

Mech 2561

Chapter 2561: Problem Cases

Compared to Percival Larkinson, Lieutenant Hector Larkinson was a lot less severe.

The Living Sentinel officer entered Ves' stateroom with a smile. He even waved at Lucky in a friendly manner.

"Hey, Lucky! What's up? Is there anything interesting up there?"

"Meow." The gem cat replied as he lay upside down with his body pressed against the ceiling.

"Be careful not to fall!"

"Meow!" Lucky arrogantly turned his head.

When the Sentinel Lieutenant sat down, he began to talk amiably with the clan patriarch.

What stood out from Hector was that he had already started a family and cared a lot about his wife and kids.

"For the sake of my family, I can't let myself be haunted by the battles I've been through." Hector spoke to Ves. "Percival can be as grumpy as he likes because he doesn't have to take care of some kids. I'm different. I have to be strong in order to give them an opportunity to grow up happy."

"That is a very admirable sentiment, lieutenant. Not every survivor of the Nyxian Gap Campaign is as ready to move on as you. Are you okay?"

The expert candidate let out a brief sigh. "It was difficult at first, but it's getting better now that we have a new commander. It's hard to move on when everyone around you keeps reliving those disastrous battles. Now that we are finally regaining our pride, I feel we'll soon be back to normal. I can continue to serve when I'm on my shifts and return to my family when I'm off-duty."

As Hector continued to answer a couple more questions, Ves gained a good sense of what he was dealing with at the moment.

What reassured him a lot was that Hector was not a problem case like Tamarin and Percival. If the latter two ever succeeded in advancing to expert pilot in their current forms, they had a very high chance of using their newfound power and influence to pursue unpalatable goals.

Ves did not sense any threat from Hector so far. Of course, there was a chance that the mech lieutenant was misrepresenting himself, but so far he came across as someone who didn't have a lot of ambition.

This was actually Hector's greatest problem.

In order for expert candidates to reach the next step, they had to push themselves. Each and every expert pilot was a driven individual before they transformed into demigods.

Ves was not aware of a case where expert candidates basically slept their way to expert pilot. Such individuals were unworthy to transcend to a higher life phase.

This was why he was concerned about Hector. As a family man, it made sense for Hector to settle for the Living Sentinels even if his piloting skill qualified him for the Avatars of Myth.

The latter may be a lot more prestigious, but demanded a lot more commitment. Avatars had to serve for days, weeks or even months at a time. They enjoyed a lot less off-days than the Sentinels.

This was largely by design. The Avatars of Myth were supposed to put the interests of Ves and the Larkinson Clan above their own interests. If the situation ever called for it, the Avatars were expected to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Was Hector someone who was willing to give up his life for the greater good? Ves seriously doubted it. Loyalty to the clan only extended so far. Even though the Sentinel expert candidate was another trueblood Larkinson, that did not mean he was a diehard idealist.

"Why did you join the Larkinson Clan?" Ves asked. He couldn't hold back his curiosity anymore. "From what it sounds like, you would have been a better fit for the Larkinson Family. Our clan can't completely guarantee the safety of your wife and kids."

Hector shrugged. "I'm aware of that, sir. To be honest, I want my family to live better than they have before. You and your clan may be engaged in various dangers, but I believe there is a purpose behind all of your decisions. No matter how bad some of your actions seem from the outside, it's undeniable that our clan has grown rapidly. Before any notions about breaking off from the Larkinson Family, I never thought that we would turn into second-raters so soon."

"This is just the start. While it sounds like a fantasy, I aim to turn us into first-raters within a century. In fact, it might not even take that long."

While the aspiration excited Hector, it did not have much of an effect.

To many people, becoming first-raters was a pipedream. The gulf between third-raters and second-raters was much easier to overcome than the gulf between second-raters and first-raters.

Many second-raters themselves had attempted to lift themselves up to the standard of the greatest humans, only to fall along the way!

Ordinarily, citizens of second-rate states had to become Master Mech Designers, ace pilots or something equivalent to those exalted ranks to become eligible to join a first-rate state.

Everybody else simply wouldn't belong to this great society within human space. The first-rate states and first-rate superstates were incredibly crowded. While their regions of space were highly-developed, it was already difficult to ensure that every first-rate citizen enjoyed the privileges they were entitled to. There was hardly any support to share the bounty of their states towards outsiders.

Therefore, it shouldn't be a surprise that Hector thought that Ves was merely talking big.

"Okay, I think I know enough. You can go now. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir. Let me just say that you have my support as long as you continue to strive for a better future for our descendants."

Ves smiled. "Understood."

He dropped his smile as soon as Hector left the compartment. He grew thoughtful as he considered how to handle this case.

So far, Lieutenant Hector Larkinson came across as a pleasant person. Though Ves didn't obtain too much information about his piloting inclinations, he knew that the man specialized in piloting space knights and other defensive mechs.

"Percival and Hector Larkinson are very different despite piloting the same kinds of mechs." Ves muttered.

No matter how Hector turned out if he ever underwent apotheosis, Ves did not sense much threat from the Living Sentinel.

The only problem was that Hector did not sound as if he was doing his best to advance to the next rank.

"He's a Sentinel." Ves shrugged. "What can I expect?"

There were at least two categories of mech pilots within the Living Sentinels.

Some possessed great ambitions or wanted to attain a specific goal. Percival Larkinson fell into this category.

The problem with these people was that they didn't measure up in some way. Perhaps they weren't diligent in their practice. Perhaps they had personality problems that made them unsuitable for the elite mech forces. Perhaps they were unwilling to commit enough time to their jobs.

People like these shouldn't be able to advance to expert candidate in the first place.

The extreme pressure of the Battle of Ulimo Citadel and the Battle against the Abyss must have pushed him over the edge. Instead of breaking, his will spontaneously grew stronger.

"What a lucky bastard."

While the most diligent, noble and skilled mech pilots tended to break through at higher rates than other mech pilots, exceptions occasionally popped up. Percival should be one of those cases.

Lieutenant Hector was different. He was not as driven as Percival, but he was a good performer prior through his breakthrough. What was notable about this was that Hector was not as diligent in training as his other colleagues.

Whereas some Sentinels regularly participated in extra practice sessions in order to become eligible to join one of the elite mech forces, other Sentinel mech pilots treated their occupations as day jobs.

Clock in, pilot mechs, clock out.

Of course, they did much more than piloting mechs, but this was how people like Lieutenant Hector approached the job.

It was rather disappointing to Ves. Still, he knew what he would be getting when he initially set up the Living Sentinels.

"The abnormality is that one of these people broke through anyway."

That was a testament of Hector's high talent. Even if he didn't work that much, he was already known as a skilled mech pilot and junior officer.

Ves bet that if Hector did not have a family, he would have become a great Avatar mech pilot!

Yet that wasn't the case, which put Ves in a difficult condition.

If he had his way, he would have wanted to transfer Lieutenant Hector to the Avatars of Myth so that the expert candidate could dig out his true potential.

"I can't do that." Ves shook his head. "To Hector, family is more important than his career."

If Hector remained at the Sentinels, he might never advance to expert pilot.

Sure, Ves could assign a fantastic mech with 100 Ves to Hector, but a machine could not do all of the work by itself.

Expert candidates had to polish their wills and remove all of their doubts and fears to become expert pilots. That took active effort.

"The issue here is that Hector clings too much to his mortality."

Expert pilots were beyond human. This also implied that they were distancing themselves from their humanity.

Every expert pilot that Ves had met had sacrificed something in order to attain more power. Some gave up more than others.

"Wait a minute. There's an exception!"

Venerable Joshua still remained remarkably like his old self. Sure, his confidence grew and he became a bit more assured of his strength. However, he did not come across as aloof and superior as the other expert pilots.

His life domain and his outlook on his piloting career had a lot to do with that. This was important because the Quint should have carried some of that over as well.

"Perhaps something good may arise when Lieutenant Hector is assigned to the Quint."

While this was an interesting idea, Ves wasn't able to implement it straight away. Currently, Venerable Joshua still piloted the masterwork mech. He needed to convince the expert pilot to make do with another mech.

"Maybe I can persuade Joshua to pilot a Transcendent Punisher for a time. The fact that it's an Ylvainan mech design shouldn't matter. In fact, Joshua can probably pilot my Hexer mechs!"

Out of all of his mech pilots, only Joshua exhibited the highest compatibility. To be able to pilot an Ylvainan mech proficiently despite his lack of belief in the Great Prophet was very remarkable.

If Prophet Ylvaine didn't have much of a problem with Joshua, then the Superior Mother shouldn't either.

Ves drafted a set of orders.

He asked Venerable Joshua if he would like to pilot some other LMC mechs for a time.

He told Commander Casella to transfer the Quint to Lieutenant Hector if the mech became available.

He also made a quick call to Calabast. He requested her to keep an eye on the problem cases that he had met. Both Tamarin and Percival Larkinson needed to be monitored, and who better to do that than the Black Cats.

Calabast's projection carefully nodded. "Performing some surveillance on these expert candidates is not an issue. What should we look out for, if I may ask?"

"Just look for any behavior that is detrimental to the Larkinson Clan."

"Do you want us to 'correct' any potentially problematic behavior?"

"Don't do anything unless you check with Major Verle or me." Ves quickly added. "Also, I want to know more about the life of Lieutenant Hector Larkinson of the Living Sentinels. He's not working hard enough and I need to know what we can do to increase his drive."

"We'll get right on it." Calabast simply accepted his orders.

He didn't need to explain anything further to Calabast. He knew that spying and possibly intervening in the lives of his expert candidates might not go over well with everyone, but he still considered this to be a necessary step.

Expert candidates were investments to Ves. He had to nurture them carefully in order to yield his desired expert pilots.

Chapter 2562: The Second Republic

After a brief break, Ves continued to meet with the remaining expert candidates.

Due to his prior interviews, he gained a better sense of what he should ask and what he should be looking out for. The talks took less time as Ves didn't need to bumble around as much to understand the person sitting in front of his desk.

"I prefer to pilot light skirmishers, but I can make do with any other light mech." Trinity Larkinson answered one of his questions. "Still, for a long time, the Sentinels didn't have any good light mech models. We still don't have any for that matter."

"You don't like the commercial light mech models that we've imported?"

"They're fast, but not fast enough. Against other second-class opponents, I doubt I can do much with them. If it's possible, I would like to obtain a better mech."

"It's in the works. In half a year, we'll have a light skirmisher that is fully capable of fighting other second-class mech forces."

"That is music to my ears. I'll be waiting, sir."

Trinity was one of the more normal expert candidates that Ves had met so far. Nothing about her rang any alarm bells. She was just a young Sentinel mech pilot who happened to break through as well.

Yet that did not mean she would remain normal if she ever broke through.

Depending on her mech and her environment, she might go the same way as Venerable Jannzi and warp into something different.

Obviously, this should never happen again.

Therefore, Ves decided that even unassuming expert candidates had to be monitored to an extent. He even thought about starting up a new group within the Military Bureau or the Hall of Heroes that was tasked with guiding the expert candidates of the clan.

"That's a good idea. Right now, it's enough to deal with them on an individual basis, but I might have my hands full in the future."

The fact that no one had developed a systematic approach to this issue so far was a sign that such a group was very needed. Why should Ves take precious time off his schedule in order to deal with the expert candidates in person? The other people in the clan should be more than capable of dealing with this matter!

Once he dismissed Trinity, he quickly composed his thoughts into a document and sent it to Major Verle.

"We'll talk later about this issue."

The last two expert candidates were very different from the ones that came before.

Avi Case-Larkinson was a Flagrant Vandal. Though Ves did not have an impression of her back when he served in the Mech Corps, he still felt some kinship with a former veteran of the final Bright-Vesia War.

"I never expected I would become an expert candidate after turning my back on the Mech Corps and the Bright Republic." Avi ruefully smiled. "At my age, even. I'm old

enough to be a mother. Did you know that I thought about transferring to the Living Sentinels in order to settle down and start a family?"

