

Mech 2611

Chapter 2611: Made To Overcome

Noon had almost come. According to the standard clock, this was the time when the patriarchs of the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan addressed their own people.

While Patriarch Reginald Cross already began to hold a domineering and impassioned speech in front of his subjects, Ves adopted a calmer approach at the beginning.

Every Larkinson in the fleet stopped what they were doing and tuned in to the broadcast.

The entire Spirit of Bentheim slowed down. Aside from allowing essential, automated processes to continue operating, everything else fell silent.

On the 6th deck, Calabast stood in the center of the new Observation Department that was responsible for analyzing sensor readings and gathering intelligence.

The spymaster had completely shed the heated emotions that she showed before. Her body and expression did not show an inkling of fury or resentment.

She crossed her arms and smirked as she observed the projection of Ves standing generously on the bridge of his new flagship.

"I did not bet on the wrong horse." She whispered. "Let's see how much further I can ride you, Ves."

Aboard another ship called the Jason, the combat carrier that belonged exclusively to the Hall of Heroes became unprecedentedly calm as the expert pilots assigned to the vessel gathered their attendants. The Bright Companions, Lost Soldiers and the Radiant Hoplites made for a mixed bunch.

The Bright Companions stood rigidly behind Venerable Joshua Larkinson. The golden boy of the Larkinson Clan exuded a vivid sense of life that made everyone want to become his friend.

The members of the Bright Companions mostly consisted of Avatar mech pilots who showed promise. Each of them were disciplined and well-behaved.

"Our journey finally begins." Venerable Joshua excitedly spoke. "I will miss my home, but exploring the greater cosmos is too good to pass up! The patriarch will definitely be able to bring us to the Red Ocean!"

The Lost Soldiers presented a very different impression. Venerable Davia Stark, the guest expert pilot of the Larkinson Clan, applied different standards when selecting her own retainers.

The mech pilots who caught her attention all originated from the Living Sentinels. While their skill and discipline may be lacking, each rifleman mech pilot unquestionably respected the woman who brought them into her squad!

Venerable Davia glanced at the younger expert pilot with a vigilant expression. "That patriarch of yours isn't bringing us all to the Red Ocean out of the goodness of his heart. Let alone his motives, the dwarf galaxy itself is a place of peril. Have you even followed the news there? Fleets that are much stronger than ours vanish every day. Pioneers who have made much more preparation than us have died or fallen into ruin."

"We can't be afraid of taking chances!" Another female voice rang throughout the compartment! "We are fighters! We shoot, smash, cut and demolish any obstacle in our way. As long as we are strong enough, the Red Ocean will never take us down!"

Venerable Davia's strong but constrained force of will ceded ground as the third speaker's triumphant will expanded outward.

The Radiant Hopliters all raised their fists to echo their leading figure!

Venerable Rosa Orfan exuded plenty of confidence as she taunted Davia with her eyes.

"You're not a Larkinson, so you don't fully understand what we're capable of. Our clan is special. Ves has continually pulled out one rabbit after another from his hat. If you fought alongside us in the Nyxian Gap, you wouldn't say those words."

Davia contemptuously raised her eyebrow. "You mean the string of battles where only 20 percent of the Living Sentinel mech pilots made it back alive?"

"Not everyone is cut out to be a soldier!"

The thoughtless remark instantly riled up the Lost Soldiers!

Each of them were among the surviving Sentinel mech pilots who had managed to survive the Battle of Ulmo Citadel and the Battle against the Abyss. They may have been part of the worst-performing mech force in the campaign, but they could not tolerate this insult!

Before the Lost Soldiers and the Radiant Hopliters descended into a brawl, a single elderly voice called everyone out!

"STOP!"

The mech pilots each backed down as Commandant Cristoph Larkinson entered the compartment.

Though the man was just a retired mech officer of the Mech Corps, the presence and authority he exuded surpassed the wills of the three expert pilots.

In front of this old soldier, the younger and brasher mech pilots did not dare to stick their necks out anymore.

The commandant's eyes swept over everyone's face. He did not even spare the expert pilots from his judging gaze.

"Each of you are mech pilots. You have trained at least twelve years to become professionals that can be trusted to pilot immensely destructive war machines. I expect each of you to exercise better control over yourselves. You are not rambunctious children anymore. If you cannot rein in your impulses, then what gives you the right to pilot a mech?"

The head of the Hall of Heroes instantly shut everyone up. Even Venerable Orfan lost her momentum. As the old man calmly walked up to the center of the hall, he crossed his arms behind his back and faced the broadcast projection with a stoic face.

"We are Larkinsons." He said. "We are the successors of a line of honorable soldiers and mech pilots. Never forget where we came from. Even if we are leaving behind our ancestral home, we are still the same honorable warriors in our hearts. Direct your ire towards the enemies who wish to tear us down instead of your fellow comrades who may be saving your lives one day."

His words completely extinguished any animosity between the Lost Soldiers and the Radiant Hoplites. Though they were very different mech pilots who shared very different ideas, at the end of the day they were supposed to fight together.

Venerable Joshua looked particularly impressed at how the old commandant defused the tension between the mech pilots. As a young expert pilot, he never succeeded in commanding the respect of the older expert pilots.

"Can I do that one day?" He wondered.

Elsewhere, Commander Casella Ingvar stood proudly in the command center of the Steadfast Vigil. The Living Sentinels each stood up from their stations as well and silently faced the projection of the broadcast without any irregularities.

The expert candidate was very satisfied with what she saw. The Sentinels had cleaned themselves up under her command. She instilled more discipline and order among the ranks in order to instill more pride in their identity.

