

## Mech 2581

### *Chapter 2581: Rapid Expansion*

The delivery of the Larkinson Clan's much-awaited factory ship initiated a very important countdown.

Hardly any excuses remained to remain in the Cinach System. After a year of residing in this boring Sentinel star system, the Larkinsons were more than eager to explore the cosmos!

In order to address the upcoming changes, Ves decided to make a public announcement. This would be the first time he faced all of his clansmen since his wedding over two months ago. During this time, the clan had recruited a lot of young and eager talents in order to alleviate its immense manpower needs.

The new factory ship alone required at least 5,000 crew members in order to function at a basic level, but in truth it was better to get at least double.

In addition, the production lines and all of the other production-related tasks also required a lot of personnel in order to run them at peak efficiency.

After studying the manuals and consulting some of the chief technicians in his clan, Ves tried to calculate how much staff he needed to assign to each GAIA production line.

He came to the conclusion that they worked optimally when at least 120 mech technicians and assorted workers such as quality control personnel, software engineers and so on were assigned to every production line.

While a production line could actually make do with 20 people or even less, the drop in efficiency would be horrendous. A lot of the advanced machines such as the enormous GAIA 3D printer required the supervision of multiple workers in order to maintain a consistent level of quality.

In addition, hiring more than 100 people allowed the factory ship's new production department to organize them into three 8-hour shifts.

After all, with so many expensive production lines and a ship that added billions of hex credits in upkeep costs, why should the Larkinson Clan shut down the machines at night?

That was an enormous waste!

Therefore, despite recruiting thousands of personnel that were specifically assigned to the factory ship, the Larkinson Clan wasn't done. Once the Larkinson fleet set off, the clan would have to continually recruit talented and eager workers along its journey.

In fact, even if the Larkinson Clan hired all of the personnel necessary to fully staff the production lines, it wouldn't have mattered.

The GAIA production lines were far too complicated for any of the workers to handle at first. They needed to undergo a lot of guided training in order to handle the production equipment without screwing something up. The learning curve was so steep that it might take years for the production crews to truly master the advanced Hexer machines!

"What are you thinking about?" Gloriana asked.

"I'm trying to figure out if the production capacity of our factory ship will be up to par once we enter the Red Ocean." He answered.

A handful of attendants and bots buzzed around him. They dressed him up, attached his cape to his shoulders, affixed some badges to his chest and styled his hair.

One of the bots even shaved his chin to make sure it was absolutely smooth and spotless even though he already shaved this morning! Ves wanted to present a neat and tidy image. Who would ever take him seriously if he showed up with a messy stubble?

"Meow."

"Miaow miaow."

Even their cats dressed up for the occasion. Gloriana had affixed a bowtie on top of both Lucky and Clixie's head.

While Clixie enjoyed her cute pink head ornament, Lucky did not look as pleased with his green headwear.

"Meow meow!"

The gem cat floated in front of Gloriana and begged her to remove his bowtie!

"Why are you so upset, Lucky?" She playfully patted his head. "It looks great on you! I picked it out myself. Don't you like how it matches your eyes?"

"Meeeeooooow!"

As the attendants finished fixing up his appearance, he turned around and grasped his wife's hand.

"It's time. Let's face our clansmen. Are you ready?"

"I already fixed up my appearance an hour ago. You're so slow, Ves."

This time, Gloriana opted to wear a dress that combined professionalism with style. Her blue dress featured a honeycomb pattern and her red suit jacket matched the colors of the Larkinson Clan.

She put up pretty but understated makeup but marked her lips with red. Her hair was styled in a crown braid which she had increasingly taken a liking of in recent times.

As Ves took in a deep breath, he also partook in her latest scent which he hadn't experienced before. His wife put on a fresh perfume that smelled of coconuts and oceans.

"I love the way you smell."

She put her hand in front of her mouth and giggled. "Hihi! I try."

The couple and their cats exited the dressing room and approached a large entrance. A squad of guards briefly inspected them before allowing them to pass.

They entered an immense hall.

Banners displaying the emblem and colors of the Larkinson Clan, LMC, Avatars of Myth and the other mech forces proudly hung from bots that floated from above.

Guards in full armor stood vigilantly at the sides. Even though no outsiders were invited to the factory ship, they still took their duties seriously.

Yet what truly impressed Ves was the large crowd that had assembled into the massive compartment.

Thousands of officers and ratings, each of them wearing their ceremonial red dress uniforms, stood in neat rows.

The huge auditorium they were in right now was an adaptable compartment. In occasions like these, it could be configured in a simple empty space with a stage at the front.

On other occasions, the adjustable interior could switch to a formal dining room setting with resplendent tables and chairs, allowing him to hold a grand banquet to entertain a lot of respected guests.

Right now, aside from the banners and other ornaments that spiced the auditorium up, it looked a little bare.

There weren't even any glows to modulate the emotions of the clansmen that had gathered in the hall.

The space did not feature enough room to add any mechs. While Ves could have employed totems, he decided not to make use of them on this occasion.

Ves already held enough public addresses to gain enough confidence in his oratory skills.

In the past, he might have borrowed the power of his mechs or embodied one of his design spirits, but this was not necessary anymore.

He preferred to make use of these methods when he truly needed to increase his persuasion. If he kept utilizing the same tricks onto his own clansmen, they would eventually lose effect.

Since he was just making some information public this time, there was no need for him to resort to excessive means.

As Ves walked down the center aisle that was marked by a red carpet, he reached an elevated stage. Together with his wife and pets, he ascended up the podium and turned around to meet the gazes of the crew of his flagship.

He could sense pride, expectation and eagerness from his clansmen. The depressing malaise that had struck the clan shortly after the Nyxian Gap Campaign had almost entirely faded away.

Part of it was due to the arrival of the HHX-6963 and a lot of other hardware. The Larkinson Clan had rapidly grown in strength, thereby alleviating the worry of many clansmen about their ability to defend themselves.

Part of it was due to time. The tragedies and deaths that ensued from Task Force Predator's journey through the Nyxian Gap had faded. Even the Living Sentinels had turned around now that Commander Casella Ingvar assumed leadership.

Yet the biggest reason was the influx of a lot of adopted clansmen. The recruiters had expanded their scope and took in tens of thousands of talents. With so many newcomers arriving in the clan who had yet to live through any of its difficult times, the clan had regained a lot of optimism!

Ves decided to address this change first. He held the Larkinson Mandate in his hands as he projected the authority of a clan patriarch that had lived through the same ordeals as the other battle-hardened soldiers in his clan.

The crowd fell absolutely silent. Whether they were old-timers or new recruits, none of them regarded him as a bookish mech designer who would faint at the sight of a drop of blood.

"My fellow Larkinsons." He spoke. "Our clan has grown explosively in the past year. First, let me welcome those who have joined our circle. Since each of you have joined under the auspices of the Golden Cat, do not be afraid that you aren't 'Larkinson' enough or any of that nonsense. Simply treat everyone as your brothers and sisters and you will receive the same treatment in return."

There were so many new faces in the crowd that Ves simply didn't recognize any of them aside from his assistants and some other acquaintances.

Of course, he knew many other Larkinsons, but they were watching this announcement from their own ships or locations.

"In our clan, there are no artificial strata that divides our members into different ranks based on bloodline, seniority or any of that nonsense. We are a meritocracy. Here, we only look at your competences and contributions. Work hard and get rewarded. This applies to all of you! Don't think you are too late to the party. With the establishment of the Larkinson Merit Exchange, each of you can transform your lives as long as you are able to redeem some life-changing augments. This opportunity is open to every clansmen no matter their status!"

Much of the newcomers looked incredibly eager to hear this. In the Larkinson Clan, it was much easier for regular clansmen to accumulate enough merits to pay for a basic second-class implant or gene mod template.

This was unimaginable to the former third-raters who used to live more regular lives!

No matter how hard a commoner from the Sentinel Kingdom worked, they could never afford second-class implants, let alone third-class ones!

Yet it was different now. The Larkinson Clan was flush with money. The main reason why Ves did not make the augments free was that he had too few biotech experts to perform so many augmentation procedures.

"During the founding of a clan, we numbered just a couple of hundred people. Now, our numbers have surpassed 50,000 members! We have not only made up for the losses of our recent battles, but we have also expanded our ranks. What is remarkable about this is that we are not done yet. Right now, we only have enough staff to barely crew our new starships and field a couple of thousands of mechs. In order to bring our strength to a level that is sufficient enough for the Red Ocean, I plan to double or triple our numbers in the next couple of years!"

This was a stunning announcement! It wasn't too long ago that the clan only numbered 20,000 people at most. In the span of a couple of months, the recruiters picked up 30,000 new clansmen, many of which had come after witnessing the splendor of the Larkinson Clan by watching the grand wedding.

To be honest, the Larkinson Clan had grown so much that it had reached its limits. The recruiters had already suspended much of their efforts so that they could work on assimilating all of the new recruits.

Still, once the Larkinson Clan digested the huge batch of clansmen, it was able to recruit a lot more personnel in the next round!

"Do not think that 50,000, 100,000 or even 150,000 personnel is enough." Ves swept his arm across the auditorium. "Our factory ship alone can easily accommodate tens of thousands of personnel. When we acquire additional capital ships, we need even more people to leverage their capabilities. Larkinsons such as you and I are the root of our clan, so expanding our ranks will definitely make us stronger!"

Even if some of the conservative old fogies in his clan grew increasingly more reluctant about the rapid expansions, Ves was determined to grow his ranks!

#### *Chapter 2582: The Planet Is Dead*

The Larkinson Clan rapidly grew into a behemoth in a matter of years. The story of its founding and growth was so remarkable that not even the Larkinsons themselves could keep up with the changes!

However, no one doubted who made it all possible. The increasingly more mythical clan patriarch had made a lot of amazing accomplishments over his lifetime. What was even more remarkable was that with his age, he still possessed a lot of untapped potential.

No one believed he would end his career as a Journeyman!

Many of the Larkinson clansmen already expected Ves and his wife to become respected and immensely powerful Master Mech Designers.

He could only chuckle when he became aware of these uninformed remarks.

While he possessed a lot of confidence in himself, realizing a mech design was anything but simple. As his clan continued to grow in strength and numbers, he found that his men constantly increased their expectations of him. Ves felt increasingly more burdened at this development.

"Your clansmen believe in you and your vision." Gloriana once said to him. "They have faith in you. As long as you continue to answer their prayers, your status as clan patriarch will become increasingly more unassailable."

He growled back at her. "Don't use those words! I'm not a god and my clansmen are not my worshippers!"

"Hihi! Whatever you say, Ves."

He blinked and returned his mind to the present. As much as he wanted to dismiss her description, when he met the eyes of the new crew members of his factory ship, their fervor reminded him uncomfortably of radical fanatics.

Oh well. This wasn't the time to think about this. He had an announcement to finish.

"In the past few months, we have acquired a lot of powerful assets in order to form our initial expeditionary fleet. Most notably, we have received a large amount of second-class mechs, second-class combat carriers and other second-class vessels. On top of that, we have purchased an abundant amount of spare parts, materials and other supplies to sustain our fleet for many months without interruption."

He waved his hand, causing a large diagram to be projected above his head.

The diagram displayed a simplified schematic of the Larkinson Clan's current starships!

"Upon the delivery of the final batch of starships, we have completed our acquisition of starships. These are more than enough to last us until we reach a beyonder gate. For the foreseeable future, we will only be looking to expand our expeditionary fleet with capital ships. After all, these immense vessels are the only ones worth bringing into the Red Ocean."

He tapped the air, causing the diagram to group up the ships under different categories.