Ves blinked. "Oh. Are you still going through with that plan?"

"I can't, sir. I'm an expert candidate now. The opportunity to become an expert pilot lies before me. How can I turn my back on a chance that many of my fellow mech pilots yearn to grasp? I owe it to everyone to try my best. Besides, I'm the only Flagrant Vandal who broke through in the last battle. I need to do my comrades proud. The Avatars shouldn't be the only ones who are hogging all of the limelight."

The middle-aged woman sounded as if she was thrust on a pedestal when she was more than content with remaining in the background.

"It's not your duty to become an expert pilot. We already have plenty of them. It's already a burden to provide them all with expert mechs."

Avi shook her head. "You don't need to fool me, sir. We all know what we are up against. One more expert pilot is always better. It is my duty to defend our clan. I won't be able to live with myself if I slacked off and a lot of Larkinsons die yet again."

"Are you suffering from survivor's guilt?"

She sighed. "Maybe. You don't have to worry about me. I'm already undergoing therapy. The folks at the Foundation are very understanding."

"That sounds good, but it doesn't seem as if you changed that much."

"That's because I have too many missions to fulfill." Her eyes grew more intense. "We used to be Brighters, you know? Even though we broke off from the Republic, we are still Brighters at heart."

"We are Larkinsons now."

"The Larkinsons always stood for the Bright Republic! As far as I'm concerned, we are a continuation of our state. Just look at our rules, our structure and how we treat each other. Even though we have adopted some other customs, we are still indistinguishable from other Brighters."

"Our leaders are Brighters. I'm a Brighter. It's a given that we take after our mother culture."

"And we can continue to keep the torch lit!" Avi passionately exclaimed! "I'm ashamed of what has become of the Bright Republic. After the government bent its knees to the Friday Coalition and the Sandmen destroyed our greatest economic center, our home state simply isn't the same anymore."

Ves shrugged. He couldn't care less about the state that stabbed him in the back and sold him out to the Fridaymen.

"Life goes on there. While it's regrettable that a lot of Brighters died in the Sand War, our state still stands. Our former people will be able to pick themselves and rebuild. There's even a vast amount of sand-scoured star systems to resettle. That will keep our home state and many other nearby states busy for the next couple of centuries."

Avi sneered. "It's not the same anymore. The Bright Republic has changed once it fell under the yoke of the Friday Coalition. Have you been keeping up with the news over there? Each day, the Ylvaine Protectorate and the Vesia Kingdom keeps hammering more nails in our state! They practically own the government, and the Fridaymen keep letting them get away with their covert attempts to annex our space."

"The Bright Republic needed a lot of aid after the fall of Bentheim."

"I don't think you're wrong, sir, but there's a difference between providing aid and taking over entire planets and institutions!"

Ves really didn't want to argue with the Vandal pilot about irrelevant matters. Ever since he founded the Larkinson Clan, he cut off almost every sentiment he held towards his home state.

Obviously, Avi was very different. The Flagrant Vandals had always been more reluctant about leaving the Bright Republic. They hated the changes that took place there but were still loyal to it. Of course, there were plenty of Vandals who were more than happy to escape their shackles, but there were also people like Avi who used to take their duties seriously.

Avi swept her arm. "I think we have an opportunity to continue the mission of the Bright Republic. The state may have decayed, but its people live on. Once we reach the Red Ocean, we can build a new Bright Republic over there. This time, we'll do it properly. No founding families. No concentrating our industry on a single planet. No betraying our greatest soldiers. I believe that as long as we learn from the lessons of the past, the Second Republic can become the new home to the Brighter people!"

"...Okay." Ves awkwardly replied.

It took some time for him to dismiss Avi. He let out a sigh of relief once she left.

"Of all the clansmen who were lucky enough to become an expert candidate, why her? Why can't I get more people like Trinity?"

"Meow."

Lucky mockingly swished his tail as he observed the proceedings from the ceiling.

Ves raised his fist at his cat. "Hey, this is your problem as well, you know!"

Obviously, it would be another disaster if Avi Case became an expert pilot while she was still delusional about reviving the Bright Republic in the Red Ocean.

Ves had no intentions of founding a state in such an unstable region.

Even if he did, he wouldn't follow the model of the Bright Republic! His Larkinsons deserved better.

He composed some messages and sent them off to Major Verle, Commander Abis Firelight and Calabast. Avi Case had rang a lot of alarm bells in his mind. It was important to monitor her behavior and compose a plan to correct her course as soon as possible!

"Well, one more to go. I hope he's normal."

He called in his final appointment. Zimro Belson-Larkinson was different from the rest.

The Black Cat strode inside the stateroom. His dark uniform fit his slim but athletic form well.

"Patriarch."

"Please have a seat, Mr. Zimro Belson."

The man did so. A few seconds passed as Ves tried to take the man's measure. Zimro was different from every Larkinson he had met today.

The man was not a regular clansman. He was part of the Black Cats which adopted a very different approach to mech piloting from the rest.

What stood out even more was that Zimro was part of the Xona Stalkers. Not too long ago, he served under the Dry Snakes at Ulimo Citadel.

Not only did he used to be a pirate, he also had second-class roots.

"As a former Xona Stalker who fought on the side of the faction that wanted to return to civilized space, you must have ties to the Life Research Association, right?"

Zimro nodded, but his answer wasn't very solid. "I left relatives behind, but they have already moved on. I didn't fight to restore my name in order to meet with them again. In fact, we're better off if we stay out of each other's lives."

"Then.. why did you take the risk of siding with our clan?"

"I'm simply disgusted by what we did." Zimro scowled. "There is no honor in piracy. I embraced your clan because you and your people are honorable. In my years at Ulimo Citadel, I have spilled too much innocent blood, whether directly or indirectly. Each day, I lost more and more hope that I would be able to look into the mirror with my head held high."

"Has that changed since you've become a Larkinson?"

"Not quite." The Black Cat expert candidate shook his head. "I still have much to make up for. I am only just starting to redeem myself."

"You sound like a Penitent Sister."

"We are much alike. I respect them for their integrity." Zimro nodded, plainly accepting the comparison.

"Don't you think it's a contradiction for a Black Cat to redeem himself? After all, you are part of the intelligence branch of our clan. Sometimes, it's necessary to get your hands dirty."

"There is honor in service. Even if we are compelled to do what is necessary, at least I can take comfort in the fact that it is for the greater good. This wasn't the case when I was still a Xona Stalker. No matter what we did, it always ended up enabling more pirates."

Ves grew more and more concerned about Zimro. While he applauded the expert candidate for trying to restore his honor, Black Cats weren't supposed to be the good guys!

"Have you ever thought about transferring to the Avatars, perchance?"

Zimro grimaced. "I did, and I rejected the notion. My presence there would only blacken this honorable branch. I would never leave until I have paid for my sins. Besides, the Black Cats need me. My experiences during my pirate days has taught me that every outfit or group needs a good role model. Without me, I'm not sure if the rest of the Black Cats will be able to remain pure."

"I think Calabast has gotten that covered. You don't need to worry about this problem."

"Respectfully, I'll be the judge of that, sir."

Ves mentally noted Zimro as another problem case.

Chapter 2563: Butting Heads

"Nine different expert candidates. Nine different personalities. Nine different problems."

Ves pressed his fingers against his forehead. Recognizing potential risks in time was always good, but it did not help him maintain his stress levels. Burdens continued to pile up on his shoulders as time went on. It wasn't easily to be the leader of a clan that was numbering past 30,000 members and counting!

For now, the expert candidates didn't possess enough power and influence to pose a threat to him. Yet that didn't reassure him much as the story would be completely different once they broke through to expert pilot.

Once they became demigods, their status changed dramatically. It was impossible to treat them like regular Larkinsons. In the traditions of the Larkinson heritage, extraordinary mech pilots always enjoyed immense respect. Even if Ves tinkered with the rules of the clan in order to curb their power, he couldn't do much to prevent others from idolizing these supreme soldiers.

Worshipping high-ranking mech pilots was one of humanity's universal traits. In the Age of Mechs, almost every society put expert pilots up a pedestal.

The only difference was how high the states raised them. In Vicious Mountain, extraordinary mech pilots wielded an incredible amount of authority. In the Hexadric Hegemony, expert pilots still had to bend their heads in front of the matriarchs of their society.

What gave Ves another headache was that the Larkinson Clan was a martial organization at heart. Just like the Cross Clan, the Larkinsons adhered to a culture that valued military strength and personal prowess.

If Ves hadn't proven his courage and valor by participating in the Bright-Vesia War and personally leading Task Force Predator into the Nyxian Gap, he would have never been able to command so much respect from his own clansmen.

Yet no matter how many battles Ves participated in, he could never become as popular as an expert pilot.

It sounded silly at first. As a wildly successful mech designer, Ves was single-handedly responsible for enriching the Larkinson Clan. With hundreds of billions of hex credits pouring into the coffers of the LMC every month, Ves could outright buy expert pilots if he wished!

Unfortunately, far more people in the clan admired Venerable Joshua than the clan patriarch who lifted them from their third-class roots.

Mech designers were too distant and aloof to the general public. While the barriers to become a mech designer weren't high, it was extremely difficult to become a Journeyman and achieve true success.

Most mech designers actually didn't earn that much respect. Those that did were so rare that they were seen as unfathomable wizards. The work that mech designers engaged in was so technically sophisticated that no average person was able to appreciate their brilliance.

In short, Ves may be the leader of the Larkinson Clan, but he would never be its foremost star. The Larkinsons were too predisposed to regarding expert pilots as heroes.

"I don't see why you're so upset about that." Calabast idly remarked as she draped her body across his couch. "You're not a vain person as far as I know. No matter how much expert pilots are hogging the limelight, the real power lies with you. The expenditures of the Larkinson Clan are enormous and cannot be separated from your earning power."

"Meow~"

Lucky squinted his eyes as he comfortably rested onto the Black Cat's stomach. Strong fingers rubbed across his tiger-striped form.

Ves pensively paced around his stateroom.

"Popularity is a weapon. Once the expert candidates I've mentioned turn into expert pilots, their obsessions and pet peeves will become amplified. I don't know about you, but I don't want our clan to turn into an advocacy organization that is only preoccupied with fulfilling the personal and political objectives of a bunch of uppity mech pilots."

"I see." Calabast briefly paused, causing Lucky to pat at her uniform in complaint. She resumed pampering the gem cat. "I'm not unsympathetic towards your problem, but it is not that easy to do something about it. From what little I know about expert candidates, they are already a lot more set in their ways than regular mech pilots. People who are able to rise above mediocrity are always.. different."

"I know that, but that doesn't mean I can tolerate every personality. Tamarin Larkinson wants to elevate the status of trueblood Larkinsons to the detriment of others. Percival Larkinson is traumatized Sentinel. Avi Case wants to transform the Larkinson Clan to the second coming of the Bright Republic. Zimro Belson, one of your own men, feels he needs to cleanse himself and the Black Cats! What do you think will happen if any of them gains a massive voice?"

Outside of his expectation, Calabast did not exhibit the paranoia that he expected from a controlling spymaster.

She nonchalantly shrugged. "I'm very much aware of Zimro's inclinations. It is not bad for the Black Cats to have such a person around. A truly competent organization should never be homogeneous. A bit of diversity is essential to keep everyone on their toes,

and there is no better way to keep my men in check than to put an adversarial member in their midst."

Ves put his hands on his hips. "How you manage the Black Cats is your business, but once Zimro advances, he becomes an issue to the rest of the clan. Perhaps his inclinations aren't as problematic, but we're all going to get our hands full once someone like Tamarin and Avi gains a greater voice."

"Ves, Ves, Ves. Didn't you listen to what I just said?"

"About how you manage your Black Cats?"

Calabast nodded. "Since you didn't get the hint, let me spell it out for you. Currently, you view those expert candidates as problem cases. While you're not wrong to view them that way, they are only problems if you let them stir up trouble. On the other hand, as long as you find a way to take advantage of their inclinations, they might become assets instead."

