ferocious Piranha should already be quite potent. Ves was afraid he might spark too many waves in the second-class mech market once he released this monster!

Yet... didn't he require more money? Acquiring capital ships wasn't cheap. He couldn't take the Hegemony's generosity for granted. With at least six more capital ships to go, Ves would have to earn trillions of hex credits in order to round out his expeditionary fleet!

Of course, the more, the better. His upcoming factory ship already became a lot more capable after its budget had been raised by 1.2 trillion hex credits!

Therefore, from a business standpoint, so what if he disrupted the second-class mech market? Money solved every problem!

That, and designing excellent mechs. So long as Ves focused his attention on these two aspects, nothing would be able to hinder his path!

Ves discussed some practical issues with Gloriana. A third-class light skirmisher featured so little capacity that they were always barebones without fail.

Once they translated it into a second-class mech design, they gained a bit of capacity, especially if its budget was high enough. By incorporating enough miniaturized components, they might be able to add one or two additional models or weapon systems.

Gloriana waved her hand. "We can explore these options in our own time. Right now, there are too many choices to count."

That was three mech design projects now. The pair was making good speed in filling out the available slots.

This time, Gloriana proposed another Hexer mech.

"I've been thinking about what you've managed to accomplish with your specialty. The properties of the glows of your mechs are remarkable. We have only scratched the surface of what is possible. Since we are turning mechs into gods, our products ought to be capable of doing more. We just have to be imaginative enough."

"What are you talking about, Gloriana?"

"Have you ever thought about using your specialty to establish communication channels?"

"Uhhh.."

Gloriana let out an exasperated sigh. She placed her hands on her hips. "Didn't you work on some way to bind people together? I don't entirely know what you've been doing with these networks, but I'm surprised you haven't paid attention to their most obvious application. Networks are inherently suited for communication. If used correctly, a communications network that is supported by a proto-god can probably circumvent all kinds of technological jamming! Perhaps it can even facilitate communication across star systems!"

He overlooked this angle!

Ves had already used the Larkinson Network in this capacity in the Nyxian Gap. However, so many other matters followed that he subconsciously neglected it. While Goldie had already demonstrated the capability to monitor the minds of other Larkinsons and communicate directly with him, Ves never considered the Larkinson Network to be a communications network!

To him, it was a measure to restrain traitors and a means of reinforcing loyalty.

Even if it was possible to open up viable means of communications through this spiritual network, Ves still wouldn't have considered it. Revealing the Larkinson Network to every clansmen would just expose one of his secrets. It was not worth it to draw so much attention to him once the spiritual network became common knowledge.

So far, most clansmen knew that there was something special going on, but as long as Ves didn't say too much, they could only hold their opinions to themselves.

"I think this is a genuinely good idea." Ves eventually replied. "It's just that implementing it on a wider scale requires a lot of research."

"We can refine this concept in the coming weeks. By then, you can tell me whether it is viable or not. I think our communications mech can help the Hex Army coordinate its units better."

Considering the supportive function of this mech, it was a given that it should be a male mech. Its specs didn't have to be high. It just needed to perform its primary function to the best of its abilities.

Therefore, from a technical aspect, the design of this communications mech shouldn't take much time to complete.

The only issue was that Ves had to work by himself to figure out a complete spiritual communications network.

He did not forget that his previous spiritual networks were all connected to humans. This was not a big problem if Ves personally supervised the formation of these bonds.

Yet this solution was untenable when it came to a mass-produced Hexer mech. It was a lot better if Ves managed to tie a spiritual network to the mechs themselves.

Normally, Ves would dismiss such a ridiculous idea. Spiritual networks could only be accessed by living entities. Dead objects weren't able to establish any connections to them because they did not possess any spirituality!

Or did they?

If Ves changed the object to a living mech, the story might be different. As long as the mechs possessed enough life, they should be eligible to form a connection with a spiritual network!

In fact, he didn't even need to design a new mech to test this theory out. He already had a network and some suitable mechs at hand!

What if Ves bound the most spiritually-developed mechs to the Larkinson Network?

What if he treated living mechs like the Quint and the Shield of Samar more like actual Larkinsons?