"Let us take stock of our current fleet. The Hall of Heroes has 3 combat carriers and 2 support ships. The Penitent Sisters has 15 combat carriers and 6 support ships. The Avatars of Myth has 20 combat carriers and 10 support ships. The Battle Criers has 10 combat carriers and 3 support ships. The Living Sentinels has 30 combat carriers and 12 support ships. The Flagrant Vandals has 12 combat carriers and 5 support ships. The Swordmaidens has 3 combat carriers and 2 support ships. The Black Cats have 1 combat carrier and 3 other vessels. Combined with 30 more assorted civilian and logistical ships, our fleet possesses a total of 94 combat carriers and 73 non-combat vessels!"

That was 167 starships in total, which was a mind-boggling number to many people! The Larkinsons weren't accustomed yet to owning so many powerful assets.

This figure didn't even include the formidable fleet of the Cross Clan and the smaller but very powerful fleet of the Glory Seekers! At least 400 starships would be setting off under the banner of the Golden Skull Alliance soon!

"We have completely reorganized our fleet and decommissioned all of our older legacy vessels." Ves happily announced. "While it is painful to divest ourselves of the ships that have supported us up until now, they are no longer fit for our needs. Our new combat carriers and support ships are all universally second-class in performance. Most notably, their FTL drives are just not capable of crossing over into other star sectors, but



they are also faster, more precise and longer-ranged than the ones we used before. We estimate it will only take 2 to 3 years for us to reach the Tarnished Crown Star Sector, which is home to one of humanity's precious beyonder gates!"

Another projection came to life that depicted the star chart of the surrounding star clusters. While the map was too zoomed out to display much detail, it was enough to show the Larkinsons how much distance the expeditionary fleet had to traverse in order to reach their destination!

The star chart did not depict any lines that signified the planned route of their expeditionary fleet. This was sensitive information. Even if he limited the broadcast to his own clan, it was far too easy for it to leak out to other people.

As long as third parties learned of the expeditionary fleet's route, they could easily set up an ambush ahead of time!

Besides, the tentative route that Ves and his staff had decided upon was not entirely fixed. The fleet could always take a left turn instead of a right turn or take a small detour in order to visit a special destination in the vicinity.

This was why Ves only mentioned a vague estimate of how long it would take to reach Tarnished Crown. The biggest variable was how much time Ves had to spend in Smiling Samuel in order to complete one of the System's long-stalled Supply Missions.

The diagram of the fleet disappeared. In its place came a representation of the new factory ship.

"Let us move on to the moment you have all been waiting for. Our first capital ship is a massive industrial workhorse, one that can accompany us into the Red Ocean. While her code number reads as HHX-6963, this is not a fitting name for a pivotal vessel that will birth the mechs that will defend our fleet and accompany our mech pilots for many years. My staff and I have carefully considered this issue."

He looked up at the projection. The two kilometer long vessel still lacked the giant golden prow he planned to add, but that would change soon enough.

"Names are important, both to people and to ships." He explained as he paced around the podium. His cape swished as he moved around. "Naming our sub-capital ships is a different matter from naming our biggest ships. I can't be like Commander Melkor and call the new flagship of the Avatars something meaningless like the Purplefeather."

A few people among the crowd chuckled. The downside of acquiring so many ships in a short amount of time was that his men didn't try very hard to come up with good names.

This resulted in a very serious lack of consistency.



The Penitent Sisters bestowed their combat carriers with names such as Mother's Wrath and Virginal Silence.

The Living Sentinels utilized plainer but uplifting names such as Courageous Heart or Steadfast Vigil.

Ves and Major Verle generally didn't bother with how the mech commanders chose to name their new starships. They were second-hand sub-capital ships that the Larkinson Clan would get rid of anyway.

The factory ship was different. It was a ship that not only symbolized the clan's industrial might, but also served as a pillar that sustained the morale of the Larkinsons during good times and bad times.

As long as the Larkinson Clan retained the vessel, it would always be able to make its own mechs! Whether the clan chose to keep the mechs for itself or sell them to others, the expeditionary fleet simply wouldn't be as strong without this bulwark!

"Early in our naming session, we have quickly decided to choose a name that honors our past." Ves continued as he gripped the Larkinson Mandate tighter "While I am aware that many of you have no connection to the Bright Republic, it is the state that has long shaped the Larkinson Family, of which we have split off from. In a final homage to our former home state, we have decided to call this vessel the Spirit of Bentheim!"

Though not many Larkinsons were aware of the significance of this name, the old guard all gasped or reacted with astonishment.

The Spirit of Bentheim!

It was a name with multiple layers of meaning. Ves instantly liked it when he first came up with it. Since much of the leadership of the clan consisted of trueblood Larkinsons, they understood some of the meaning as well.

Ves waved his hand, causing the projection of the factory ship to turn into a live view of the starboard side of the hull.

Below the huge, painted code number, a huge portion of the exterior spontaneously morphed into white lettering. The factory ship immediately assumed her new identity!

He waved his hand again, causing a projection of the planet it was named after to appear into view.

The footage depicted the planet at its prime and when it was fortified during the Sand War.

"A few years ago, our star sector came under attack. The sandman race had swept over many border states. The Bright Republic soon became caught up in it as well. In order to support the war effort, the Republic's only port system played a strategic role in keeping everyone supplied with mechs and starships. What you are seeing now is the planet that used to be the heart of my former home state's industry."

The planet in the footage did not last long. As the Sand War progressed to the end, a humongous concentration of sandman vessels funneled into the star system. The defenders quickly became overwhelmed and the overly-complacent MTA defending starships had been taken by surprise!

A lot of veterans and victims of the Sand War became emotional at what was about to come. Some of the trueblood Larkinsons and former citizens of the Bright Republic even broke out in tears!

The sand storm that had swept over the entire planet wiped out centuries worth of industrial development, an enormous amount of unevacuated citizens and a proud heritage that had never succumbed to the Vesians.

The depressing end of this once-great planet affected even Ves.

"Bentheim, the engine of the Bright Republic, is dead." He announced.

The entire crowd fell silent. Even the newcomers who didn't have anything to do with the Sand War became emotional.

Ves looked up at the projection of the sand-scoured globe and pressed his fist against his chest.

"While the planet might be dead, its spirit still lives on!" He claimed with a raised voice. "Many of the people who visited it, lived on it or had relations with it still remember what that prosperous and exciting planet was like! While there is a huge library's worth of historical documents, images and footage of Bentheim in the past, these are lifeless records that do not mean anything without the right context. Our memories on the other hand are different. We remember its spirit of what it once was. It is this sentiment that we wish to keep on so that our subsequent generations will keep the Spirit of Bentheim alive! Honor the past, but work towards the future!"

The crowd all stood up and pressed their fists against their hearts!

"For the future!" They roared!

A huge wave of satisfaction swept over Ves. The projection of the sand-blasted planet disappeared, leaving only the newly-named factory ship over his head.

The planet may be dead, but its spirit lived on. His factory ship inherited the name of the planet that had played a major role in his life and helped him lift off his career as a mech designer.

While Ves did not have much affection for the Bright Republic these days, he felt it was worth it to carry on some of his happier memories in this fashion.

#### *Chapter 2583: Lucky the Sniffer*

The naming ceremony of the Larkinson Clan's first capital ship went well.

It signified another turning point in the history of the clan. Once the Larkinsons gained basic control over the Spirit of Bentheim and their other recently-obtained starships, the grand expedition would officially set off for Tarnished Crown.

No one was sure how long the preparations would take. Ves decided to set a tentative deadline of 1 month.

In 1 month, he wanted every ship in the Larkinson fleet to be ready for departure.

He knew this was going to be a challenge, but he did not ask for much. The second-hand starships provided by the Hegemony may be old, but they had all been serviced and refurbished. As long as they were reliable at the beginning, their crews didn't need to have much familiarity and expertise.

The main reason why you needed knowledgeable and competent crew members for starships was to respond to any possible emergencies. When fires broke out, power reactors overloaded and FTL drives fell apart, having crew who served on the ships for a very long time could make a huge difference!

For now, the need wasn't too great. As part of his deal with the Hegemony, the Hexers dispatched a small but crucial amount of trainers who also served as very capable stand-ins. While Ves was a bit leery about Captain Daria-Maria Vraken's background, he could not think of anyone else he would entrust the safety of the Spirit of Bentheim more. Her lengthy list of competences and certifications was more than enough to convince him that his factory ship was in good hands!

That said, Ves knew that he shouldn't blindly trust the Hexers on everything. While it was nice to replace his old fleet with a lot of new Hexer-built vessels, the problem was that the Larkinson Clan was unable to confirm whether their builders added in any backdoors to them! If he was in their place, he would have definitely slipped in a lot of listening devices and tampered with some of the core programming of the ship systems.

As worrisome as this sounded, Ves did not panic because of several reasons.

No matter where he bought his ships, he could pretty much assume that the shipbuilders or the states they answered to always tampered with the vessels in question.

Even if he managed to buy a starship from the MTA or the CFA, Ves would merely exchange one set of voyeurs to another set of voyeurs.

"The only way to completely eliminate this problem is to build my own ships and ship components." He muttered.

The latter was possible but the former was way too difficult to realize. Capital ships were especially challenging to build.

Therefore, buying ships that were compromised was not something that his clan could avoid.

Still, if the shipbuilding companies ever went too far with taking advantage of the backdoors they built into their own products, their credibility would definitely be ruined!

Not just the shipyards, but also their owners and the state they belonged to would lose a lot of reputation. This was very fatal to the shipbuilding industry to a state. If wealthy clients no longer turned to a specific state, then it would lose a lot of revenue.

Capital ships weren't cheap! The value of the Spirit of Bentheim exceeded 2 trillion hex credits. Though Ves had not obtained her through ordinary means, in many cases governments stood to earn immense sums of money through levying taxes and other fees.

Shipbuilding was such a major industry that it affected many other industries as well. All of that money spending invigorated the economies through the multiplier effect.

With such a lucrative cycle, the short-term benefits of exploiting the backdoors built in a starship simply wasn't worth it. Yet that did not automatically mean that those backdoors didn't exist!

Ves liked to assume the worst. Until proven otherwise, he considered the Spirit of Bentheim to be stuffed with bugs, listening routines and secret programming.

Naturally, there was no way he tolerated their existence. The longer they existed, the greater the chance that someone, whether it was Hexers or some other people, would find a way to exploit the backdoors.

In order to discuss this very serious security problem, he chose to leave the Spirit of Bentheim and travel back to the surface of Cinach VI. After arriving at the temporary base that was in the process of being abandoned, he entered a small, secure meeting room that had been especially prepared by the Black Cats.

Numerous jammers flooded the bare metal interior with interference.

"Meow."

"I know it feels uncomfortable, but just bear with it. As long as you do your job, you can go play around."

"Meow?"

"I mean it! Now get to work!"

As his cat utilized his excellent sensors, Ves sat next to the bare metal table.

A short time later, two of his most trusted advisors entered the room. Major Verle and Calabast took their seats.

"Before we begin, I'd like to thank you, Ves."

"Oh?"

"The planet is dead, but the spirit still lives on." Verle recited. "You honor us all by calling your factory ship the Spirit of Bentheim."

Ves looked a bit closer at the military officer. The major's increasing workload had caused him to look a bit older than before. No matter what care he received, it was hard to counteract the effects of overworking.

Major Verle used to be a mech pilot and mech commander when he was in his prime. That was a long time ago. It must have been at least a decade since he last entered the cockpit. His thinning form and greying hair signified that he must have lived through several ordeals that took a toll on his health.

"Are you okay, Verle?"

"You don't have to worry about me. It's just that your announcement has caused me to recall my old life. Before all of this, I was just a mech officer of the Flagrant Officer and a Firestarter answering to Flashlight. Life was much simpler back then. Do you agree?"

Ves shook his head. "The past is the past. I was weaker, stupider and more naive back then. The Bright Republic may have shaped me, but it has also stabbed me in the back. I don't like to think back on those days for this reason."

"Hehehe." Calabast chuckled a bit. "You clearly hate the Bright Republic and its hypocritical government. Why would you possibly honor your home state by dredging up the name of Bentheim from the grave?"