"That's playing with fire." Ves frowned. "Expert pilots can't be controlled. They can easily bite the hand that feeds them. Jannzi has already done so. I don't want other dogs chewing on my flesh."

"You're not thinking this through, kid. From what it looks like, expert pilots will keep emerging from the ranks of the clan. Are you determined to transform each and every expert candidate? It won't work as well as you think. Both the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony have performed plenty of studies on this topic. Expert candidates are strong because of who they are right now. If you attempt to indoctrinate them into different people, you will be robbing them of the source of their strength. If you don't believe me, you can try. I can guarantee you that you will ruin the potential of most of your expert candidates."

Her words splashed cold water over his plans. Ves froze as he took in her explanation. Her arguments conformed with his own theories on the progression of mech pilots.

Ves thought that it was not that problematic to change the ideology of expert candidates, but if the Coalition and the Hegemony failed to achieve good results, then why should he do any better?

Certainly, he had a secret weapon in the form of spiritually-enhanced mechs, but they merely increased a mech pilot's spiritual accumulation as far as he knew. The intangible willpower that represented the true source of strength of a mech pilot could not be elevated by outside factors.

Otherwise, more advanced states as well as the MTA would have been able to pump out a lot more expert pilots!

His glower deepened. "Are my hands tied, then? Is it futile to proceed with the plan to set up the Mech Pilot Management Bureau?"

"I didn't say that, Ves. I still support your idea. I'm just warning you to tone it down. People aren't machines. You can't just reprogram and expect them to function normally. In my line of work, we often gain better and more consistent results if we merely nudge people into the right direction. We have learned the hard way that if a nudge turns into a shove, the individual in question is liable to push us back. Don't make the same mistakes we did. If there is one notion I agree with you, it's that our expert candidates are all assets."

Ves approached and sat down on another couch. He looked at her with a helpless expression.

"Instruct me, then. How should we manage our expert candidates?"

"It's not too complicated. You can still attempt to influence your expert candidates, but you need to be careful about changing their core values. You can't be too heavy-handed in their treatment. It's a lot better to set up the situation that encourages them to alter their course on their own accord. However, it is crucial that you don't go too far with this. You can moderate an expert candidate's inclinations but you cannot force him to adopt the opposite stance."

She continued to give him some advice on how he should address this issue. Her overall message was that if he objected to any of his expert candidates, he could only lessen the severity of the problem. However, more often than not, he couldn't make it go away.

"There is only one real way to prevent expert candidates with troublesome motives from turning into threats. You can stop them from advancing in the first place." Calabast remarked.

That was indeed a viable, if sub-optimal solution. Ves felt very uncomfortable about crippling the future of any of his expert candidates. It was no different from engaging in political machinations. The Larkinson Clan should never pit Larkinson against Larkinson.

"In the end, I should just accept I will have to deal with troublesome personalities?" He asked.

"Not per se. Look at the current state of our five expert pilots. Venerable Jannzi is quite a handful to you, right?"

"Yeah. I should have paid more attention to her. If I knew she would end up this way, I would have taken the Shield of Samar away."

Calabast frowned. "That's exactly what I'm warning you against. You can't go against your expert candidates like this. If Jannzi was able to advance to expert pilot anyway, then her resentment against you would have settled in too deeply. If your act ruined her progression, then her absence in crucial moments such as the Battle against the Abyss would have led to a lot more losses."

He understood her implicit message. No matter how troublesome it was to deal with an expert pilot with a problematic agenda, they were still assets to the clan. Their strength was undeniable and the Larkinson Clan wouldn't be as strong if Ves ruined their future!

"I brought up Venerable Jannzi for a reason, Ves." She continued. "Even though you consider her a headache, is she really damaging your interests?"

"Uhhh.."

"She isn't." Calabast smirked. "That's because you've employed other ways to neutralize her threat. Putting her in the Hall of Heroes, making her a member of the Larkinson Court and so on are all viable ways to limit how much trouble she can stir up. Yet these measures aren't as good as employing a counterbalance."

"A counterbalance?"

"An opponent. Isn't Venerable Joshua highly opposed to her stance? His existence constrains Venerable Jannzi. So long as he voices his support for you, Venerable Jannzi won't be able to gain enough traction in the clan to curb your authority."

"That works?" Ves dubiously asked.

"Think about all of the expert pilots and expert candidates that you have. Many of them can be nudged into butting heads against each other. This is how large organizations truly manage their expert pilots. They can be quite a handful if they left to their own devices, but once they get into a conflict with others of their kind, they will be so consumed by them that you can just sit back and relax!"

He had to admit that this approach sounded very elegant! Instead of trying his best to suppress the problem cases, why not leave the job to other expert pilots? It was perfect!

Chapter 2564: Compromising Allies

With the help of Calabast's useful insights, Ves formulated a revised plan to manage the expert candidates of the Larkinson Clan.

By no means was he willing to let these potential problem cases develop without supervision. That was a recipe for chaos and disaster.

He still pushed through with his plan to set up the Mech Pilot Management Bureau. He just dialed back its mission and imposed stricter limits on its discretion.

The new bureau needed to employ a soft touch to manage, supervise and guide the future expert pilots of the clan. It was very important to prevent any of the expert candidates from brewing any resentment towards him or the current leadership.

If they had any aspirations that were detrimental to his agenda, then the bureau should employ gentle means to dampen their extreme edges. The goal wasn't to remove the problem, but to turn a bigger issue into a smaller one. Anything further than that was too risky.

After doing all of that, if the threat still remained, then the bureau should discreetly find ways to put expert candidates and expert pilots at odds with each other. If these strong personalities directed most of their animosity towards other expert pilots, then Ves and the true leadership of the clan wouldn't have to spend too much energy on countering their narratives.

All in all, this was a much more intensive but considerably more elegant approach than before. His previous plan was too hamfisted to succeed in the long run. Expert candidates and expert pilots simply weren't sheep that were easily controlled. They were like wolves that could never be tamed.

Once Calabast helped him refine their new approach towards expert candidates, Ves commanded her to continue to flesh it out with Major Verle.

Though Ves pulled back the scope of the Mech Pilot Management Bureau, its work could not be done without resorting to multiple prongs. The open and aboveboard institutions had to work together with the hidden and secretive arms of the clan. Employing official means to influence expert candidates was not enough. The role of the Black Cats was indispensable.

As Calabast stood up and turned to leave, Ves brought up another matter.

"By the way, are you up to date with what our good friend 'Professor Benedict Cortez' is doing in the Cross Clan?"

She stopped and turned back to Ves. "Are you concerned?"

"Don't play dumb in front of me. You're the one responsible for giving him his current cover identity."

Calabast crossed her arms. "He would have turned to someone else if I refused his commission. You should be happy that I am the one who fashioned his new identity. Think of what might happen if you partnered up with him without becoming aware of his sordid past."

"I'm not blaming you for giving the Skull Architect a way to return to civilized space. I've even made a verbal agreement with him to partner up. I just want to make sure we have enough safeguards in place in the event he goes crazy or something."

While Ves did not think that the Skull Architect was irrational enough to tear apart a good deal, it was best to be prepared. Ves had managed to live up until now because he always prepared plenty of contingencies.

He couldn't account for every possible outcome, but it was enough to prepare against the most likely and damaging events.

"Who do you think I am, kid?" Calabast sneered. "I have already prepared several countermeasures should the professor ever take aim at us. The greatest form of leverage we have over him is our knowledge of his true identity. Make no mistake. Once we leak it to the MTA, the professor is history."

Ves didn't feel very reassured about that. When he met the Skull Architect, he seemed way too confident and self-assured to be worried about exposure.

"Why do I have the feeling that this isn't as useful as I think?"

"Benedict knows we have leverage over him. Despite the risks to his life and safety, he still chose to join the Cross Clan in order to get close to us. Why would he make such a dangerous choice?"

Ves frowned and thought for a moment. As someone who is used to taking risks, he quickly understood what Calabast was steering him towards.

"Because.. What the professor wants is worth the potential risks. From what I know, all he wants is to advance to master. He's so desperate to realize his design philosophy that he didn't hesitate to murder an expert pilot and eke out a new living in the frontier."

"Exactly." Calabast nodded. "Make no mistake. The Skull Architect did not earn his name by being a fuddy duddy scholar. He is a truly ambitious man who does not let any of the rules get in the way of what he wants. The only reason why he abides by them is because breaking them is not conducive to his goals."

"Are you saying that we can trust Professor Cortez?" Ves frowned.

"Mech designers like him are not that difficult to deal with. As long as you know what he wants, it is easy to manage our relations with him. Isn't he going through all of this trouble because he believes that collaborating with you will help him advance to Master Mech Designer?"

"That's correct..."

"Then he should not be an acute threat to us. In fact, it's the opposite. It's in his best interest to support you and keep you safe. I guess this is the other reason why he joined the Cross Clan instead of becoming a part of the Larkinson Clan. He can turn the Cross Clan into your unwitting guard dogs, thereby increasing your security in the times to come."

The situation sounded a bit surreal to Ves. The Skull Architect was actively trying to become one of his backers? This was absurd! A dignified Senior never compromised so much in order to earn the favor of the Journeyman!

Yet... as powerful as Benedict might be, he did not actually possess that much leverage over Ves. If the Skull Architect wanted to coax Ves into collaborating with him, then the former war criminal had to lower his head and employ gentler means.

Why did that sound familiar?

"Benedict isn't concerned about the possibility that we would rat him out." Calabast explained. "He knows it is not in our best interests to remove him from the picture. Also, he is expressing his sincerity by giving us leverage over him. He is signalling a willingness to cooperate earnestly with us without resorting to any tricks. Someone who wants to betray us at some point wouldn't do that. This is why I'm not very worried about Benedict."

"All of this makes sense, but... the biggest flaw is that this only holds true as long as the professor remains rational. I don't know about you, but in my past interactions with the Skull Architect, he can be pretty irrational sometimes."

Calabast nodded in acknowledgement. "The risk exists, but there is too much at stake for him. I doubt he is irrational enough to engage in self-destructive behavior."

"That doesn't mean he's harmless."

"Of course not. While it's difficult to penetrate the Cross Clan, we still keep an eye on the professor and the rest of the Crossers. If there are any credible signs of danger, I will immediately bring it up to your attention."

That sounded good. Though Calabast had been incredibly helpful in many matters, she was caught off-guard several times in the past. Ves didn't want her to miss another foreseeable disaster.

Ves briefly discussed the upcoming alliance between the two clans. The Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan had already negotiated most of the terms of their cooperative relationship. They were merely held up due to a number of lingering disagreements about benefits.

"You don't have to be so concerned, Ves. Patriarch Reginald Cross is in the same boat as Professor Cortez. For some reason, he believes that your cooperation is essential to attaining his goals. As long as he needs you, the Cross Clan will remain firm allies."

"What happens when these figures finally realize their ambitions?" Ves asked a very crucial question.

Calabast smiled in an intriguing fashion. "That is when the situation gets interesting. If these two figures don't need us anymore, then there is no compelling reason why they should continue to cooperate with us. I hope you have some kind of plan ready when the time comes."

Great. This was yet any concern that Ves had to worry about. Fortunately, he could delegate this problem to Calabast. She may be a bit unreliable but she was still on his side.

Once she left his stateroom, Ves pushed aside his concerns and tried to shift his focus back on his immediate priorities.

"Designing mechs comes first." He whispered to himself.

After wrapping up some administrative tasks, he moved over to the design lab.

Over fifty mech designers were grouped into a dozen design teams. Each team was already busy at work. Designing six second-class mech designs at once was an enormous burden that would strain everyone's limits over the course of the next half year.

This was just the start.

He moved forward until he reached Gloriana's side.

Lucky, who trailed behind Ves, jumped up to the work table and nuzzled his head in Clixie's stomach.