"I'm a Brighter as well as a Larkinson. While I value the latter, I can't get rid of the former. It sounds contradictory, but a part of me still loves my home state."

He felt rather helpless about this. No matter how hard he tried to override his old feelings for the Bright Republic, he simply couldn't douse this stubborn flame in his heart.

"I understand how you feel." Major Verle supported him. "Anyway, our feelings and nostalgia are not up for discussion today. Our time is short, so we should address the main reason why we have gathered here."

"Calabast?"

The spymaster brought out a tube and retrieved a set of printed blueprints of all things. She carefully placed the blueprints over the surface of the metal table.

The blueprints all depicted various cross-sections of the factory ship.

A lot of sections and points were marked in red. In fact, there were so many of them that there were hardly any clean white lines or blue spaces in the interior of the Spirit of Bentheim!

"There are two broad categories of security risks that we need to take into account." Calabast began. "The most laborious one by far is the integrity of all of the electronic components and software systems of the ship. As a former DIVA agent, I can state with 100 percent certainty that DIVA along with many other Hexer intelligence agencies have bugged your new capital ship."

While he expected her answer, hearing it still made him upset. "We signed a contract that explicitly stated that the Hexers weren't allowed to compromise her systems."

Both Calabast and Major Verle looked amused.

"Intelligence agencies aren't bound by the usual constraints. You of all people should know that by now. Even if you catch them red-handed, no authority is going to sanction them for their actions. Each intelligence agency is an arm of the state."

"Damn Hexers." Ves cursed and pressed his fingers against his forehead. "Well, it was nice to hope. The more important issue is what we can do to sweep all of the bugs and backdoors."

Calabast pointed to Lucky, who had slacked off on the job and was lazily floating around in the air. "He can help, for a start."

"Meow?!"

"Yes, you. I don't know how, but you have CFA-grade hacking and detection capabilities. Do you know what this means? With your sensors, you can detect any listening device that Hexer intelligence agencies make use of. With your hacking and virtual intrusion capabilities, you can expose every layer of programming of any electronic device. On the Spirit of Bentheim, only her AI core is able to resist your intrusions!"

Ves nodded in agreement. "You're right. We shouldn't squander Lucky's gifts. Calabast, starting from tomorrow, I want you to employ Lucky as your personal sniffer."

"This is a massive effort." She gestured to the blueprints. "Do you see how many compartments and ship components that we have to sweep? No matter how much I expand the Black Cats, I don't have faith in any of our anti-surveillance technology. Only Lucky gets my vote of confidence."

"How long do you think it will take?"

The woman paused for a moment. "Years. The work might not be finished by the time we enter the Red Ocean."

Though Ves was disappointed by that news, he knew that an endeavor as vital as this couldn't be rushed.

"Just do the best you can. I want Lucky to perform his duty at least an entire shift a day. If he ever shirks his job, then let me know."

Lucky's tail straightened behind his back!

"Meow!"

"Don't complain! You're not a kitten. As an adult, you need to earn your keep!"

"Meeoooww..."

Ves ignored the complaints of his cat and turned to the blueprints. "Are there any parts of the Bentheim that aren't as easy to deal with?"

"There are plenty. What is particularly tricky to deal with is to inspect every single line of code of every piece of tech. We can't fully automate the process because it is too easy for hackers to camouflage malicious programming. While Lucky's capabilities help somewhat in this aspect, we still need a large team of programmers to verify the code by hand."

"Ugh. Well, do your best, then. Is there something more specific we should take into account?"



Calabast pulled out a red pen from her pocket and circled the heavily-reinforced compartment that held the ASTERA AI core. "Lucky won't be able to deal with this. This CFA-made AI core is built out of a fragment of a sandman admiral body. I think the three of us know how that might complicate matters."

"The AI core won't suddenly grow sentient, will it?" Major Verle asked with a hint of concern.

"Impossible. The conditions simply aren't there." Ves stated. "If it makes you feel better, I'll frequently check up on the AI core. Even if it is good at hiding whether it has become sentient, don't underestimate my capabilities. I'm very good at discerning whether something is alive."

Calabast nodded. "I trust you, Ves. The issue that I'm trying to address is not about this. Instead, I'm more concerned about the CFA connection. Just like every quantum communication node made by the Comm Consortium, this AI core can probably feed back a lot of data to the CFA."

"Not directly, though." Ves pointed out. "It's not a quantum communication node and every transfer of data takes place through specific channels. As long as we tighten our control over these channels, we can lessen the risk of data leaks."

"That sounds good in theory but is much more complicated in practice. Let me explain all of the steps we need to take to contain an AI core that we cannot alter..."

#### *Chapter 2584: Security Deficit*

"Meow~"

As the secret meeting went on, Lucky had descended and allowed Calabast to place him on her lap. As she stroked his patterned metal exterior, he cutely looked up at her with his glowing green eyes and pressed his paws onto her tummy in a rhythmic pattern.

Ves inwardly sneered at his cat's feeble display. If the lazy cat thought that he could escape being used as her personal sniffer, then he was very much mistaken! It was his fault for devouring the salvaged CFA gear that Ves had brought back from the Starlight Megalodon.

He conveniently ignored the fact that the CFA would have confiscated his goods regardless.

As Calabast outlined how much manual effort that she and her Black Cats had to expend to sweep the Spirit of Bentheim of any improper elements, no one in the shielded meeting room looked pleased.

"So to sum it up, it will take at least three to four years to sanitize our factory ship." Ves flatly said. "While I can reluctantly accept this requirement, the Bentheim won't be our only capital ship. In the next couple of years, I want to acquire at least six more capital ships before entering the Red Ocean. How long will it take to clear all of those vessels?"

"It depends." She looked thoughtful. "Some of the work can be done in parallel, especially when it comes to inspecting and correcting suspicious programming. However, sweeping all of the hardware on the vessels can only be done with the help of Lucky. How long that will take depends on the size and the interior design of the ships in question. For example, the Spirit of Bentheim is of a small to medium size as far as capital ships are concerned, but she is packed full of production equipment, power management systems, heat management systems and so on. In contrast, a fleet carrier like the Indigo Tremor contains a lot more empty space in order to hold all of those carriers. Combined with her relative lack of advanced components, we can probably sweep her entire hull in 2 years or less."

That was still a lot of time! No matter the size and complexity of the capital ship, Ves did not want to wait 20 years or more in order to remove or contain all of the security risks on his most important vessels!

Major Verle raised a finger. "Don't forget about our sub-capital ships either. While we already plan to sell off most of our fleet when we arrive at Tarnished Crown, we will have to acquire a lot of new combat carriers when we reach the Red Ocean. You can assume that all of the shipbuilding companies will certainly slip some hidden surprises into the vessels we buy. Who knows what the masterminds will do with the information they can secretly collect from us. Maybe we'll stumble upon a rich deposit of phasewater one day and attract lots of vultures the next day."

As long as there wasn't any solid proof connecting these two events, who could ever fault the shipbuilding company? Unlike civilized space where attacks against powerful fleets never happened without a reason, the Red Ocean was filled with greedy opportunists.

Any pioneering organization that managed to enter the Red Ocean was not average! The ridiculously high entry fees ensured that the competition would not be weak!

With so many sharks prowling humanity's latest frontier, it became more important than ever to exercise strict information control. While it was easier to hide the whereabouts of his fleet in the undeveloped star systems of the Red Ocean, as long as its whereabouts were leaked, it was too easy for nefarious actors to ambush the Larkinsons!

What was the chance of this happening? It shouldn't happen too often, but the odds were definitely higher than he could tolerate.

"We need a different solution." Major Verle concluded.

Both Ves and Verle looked at Calabast.

She frowned. "I can think of a way to solve our security issues faster. We can't solve this problem with our own strength, so we need to leverage our contacts and seek help from others. We have at least two choices. The first one entails establishing a deeper relationship with a very competent intelligence agency. That can be DIVA but it can also be spies from another state."

"This is not a good solution." Verle immediately shook his head. "DIVA is our biggest suspect. How can we ask your former employers to remove the bugs they installed on our ships in the first place?"

"Hey, our clan has developed friendly relations with DIVA. As one of its former agents, I know that the agency can be very pragmatic. As long as Ves and the clan exchanges enough benefits, DIVA will be more than happy to act in good faith. I have done so several times when I was in the field. We aren't the baddies."

There was no way the other two took her by her word.

"I don't want to have any further entanglements with the Hegemony." Ves stated. "Unless DIVA can provide solid guarantees, I am not inclined to make any further deals."

Calabast sighed. "I don't blame you. I don't advise you to approach any other intelligence agency then, especially foreign ones. They only look out for themselves and the authorities they answer to. If you haven't developed a prior relationship with them, then they aren't trustworthy."

"You mentioned that we had two options. What is the second one?"

"The MTA. Don't you have a good relationship with Master Willix, Ves? Try asking a favor from her. The MTA is bound to have a way to solve your security issues. If possible, ask for a scanner that can sweep entire starships or large sections of them at a time. We should also ask for a device that can automatically detect and correct malicious programming."

"This..." Ves hesitated. "I will issue a request the next time I see her, but I don't expect a positive response. I've already leached a lot of freebies from her. I don't want to push my luck too far. She has already signalled to me several times that I shouldn't expect any further favors for the foreseeable time."

She was dissatisfied with her lack of progress in harnessing his design philosophy, the delay of their expert mech design projects and his unwillingness to reveal more of his trade secrets.

However, Calabast pointed out another way for him to pay for what he wanted.

"You have a lot of merits, correct? This is a powerful resource. While the equipment that I'm asking for is not cheap, you can probably obtain what you need by spending a couple of million MTA merits."

That did not sit well with Ves!

"I don't want to spend any of my precious MTA merits. We all earned it through blood, sweat and tears. Within the Golden Skull Alliance, the merits that we've accumulated directly translates to leverage. Any expenditure will directly reduce our weight within our pioneering alliance and will cause us to lose a lot of advantages."

Calabast pursed her lips. "Then find a way to earn more. This security issue is not acute while we are still residing in the galactic rim, but once we enter a new stage, the rivals and competitors we face are of a different caliber. They will exploit every possible vulnerability we have. I can already tell you now that we will likely face twice as much danger in the Red Ocean if we are slow in patching up our virtual security. The battles that take place in this domain can be just as decisive as battles in realspace. Don't make the mistake of investing solely in bigger ships and powerful mechs!"

"She has a point." Verle crossed his arms and nodded in agreement. "The defense of our fleet must be comprehensive. Strong military power is the root of our strength and should never be neglected. However, we need to be strong in other areas as well. Strong information control and virtual security setup will protect us against ambushes and sabotage. Close diplomatic relationships with allies and partners will prevent us from getting schemed against. Good mech designs will provide us with the means to maintain and expand our strength."

The Larkinson Clan needed to cover all of these aspects. The Red Ocean was simply too terrifying. Not even the Nyxian Gap could come close to all of the dangers that the clan might stumble upon in the dwarf galaxy!

The immense burden caused Ves to grimace. "We are too far away from fulfilling all of those requirements. The good news is that we have at least a couple of years to address our shortcomings. The bad news is that I'm not sure we'll get close enough by the time we reach Tarnished Crown."

A coy smile appeared on Calabast's face. "You can start with raising my budget."

"Granted. Discuss it with Major Verle. Do understand that acquiring expert mechs and capital ships come first. Without a strong fist, everything else is superfluous."

The Black Cats hadn't kept pace with the growth of the Larkinson Clan. It was a lot more troublesome to recruit reliable spies because those who worked in this sphere didn't inspire a lot of trust.

The discussion moved on to the second major security vulnerability that Calabast was concerned about. She set aside the blueprints of the Spirit of Bentheim and put some paper documents onto the table.