"Miaow!" She swatted the gem cat away.

"Meow."

"It's about time you showed up." Gloriana turned around her seat, facing away from the schematic she was working on. "You promised not to get distracted by clan matters this time."

Ves innocently raised his arms. "I'm sorry. Something truly important came up. I've taken care of it now. There shouldn't be too many distractions left aside from concluding our negotiations with the Cross Clan and welcoming the arrival of our new factory ship."

"I hope that is true, because I won't be as patient next time. Now sit down and help me expand this draft."

He looked at the projected schematic and saw that she was currently working on their upcoming Hexer communication mech.

"This mech.. I'm not sure we can realize the spiritual aspect of this mech." Ves hesitantly said. "I've never implemented this function before."

Gloriana confidently smiled and leaned against his arm. "I'm sure you can do it, Ves. You have several months to come up with something. For now, let's start with the basics. As you can see, I have opted to design a light auxiliary mech to become the carrier of this function. There is no great need to arm it because it is better if our communication mech is cheap and not as burdensome to make. The Hegemony may have stockpiled a lot of materials but that is no grounds for waste."

Her floral scent was already filling his nose. He relaxed in her presence as he began to get back in his groove.

He seriously studied her work, paying extra attention to her fundamental design choices.

What stood out from her proposed concept was that the communication mech did not possess any weapons!

"I'm not sure about this design choice here. Even if auxiliary mechs aren't designed for direct confrontations, they at least carry a knife or pistol. You never know when a backup weapon comes handy."

"It's pointless." Gloriana shook her head. "This is a male mech design. Arming them with any weapon means we have to devote some capacity to make it viable to fight with this frame. That's too much of a burden. I would rather devote all of its capacity towards increasing its survivability. It has to stay up as long as possible to keep every Hexer on the battlefield in the loop. We should leave its protection to other mechs that are much better geared towards actual combat."

Usually, Ves was in favor of specializing his mechs. However, he didn't feel so great about this auxiliary mech. To leave a male mech on the battlefield without any capacity to defend itself sounded wrong.

At least their Blessed Squire design was still a qualified knight mech, if a rather poor one.

"I think those poor male Hexer mech pilots could use a weapon." He told her. "Otherwise, our communication mech becomes completely dependent on the protection of other Hexer mechs."

"That's the point."

Chapter 2565: Unarmed Mechs

Ves thought that returning to the design lab freed him from suffering from headaches.

It turned out that he was wrong.

He groaned and pressed his fingers against his forehead. Not even Gloriana's perfume and her body warmth alleviated his rising stress.

"Mechs are combat machines. They are big, powerful and deathly. They require a lot of resources to make and they take up valuable transportation space to move them to the battlefield. Under these circumstances, why would you spend all of those resources on a machine that can't even defend itself?!"

His wife shook his head at him. "You don't comprehend how the Hex Army is set up. It is not unusual for certain low value mech models to carry no weapons. They don't need any. In fact, it is better this way."

"Why?"

"Because of their mech pilots."

Ves grew angry. "Is this another way to denigrate the brave male Hexer pilots who are risking their lives on the battlefield without earning any appreciation from their female overlords?"

"It's not that!" Gloriana quickly responded. She patted his arm in order to calm him down. "Let me explain. First, think about the pool of mech pilots of a state like the Hegemony. I'm sure you can guess that the best mech pilots that graduate from our mech academies are destined to serve in the Hex Army. That's where all of our frontline combatants in the Komodo War come from. These talented, highly-trained mech pilots are all entrusted with our best and most capable mechs because they have the ability to make the most out of the most advanced machines built by our mech industry."

"I know that. What does that have to do with this weapon-less communication mech concept you came up with? Why can't we design it like the Blessed Squire?"

Though the Blessed Squire was a male Hexer mech, Ves at least succeeded in giving it a bit of dignity. It was a knight mech, which meant that it was capable of resisting an enemy up close.

What Gloriana proposed was something worse than that. The draft design she came up with did not possess any elements that were conducive to dealing damage or resisting

damage. If she told him that this was a civilian industrial mech, then Ves would have believed her! How could such a defenseless mech ever belong to the battlefield?

"Their roles are different. The Blessed Squire is a combat support mech. We designed it as an accompaniment to assault squads. Without adding a sufficient amount of armor and offensive capabilities to the Blessed Squire, it would have been too easy for the Fridaymen to take it down."

In fact, the Blessed Squire rarely fought against enemy mechs up close these days. Due to its indispensable glow, the Hexers always deployed it in the center of their mech formations and treated it as a VIP that needed to be protected at all cost.

While Ves didn't exactly have that in mind when he designed the Blessed Squire, it was better than treating it as worthless cannon fodder.

"Doesn't the circumstances apply to our communication mech?"

"No!" Gloriana shook her head. "It's different! For our comm mech to be useful, it doesn't have to accompany the leading elements of a Hexer unit. It's better to deploy it a bit further behind in order to attract less enemy fire and to keep a good overview of the battlefield. Since the comm mech isn't required to clash with any enemy mechs, we can dispense with weapons. Since it's already a light mech, its armor isn't very thick in the first place, but we can make do with more affordable armor systems in order to save on costs."

"While I admit those reasons sound logical, it doesn't cost that much to invest a bit more in the combat capabilities of this mech. Sure, communications lines might get interrupted more often if you foist some combat capabilities on its design, but it at least gives it some teeth in the event it's under attack!"

His wife shook her head yet again. She looked at him as if he was silly.

"You still don't understand. Have you seen how simple and easy it is to pilot this comm mech after I have left out all of the more complicated combat-related elements from its design?"

"I noticed that. It's as if you're designing an industrial mech. Only potentates with incomplete training and mech pilots with the poorest aptitudes pilot these kinds of basic machines."

Modern mechs were very complicated to pilot. The genetic aptitudes of potentates went from E to A, though some rumors on the galactic net suggested that the MTA actually extended this range to S. Whatever the case, the quantity of mech pilots with poorer aptitudes was significantly greater than those with better aptitudes.

This had led to situations where many states didn't even bother to put mech pilots with E-grade genetic aptitudes through the academy. It simply wasn't worthwhile to turn these poorly-talented prospects into qualified mech pilots.

"Our comm mech has to be simplified in order to lower the skill requirements to pilot it. Right now, the Komodo War is going bad for the Hex Army. Too many elite and well-training mech pilots are getting killed. No matter whether the mech pilots are male or female, attrition is high for both of them. Not too long ago, the Hegemony sent me a communiqué that requested us to design some mechs that takes lesser-skilled mech pilots into account."

"The Hegemony is that desperate?"

Gloriana tried to look brave. "The Hex Army still has plenty of manpower! It's just that it needs to look out for the long-term. From what it looks like, this war will probably drag on for at least a couple of years. We need to conserve as much high-quality mech pilots as possible, and that means we need to expand the use of low-quality mech pilots. There are so many of them that preserving their lives is not as important."

Ves frowned deeper at her. "You can put these so-called low-quality mech pilots to much better use by pairing them up with frontline mechs. I know you second-raters don't like to field these kinds of mechs, but they are quite effective in wars between third-rate states."

"We're already doing that." She replied. "The Hex Army is mobilizing as many low-aptitude female mech pilots as possible."

"What about the male mech pilots, then?"

"They'll be paired with mechs like this one. There are plenty of auxiliary mechs for them to pilot. However, it takes too much effort for them to utilize the weapons of their mechs well."

Ves looked at her in disbelief. "The pool of mech pilots with low aptitudes is huge. There ought to be just as many men as women who are part of this pool. The Hex Army can't possibly field enough auxiliary mechs to make full use of all of those men!"

"We're not ignorant of that, but this is the policy that the Matriarchs have set. Low-aptitude female mech pilots are allowed to pilot armed frontline mechs while untalented boys must strictly pilot auxiliary mechs."

"Why did the Matriarchs set such an arbitrary rule? A war is going on! The last thing you want to do is to impose artificial restrictions on your fighting forces that will handicap their combat potential!"

His wife paused for a moment. She seemed hesitant to say her next words.

Ves looked her in the eye. "What is going on?"

"There.. is another reason why the Hegemony is reluctant to arm low-quality auxiliary mechs. It's.. so that the boys who pilot them don't pose an acute threat against our own side."

"The Hexers.. are afraid of their own boys turning their coats?" Ves raised his eyebrows.

"Yes."

"Has it happened already?"

"There are isolated cases. Still, the problem isn't as serious as you think. Most boys are well-trained. Every male Hexer pilot that was part of the armed forces at the start of the Komodo War are very obedient and reliable. They're trained to be that way. It's just that the huge influx of low-aptitude mech pilots are different."

"They're not house-trained, are they?" Ves recognized the main issue.

Gloriana sighed. "Yes. They weren't originally a part of the Hex Army."

"That sounds like a massive oversight. The Hegemony started the Komodo War. Couldn't you Hexers take the effort of preparing your low-aptitude mech pilots sooner?"

"That would have tipped the Fridaymen off. You can't hide such massive movements. Also, this isn't something that normal second-rate states do. The more advanced the state, the more its military is geared towards the development of elites. While our state is wealthy, it can't arm so many weak mech pilots without draining resources elsewhere."

Obviously, the Hegemony couldn't afford to be conservative anymore.

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "So what's the danger of pairing these hastily-conscripted boys with armed mechs? From what I have seen of the Hegemony, pretty much every boy is committed to the matriarchy."

"It's not that simple." Gloriana looked pained. "The Hegemony is huge. It's split up into several matriarchal dynasties, which are further split up into smaller dynasties. While the former tries to be as unified as possible, there are still.. differences.. in the way they govern their territories. In some dynasties, boys are treated well as long as they are good. In other places..."

"They're treated like crap, am I right?"

"I guess I can't hide it from you. There are dynasties where boys and in particular male potentates are seen as threats to other Hexers. Sometimes, they only receive the most

basic of mech piloting training. In other places, they are treated harshly. None of us ever thought we might actually have to enlist them in battle. We thought we'd be able to win the Komodo War by relying purely on our professional soldiers."

"Hahaha!" Ves couldn't help but laugh! "You women look down on the Friday Coalition too much!"

Obviously, Gloriana didn't look pleased. It became harder and harder for her to maintain the delusion that a Hexer victory was inevitable.

"The point is that it's appropriate to assign armed mechs to untalented and undertrained boys. Even if they pilot a mech with a weapon, there is a good chance that they can't even hurt a fly. They lack the training to actually fight with them. As for the boys that do possess this training, too many Hexers don't trust them. We're all afraid they might succumb to Fridaymen lies and sabotage their own side."

Ves snorted. "I wouldn't blame these poor fellows. I think their lives would actually be better if the Hexer regime is torn down."

"THAT'S NONSENSE!"

There was no point trying to argue with Gloriana about this. Ves moved away from this contentious topic.

"Let's get back to your comm mech. Now that you explained the reasoning behind your design choices, I understand why your concept doesn't mention any weapons."

"Boys can't be trusted with guns."

"AHEM." Ves coughed. "Just because I accept your design choice doesn't mean I agree with it. You reap what you sow. If you Hexers treated your male potentates better, you wouldn't have ended up in a situation where you have to watch out for betrayal."

Gloriana lowered her eyes. "I realize that, and so do many Hexers. Don't think that I'm part of the groups that mistreated these boys."

"I can believe that, but Hexers like you are not innocent in this matter. You either ignored this deplorable behavior or condoned it in some tacit way. Now that the war has forced you to draw upon the dregs of your society, it's too late to apologize."

The entire concept behind her proposed communication mech was based on some very problematic circumstances. The entire situation disgusted Ves, but he didn't have any choice but to go along with his wife.

Situations like these continually reminded him that he was fighting on the wrong side of the war. Yet no matter how awful the Hexers turned out to be, he never contemplated changing sides.

There were too many reasons why he needed the Hexers to win.

Ves always put his interests before his conscience.