Ves picked up one of them and observed the familiar-looking profile image of Grand Captain Daria-Maria Vraken!

"Ideally, only vetted Larkinsons should be on our ships." Calabast began. "If we have any desire to take on passengers or host some guests, it is best to entertain them for a few days under heavy supervision."

She tapped the printed profiles of the Hexer trainers assigned to the Spirit of Bentheim and many of the other ships acquired from the Hegemony.

"Our current circumstances are worse. There are thousands of Hexers spread across our ships, with around 500 of them stationed on our capital ship. You can bet that each of them are carefully observing everything we do. Their deep control over our own starships not only allows them to access sensitive data, but also gives them the opportunity to engage in sabotage without alarming any Larkinson. While I don't think the trainers will go this far, their motives might change over the course of our journey."

"We can't kick them out." Major Verle immediately stated. "Our naval experts such as Ophelia Kronon and Commodore Abigail Evern have already stated that the instructors sent by the Hegemony are needed for at least a year, but preferably more. Our inexperienced and underqualified starship crews need a lot of guidance. Right now, they are too dependent on the trainers to man their stations properly."

This was not good news, but Ves had already accepted this tradeoff.

"I'm not too concerned about these people. Once they have passed on much of their knowledge and expertise, we don't need them anymore."

Calabast did not agree. "That may be possible for some of the easier positions, but the more crucial ones are always the most demanding ones. In particular, it is far too difficult to nominate adequate replacements for the chief engineer and the captain of the Spirit of Bentheim. This means we will be depending a lot on Daria-Maria Vraken."

Ves suddenly recalled something. "Calabast, you used to be a Vraken as well, right?"

"I officially severed ties with the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty a couple of years ago. No Vraken will recognize me as kin. If you think I can befriend the grand captain, then think again."

"I'm curious. What are the relations between the two of you? Back when you were a part of the Vraken Dynasty, did you know each other?"

The woman snorted. "Hah! Far from it! Daria-Maria is a main branch member of my former dynasty. You can think of her as the grown-up version of Gloriana. She received the most resources and the best training. Obviously, she was able to thrive with all of these advantages. As for me, I'm just one of thousands of side branch members. While I won't deny that I have lived a privileged life, I had to meet a lot of expectations without enjoying as much resources. I'm similar to Dr. Ranya in this regard. Does this help you understand our relative positions?"

"I see. So the two of you aren't acquainted or anything?"

"No." Calabast spat. "If we ever meet each other, she'll probably act condescendingly and lecture me how I've abandoned my responsibilities."

Ves was taken aback at her acid tone. She held quite a lot of resentment towards her former dynasty!

#### *Chapter 2585: Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty*

Ves grew quite interested in Calabast's background.

Normally, she never spoke about her past life as a member of Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty. Trying to pull out information out of her was as difficult as getting Lucky to vomit out his meals.

This time was different. With the arrival of another Vraken, Calabast probably thought it would be prudent for Ves to know more about one of the six ruling dynasties of the Hegemony.

As one of the foremost powers of a second-rate state, everyone who carried the Vraken name was exceptional! This applied even more to main branch members such as Daria-Maria Vraken.

"The Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty is huge. It has to be in order to control vaste swathes of Hegemony space" She began. "All of its branches added up together amounts to over a million people. Don't think that there are a lot of spoiled brats among this group. Those who fail to meet the high expectations of the dynasty are deprived of their Vraken names and saddled with a lot of debt. This is a very shameful outcome, and it has ruined the lives of millions of former members. Not even their fathers and mothers will recognize them anymore."

"That.. sounds awful." Ves looked shocked.

"It's what I was used to when I grew up. Don't misunderstand. As Vrakens, we enjoyed lots of luxuries and had access to the best augments and resources available in our state. It's just that the Vrakens never forget to remind us that we need to repay the gifts we receive. Back when I didn't go by the name of Calabast, I constantly shouldered the



fear of disappointing my superiors. I knew that if I ever slacked off in my studies and failed my assignments, I would be at risk of falling from grace at any time."

She infused genuine emotion in her voice. Calabast had opened herself up to such an extent that Ves was convinced she was being sincere.

"I agree with Ves. The way you grew up is too inhumane." Major Verle commented.

The contrast between the Larkinson Clan and the Vraken Dynasty was too considerable. The former emphasized kinship while the latter treated its descendants as tools.

To Ves, family was about love. To the Vrakens, family was an extension of power.

These diverging principles caused the two to develop some very different approaches.

Calabast studied the faces of the two men and smiled sardonically. "Inhumane, huh? You may have a point, but I don't necessarily see it that way. There are good reasons why the Vrakens demand so much. Without exerting enough pressure, it is too easy for the subsequent generations to become weak and decadent. This is why my former dynasty did not hesitate to exile any descendants who trended in this direction. Keeping them will only spread their bad habits among the other Vrakens."

"Why do the Vrakens try so hard?"

"Competition. Isn't that obvious? Every Matriarchal Dynasty has remained in power by being better than everyone else. If the Vrakens ever grow complacent, then smaller dynasties such as the Wodins might band together and seek to tear them down. The Vrakens must maintain their basis of strength in order to continue to call the shots in the Hegemony. To be fair, their approach is clearly successful. They are always ranked in the top 3 without fail."

Their strategy paid off, but at what cost? If Ves had a say in the matter, then he would have opted to treat the Vraken descendants differently. Everyone deserved to live a decent life.

The Larkinson Family never pushed its descendants to perform better. If someone didn't want to excel at something, then that was their choice. Ves felt this was a much nicer and more pleasant approach.

Sure, the Larkinsons didn't produce as many exceptional offspring as the Vrakens, but at least everyone was happy and enjoyed a rounded life.

"Our clan will never be like this." Ves seriously vowed.



That caused Calabast to smile. "I know. I like the current direction of our clan a lot better. While I have some concerns for the future, I'm sure you can figure out a way to prevent us from stagnating."

Now that Ves gained more context about the Vraken Dynasty, he wanted to know more about how Calabast and Daria-Maria fit into the picture.

"Are there any opportunities for branch members to rise to the top?" He asked.

"Technically yes, but realistically no." She shook her head. "The starting points of side branch members and main branch members are different. Captain Daria-Maria Vraken received at least a hundred times if not a thousand times more investment than someone like me. It's worth it though as she has become one of the best capital ship captains of our state. If I didn't make the right bet and hitch onto a rising star like you, I would never have been able to surpass her in my life."

Ves looked amused. "That must be quite satisfying for you, right? At most, your distant relative will be promoted to a leadership position within her dynasty. You on the other hand occupy one of the most important positions of a rapidly-growing clan that might very well become greater than the Hexadric Hegemony in the future."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Ves. We need to overcome a lot of challenges before we get to that point. Don't assume that you will win all the time. We need to account for failure as well if we want to survive in the long run. Anyway, I'm not trying to compare myself to Daria-Maria. We are two different women living in two different worlds. I just want to warn you that I lived a bit like her once. Her presence in our fleet is quite suspicious. Vrakens don't get sent to places at random. Main branch members are especially valuable. Why did the council of matriarchs appoint her as the captain? The Hegemony is able to dispatch many other alternatives. Why send their best?"

Both Ves and Major Verle looked clueless. They hardly understood Daria-Maria's background. They weren't familiar with the intricacies of Hexer decision-making.

However, they received her message loud and clear.

"You're saying the Hexers are plotting something."

Calabast chuckled. "Hexers are always plotting something. This applies especially to the Vrakens. They are known for intelligence, intrigue and planning. One of their main principles is that it is best to war without resorting to battle. If you don't set up the circumstances in the right way, then you might need to fight an actual battle, which is incredibly messy and filled with uncertainty. It's a lot better if you can accomplish your goals without resorting to desperate measures."

"Sun Tzu. Art of War." Major Verle noted. "He was a man, by the way."

"There are female strategists in more modern eras as well, you know. The 66 stratagems by Admiral Bastia Ludwig is a particularly popular book in the Hegemony. It's a very influential strategy book written in the early days of the Age of Stars. The views she outlined helped humanity navigate the perils of trying to grow when surrounded by dangerous alien empires."

Ves tapped his finger against the desk. "Discussing history is not on the agenda today. All I care about right now is trying to figure out Captain Daria-Maria Vraken's purpose. She is currently in command of the most important ship of our expeditionary fleet. I don't know about you, but that makes me very nervous."

"As you should." Cabalast concurred. "To be honest, her presence mystifies me. While we can definitely assume she has ulterior motives, she isn't necessarily scheming against us. Her goals may lie elsewhere. For example, the council of matriarchs could have entrusted her with a secret mission that requires her to reach the Red Ocean first. Currently, I'm inclined to believe that as there are simply too few reasons for Hexers to act maliciously against us. In fact, it's the opposite. They want us to succeed."

That last part caused Major Verle to look up. "Maybe we're overthinking the problem. I think we are trying to see threats in places where there are none. Perhaps the Hegemony merely decided to assign Daria-Maria Vraken as the interim captain of our factory ship out of goodwill. Is that possible, Calabast?"

"...Perhaps. I'm not an insider anymore, so I cannot understand the motives behind the decision. All I can say is that your words are plausible."

This didn't help their situation much. There was simply too much uncertainty. Unless they managed to gather more information, how could they ever discern the truth?

Calabast looked tired. She kept stroking Lucky while making some internal calculations.

"We have no choice but to keep an eye on Captain Vraken and the other Hexer trainers. Don't focus too much on the former. The grand captain may be nothing more than a decoy that is meant to attract our attention. Every single Hexer aboard our ships can be an informer or a hidden agent. You don't need to concern yourself too much over this problem. It's my job to identify them and guard against their actions. You just focus on your own affairs."

After discussing some other related security matters, the meeting finally broke up. Major Verle exited the room and went back to handle the preparations for the grand expeditions.

As for Ves and Calabast, they remained a while longer.

"Meow."

Lucky grew upset that Calabast no longer pampered him. He crawled up her body and begged for pats, to no avail.

"Don't you think you should be more forthcoming, Calabast?"

"I don't have an obligation to spill my entire life story to you. Much like you, I like to look forward."

"That isn't a reason to forget about the past." Ves frowned as he leaned against the table. "We have been partnering up for years. You occupy a very vital and sensitive position within the clan. I have been patient all this time and allowed you to hitch on my wagon. Yet despite all of this, I barely know anything about you. Even if we include what you have told us today, I hardly know you better than when we initially joined hands aboard the Starlight Megalodon."

"It's about trust, isn't it? You can't trust me without understanding my story."

"That's about right."

"Haven't we talked about this? Trust isn't necessary to establish a good working relationship. As long as we hold mutual interests, we can always rely on each other."

"I know that, but you're a Larkinson now. You are a part of our clan, and you know very well that means more in this context."

"Then I don't understand your problem. Since I am a member in good standing of the Larkinson Clan, I am not a threat to anyone."

Ves chuckled. "I never completely believe in any assumption. Something can always go wrong. Look, is it too much to ask some questions? You probably know a lot about me. My life is largely an open book, and you have observed me up close for several years. In contrast, I don't even know your real name. Don't you think we should address this information disparity?"

She listened to his request and paused for a time. She eventually uttered a single word.

"No."

With that, she turned around and left the meeting room.

Ves looked helplessly at Lucky.

"Meow?"

"Yeah. Women."

Though Calabast hadn't been very forthcoming today, he didn't sense any ill intent from her. Of course, her self-control might be good enough to hide her true emotions from Ves, but he didn't think she was that duplicitous.

Spy or not, she was still a human.

In a way, she was right. As long as she benefited from being around Ves, she shouldn't pose a threat. That was enough for them to continue their current partnership.

"Well, hopefully she'll change. There's no way she'll remain closed forever."

"Meow meow meow." Lucky nodded his head.

#### *Chapter 2586: Modest Ambition*

Ves returned to the Spirit of Bentheim in low spirits.

They both had different reasons to be pensive. Ves not only failed to make Calabast open to him, but he also had to deal with an enormous latent problem.

Not a single ship built by others was secure. No matter where he bought his ships, there was simply no way to guarantee they were free from tampering and listening devices.

While it was possible to overhaul smaller vessels such as the Barracuda and the Scarlet Rose, the Larkinson Clan lacked the time and capabilities to do the same to the Spirit of Bentheim.

"We need shipbuilding capabilities of our own." He muttered as he boarded a lifter platform that would bring him to the design labs.

Lucky had scurried off somewhere else. Now that he had been roped into acting as a sniffer device, he was probably trying to enjoy his last day as a freeloading bum or something.

The fact that Calabast had to make use of his cat of all things was absurd in itself. It highlighted the lack of adequate tools and means.

In other words, he really had to get his hands on some good MTA tech. He already received the Darkbreak module. He should be able to obtain something else as long as he paid the corresponding price.

Of course, Master Willix wasn't interested in ordinary goods. The prices she charged would definitely make him bleed!

After a lengthy transit, Ves finally finally reached the entrance next to the production halls.

This was the section of the ship that corresponded to everything related to R&D, including the design labs and the mech workshops.

The design labs of the Spirit of Bentheim were not only larger, but also contained much better lab equipment. Combined with access to the formidable processing capabilities of the ASTERA AI core, the assistants who had just settled in all looked incredibly eager to play around with their new toys!

"Welcome back, sir." Miles Tovar greeted near the entrance to the only occupied lab.

The other two labs remained unused for the moment because the Design Department wasn't big enough to occupy them. Ves needed to hire hundreds more assistants before these extra spaces became useful.

"How are the design teams settling in?" He asked as he looked around.

Every Brave and Erudite looked happy and impressed with all of the advanced equipment they had at their disposal. It was impossible for mech designers to dislike upgrades to their working environment.

"As you can see, we're all ecstatic to move into a real design lab, sir. That is not to say that the labs at the Scarlet Rose and the Stellar Chaser are inadequate. It's just that the upgrades, in particular the vastly-improved simulation and data processing capabilities, massively speed up our workflow."

Speeding up the workflow not only meant that mech designers could complete their assigned task faster. They could also explore alternative solutions and compare them side by side in order to select the best options.

In short, the new working environment vastly improved the quality and quantity of output from the design teams!

Ves smiled in satisfaction. "Don't gawk at our new stuff for too long. We still have a lot of work to do. The six design projects aren't going to complete by themselves. Now that we are in a better facility, I expect better end results than before."

"Don't worry. With these excellent facilities, we'd be stupid if we aren't able to make good use of them. The only issue is that we aren't accustomed to the new functions. It will take some time before we get accustomed with all of the new options. The more advanced features will still be out of reach for us if we don't receive some tutoring."

"Let's see what happens when you get to that point. Perhaps the lead designers and I will hold some classes in order to get you all up to speed."

He briefly discussed his personal progression as a mech designer. Just like Ketis, he was getting closer and closer to becoming a Journeyman, but this was not a linear

process. No one could predict whether he could break through in a month or in a couple of years.

"I feel confident in my chances." Miles spoke with confidence. "Gloriana has given me some crucial guidance in the past several months. I have designed plenty of mechs, so my accumulation is definitely good enough. I just need to achieve a breakthrough in my design philosophy."

Unlike Ketis, Miles had fallen under the Erudites. He was not an exceptionally brave or intelligent mech designer, but his inclinations aligned more with the Erudites rather than the Braves.

Ves found that to be a little disappointing, but that did not hinder him from looking forward to welcoming another Journeyman to the Design Department.

No matter how close he was towards any of his subordinates, as long as they managed to make this pivotal crossing, they deserved to be treated as equals.

"How have you developed your specialty further? You initially specialized in designing aerial mechs, but that is too broad. How have you narrowed it down?"

The former member of the Tovar Family spread his hands as if he was simulating a pair of wings.

"I have taken a lot of inspiration from the Valkyrie Redeemer and the Ferocious Piranha designs. While they aren't exclusively aerial mechs, their flight characteristics are quite interesting. I also consulted a lot with Juliet recently. Her specialty shares a great resemblance to mine."

Class VI design philosophies mainly centered around mobility. The mech designers that adhered to these philosophies always sought to make mechs faster, more agile and so on. For example, Juliet excelled in high-mobility flight systems, but what that actually meant was still unclear.

Regardless, design philosophies couldn't be too broad. Miles needed to focus on a specific goal in order to make measurable progress.

Ves issued a warning. "Be careful about taking too much advice from a mech designer that shares the same interests as you. A good mech designer must develop his own ideas instead of borrowing them from someone else. At some point, sincere advice can turn into mental shackles that restrict your perspective in a specific direction."

"I'm aware of that, sir. I have been thinking very carefully over my options in the past year. I have decided to specialize in low-powered flight solutions."

That caused Ves to be taken aback.

"That sounds.. quite modest. That's not to say that I disapprove, it's just that you could set your sights higher. It's easier to motivate yourself if you grow your ambitions."

"That is what Gloriana has told me as well." Miles replied with a depreciating smile. "It's just that I am nowhere near as good as the two of you. As someone who has been around the block, I know what I am capable of. If I hadn't joined the Larkinson Clan with my other relatives, I wouldn't have been able to make it this far. It is mostly due to receiving a lot of help and resources from you and the rest of the clan that I have been able make such rapid progress."

"That doesn't discount your value, Miles."

"Perhaps, but I am different from Ketis, who is a decade younger than me and is just as far ahead. I'm just a regular mech designer who happened to take advantage of superior circumstances. Even if I break through to Journeyman, I don't have the confidence to reach Master if I adopt an ambition that is as radical or difficult as the rest of you. I just want to set a more achievable goal so that I can do my part for you, the Larkinson Clan and the MTA."

It all came down to confidence. Miles believed he wasn't as talented as Ves and Gloriana. He was so afraid of overestimating his capabilities that he deliberately chose an underwhelming design philosophy.

There was no right or wrong answer to this issue. Ves could not tell him that he should aim higher, but neither could he state that he had made the right choice.

He patted the assistant mech designer's shoulder. "You can only make this choice once in your life. As soon as you determine your exact specialization, you should commit to it with all of your heart and soul. Doubting yourself at this moment of time can be extremely fatal to your progression."

Miles looked anything but conflicted. "If there is one lesson that I have learned from you, it's that I should always do my best to move forward. I am not changing my mind. I am serious about pursuing the limits of flight systems that enable flight with the lowest possible drain to the mech. As long as I flesh out my specialty further, my solutions can provide a lot of help to both our aerial and landbound mech design projects."

"I will look forward to that." Ves chuckled a bit. "For a long time, it was only me and my wife. Now, I might be getting close to obtaining the services of two different mobility-oriented Journeymen. Our future mech designs will doubtlessly score better in terms of mobility than before."

"You also have Ketis. She will give us a sharp edge whenever we design a blade-wielding mech."



This was already a luxurious lineup. Many mech designs that the Design Department developed in the future would no longer score 'average' in many key performance metrics.

With a collection of Journeymen with different specializations at hand, LMC mechs might finally begin to excel in the areas that many customers cared about!

That was not to say that Gloriana's specialty was useless. The problem was that her Class I design philosophy was barely noticeable to those who didn't study LMC mechs in detail. She mostly boosted their quality in a holistic but dispersed fashion, and it was difficult to see the difference sometimes.

Of course, Gloriana hadn't been able to leverage her specialty up to this point. Once they begin to design some expert mechs, she should definitely be able to showcase her full value!

Unfortunately, his good mood didn't last long when Miles asked a very sensitive question.

"By the way, sir, if I ever reach Journeyman, will I be able to receive some shares in LMC?"

Ves almost tripped.

"Uhm, let's not get ahead of ourselves." He coughed. "We can talk about acquiring a stake in the LMC when you actually succeed in breaking through. Don't forget that there are no guarantees. Plenty of Apprentices have remained stuck at the threshold for the rest of their lives."

That situation didn't apply to Miles, though. Ves had already confirmed that the Tovar descendant possessed spiritual potential.

Miles didn't give up on his inquiry.

"It would help if I get to know what benefits I might be able to get. Neither Gloriana or Juliet has been clear about this. They told me I had to go to you for clarification."

Ves felt troubled by this matter. There were special reasons why the other two Journeymen didn't need any ownership in LMC.

This was different. Miles used to be part of one of the founding families of the Bright Republic. He knew the industry standards and he knew his rights.

Even though it was extremely unlikely for Miles to resign from the LMC and go his own way after becoming a Larkinson, he could still build up some resentment if Ves tried to brush off his demands.

"You will get your rightful share, have no fear of that." Ves tentatively said. "However, don't expect too much. Your rewards are commensurate to your contributions. If we compare each other's design philosophies, then it's very clear that my contributions will always be greater than yours. All of our customers are buying our products because they have glows bestowed by me. I doubt that any of them will get excited to buy an LMC mech because it consumes 5 percent less energy during flight."

"I can do much better than that, sir."

"You get my point."

#### *Chapter 2587: Organizational Chart*

The remuneration issue kept bothering Ves as he tried to get back to designing mechs.

The inquiry from Miles signalled that Ves couldn't keep avoiding his issue. The more he tried to push it away, the more his integrity as a mech designer rose up and made him feel like a scumbag.

Normally, this shouldn't be a big deal. Ves was used to defying his principles when they became inconvenient. He should have been able to brush aside the stock sharing issue, but to his consternation, it kept nagging him while he worked.

His guilty conscience prevented him from working in peace. It seemed that without clarifying this issue to his mech designers, he wouldn't be able to maintain his best state.

He interrupted his work and began to develop a plan. He consulted several people in order to figure out a solution that would placate the demands of his fellow mech designers without giving too much away.

"Ownership in the company is a reward that the founders and leaders of a mech company bestows to mech designers that are useful." Gavin explained his own views. "From what I have studied about the mech industry, it is a custom that has arisen out of a need to retain talent that would have otherwise quit and started their own business instead. When mech designers make the leap from Apprentice to Journeymen, they have gained enough capital to go independent."

Ves nodded as he leaned back on his new floating chair.

Considering the importance of meetings to a leader like him, he took over and furnished a large and spacious office compartment aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

While he could have held his meetings at his private office at his grand stateroom, he intended to use it as his private sanctuary where not even Gloriana was allowed to barge in at her will.

His new main office not only exuded a lot of luxury, but also offered versatile seating options. He could summon and retract as many chairs and couches as he wanted and alter their configuration in countless different ways.

If he wanted a meeting to go shorter, he could alter a chair so that it became more uncomfortable to sit in over time.

If he wanted his visitors to be more forthcoming, he might increase the comfort level of the chair as well as manipulate the temperature and air composition in order to lower their guard.

He had access to many new features that he never even heard about. After discovering how extensively he could manipulate the environment to his advantage, he felt a lot of admiration for the people who developed these tricks.

When it came to manipulating people, other leaders were much further ahead than him! Compared to their exquisite, subtle techniques, Ves was like a brute. His limited repertoire of bold-faced lying, matching interests and abusing glows introduced way too many loopholes.

"Your situation is different from that of other mech designers." Gavin continued to explain. "You are officially a Journeyman who only advanced a couple of years ago. You haven't designed too many mechs since then. Yet are you really comparable to other young Journeymen such as Gloriana?"

Ves immediately shook his head. "That's absurd. Ordinary Journeymen, whether they are second-class or third-class, can't come close to leading a mech company that is able to pull hundreds of billions of hex credits in profit on a monthly basis! An average Journeyman in the old Bright Republic should be able to earn a few billion pre-inflation bright credits in the same amount of time, which amounts to around a hundred million hex credits. As for second-class Journeymen, their earning potential is higher, but they face much stiffer competition. Perhaps a good one is able to earn a couple of billion hex credits a month."