Chapter 2566: Interconnected Mechs

The Hexer communication mech that Gloriana envisioned was one of the most basic, simplest, cheapest and pathetic second-class mechs that Ves had ever seen.

The entire concept of it made it clear to anyone that the auxiliary mech was nothing more than a movable, adaptable communications relay.

"It carries some decent sensors as well." Gloriana defended her vision. "If we want to turn it into an asset on the battlefield, then it has to do more than opening up reliable communication channels. Since we aren't putting any weapon systems and everything related to them in our mech, we've freed up a lot of capacity. It can fulfill the role of a scout as well, though I want to make sure we devote enough space for its ECM systems and short-range communication systems."

The latter caused Ves to raise his eyebrows. "I can understand the need for ECM systems. It's too costly to turn it into a stealth mech, so the next best option is to add modules that can reduce its energy signature to enemy sensors. What I don't understand is why you want to invest so much in additional communication components. The mech doesn't need anything extra in order to perform its main role."

After all, the greatest advantage of spiritual components was that they did not take up any physical space. No matter how little space the mech had left, it took no effort for Ves to squeeze in a couple of spiritual constructs.

Of course, Ves had to pay another price in order to add spiritual capabilities to a product. The spiritual foundation of a mech design essentially represented the spiritual capacity of a mech.

The greater the foundation, the more spiritual load it could bear.

Adding one or two powerful abilities was his current limit. He could add more, but that entailed weakening everything else. That was not a good design approach in his opinion.

For this simple communication mech, Ves did not intend to add any extra features. He intended to devote as much spiritual capacity as possible to instill the strongest possible spiritual communication capabilities into this design.

While Ves didn't exactly know how powerful he could make these features, he was confident he could spark a minor revolution in this field!

However, Gloriana did not stop her thoughts at this point. She pointed her finger at the various communication arrays and other components.

"The long-range communication system that you're responsible for implementing is good for connecting mech units to central commands and so on. However, it's not useful in connecting to mechs that lack this system. Try and imagine a situation where a mech company is fighting under heavy jamming. A lot of signals will become garbled, thereby preventing individual mechs from transmitting lots of crucial data to each other. Our comm mech must be able to pick up and transmit high-fidelity communication signals even under heavy jamming."

"You're talking about very expensive equipment."

"That's only for communication systems that are meant to transmit signals across longer distances." Gloriana shook her head. "We already have your divine arrays for that. What we need is to ensure solid connectivity at shorter ranges. On land, we're talking an effective range of 1 kilometer. In space, it needs to be at least at least 10 kilometers, though ideally we should aim for more."

He had to admit her logic was sound. While Ves personally didn't have much experience with the level of jamming that Gloriana talked about, he knew that it could get quite intense in second-class mech combat.

This was a necessary development on land. It was not that difficult for second-class mech designers to develop an artillery mech that could fire at targets over the horizon with pin-point accuracy.

Still, in order to hit anything at such distance, the artillery mech needed accurate targeting data.

If a mech unit was able to observe an enemy formation and transmit precise data to a prepared group of artillery mechs, then a lot of shelling would commence very soon!

Of course, artillery mechs were never able to pound enemy fortifications and units with impunity. They were large, heavy and somewhat immobile. Each time they fired, they emitted a lot of heat, sound, pressure and other emissions, thereby exposing their positions to any watchful scouts. This left them vulnerable to counter-battery fire or lightning raids by enemy aerial mechs.

In short, the side who fired first might not have the last laugh!

A tenuous balance had formed due to all of these developments. An intricate web of threats and countermeasures forced both sides to make careful use of their artillery

mechs. These were powerful but very vulnerable and expensive assets that played a crucial role in constraining the actions of the enemy. Ruining an entire artillery mech company not only deprived its owners with a lot of valuable machines, but could also exposed many other other mech companies to lots of shelling!

The insertion of a single communication mech that promised to enable reliable communication transmissions across battlefields could easily upend this balance!

This was what Gloriana was truly aiming for. The communication mech might not be that impressive in itself, but once it slotted into the mech lineup of the Hex Army, it could amplify the performance of many other mechs!

As Ves comprehend Gloriana's goal, he became impressed by her foresight and ambition.

"I see! It's much like the Blessed Squire in that regard. Both function as force multipliers!"

The Blessed Squire boosted the performance of other mechs with the Superior Mother's glow. To perform its function effectively, it had to be in the thick of combat, so it made sense to turn it into a knight mech.

The communication mech envisioned by Gloriana did not need to be in a central position. In fact, it was the opposite. The mech wanted to attract as little attention as possible.

"It doesn't make much sense for this mech to possess a glow." Ves remarked. "We'll have to suppress it for this design."

"Can you do that, Ves?" Gloriana curiously asked.

Ves nodded. He had already done so for the Devil Tiger. Though repressing its glow caused the mech to acquire a strange charm, at the very least it didn't resemble a spiritual torch in the dark!

"No problem. Only the mech pilot will experience its glow."

"Wait. Try to gear our mech towards the dust phase of existence. Maybe it will have a surprising effect." She requested.

Ves considered her proposal. "You might be onto something. I can't promise it will have the effect you desire."

"If it works, we can also implement this effect onto our stealth mech!"

That was a much more complicated project. While Ves was interested in designing a real stealth mech, he did not look forward to solving all of its technical challenges. It took a lot of precision design work in order to contain or dampen as many possible emissions as possible.

Just a single leak or design flaw could easily expose the stealth mech to enemy sensors, thereby dooming it! Without the ability to hide from enemy sensors, stealth mechs were incredibly vulnerable to enemy attacks!

That particular project was not on the agenda today. For now, Ves and Gloriana just wanted to establish a solid plan for their communication mech design project.

Their discussion continued on for a while. They made a number of other notable design choices.

One of them was to split up the mech into two variants.

"You want us to design two versions of this mech?!"

"It's not as bad as it sounds, Ves! Look at our draft design. Does this look like a complicated mech to you? If we leave aside the auxiliary modules, its frame is incredibly simple and free of clutter. Since our communication mech is meant to be paired with low-quality mech pilots, we have to simplify its controls as much as possible."

For low-skilled mech pilots, piloting a regular Hexer military mech was out of the question. Modern mechs were already several times more difficult to pilot than mechs developed in the past, and they would continue to become more complex over time.

In order to simplify the controls of a mech, its design needed to be stripped with many innovations that made modern mechs better.

It was like turning back the clock in a sense.

This meant that while the mech became easier to pilot, its performance and control range decreased as well.

Even if Ves insisted on retaining some combat ability for the mech, it simply wouldn't be able to keep up with the high-intensity battles of the Komodo War!

"Maybe you have a point. Since the mech design is so small and simple, I guess it's possible to design two concurrent versions."

Gloriana wanted to design a version of the communication mech that was optimized for landbound deployment. She also wanted a slightly more complicated version that was optimized for spaceborn combat.

Mounting a flight system onto a light mech was very cumbersome. The design needed to devote a fair amount of capacity in order to accommodate such a module. A lot of other characteristics of the mech would change as well such as the energy consumption and heat management of the mech.

Still, despite these complications, the communication mech was still an easy mech to design to design. Its relatively low budget, simplified internal architecture and basic components meant that designing two versions at once did not match the workload of designing a more advanced second-class mech such as the Valkyrie Redeemer or the Transcendent Punisher.

Ves reluctantly nodded. "We can do this I suppose."

"That's great! The Hex Army will be pleased to receive two separate versions. By the way, this mech design needs a name or at least a temporary codename. I'm thinking of Cherub."

"Cherub?" Ves frowned for a moment.

He quickly accessed the galactic net and became flooded by images of pink-cheeked boys with flying wings. Some of them carried bows and arrows, but more often than not they were depicted as cute or mischievous infants!

"So what do you think, Ves?" She asked as her eyes sparkled with delight.

She loved the name she came up for the mech!

"..."

In the end, he didn't bother to argue with Gloriana. She obviously insisted on it and Ves didn't want to ruin their fragile harmony over a trivial naming issue.

Besides, he had to admit that the name fit the vision of the mech. It was a harmless auxiliary mech that was meant to be piloted by the equivalent of baby boys in Hexer society.

Ves wasn't sure what the male Hexer mech pilots would think if the Hex Army compelled them to pilot the Cherub. Would they understand its meaning? He wasn't sure whether its intended mech pilots would interpret the name as an honor or an insult.

With that decision set, he brought up one more issue.

"Since this project entails designing two related mechs, we need to work together with Juliet."

"What? No! There's no need for her involvement. I can take care of everything. This is such a simple mech design that her expertise won't have much room to play."

Ves crossed his arms. "Let Juliet be the judge of that. The spaceborn variant especially needs her input. Don't fight me on this. I've already made my choice. The Cherub has no weapons at all and very little armor. It relies entirely on mobility, cover and ECM in order to stay alive on the battlefield. Since mobility plays such a crucial role in its effective performance, we need to pull in a specialist who can amplify this aspect as much as possible."

Though Gloriana kept shaking her head, Ves held his ground on this issue. He truly believed the Cherub would become a significantly better mech if Juliet worked on its mobility.

As a Journeyman, she should not be weak in this aspect!

Fortunately, Gloriana finally acquiesced. It was difficult for her to deny that her Cherub design would probably be better off if Juliet was able to provide her input.

Chapter 2567: New Naming System

The Cherub Design Project actually called for designing two versions of the same mech, which was something Ves had never done before.

He learned from his project management lessons that this was not an unusual approach in larger design teams or mech companies.

Even if he limited the project to a single version, the Hegemony would definitely knock on his doors and request a variant that was optimized for a different environment.

Instead of going through all of that trouble, the Design Department might as well work on a base model and a variant concurrently so that it could deliver both mech designs to the client at once.

"What budget do you have in mind for the Cherub?" Ves asked.

"Hmm. I'm aiming for a maximum production cost of 50 million hex credits for the landbound version and up to 55 million hex credits for the spaceborn version."

"That's very tight!" Ves exclaimed. "The frame of the Cherub might be simple, but all of those auxiliary modules aren't cheap. We'll have to impose a lot of limits in order to keep the cost of the mech within those ranges."

"I'm confident we can do it. All of those times spent on designing third-class mechs has made me a lot more budget conscious. If you think about it, designing the Cherub is not

that different from designing a lesser mech. We just have to curb our desires and plan ahead."

She had a point. Now that she pointed this out, Ves calmed down. The Cherub may still be a second-class mech design by virtue of its tech and its components, but its overall scope and complexity was closer to that of a third-class mech design.

"I think it won't take much time to complete this project either." He muttered.

As Ves constructed a schedule by estimating how much time it took to design each aspect of the Cherub, he found out that it still entailed considerably less effort than usual.

It didn't matter if they had to design two different but related mechs at the same time. From a complexity angle, the Cherub was as easy to design as a mech from two centuries ago. Its design stripped a lot of refined features that were quite challenging to incorporate.

This was good news to Ves and the rest of the Design Department. They could spend additional time on completing other tasks. Unlike the Cherub, the other five design projects were fully modern! Depending on their complexity, Ves and his fellow lead designers might be forced to allocate extra time to the projects.

"Juggling six major projects at the same time isn't easy." He sighed.

After Ves worked with Gloriana to define their vision for the Cherub, they moved on to specifying some of their other mech designs.

Of the six projects they were tackling for this round, two of them happened to be based on existing models.

The Bright Warrior Mark II and the Ferocious Piranha Mark II were largely based on their older equivalents. The major difference was that Ves wanted to translate their mech concepts to a higher class.

The second-class versions of the Bright Warrior and the Ferocious Piranha were meant to become the backbone of the Larkinson Clan. Since they played such an important role in the defense of his fleet, Ves did not dare to neglect them despite their familiar nature.

It didn't take much time to set some solid targets for the two design projects. Ves had already done a lot of preparation work in defining the new place for the Bright Warrior Mark II

"Downgrading the status of the Bright Warrior Mark II is a harsh decision. You're going against the spirit of its original vision." Gloriana carefully pointed out.