"There is a lot of fluctuation in the industry, boss. There are many Journeymen who don't excel in anything attractive or flashy. Their earnings may be just a tenth of the figures you've just mentioned. Only a minority of Journeymen earn at or above those sums."

As Ves did some quick research on the galactic net, he found that his assistant was right. "If that's the case, then the Journeymen earn below the mean may be better off working under the umbrella of a stronger mech designer. They're not capable of creating star products, but they are more than sufficient to add some strength to a collaborative mech design project."

"Those Journeymen are still good in their own way, though. If the conditions offered by a mech company aren't attractive enough, then they won't be motivated to stay. In order to retain these valuable talents, a mech company must offer one or several attractive conditions. These can range from guidance by a Senior or Master to access to an expansive distribution network."

"What about giving away shares?"

"It's a custom that is often used when leaders can't offer enough attractive conditions, which is often the case when you aren't a Master. As a Journeyman yourself, you shouldn't be able to retain other Journeymen. You are technically equals on paper. However, we both know that's not the case. The LMC's situation is special. Not only is it an arm of the clan, but every mech designer who works for you are Larkinsons as well. There is much less mobility. Combine that with the fact that the LMC earns at least a hundred times more money than a typical Journeyman-led mech company, the value of a share in your company is completely different."

"You look like you have a plan, Benny."

"I do." Gavin nodded but hesitated a little. "It's a bit risky, though. It entails breaking customs. While I believe you have the capital to do, it will definitely affect your image among your subordinates."

That didn't bother Ves too much. "I'm not looking to win a popularity contest. When it comes down to it, I am the LMC. Even if every other mech designer quits, I can still sustain the same level of success as before. My specialization is the basis of our current level of success. No one can take that away from me. Not even my wife."

He spoke with an abundance of confidence. He wasn't as dependent on help as other mech designers. As long as his bargaining power was high enough, he didn't have to go out of his way to flatter other mech designers!

As Gavin outlined his plan, Ves quickly decided to adopt it. He commanded the LMC's Legal Department, Accounting Department and other related departments to draft a new set of contracts and rules.

It only took a few days to finalize the plan. Once everything was set, Ves entered the main design lab and gathered every mech designer together.

Gloriana, Juliet, Miles, Ketis and every other Brave and Erudite mech designer assembled before him. They all appeared curious at what he had to say. The last announcement happened just a few days ago when Ves revealed the name of the factory ship.

Though a lot of people in the LMC worked on the plan, Ves hadn't informed any of his mech designers yet. Even his wife was left in the dark.

"Fellow mech designers." He began. "The Living Mech Corporation has come a long way since I founded it back on Cloudy Curtain. From selling a bunch of variants from a shabby workshop to expanding our reach across the star cluster, our growth has been phenomenal. I am proud of what I have been able to accomplish as the founder, chairman CEO and lead designer of the LMC. Under my leadership, my mech company will continue to prosper in the future. Do any of you doubt my predictions?"

"No!"

Mech designers weren't stupid. Perhaps some didn't possess much sense for business, but that didn't stop them from observing how the LMC continued to expand at a rapid pace.

Even if there was a limit to this growth, the mech company's current growth trend showed no signs of plateauing anytime soon!

Ves smirked. There was a very good reason to open his announcements with those boasts. He aimed to increase his stature within the LMC as much as possible. This also had the effect of diminishing the standing of the other mech designers, which was very crucial to what he was about to reveal.

He waved his hand. A projection appeared into view. It depicted the basic hierarchy of the Design Department.

"As you can see, our Design Department has grown as well. In the beginning, it was just me. Over the years, my team has slowly expanded up to its current form. As time goes by, this organizational chart will only grow more expansive."

He pointed his finger at the projection, causing two distinct names to glow. They rose up from the level of assistant mech designer and reached the height of lead mech designer.

Ketis and Miles both looked expectantly at this change. Their names had risen!

Ves smiled at the crowd. "It is possible that we might welcome two additional Journeymen in the future. When that happens, this organizational chart becomes a little confusing. Just because my name is on the same level as the other four doesn't mean our importance to the Design Department is the same. I am ultimately in charge here by virtue of my ownership in the company and my contribution to the LMC's success. Back when it was just me and Gloriana, it didn't matter too much if we were on the same level. However, now that we are starting to welcome more Journeymen in the fold, we need to refine the hierarchy at the top. For this reason, I have decided to create a new position in our department."

In the organizational chart, a new band appeared above the height of lead designer. Ves' name automatically rose up to occupy this new band by itself.

"From today onwards, I am the principal mech designer of this department." Ves announced with a steady voice. "This is not a change. This is a recognition of the actual reality within our Design Department. If you disagree, please stand up now and voice your objections."

The authority he exuded along with his existing standing within their circle suppressed every other mech designer. There was no way any assistant mech designer would rise up against his move!

The only possible mech designer who could have stood up to Ves was Gloriana. She had always considered herself to be an equal partner to him even though her design philosophy hadn't contributed too much to the LMC's success as of yet. However, her pride might compel her to object.

Ves stared at his wife. He could sense some of her emotions. She looked intrigued, surprised and even a bit offended.

However, she eventually schooled her face and held herself still. Thankfully, she didn't intend to spoil his power play.

That brought him a lot of relief. His plan wouldn't proceed as smoothly if Gloriana kicked up a fuss.

After sending her a brief smile, he faced the rest of the crowd again.

"Very well. Now that you have unanimously agreed to my ascension to principal mech designer, I intend to make another change. More specifically, as we welcome more Journeymen and lead designers to the fold, we need to expand and formalize our reward structure in order to ensure that every lead designer is adequately compensated for their work."

He waved his arm to the side, summoning a second projection. This time, the projection displayed a document that outlined the rewards the lead designers of the LMC were entitled to. The heading of the document announced the name of this new remuneration scheme.

"Let me introduce you to the Exemplar Plan!" Ves announced with a smile. "This will be our new standard for remuneration going forward. We have customized this plan according to our specific circumstances. Since the conditions of our mech company are very different from the norm, the standard solutions won't work."

Ketis couldn't hold her curiosity any longer. She raised her arm. "What is the Exemplar Plan exactly?"

"Good question! At the heart of it, the Exemplar Plan is a profit-sharing scheme for lead designers. Any mech designer who qualifies won't receive any shares in LMC, but they

are entitled to receive cash dividends equivalent to a certain level of ownership in my mech company. In other words, as long as you become a Journeyman, you will immediately begin to earn billions of hex credits!"

His entire audience looked shocked. They never expected Ves to roll out such a scheme!

#### *Chapter 2588: The Exemplar Plan*

Ves conceived of the Exemplar Plan as a means to avoid giving away his shares.

Due to his bad experiences with giving away shares in the LMC, it had become taboo in his eyes. He never wanted to reduce his ownership in his mech company or dilute his existing shares ever again!

By drawing such a hard red line, he couldn't reward his lead designers like many other mech companies.

Perhaps regular leaders might not care too much about passing on 2 or 5 percent of outstanding shares to a helpful Journeyman, but Ves was different.

He didn't want to give away a single individual share if he could help it! After losing majority control in the LMC for a period of time, he managed to climb back up to possessing a 59 percent stake.

This was his bottom line!

In the future, he would always welcome expanding his stake, but never lowering it. The LMC was a private corporation and he had no intentions at all to make it public anytime soon!

Only by grasping the majority of shares would Ves maintain absolute control over his mech company. The share of dividends he was entitled to wasn't as important to him as he reinvested most of his personal earnings into the clan anyway.

The reason why he didn't compromise and settle for 51 percent or so was because he wanted to maintain a buffer. If a situation ever arose where the MTA or some other entity coerced him into issuing new stock, thereby diluting the value of existing shares, Ves wouldn't instantly lose control.

He had learned his lesson. He could never be too careful about this, especially when he planned to enter the Red Ocean.

Ves didn't intend to explain all of this to his mech designers. He first focused on explaining how he planned to distribute the profits of the LMC.



"Right now, a significant chunk of the LMC's earnings is reinvested right back into its operations." He explained. He even called up a balance sheet that displayed the massive sums involved. "As you can see, our company is constantly setting up regional headquarters, establishing alliances, building our own distribution network and so on. Spending in this aspect will slowly recede once our growth in the Yeina Star Cluster has reached saturation."

He pointed finger at another section of the balance sheet. "Now, if you account for all of the expenses, taxes, investments and so on, we still have hundreds of billions of hex credits left over. The LMC has always paid out all of its earnings in the form of dividends."

A fourth projection came into view. It displayed a simple pie chart that depicted the current ownership of the LMC. Naturally, Ves dominated more than half of this chart, with the Larkinson Clan coming up second with its 24 percent stake.

"As you can see, more than three-quarters of the LMC's earnings flow into the pockets of myself and the clan in proportion to our shares. There is only 1 class of shares at the moment, so the distribution of money is very simple. I own 59 percent of the company, so I get 59 percent of the money."

This was a huge amount of money! Not a single mech designer including Gloriana could remain calm after hearing this explanation.

To Ves, money was a number. Though he was aware that he could constantly expand his personal fortune, there was little point to hoarding money. He cared much more about growing his strength and expanding his power. In order to do that, he needed to convert his money into useful assets and resources.

The main reason why he continued to dominate the clan was because he spent almost all of his dividends into strengthening it. There was no way his clan would be able to acquire 6 more capital ships in the next couple of years if Ves did not open up his bank accounts!

He didn't hesitate to let everyone know this detail.

"As you can see, even though the LMC has paid out a lot of dividends over the years, in practice much of that money ends up improving the Larkinson Clan in some fashion. The second-class mechs and starships we have recently acquired are all funded by the dividends earned by myself and the Larkinson Clan. Even the factory ship we are in right now is obtained through my efforts."

No one denied how much funding and resources he put into the clan. The numbers didn't lie.

"We are all in this together. If I had my way, all of the money earned by the LMC should be spent on growing and strengthening our clan. However, this is not entirely fair to those of who you are able to contribute significantly to our products. I do not wish to treat you all unfairly, but neither can I allow a situation to arise where the clan no longer gets the funding it needs. The Exemplar Plan exists to balance these priorities and ensures that our clan and mech company and everyone else remains content."

All of that was a big fat lie, of course. Ves was not that generous.

He gestured his hand to the document that outlined the Exemplar Plan. Eight different slots stood out from the text.

"Now how does the plan address this issue? It's quite simple, actually. Through a simple financial arrangement, I will voluntarily deposit the cash dividends I've earned from stock corresponding to an 8 percent stake into a separate fund. This fund will subsequently distribute the money it has received to our best mech designers."

He tapped at the projected Exemplar Plan. Some of the eight empty slots began to fill up with names. Juliet Stameross, Ketis Larkinson and Miles Tovar occupied the top three slots.

"Let's say in the near future that Ketis and Miles have successfully advanced to Journeyman. They become eligible to join this profit-sharing scheme by virtue of their design capabilities. Each slot corresponds to the dividends earned from a 1 percent stake in the LMC. This means that each mech designer that is on this list effectively earns 1 percent of the income of the LMC!"

A lot of mech designers looked impressed, but there were several that grew confused at how the plan was structured. The profit-sharing scheme was not as simple as it looked.

For example, Neither Ves nor Gloriana were on the list. This caused the latter to look a little upset.

As far as Ves was concerned, Gloriana had no reason to take part in the plan. As his wife, his possessions were hers and vice versa. Of course, this was just an excuse. Ves had no intentions of actually allowing her to do anything with his ownership stake.

Oscar DiMartin raised his hand. "Sir, the document only holds eight positions. What if the LMC grows to the point when there are more Journeymen?"

The most important question had finally come up. Ves crossed his arms.

"The plan only encompasses the top 8 mech designers of our Design Department. If there are nine, ten or even more Journeymen, then I am sorry to say that the mech designers who haven't reached the top 8 will not receive any cash dividends."

"Isn't that unfair, sir?!"

"I don't think so!" Ves barked back! "In every mech company, it is always the top mech designers who are responsible for most of the success. As more and more mech designers ascend, more and more people will want a slice of the pie. At a certain point, each additional talent that rises up will effectively take away the earnings of other mech designers. In order to prevent future arguments, I have capped the amount of eligible mech designers at eight. This means only those of you who work the hardest and contributes the most are entitled to the richest rewards! These eight individuals should be lauded in our company. This is why they will be regarded as Exemplars!"

Exemplars!

This was a new title that Ves had created in order to celebrate the breadwinners of the LMC.

He could already see the effect of this announcement on his mech designers. They aimed to secure this coveted position for themselves and beat out any rivals that could push them out of the top 8. The competitive spirit of his Braves and Erudites were already firing up as they understood the significance of becoming an Exemplar!

"You haven't exactly explained how this is fair to the rest of those who aren't... Exemplars." Oscar said.

"Non-exemplars will not go destitute, if that is what you're afraid of." Ves quickly answered. "Working for the LMC has never been about money. The Exemplar Plan is just a relatively small reward compared to all of the other benefits you are getting. Think about it. Aside from earning a salary that is already generous by industry standards, you also earn Larkinson merits, which you can exchange for all kinds of exclusive benefits. Since we set up the Larkinson Merit Exchange, I have seen plenty of you exchange your merits for tutoring sessions, the right to access one of our many exclusive textbooks and many other rewards that can facilitate your career. Is this not generous enough?"

The Larkinson Merit Exchange was a completely open, fair and impartial reward mechanism. As long as they worked hard enough to earn enough merits, they could obtain their rewards without any fuss!

Only the better mech companies offered such lavish conditions. If these mech designers worked anywhere else, then they ordinarily wouldn't be able to obtain these benefits so easily unless they were valuable.

"Being a part of the Larkinson Clan is already an excellent reward in itself." Ves confidently stated. "Working for the LMC is a dream for many of you. The generous conditions that we already provide are your actual rewards. The Exemplar Plan is just a bonus that we award to our best lead designers. While it may sound nice to earn a lot of

money, think about what you can actually do with it. As long as you are a part of the Larkinson fleet, where will you spend that money on? A personal ship? Implants? Tutoring? Textbooks? Except for the first one, you can already obtain the rest through other means! Money hardly means anything when you are a part of the Larkinson Clan."

He was right. The people who had become a part of the clan all lived and worked in space. They all travelled together in one big fleet that was intended to fly from one destination to another.

One of the rules of the Larkinson Clan was that every member had to stay within the fleet unless ordered otherwise. Not a single clansman was allowed to leave the fleet and do something on their own without permission!

This meant that if the Larkinson Clan never settled down on a planet, the Exemplars who stood to earn a huge amount of money didn't really have a lot of ways to spend it all. Ves predicted that most of them would eventually channel all of that money back into the clan, but with different priorities.

For example, Ketis would probably choose to funnel the money into the Swordmaidens while Juliet would choose to invest in the Penitent Sisters.

This did not bother Ves or the clan too much. They could always adjust their own investment in reaction to these developments.

For example, if Ketis decided to spend 10 billion hex credits on the Swordmaidens, then Ves would just spend 10 billion hex credits somewhere else!

Regardless of the distribution, in the end the new situation hardly differed from the old one!

This was his ultimate scheme!

Instead of Ves or the Larkinson Clan spending the money directly, it first flowed into the hands of the Exemplars, who subsequently spent it in a similar fashion.

In other words, the Exemplar Plan just introduced a detour that allowed the mech designers in question to feel rewarded while not actually changing the ultimate result!

Though Ves could see that Gloriana, Miles, Oscar and a number of other astute mech designers understood some of the depth of his plan, what did it matter?

With his power, authority and prestige within the LMC, who could possibly force him to change his plan?

The reason why he introduced the Exemplar Plan now instead of later was because his bargaining position was still strong at this point!

Once a lot more mech designers advanced to Journeymen, it would be a lot harder for Ves to ram his scheme down their throats!

#### *Chapter 2589: Scamming Mech Designers*

No one objected to the Exemplar Plan. No one had the guts to do so. Ves had signalled very clearly that he was passionate about the profit-sharing scheme.

This meant that criticizing the Exemplar Plan implicitly translated to an attack on Ves! As long as the assistants weren't crazy, they wouldn't take the initiative to piss off their boss.

Though Ves felt dirty for resorting to such a coercive psychological trick, he liked the alternative even less.

As long as his mech designers mounted a serious challenge to the Exemplar Plan, then Ves would not be able to hold the high ground anymore. The illusion he weaved in their minds might shatter as long as someone pointed out the flaws.

The stories he crafted about benevolently investing in the clan and that earning money wasn't important to them were just excuses designed to stop them from demanding more money or shares!

Everything went according to plan. Gloriana did not challenge his plan while the rest were too weak to rock the boat.

A lot of mech designers began to dream about the honor of becoming an Exemplar. They got so caught up in his story that they didn't even realize that they had fallen into his trap.

All of the ceremonial window-dressing surrounding the Exemplar Plan such as limiting it to the eight best mech designers were just artificial constructs meant to distract everyone.

It was just as worthless as an 'employee of the month' contest!

As long as every ambitious mech designer fought to become an Exemplar, they weren't fighting for what they should truly earn, which was actual shares in the LMC!

He had to admit that Gavin possessed quite a devious mind for coming up with a scheme that exploited the weaknesses of the human psyche. As long as the end result did not cross any of his red lines, anything was acceptable, no matter how unethical they looked!

The most he did after announcing the plan was to answer some questions.

"What happens if an Exemplar retires due to old age or some other reason?" Catherine Evenson asked.

As expected from someone with a noble background. Aristocrats tended to look much further ahead than others. Continuity and inheritance always factored into their decisions.

Ves smiled. "Good question. In principle, the list of Exemplars is not fixed. Those who get on the list can also be removed from it due to various reasons. Retirement is one possible reason. Getting surpassed by a more helpful and hardworking mech designer is another reason. In short, no Exemplar should rest on his or her laurels. The main criteria used in deciding who belongs to the top 8 is largely based on contributions. Those who have played an important part in the success of the LMC are more exemplary than those who have only played a marginal role."

"How do you actually measure contribution, then?"

"We look at whether the work done by a mech designer has resulted in higher performance and more sales. Mind you, the time range that we use to judge everyone's contributions isn't much. At most, it will stretch a few years in the past. To go back to your original question, when a retired Exemplar has no longer made any significant contributions for a couple of years, even if his prior work is still responsible for pulling in millions of sales, it becomes increasingly more untenable for him to hold this position. Exemplars aren't nobles, and legacy must not trump current efforts."

That disappointed a few mech designers in the crowd, but also delighted many others.

If the list of Exemplars was based on current contributions rather than accumulations made in the past, then latecomers had a better chance of catching up. Those who got on the list earlier couldn't relax and had to keep working hard in order to maintain their superior position.

Overall, the Exemplar Plan succeeded in motivating every mech designer. Previously, everyone's goal was to become a lead designer. They wanted to become a Journeyman and receive greater responsibilities so that they could exert actual influence on LMC mech designs.

Yet Ves was afraid that once the new Journeymen reached this goal, they no longer had any way to go higher.

It wasn't as if they could keep climbing up in the LMC. Ves was not willing to hand over too much responsibility to any mech designer. Whether they were Apprentices or Journeymen, he wanted them to obediently remain in the Design Department and keep doing their work they were meant to perform!

Introducing the position of Exemplar was a good way to give the current and future lead designers something to work towards. The brilliant part about this change was that no Exemplar could guarantee they could keep their honored position. They would continually worry about maintaining their existing benefits, thereby giving them less time to think about promoting to an even higher rank!

Of course, he couldn't leave it at that. If Ves didn't introduce enough sweets to make the position desirable enough, his mech designers wouldn't be motivated enough.

"Do Exemplars get anything aside from earning a share of the dividends and outranking everyone else who is below?" Moltar Ringer asked.

Ves nodded. "Exemplars are the top mech designers in the LMC and the Larkinson Clan aside from myself and my wife. Their status in the clan is different. For one, they can have a greater say in how the clan is run. I have already made an agreement with the Larkinson Assembly. They agreed to recognize every active Exemplar as an assembly member!"

This was quite a big gesture! His audience all looked moved!

In the early days of the Larkinson Clan, the Larkinson Assembly didn't seem very important. While it passed a lot of rules and decided on the finer details on how the clan should be organized, most Larkinsons considered the Assembly as a boring club for older clansmen who liked debate all the time.

That impression gradually changed as the Larkinson Clan expanded its ranks. As thousands and tens of thousands of adopted Larkinsons entered the fold, the importance of the legislative body of the clan increased.

Many people started to realize that all of those old fogeys actually wielded a lot of decision-making power!

Even though Ves and the Executive Council wielded a lot of direct power, they couldn't possibly direct their attention to every single matter.

Originally, the Larkinson Assembly consisted of 50 members. The Assembly expanded several times over the course of the last year as the assembly members had to address more and more dossiers.

After factoring in the 8 possible Exemplars, the Larkinson Assembly currently consisted of 333 seats.

Half of the members were chosen by factoring in their seniority, rank and expertise. The other half were chosen through direct elections.



While this wasn't a perfect setup by any means, there shouldn't be any problems in the short and medium term. There was plenty of time to adopt a better solution once the clan ceased its initial growth phase.

Ves inwardly smirked as he saw some of the ambitious Larkinsons fantasizing about becoming a member of the influential Larkinson Assembly.

The power of the Assembly might be substantial, but a single assembly member among hundreds could hardly effect any change!

In other words, allowing Exemplars to join the Larkinson Assembly was another empty reward. With how much time they needed to spend on maintaining their position on the list, how could the Exemplars spend any time on politicking?

The most that they could do was spare some time to vote on bills. It was very improbable that any Exemplar would do something drastic like starting a faction and gathering followers.

Even if they did, the Larkinson Assembly was not as powerful in front of Ves. As clan patriarch, he could override any of their decisions unless the assembly members booted him out of office.

Of course, he didn't reveal any of this to his excited audience. What mattered was giving them the illusion of power without actually granting it. Hardly any mech designers realized that he was scamming them! Only a couple of politically-astute individuals such as Catherine Evenson faintly realized the truth.

After answering a couple more questions, Ves ended the announcement. As everyone went back to their stations in order to resume their work, Gloriana marched over while clutching Clixie against her body.

"Ves. We need to talk. NOW."

"Miaow." Clixie released a warning sound.

"Ehm, can this wait?" Ves raised his hands. "Due to all of the changes that have happened in the past week, we are beginning to fall behind schedule. This announcement has already taken up a lot of time. Let's do our best to catch up today."

"Talk. Now!"

Ves had no choice. He slumped his shoulders a bit as he followed his wife to a private office. As they entered and closed the hatch, Ves didn't even have the benefit of Lucky's company.

His pet was probably being pampered by Calabast as she used him as her personal sniffer.

As Gloriana released Clixie and faced her husband, she crossed her arms and tapped the deck with her shoe.

"So, care to explain?"

"What is there to explain?" Ves innocently shrugged.

"What is up with your so-called Exemplar Plan?!"

"It's exactly what I have just said! It's a means to motivate and reward our best mech designers. It's an alternative to issuing stock that ensures that we will continue to maintain our grip on the LMC!"

"Our grip or your grip?" She suspiciously probed.

"Ours! We're a married couple, honey. We share our possessions!"

"That's not what you have said the last few times. You made it pretty clear that you called the shots in the LMC. Why did you leave my name off of the list of Exemplars? Where are my dividends, Ves?"

"That's not true." Ves lied. "Your input is crucial. You rank higher than any Exemplar as far as I'm concerned. It's just a rat race. As an elegant cat, you wouldn't lower yourself to their level, right?"