Ves ruefully smiled. "We've already discussed this. The Bright Warrior Mark II will become the basic generalist mech platform for our clan. I know the Mark I is a beloved mech among the Avatars of Myth, but I don't want them to pilot the Mark II. Elite mech pilots ought to be paired with elite, high-performing mech models. The Ferocious Piranha Mark II is a good example of that. The Mark I is already raising hell in the third-class mech market. With this uplifted version, our clan can shake the hearts of any second-class opponents!"

He did not believe the Ferocious Piranha's glow was capable of disabling second-class mech pilots. Their training level and mental discipline was a lot higher than third-class riffraff.

That did not detract too much from the Ferocious Piranha Mark II's value. As the Valkyrie mechs had already proved in the Komodo War, any enemy affected by a hostile glow experienced varying degrees of discomfort.

It was very difficult for even the most well-trained mech pilots to shrug off all of the negative effects!

"Hehehe..."

Just thinking about all of the opponents it could sabotage in the future brought Ves a lot of satisfaction!

Gloriana thrust her elbow against his side.

"Hey! What was that all about!?"

"You weren't listening to me, Ves."

"Oh sorry. You were saying?"

"I was just trying to tell you that your naming system sucks."

"What?!"

"Hear me out first." She raised her finger. "The Crystal Lord Mark I is a third-class mech design, correct?"

He nodded. "Correct."

"The Crystal Lord Mark II is also a third-class mech design."

"That's true. We just released it not too long ago. Even though the Crystal Lord Mark II hasn't caught as much attention as the Ferocious Piranha, it's quietly ramping up as

well. The Marketing Department intends to hold off on promoting the new Crystal Lord model until the hype surrounding the Ferocious Piranha finally begins to fade."

It was too difficult for the Crystal Lord Mark II to escape the shadow of the much more attention-grabbing light skirmisher. In hindsight, the LMC should have just released the Crystal Lord Mark II first so that it enjoyed plenty of time in the limelight.

Oh well.

"Now think about the Bright Warrior line and the Ferocious Piranha line. The Mark I versions are third-class mechs, but what about the Mark II versions?"

"They're both second-class mech designs."

"Don't you see the inconsistency here? You're breaking the pattern you've established before! A lot of people, from customers to our own clansmen, will quickly become confused whether a mech is supposed to be second-class or third-class!"

"I haven't fully thought about that." Ves admitted.

"Then correct it. You need to develop a more systematic naming scheme in order to keep our product lineup as clear as possible. Otherwise, misunderstandings might result where people expect a third-class mech only to get a second-class one or vice versa. By the way, are you determined to keep our third-class mechs up to date?"

"I do. As products such as the Desolate Soldier, Doom Guard and Ferocious Piranha have already proven, it's very easy to break into a lot of third-class mech markets at once. The profit from selling a single unit is low, but when monthly sales surpass 1 million copies, we are easily able to afford decent capital ships. As long as our current business model remains viable, we can keep treating the Yeina Star Cluster as our perennial cash cow."

There was no way he wanted to abandon all of the market share the LMC had captured in this region. Even if Ves set his sights on the Red Ocean, he knew that he needed to continue upgrading his fleet in order to face dangers that thrived in the new frontier.

Forget about battling against first-class opponents and remnant alien survivors. Just the second-class opponents from the galactic center were far more advanced than the backwater Hexers and Fridaymen!

The Red Ocean was open to all of human space. Those who originated closer to the center of the galaxy were much further ahead when it came to tech, assets and manpower.

If the Larkinson Clan wanted to establish its footing in the Red Ocean, then it had to continue with earning a lot of money. Due to the law of diminishing returns, it cost an astronomical amount of money just to strengthen his fleet by a modest amount.

Ves could not let go of any revenue stream if that was the case!

"Since you are determined to exploit the third-class mech market, then you need to establish a better naming system straight away. Don't let this contradiction unfold and cause mass confusion."

Ves bent his head in thought. "Do you have any ideas?"

"In fact, I do." His wife responded with a smug grin. "In the mech industry, there are various ways to differentiate different products that are related to each other. Right now, make use of Marks to designate generational advancements of the same mech. I don't have a problem with that as long as we apply it consistently. What we need is a second method to distinguish mechs from the same product line that are differentiated by class. I'm thinking about using Version A, Version B and Version C."

Ves frowned. "That sounds rather clunky, Gloriana. What do you call the Bright Warrior Mark I, then?"

"In my proposed naming system, its full name would be the Bright Warrior Mark I Version C, or Bright Warrior IC for short. The second-class version you're working on right now is not a generational advancement, so it is still a Mark I product. However, it's of a higher class, so it is designated as Version B. Its full name is therefore the Bright Warrior Mark I Version B."

"That's a bit of a mouthful. I think everyone will just call it the IB for short."

He had to admit that Gloriana's naming scheme was very handy once he got used to it. The point of it was to distinguish the placement of a particular mech within its product line.

Perhaps it might not be a big deal at the start, but once a few decades went by, a lot of people would depend on the clarity of this naming scheme.

Not every mech company abided by such a transparent and convenient naming system. Sometimes, the mech company didn't want to attract too much attention to the exact version of the mech. This made it easier for them to sell older and outdated mechs.

What also complicated the naming situation was that not every mech company adopted the same model with regards to product development.

What the LMC did was fairly typical. Once it designed a mech like the original Ferocious Piranha, Ves had no intentions of tinkering with its design. He wanted to wait for at least 5 years but ideally an entire generation before he would design an update.

Other mech companies didn't wait that long to come up with a new product. For example, continuous product development schedules called for publishing version 1.0, version 1.01, version 1.02, version 1.03 and so on at month-long intervals or something.

The naming schemes that mech companies adopted to distinguish or obfuscate their placement became quite confusing sometimes.

This was on purpose.

The less average people understood, the more the companies in question looked down on its customers.

Suffice to say, Ves and Gloriana opposed this outlook. They had enough confidence in their products that even their older mechs would still be able to earn some appreciation from the mech market.

After considering Gloriana's proposal a bit further, Ves eventually accepted her system. He was satisfied with the clarity it provided. As long as people learned what versions A, B, and C stood for, they could easily comprehend the LMC's entire mech catalog.

He updated his administration and sent some memos to Raymond and Gavin to inform him of the change. Even though it would take a long time for him to complete the Bright Warrior IB and the Ferocious Piranha IB, it was best to plan ahead."

After handling this issue, the newlyweds proceeded to discuss some other details about the two second-class mech design projects.

Chapter 2568: Docile Woman

While Gloriana wasn't easy to get along, Ves had already established a good working relationship with her. Even if they disagreed with each other, they always hashed out their differences somehow.

Together, they set a comprehensive plan for the Cherub, the Bright Warrior IB and the Ferocious Piranha IB.

Ves decided he spent enough time with Gloriana after handling these projects. He rose up from his seat and began to move to the other side of the design lab.

"Are you visiting Juliet now?"

He paused. "I am."

"Don't do anything naughty. I'm keeping my eye on you. You're mine."

"For the millionth time, Gloriana. You don't have to worry about these unrealistic fantasies. If you truly love me, then you should know how much I value loyalty."

She directed a measuring glance at him. It was as if she completely disregarded his words!

Ves did not bother to entangle with his overpossessive wife any further. He leaned in for a quick kiss before heading over to Juliet's corner of the design lab.

"Hello."

"Hello."

The Penitent Sister turned from her work station in order to face him. "I've just received your memo on the new naming system. Let me guess. Did your wife come up with this scheme?"

He nodded. "It makes sense. In the future, we'll be designing a lot more mechs, many of which will be derived from other versions. We need to make sure we don't get lost in the confusion of our own making."

"I think it's a good method of naming our designs."

"Even when it comes from Gloriana?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

She sheepishly shrugged. "I don't hate your wife, sir. I merely dislike her because.. you know. Regardless, a good idea is a good idea. There are many objective and subjective aspects to mech design. While we can disagree about the latter, we should be careful not to distort the truth."

"That is strange to hear from a Penitent Sister."

Juliet straightened her back. "I am a Penitent Sister as well as a mech designer. I see no contradiction here. I pursue the truth in both my identities."

"How does that even work?"

"As a Penitent Sister and devout Hexer, I seek the truth behind our place in life. How superior are women? How inferior are boys? What must we do to catch up to the Superior Mother's glory? Every sister of mine grapples with these profound questions every day. Don't underestimate the difficulty of answering them. Back in the Hegemony, even our most honored matriarchs have failed to settle on a definitive answer. In comparison, designing mechs is a lot easier."

Ves twitched his mouth. Juliet made it sound as if the religious crap she mentioned was serious science.

He strenuously objected to this comparison!

He decided to adopt the same approach he used whenever Gloriana brought up something nonsensical. He ignored everything she said that was related to faith and tried to pivot the conversation back to normal territory.

"We should focus on our work. Gloriana and I have just made some important decisions regarding some of our design projects. Let me fill you in on our design choices..."

As Ves quickly brought Juliet up to speed, she began to provide her own input on matters. She especially had a lot of opinions about the direction that they should take with regards to the Ferocious Piranha IB and the Cherub.

"The Ferocious Piranha and the spaceborn version of the Cherub may both look like light mechs, but their flight and movement characteristics are dramatically different." She explained. "The Ferocious Piranha is a high-budget mech that scores high in terms of energy reserves, peak energy output, heat management and other qualities. The Cherub on the other hand is like a toy. It has too many constraints. Not only are we confined to using cheaper components, but we also have to make do with simplified ones in order to avoid burdening the mech pilots."

"Do you have a problem with that, Juliet?"

"Not per se, sir. It's just annoying that I have to take a different approach for the Cherub. We need to take a rationing approach and strictly limit how much capacity and other resources we expend in order to integrate any part in the design."

Ves just recalled that Juliet probably lacked experience in designing third-class mechs. As a proud graduate of the Artemis Institute, she was almost as elite as Gloriana in the Hegemony's mech industry. There was hardly any reason for someone as good as her to dabble in lesser mechs.

"You need to get used with designing mechs under these limitations." He warned her. "The LMC started off as a third-class mech company. We only started to design second-class mechs not too long ago. While I intend to ramp up our output of second-class mech designs, we won't abandon the third-class mech market."

Juliet looked confused. "Why would you do that? The profitability of second-class mechs is much higher."

"There are multiple reasons. Second-class mech markets are far more complicated. I also don't want to pass over the third-class mech market. Devoting our energies to one

market might be profitable enough, but being active in both markets at once is even more profitable."

"It's quite a burden to keep servicing the third-class mech markets."

Ves waved his hand in dismissal. "It's not a big deal. Third-class mech design projects are considered minor projects in our department. We can just leave most of the work to our assistants and just keep an eye on their progress every once in a while. In fact, this is good practice to them. Those who do well under these circumstances can exercise their nascent design philosophies."

There was another important reason why he didn't want to abandon the third-class mech market.

The huge volume of sales provided a lot of spiritual feedback to his design spirits. In fact, for some of them, they received far more spiritual feedback than they could handle.

While that wasn't entirely good, it was much more preferable than the alternative! Poor, stagnant and impoverished design spirits such as Bravo could only dream of earning so many rewards!

Ves did not have to worry about any of his design spirits going hungry as long as millions of mech pilots kept piloting related mechs.

While there were many differences between third-class mech pilots and second-class mech pilots, they were largely the same when it came to the quality and quantity of spiritual feedback they provided!

Even expert candidates and expert pilots were no different. At most, second-class expert pilots were a bit more vigorous and varied due to their superior heritage and training.

While he couldn't tell all of that to Juliet, it was enough to make his stance clear.

"You're in charge, sir." She demurringly said. "If this is your policy, then I will get up to speed on how to design a lesser mech."

"That's exactly what I want to hear."

Ves resisted the urge to pat her head and call her a good girl.

Unlike his stubborn and bossy spouse, Juliet was remarkably well-behaved. He couldn't help but study her appearance a bit deeper.

She was not too tall or too short. She was moderately fit due to the training she underwent as a Penitent Sister. She possessed unremarkable brown hair that she neatly tied in a plain ponytail and she wore no makeup at all.

Perhaps the only real demerit to her appearance was the ♂ symbol tattooed on her face. If not for this mark of shame, Ves might have called her homely.

Though Ves did not feel any special attraction to Juliet, he briefly imagined what it would be like to enter into a relationship with the Penitent Sister.

There was no getting around to the fact that Juliet was a Hexer. A devout one at that. Yet she was completely opposite to Gloriana when it came to her demeanor.

Despite her sordid past as cultist and extremist, Juliet had grown a lot less combative and much more moderate over the past month. The Larkinson Network, the Superior Mother, the hardships they went through all played a role in deradicalizing her and her fellow sisters.

In her current state, Juliet would make for a much more lovelier partner than Gloriana.

What Ves especially liked about the Penitent Sister designer so far was her dereference towards him. Even though her attitude towards him was largely based around the mistaken belief that he was the son of the Superior Mother, he quite liked it actually.

Hexers were much more tolerable when they put down their superior attitude towards him and looked up to him instead. That was something Gloriana rarely did, much to his regret.

As Ves kept staring at Juliet, the third lead designer of the Design Department felt as if the mood between the two had grown a little weird.

"MIAOW!"

"Ouch!"

Ves almost jumped from his seat!

He quickly turned around to see an irate Clixie staring up at him. The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat hissed a warning at him. Her bared teeth made it clear just how she had managed to make him feel pain!

"You, what are you doing?!"

"Miaow miaow miaow!"

"Hey, it wasn't like that! You're a cat. What do you know about humans? I was just thinking about mechs!"

"Miaow." Clixie merely hissed again.

Ves sighed in exasperation before turning around to look for Lucky. His own cat turned out to be floating leisurely above his head.

"Aren't you going to defend your master, Lucky?"

"Meow?"

"She just bit me! Don't you see the problem in that?"

"Meow meow."

"What a vigilant cat you are! Should I cut your diet in half or something?"

"Meow."

"I said no stealing!"

He gave up on Lucky. He carefully sat down. Clixie meanwhile hadn't left at all. She jumped up to the workstation and rested her body on it. Her deep blue eyes kept staring closely at Ves.

"Uhm, what was that about?" Juliet hesitantly asked.

"It's nothing. Our cats like to play pranks every now and then."

Though Juliet didn't seem to buy his story, she didn't bother to entangle with it any further. She was much more interested in progressing their design projects.

After he settled down, Ves brought up the mech that he intended to design for the Penitent Sisters.

"So far, I have been thinking about the mech type that we should adopt for this specific mech. Remember, it has a special purpose. It is not only meant to bring out the most of your sisters, but must also be capable of threatening vastly-superior mechs."

His idea was very bold. So bold in fact that Juliet was not fully onboard with his plan!

"Even if this mech draws strength from the Superior Mother as you claimed, we cannot rely on her for everything. We must fight by relying on our own strength. That is what truly keeps us strong. I don't know if any second-class mech we design is capable of challenging the might of a first-class mech."

Ves pressed his lips. "We are mech designers. We make the impossible possible. Even if the idea is ludicrous, just go through with it. Even if we come up short of our goal, we'll still end up with a mech that is still powerful enough to challenge very powerful second-class mechs."

"Isn't our department already working on an anti-expert mech for the Hex Army?"

"You're right, but the Blinding Mech is merely another auxiliary model. Its goal is not to defeat an expert pilot, but to debilitate it. The Hex Army is powerful enough that it can deploy plenty of other mechs to take advantage of the opening created by our Blinding Mech. What I have in mind for the Penitent Sisters is much more ambitious."

He cautiously revealed some of the principles behind his idea of a Penitent Sister mech. Battle formations played a central role to this mech!

Previously, he only tied mech pilots to the battle network. This time, he wanted to integrate both the mech and mech pilot to the same network!

Chapter 2569: Matching Grandeur

The floating hexagonal-shaped platform that orbited Cinach VI hosted another official gathering this day.

Previously used as the venue of one of the most spectacular weddings in the region, the so-called Hex Garden made for an excellent stage for one of the most important agreements the Larkinson Clan had made. Its picturesque garden and resplendent marble-like ornaments impressed both hosts and guests alike as they entered through the huge double doors.

Two different groups of people floated inside the main garden. They relied solely on their antigrav clothes to keep themselves aloft in the air. Each of them maintained a uniform and even altitude.

As some of the entrants passed through the entrance, they tilted their heads upwards. Past the enormous energy shield that kept the atmosphere in the garden in place, a vast expanse of stars stretched over everyone's heads.

Yet as more and more people floated through the entrance, some of those stars began to disappear.

Starships upon starships began to fly over. Two different fleets approached the space above the Hex Garden in parallel.

On one side were the distinctly red-coated combat carriers and other starships of the Larkinson Clan. Their subtle hexagonal sides made it clear where the clan obtained the powerful ships.

A lot of Larkinsons were secretly nervous about their fleet procession. Their crews didn't have enough time to master the newly-refurbished Hexer-built vessels. Fortunately, nothing went wrong. Each and every starship moved forward at an even, ceremonial pace.

On the other side were the pale blue vessels of the Cross Clan. Larger and more robust, these vessels were built for war. Due to the flight from Vicious Mountain, only the toughest ships that could keep up were able to cross over to Komodo.

Different from the Larkinson fleet, the Cross fleet featured two very overpowering elements.

Surrounded by an honor guard of combat carriers, the two capital ships of the Crossers flew over in an imposing manner. If not for the sophisticated lighting system that kept the garden evenly-lit, the huge hulls of the Antonio Cross and the Hemmington Cross would have cast huge shadows over the Hex Garden!

Even now, the posture of the Larkinsons taking part in the ceremony faintly grew weaker. This was the suppression of enormous capital ships.

Hardly any human could keep their composure when two enormous capital ships loomed directly from above!

The Antonio Cross with her fairly slender 1.8 kilometer hull and the Hemmington Cross with her bulky 3 kilometer were like two floating cities. Their dimensions and mass were so incomprehensibly huge that everyone seemed like ants underneath their majesty!

The Crossers who were entering from the other side all looked amused at their Larkinson counterparts. It was not a coincidence that the Antonio Cross and the Hemmington Cross flew so closely over the Hex Garden.

Even though all of the terms of the alliance treaty had been set, the Crossers still had their pride.

If not for the fact that the Cross Patriarch didn't have as much MTA merits as the Larkinson Patriarch, the Crossers wouldn't have been forced to make so many compromises!

As Ves passed through the double doors, he frowned upon the sight. If his clan received his much-anticipated factory ship and the Glory Seekers obtained their formidable Indigo Tremor, then the Crossers wouldn't have been so unbridled.

These little power plays indicated that the relationship between the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan was anything but harmonious. The two groups only banded together out of necessity. Each of them needed something from each other. Emotion, sentiment and camaraderie had nothing to do with their decision to band together.

Though this did not sound ideal, Ves knew that his clan would be welcoming several more allies like the Cross Clan in the near future.

After all, if he did not wish to take the risk of performing high-risk missions for the MTA, there was no way for him to earn millions of MTA merits in a short amount of time.

This meant that in order to redeem a fleet beyonder ticket, he had to seek more partners like the Cross Clan to split the cost.

As Ves floated forward, he wore his formal clan patriarch uniform, complete with a billowing cape.

"Meow."

Lucky floated alongside him. He looked quite taken in by the cute little cape that Ves had quickly made and fitted for his cat this morning.

"The Cross Clan won't be arrogant for long." Gloriana huffed as she held her own cat against her chest. "With how much revenue the LMC is bringing in, we'll soon be able to overwhelm their ragtag fleet."

As with other occasions, Gloriana opted to wear a custom dress. She wore a purple ensemble that was bedecked with lustrous blue gems cut in hexagonal shapes.

She was the only member of the Larkinson Clan who eschewed the standard red uniform, thereby making her stand out from the crowd.

"Miaow."

Clixie squirmed out of Gloriana's grip and began to float in the air herself. Even though she lacked Lucky's flight capabilities, her owner fitted her with a small harness that incorporated an antigrav module. The organic cat was not at risk of falling anytime soon!

If not for the public occasion, the Golden Cat would have materialized her spiritual body as well. As it was, Ves could sense that she was paying close attention through the Larkinson Mandate that he carefully grasped.

As more and more people poured in, some more differences became apparent.

Even though the Larkinson clansmen wore identical red dress uniforms, they partitioned themselves in distinct groups.

The Avatars of Myth, Living Sentinels, Flagrant Vandals and so on all kept a small but noticeable distance from each other. The rivalry between the mech forces had not faded after battling alongside each other in the Nyxian Gap.

Instead, it had become more intense!

Ves keenly studied the attitudes his soldiers held towards each other. A bit of rivalry was good in his eyes. Even though the lack of total unity made his clansmen look a bit improper, he didn't mind this little detail.

A bit of friendly competition could do a lot of good in keeping his mech troops on their toes. He didn't want them to grow too complacent and stop working as hard to improve themselves.

Of course, if the competition between the different forces surpassed a certain threshold, it stopped being friendly. Fostering rivalries was a double-edged sword that could easily backfire on him if it went overboard.

As Patriarch Reginald Cross and his closest advisors and subordinates entered the garden, the posture of the Cross Clan had reached its peak!

Aside from their patriarch, the Crossers possessed three additional expert pilots. Their clan actually had more, but several brave expert pilots sacrificed their lives to delay enemy pursuit.

The four expert pilots each possessed strong force of wills. They were unlike the recently-advanced expert pilots who were still exploring their new capabilities.

"Patriarch Ves."

"Patriarch Reginald."

The two leaders greeted each other as they floated above a ceremonial altar. The leader of the Cross Clan smirked as he saw that the Larkinsons were faintly suppressed by the strength his clan put on display.

In addition to parading his pair of capital ships and his veteran expert pilots, the Cross Patriarch also brought another trump card.

Professor Benedict Cortez had become the new star of the Cross Clan!

As members of a martial clan, the Crossers were not ignorant of the value that a Senior Mech Designer brought to the table.

Even though their guest mech designer only partnered up with them a short time ago, the Senior already wowed most of the mech pilots by displaying his formidable design capabilities.

Hardly any Crosser rejected Benedict's entry into their midst!

Since a Senior Mech Designer enjoyed a much greater status than a bunch of Journeymen, the three lead designers of the Larkinson Clan all looked like a bunch of kids in front of the former Skull Architect!

It didn't help that Ves, Gloriana and Juliet were all in their thirties. While it was actually very impressive for them to reach the rank of Journeyman at relatively young ages, in this setting they were still lacking in grandeur.

Ves did not show any concern. Instead, he faced away from Patriarch Reginald and stared in the direction of the entrance.

"The best is about to come."

Every Larkinson suddenly gained a burst of pride as a number of special individuals passed through.

Wearing their customized dress uniforms, the expert pilots and expert candidates of the Larkinson Clan finally appeared into view.

An invisible momentum surrounded the extraordinary mech pilots as they flew forward.

Despite their differences in ideology and will, at this moment, each of them maintained a united front. Their different force of wills calmly existed alongside each other.

With 5 expert pilots and 9 expert candidates, the Larkinson Clan crushed the Cross Clan when it came to numbers!

Perhaps the Cross Clan may have the edge in the strength and development of their individual expert pilots, but they were much worse off in terms of continuity. They didn't have a lot of expert candidates and their established demigods were already middle-aged.

The two clans made for a powerful contrast.

The Larkinson Clan may be weaker, but possessed a much greater future.

The Cross Clan used to wield a lot more might, but had declined heavily in recent times.

The expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan looked especially dashing as they wore their custom capes. Their personal emblems were prominently visible on the backs of the extra garments.