"Miaow?" Clixie looked confused.

Gloriana furrowed her brows for a moment before shaking her head. "Don't try to play your stupid word games on me! Either tell me the truth or give me my rightful shares!"

"Come on, honey. Calm down. Don't be angry at me." He spoke as he sidled closer.

Even though she adopted a defensive posture, she allowed him to embrace her body. She relaxed a bit as their bodies pressed against each other.

Ves brought his lips close to the side of head in order to whisper in her ear.

"Ever since we slipped our wedding bands on each other's fingers, we became one. What is yours is mine, and what is mine is yours. On paper, I might own a 59 percent stake in the LMC. That ownership is yours as well. It's a mistake to think you don't own any shares. The truth is that you hold 59 percent ownership in the company as well! Do you get it now? Joining the Exemplar Plan is completely pointless for you because the dividends that I have apportioned come from us in the first place."

"Oh." She uttered. "Well.. if you put it that way, it does look kind of silly. However, if what is yours is truly mine, does that mean that I can exercise more leadership in the LMC?"

"Um, eh, it's complicated. Let's just say that I will listen to your input. As long as I approve, I am more than willing to implement your suggestions."

"If that's the case, then I want to dictate our next design projects!" She exclaimed as she drew back. "You've had your fun for a long time, Ves, but the next round is mine. We have to design a lot of expert mechs and custom mechs in order to reward our expert pilots and other individual mech pilots. Do I need to remind you that you have been neglecting Commander Melkor's request all this time? He's been waiting for a custom rifleman mech for years!"

### *Chapter 2590: Hexer Despair*

The war that decided the future of the Komodo Star Sector had swung rapidly since the Friday Coalition initiated its counterattack!

With the powerful Gauge Dynasty and the disciplined Konsu Clan taking the lead, the Fridaymen mech divisions retook star system after star system.

In many cases, the Hexers didn't even have enough time to pull out all of their assets before the Fridayman offensive liberated the occupied star systems!

Though the great counterattack only began a few months ago, the Fridaymen already took back much of the hinterland of the Carnegie Group and Vermeer Group!

As news of the grand offensive penetrated through the occupied planets, the resistance movements that had been biding their time there had all risen up and committed considerable sabotage against the Hexer garrison forces!

The occupiers hit back hard against the exposed partisans, but the damage was already done. Considerable damage had been done to both the infrastructure and industry that the Hexers relied upon to supply the Hex Army.

In some cases, saboteurs even managed to blow up or crash critical space stations!

With the frontlines crumbling and the rear areas aflame, the mech divisions and mech army groups of the Hex Army had to abandon a considerable amount of supplies and fixed assets in order to avoid getting swamped by the aggressive Fridaymen.

After getting beat up by the Hex Army time and time again in the earlier stages of the Komodo War, the vengeful Fridaymen vented all of their resentment towards their retreating foes!

"Slaughter these women!"

"Komodo belongs to the Friday Coalition!"

"The hour of men is at hand!"

So many incidents took place throughout the conquered Fridaymen territories that the Hexadric Hegemony could no longer withdraw at a controlled pace!

The Hex Army drew back its elements with greater urgency. The Hexer generals prioritized evacuating the mech pilots of the Hegemony above all else. While it hurt to abandon a significant amount of mechs, supplies and industrial equipment, they were just machines!

The Hexadric Hegemony still possessed considerable material reserves and a fully-intact industrial sector. The Hexers could easily replenish the goods they lost, especially considering that they had already plundered a lot of materials and supplies from the occupied territories.

What truly mattered was to preserve as many mech pilots as possible. While the Hex Army succeeded in accomplishing this goal, the hasty withdrawals had a devastating effect on morale.

The transition happened too abruptly.

At one moment, the Hexers rampaged through the lightly-defended star systems of the Carnegie Group and the Vermeer Group.

In the next, the Sundered Phalanx and the Oni Guard unleashed their full might all at once, shattering every illusion that the Friday Coalition was just a pushover!

A lot of Hexer mech pilots who continually achieved success after success couldn't adjust to the fact that they were being pressed in the opposite direction.

"I am not a coward! Turn back! I want to impale them with my spear!"

"Women are supposed to be superior! How come those stupid boys keep overwhelming us over and over again?"

"Superior Mother, help us! I beseech you! Bless our mechs and strike down the heretic Fridaymen!"

As long as the counteroffensive continued at its current pace, it would only take a couple of months before the Fridaymen regained all of their original territories!

Once the mech militaries of the Friday Coalition reached the Crestfallen Stars, the Hexers feared what might happen at that point.

"Will the Fridaymen stop at the border and reconsolidate their lines? The Sundered Phalanx and the Konsu Guard can't push forward forever. Once they pass the border, they'll have to fight head-on against our fortified star systems."

"The greedy boys in charge of the Friday Coalition won't settle for regaining their lost territories. They still have ample strength to batter our frontlines! We're going to have a hard fight on our hands."

"We can't allow the Hegemony to be despoiled by these stinky boys!"

"Where are our reserves? We need to deploy more mechs to our defensive lines. If we can't hold back the Fridaymen, it will be our turn to lose a lot of territories!"

The Hexers became increasingly more apprehensive of what might happen. The Fridayman mech militaries showed no sign of stopping. The risk of seeing Hexer star systems burned and Hexer boys being brainwashed into confident brutes who no longer looked up to women frightened the Hegemony.

Even the council of matriarchs started to issue grim messages. As one of the highest decision-making organs of the Hexadric Hegemony, the council reflected the collective will of the six matriarchal dynasties.

Having long been used to throwing their weight around, the highest levels of the Hexer state suddenly lost a lot of confidence. Were they truly losing? Was the Hex Army too weak to resist the filthy Fridaymen? How could they possibly remain in power when all of their planets and fixed assets fell into the hands of their archenemies?

The mere prospect of losing the Komodo War sent the Hexadric Hegemony on a tailspin!

As the Hexers lost confidence on a large scale, a secret element of Fridaymen military assets had gathered together at a quiet star system.

A dim red dwarf star feebly shone its light on the five massive starships gathered at the edge of the outer system.

The gathered group of ships were highly unusual. Their hulls were massive. Each of them stretched for at least two kilometers, signifying that they were capital ships!

What further distinguished these vessels was the activity that took place around them. Large amounts of mechs disgorged from their spacious hangar bays. More than a thousand mechs patrolled the perimeter of the gathered capital ships in a matter of minutes!

The sheer amount of mechs held by the five vessels immediately revealed their true nature.

They were military fleet carriers!

Though their silhouettes and colors differed, they each had at least two elements in common.

First, their hulls bore a green flag with a starry arrow pointing upwards.

Second, their hulls also flaunted an emblem that consisted of a nine-headed hydra.

All five vessels wore the flag and symbol of the Friday Coalition!

However, that was all they had in common. Additional markings made it clear that each and every fleet carrier hailed from different parts of the Coalition.

The Auralis was by far the most eye-catching of the five vessels. Her gleaming golden coating made it seem as if the fleet carrier was afraid that people would neglect her existence!

Built and operated by the Gauge Dynasty, the Auralis reflected the strength of the most powerful partner of the Coalition. She possessed the best capacity out of all of the gathered carries. She was not only able to hold 600 mechs, but also featured resilient armor and a full coverage of capital ship-grade shield generators!

However, her considerable hull plating also increased her mass by a huge degree. Her acceleration and other mobility characteristics were the worst out of all five capital ships.

The Amagi was a fleet carrier built by the Konsu Clan. The martial-looking vessel was an all-rounder among the assembled vessels. She possessed decent capacity at 500 mechs while also being able to boast adequate defenses and decent mobility.

The Forward Momentum belonged to the Vanguard Group, which was a Coalition partner that did not fully engage in the Komodo War up to this point.

As one of the weakest partners in the Coalition, the Vanguard Group's military forces were only a fraction of the size of the Sundered Phalanx or Oni Guard. The fact that the Vanguarders dispatched one of their strategic military assets at all for this operation was a miracle.

The relative lack of strength was reflected in the design of the Forward Momentum. Though she possessed the best mobility out of all of the fleet carriers, her armor was very feeble for a military capital ship. In addition, her total capacity only amounted to 400 mechs.

In fact, the fleet carrier dispatched by the similarly-weak Puffer Clan was even worse. As the smallest capital ship in the star system, the Orca Tyrant only carried 350 mechs at most.

The Puffer Clan's fleet carrier was actually slower than the Forward Momentum, but she boasted significantly better armor and possessed highly-reinforced bunkers.

Compared to the other four fleet carriers, the Orca Tyrant devoted less space to carrying mechs and instead embraced the role of a pseudo-battle cruiser.

All four aforementioned fleet carriers flanked the fifth and most central fleet carrier.

Just like the Amagi, the relatively plain-looking fleet carrier possessed balanced if average properties. With a capacity of 450 mechs, the Eager Condemnation featured decent defenses and was not a slouch in terms of mobility.

Right now, several shuttles departed from the other fleet carriers and calmly flew over to the Eager Condemnation.

The commanding officer of the operation called for a meeting. The highest-ranking officers and the most notable mech pilots attended the gathering.

No one objected to stepping aboard the Eager Condemnation. Unlike the other four fleet carriers, the Condemnation belonged to the Coalition Reserve Corps, which was a Coalition institution that transcended the rivalries of individual partners.

In fact, every Coalition partner collectively ran the CRC, so there was no way it would make any Fridayman uncomfortable.

In a large and tastefully-decorated conference room, hundreds of Fridaymen military officers gathered. They hailed from every Coalition partner.

Officers from the Gauge Dynasty, Konsu Clan, Vanguard Group and Puffer Clan each claimed their own separate corners of the conference room. The soldiers of the former two groups faintly looked down on their counterparts of the latter group.

It couldn't be helped. Even though the CRC demanded a contribution from the Vanguard Group and the Puffer Clan, the fleet carriers dispatched by the weakest Coalition partners were not good enough.

Still, despite their inadequacies, the Forward Momentum and the Orca Tyrant met at least one vital requirement. Otherwise, the two fleet carriers wouldn't have been able to take part in this operation.

A highly-decorated older man stood at the very front of the conference room. Brigadier-General Vander Pierce was one of the most distinguished senior officers of the CRC.



Even though the Friday Coalition as a whole did not think much of this branch, the CRC was a complete military branch that could give any Coalition Partner a run for their money!

None of the other commanders showed any disrespect towards the 182 year old man. Many of the people that had gathered here today had heard that General Pierce had come up with this operation and persistently pushed for it until the higher ups eventually assented to it despite the risks.

Sitting not too far away away from General Pierce, Venerable Ghanso Larkinson and Venerable Relia Foster waited for all of the guests to arrive.

"It's finally happening." Ghanso whispered as he kept his will contained. "I told the Fridaymen that they needed to do something. It seems the men in charge are finally willing to invest in an operation."

Venerable Foster levied her eyes at the new arrivals. "This might very well be a suicide mission. The plan that General Pierce has come up rests on a lot of assumptions. If anything goes wrong, we might miss the mark, or expose our whereabouts. As long as the Hexers know we are close..."

"That won't happen." Ghanso grinned and slapped the surface of the conference room. "The Eager Condemnation and the other four capital ships are different. They're all deep strike fleet carriers! With the immense range of their FTL ranges, we can get in and out without leaving too many traces behind."

Deep strike fleet carriers were much more valuable than their regular counterparts. Due to their high cost, the Friday Coalition didn't have many of them. If anything happened to the five capital ships under General Pierce's command, then the Fridaymen would lose some very versatile war assets!

Both expert pilots looked up at this time. They sensed the approach of their own kind.

In the span of a few minutes, six expert pilots entered the conference room. Together with Venerable Ghanso and Venerable Foster, a total of eight expert pilots took part in the operation!