The counterattack of the Larkinson Clan did not end here!

Moments after the expert pilots and expert candidates stood behind the lead designers of the Larkinson Clan, mechs began to arrive overhead.

Beyond the energy screen, many smaller elements flew underneath the massive hulls of the Antonio Cross and Hemmington Cross.

Numerous Desolate Soldiers, Bright Warriors, Doom Guards, Ferocious Piranhas and even a handful of Valkyrie Redeemers from the Glory Seekers flew forth in echelon formations!

Though many of the mechs hardly looked impressive to the Crossers, they were all LMC mechs that possessed their own distinctive glows.

Though the mechs were too distant to project their glows to the Larkinsons and Crossers attending the ceremony, their appearance nonetheless broke the suppression exerted by the Crosser fleet carriers!

The Cross Patriarch saw the situation wasn't as good anymore. He needed to do something in order to regain the upper hand.

"Feh." He rolled his eyes. "These third-class mechs are as weak as chickens. What possessed you to parade these inferior mechs?"

Ves smirked as he turned to his Crosser counterpart. "These mechs may be humble, but they are each in high demand. Our Living Mech Corporation sells millions of copies a month to customers all over the Yeina Star Cluster. Our market reach surpasses that of any average Senior. As long as we gain some time, we can easily grow our strength to the point where our fleet will surpass yours."

Patriarch Reginald did not lose any wind. "We have a Senior. Our commercial strength will soon explode once Professor Cortez builds up his industries."

"Good luck with that." Ves briefly flicked his gaze over to Benedict. "Don't underestimate our Journeyman. With my indispensable design philosophy, the value of my products has exceeded that of the competition. If you don't believe me, you should ask the good professor."

Benedict's eyes twinkled for a second. "Patriarch Ves is correct. He is an outlier in the mech industry. While Seniors such as myself have many different ways to earn lavishly, I dare not claim that my products can be as competitive as the products of the LMC."

The leader of the Cross Clan looked annoyed at his guest designer. The two kept silent but Ves detected that they were likely communicating in private through their cranial implants.

"Let us proceed with the treaty signing." Patriarch Reginald turned away from Professor Benedict. "Our two clans must join hands."

Ves schooled his expression and nodded. "I agree. Our alliance will form the basis of our success in the times to come. The Red Ocean may push us, but we will never break as long as we cover each other's backs."

The two clans were ready to form an alliance.

Chapter 2570: Pioneering Alliance

An ornate bot floated down from above. Faint spotlights shone on the bot and two identical scrolls in its grasp.

The lengthy paper documents were exaggeratingly large and encrusted with golden flourishes and other decorative elements.

The scrolls served as the symbolic representation of the treaty that the Larkinsons and Crossers had settled upon. The actual treaty existed in an electronic format, but it was nice to hold a traditional event in order to formalize the historical occasion.

The alliance was of paramount importance to both clans.

On the surface, the pioneering alliance was about sharing the responsibilities and benefits of becoming galactic pioneers.

According to the admissions scheme set up by the Big Two, alliances were subject to additional rules. Any individuals or groups that chose to split the cost of a single fleet beyonder ticket needed to pick their allies carefully.

The reasons for this was that a group of pioneers were collectively seen as one cooperative unit. The pioneers not only had to account for themselves, but also each other.

To be more specific, if a pioneer betrayed the human race and colluded with the indigenous alien races of the Red Ocean, every partner who helped the violator pass through the beyonder gate could not escape punishment!

This meant that the Larkinson Clan had to pick its partners very carefully! Ves could not afford to ally with someone who was liable to piss off the Big Two!

Fortunately, the rules weren't overly harsh. Even if the Cross Clan went crazy one day, the Big Two wouldn't annihilate the Larkinson Clan. Ves would merely shoulder a lot of debt and become subject to some troublesome rules.

In any case, neither the Larkinsons nor the Crossers believed their allies pursued a crazy agenda. Both of them simply wanted to grasp some opportunities and grow their respective clans into something greater.

Once the bot floated placed the documents onto the surface of the floating altar, it flew back and entered standby mode.

Both Ves and Reginald approached and inspected the terms of the treaty.

The terms were fairly simple and did not cover a lot of ground. The alliance that the two sides had been keen to forge was not as close as a marriage. It was more about sharing benefits.

Ves looked at the first and most important treaty clauses.

"Together, our two clans shall form a formal pioneering alliance." He announced. Invisible speakers and sound projectors carried his voice to every attending Larkinson and Crosser. "After the signing of this treaty, we shall officially register our pioneering alliance to the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance. The leadership of this cooperative venture alliance shall nominally rest with the Larkinson Clan."

This wasn't as impressive as it sounded. Neither clan wanted to become subordinate to the other. Even if more clans joined, the Larkinsons wouldn't be able to call the shots.

There were some other details in these clauses that might be relevant in certain situations. In certain collective decisions, votes needed to be held. If a partner did not want to abide by the result, they could choose to withdraw from the pioneering alliance but not without a considerable penalty.

These were all terms agreed upon by the negotiators. Ves was not a diplomat so he did not claim to understand the intricacies of these arcane rules.

As someone who was no stranger to breaking rules, he hardly cared about the complicated clauses that were filled with lawyer-like jargon. He knew that when a crisis hit, no possible rule could stop people from looking out for themselves.

Patriarch Reginald announced the second set of clauses in the treaty. "Both of our clans shall form a defensive alliance. We promise to come to each other's aid if either of us are threatened by an unprovoked attack. This defensive pact does not apply if any of us has provoked the enemy or launched hostilities first. If the enemy is overwhelmingly powerful, no partner is obligated to fight as well. In the event that a request for military aid is not honored, the partner in question will immediately cease to be a part of the pioneering alliance, and must pay all of the penalties associated with this breach."

Naturally, the exact rules and mechanics were very thorough and covered nearly every scenario imaginable. The lawyers of both clans spent weeks on hammering out the terms.

The overall point behind these terms was to encourage the allies to stick together against threats that targeted their entire pioneering alliance. They were much less strict towards private grudges and individual rivalries.

"Our alliance stands alone when we arrive in the Red Ocean." Ves spoke up. "With ambitious pioneers gathering from every region of human space, we will be surrounded by strangers. It is more important than ever to turn to friends that are closest to us. As citizens of neighboring star sectors, we share a much closer bond than any of the pioneers in the Red Ocean. Trust is essential to keep our alliance alive, and I sincerely hope we can cover each other's backs."

The next clauses pertained to a different set of agreements.

Patriarch Reginald briefly summed them up. "Our clans may choose to cooperate on commercial or industrial ventures on a case-by-case basis. Since both of us have talented and capable mech designers, it is a given that we shall collaborate frequently on certain mech design projects. Each of these collaborations must set out a specific remuneration structure or profit-sharing arrangement in order to reward every contribution. In addition, we encourage the mech designers of both our clans to combine forces when designing specific, high-end mechs."

This was the most interesting part of the treaty to both sides. Reginald clearly valued that last part the most. If the opportunity to design the mech that would propel him to ace pilot ever came up, Ves had promised to lend his design philosophy to the pivotal project.

Of course, he wouldn't do so for free. The Cross Clan already promised to part with a significant amount of rare exotics and strategic materials.

What Ves especially paid attention to was obtaining a small quantity of monoexurite and a whole Worclaw Crystal. While Ves lacked the knowledge and tools to make use of both high-grade exotics, he could slowly change that as he and his clan accumulated more means.

Aside from that, neither the Larkinson mech designers nor the Crosser mech designers were obliged to lend their services. They had to come to a voluntary agreement before they started any collaboration.

The most important portion of the treaty came up next.

Ves took a deep breath. "Once we establish our pioneering alliance and collectively obtain a fleet beyonder ticket, we have agreed to allocate our quota of ships that we are allowed to bring to the Red Ocean according to a fair and predetermined formula. If our pioneering alliance expands to the point where we have enough merits to redeem a ticket, the Larkinson Clan will be able take up 8 starship slots while the Cross Clan is entitled to 5 starship slots."

The Larkinson Clan almost possessed 40 million MTA merits, but not quite. Yet because the Larkinsons possessed so much leverage, it was easy for them to ask for a little extra.

In contrast, the Cross Clan possessed much more weight. Poor Patriarch Reginald only had about 25 million MTA merits at his disposal, so the Crossers could only make do with a quota of 5 vessels.

It wasn't fair, and the Larkinsons might not be able to justify claiming so many slots once other partners came onboard. Ves knew that if he wanted to keep his current quota, he might have to earn a couple of million more MTA merits in the next couple of years.

The remainder of the treaty was not as interesting or impactful.

For example, one miscellaneous agreement called for putting a portion of their industrial capacity at each other's disposal.

For example, if Professor Benedict designed a new Crosser mech and wanted to borrow the Larkinson Clan's factory ship to produce a lot of copies, then Ves could choose to accept the request. As long as the request wasn't excessive, the Larkinson Clan would produce and supply the mechs to the Cross Clan at a considerable discount.

Of course, the same also applied in reverse. If Ves ever wanted to acquire hundreds of Transcendent Punishers in a short amount of time, he could ask the Cross Clan to help with the production.

After quickly going over these minor points, neither side offered any objections. Though there were many areas in which Ves or Reginald didn't like, this was the nature of compromise. It was impossible for either of them to have their way. They had to move away from their initial demands and come to a middle ground in order to ensure that both sides benefited from the agreement.

If there was any massive discontent from one side or the other, the alliance wouldn't be able to last.

Despite the unpalatable compromises, the patriarchs didn't show their dissatisfaction. The truth was that the negotiations produced an agreement that provided more gains than losses to them. As long as this held true, there weren't any sufficient reasons to reject the alliance.

"Let us sign this treaty."

Both patriarchs floated forward. The bot that hovered on standby gradually lowered itself and extended two ornate pens to the leaders.

They grasped the pens and began to sign their names and signatures with aesthetically-pleasing flourishes.

Of course, neither of them employed their actual handwriting. The autopens merely executed their pre-programmed motions by themselves.

Otherwise, both Ves and Reginald would immediately ruin the solemn treaty signing by displaying crooked and ugly handwriting!

Each autopen signed two times. This way, the two copies of the treaties held the signatures of both leaders.

Ves turned around and raised his fist!

"From this day onwards, the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan are united!"

His counterpart, Patriarch Reginald, also raised his fist.

"From this day onwards, the Golden Skull Alliance shall rise to greatness in the Red Ocean!"

The Golden Skull Alliance!

This imposing name was the official designation of their alliance!

Both Larkinsons and Crossers raised their fists in response and cried out the new name in a martial fashion!

"Golden Skull! Golden Skull! Golden Skull!"

No one noticed that Ves' proud smile was shaking a little.

To be honest, Ves vehemently disagreed with the name. If he had a choice, he would have called it something else like the LC Alliance or something neutral.

However, the Crosser negotiators insisted on the name. More specifically, they demanded the inclusion of the word 'skull'!

The Larkinsons eventually agreed to this strange demand because they obtained some very attractive concessions in exchange.

It didn't take much guessing to know that Professor Benedict had a hand in this event.

Was he crazy?! Why would the former Skull Architect reference his hidden past in such an open fashion?

If he hadn't received some reassurances from the man himself, Ves would have rather given up on the concessions his clan had received in exchange.

He briefly turned his head to look at the guest designer of the Cross Clan.

Professor Benedict noticed his gaze and responded with a satisfied smile.

Of course he was happy that the two clans managed to find common ground. The Senior Mech Designer actually paid very little in order to be a part of the new alliance. He was the true winner of this development!

"Clever bastard." Ves whispered.

Though he equated the former Skull Architect as a leech, he was still a useful one. As long as Professor Benedict provided enough benefits, Ves had no reason to mess up this arrangement.

The Golden Skull Alliance shouldn't stir up too much trouble in the Red Ocean.

To some people, a sordid name like that did not bode well for the future. It was too bad that Ves was not prone to superstition.