"Chirp. Chirp."

A yellow bird perched on her shoulder. Casella idly fed her pet with a seed.

"Hush, Mirrie. You can fly off later."

Elsewhere, aboard one of the civilian ships of the Larkinson fleet, a group of sloppy and undisciplined-looking mech pilots along with mech technicians and other personnel gathered in a crowd.

Director Raella Larkinson and 'Captain' Vincent Ricklin stood at the front.

"When is this speech supposed to start?" Vincent impatiently asked.

His girlfriend smacked his arm. "Shut up. It's starting right now!"

"Hey, don't hit me! I am the preseason finalist of the Larkinson Dueling League. Is this how you treat a champion?"

"You're not a champion. You got your butt whooped by a Swordmaiden." Raella sneered.

"I'm a gentleman, babe! I couldn't bring myself to hurt a girl."

"Excuses, excuses. Your Adonis Colossus simply can't handle an opposing mech that is more maneuverable and more ferocious than yours. I told you that it's not a proper dueling mech!"

"Hey, look! The big boss is finally speaking now!"

Back on the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves looked at the projection that depicted hundreds of second-class ships. The power he had at his beck and call far surpassed what he controlled just half a year ago. The task force he brought into the Nyxian Gap would probably collapse after a single blow if it directly squared off against his current assets!

Anyone who made this realization would feel confident. Ves was no different. He had the illusion that he could defeat the entire galaxy as long as his forces kept growing stronger.

Though his mind told him that this growth could not be sustained, his imagination couldn't stop conjuring more ridiculous fantasies.

He took a deep breath. He gripped the Larkinson Mandate in his hand. Some of his delusions faded away as he drew strength from Goldie's warm and friendly presence.

"My fellow Larkinsons." He began as he took a few steps forward. "We are on the cusp of embarking on the journey of our lives. Only a couple of years after the founding of our clan, we are ready to fulfill our first great endeavor."

Lucky silently trailed after him as he paced, attracting attention from many people and pets.

"Each of you must be aware of how Task Force Predator fared in the Nyxian Gap. While the losses we have suffered are regrettable, the sacrifices we have made are not in vain. We have learned from some very valuable lessons from the battles we have fought. Our mechs and ships are stronger, more modern and more capable of withstanding the perils of intra-galactic travel!"

While it may not be the best decision to mention an old wound in the clan, Ves had a very good reason to bring up the recent tragedy.

"The Red Ocean is dangerous." He stated. "So is the Milky Way, in fact. No matter where we venture, we are constantly at risk of getting attacked for one reason or another. This is especially the case when our clan and alliance are independent. There is no state or huge organization backing us up. While this affords us the freedom to travel wherever we want, we also have to accept the possibility of being surrounded by enemies!"

His grave words dampened the enthusiasm among the Larkinsons. The clansmen did not expect to hear such a solemn speech today!

"Don't you think that sounds familiar?" Ves coyly smiled. "The Nyxian Gap is very similar to the Red Ocean. Think about it. Both regions are filled with dangerous elements. The authorities are largely absent and the humans who roam this region are opportunistic robbers who won't hesitate to attack you if you show any weakness. Do not think that I am exaggerating. Remnant aliens survivors are the least of our worries in the Red Ocean. The true danger comes from other humans!"

Too much publicity from the Red Ocean centered around the success stories. The news portals constantly gushed over lucky pioneers who managed to stumble upon a rich phasewater deposit or a cache of alien tech.

Hardly any journalist investigated the thousands of pioneers and fleets that had gone missing. Ves, who always regarded the Red Ocean with wariness, wanted to make sure his fellow clansmen didn't have the wrong idea!

"The Nyxian Gap has allowed us to witness the worst of humanity. Do not think that the Nyxian pirates are unique. I have seen the same kind of lawless bastards in the frontier beyond the border of human space. The dwarf galaxy we are heading towards is called another frontier, so do not think that the rules of civilized space apply to this uncontrollable region of space."

A strong desire flowed through his body.

Ves raised the book in his hands. "That does not mean we will shy away from this challenge! Where there is danger, there is riches. Each frontier offers an abundance of opportunities to those who are brave enough to venture in it. Even if nine out of ten explorers may die in pursuit of these opportunities, I am confident that our Larkinson Clan will be among the winners."

The Larkinson Mandate seemed to glow as Goldie resonated with his boundless confidence! Every clansman watching the broadcast felt a stirring in their hearts that could not be suppressed!

"Do you know why?! Because we are Larkinsons!" Ves exclaimed! "This is all the answer you need. If you believe in our clan, then you must believe in our strength! No matter what adversity we face, we are made to overcome challenges! For the clan!"

"FOR THE CLAN!" The clansmen roared throughout the fleet!

Chapter 2612: Goodbye Cinach

The Larkinson fleet adopted a standard formation as it rested in one of the Langrange points close to Cinach VI.

Mechs that used to be on patrol began to fly back to their respective carriers now that the fleet was about to depart.

The former Hexer combat carriers formed an oval formation around the fleet. Their relatively tough exteriors made them suitable for these positions. While the combat carriers weren't designed to serve as shields, they could play the role in an emergency.

This was necessary in order to protect the more fragile vessels clustered in the interior of the formation.

Various logistical ships, cargo ships and civilian ships could not withstand as much damage as the combat carriers. Even though the second-class vessels were more than capable of withstanding attacks from third-class mechs, it was a different story if second-class enemies emerged.

The Spirit of Bentheim occupied the center of the huge formation. Even though her defenses were far more comprehensive than that of the combat carriers, she was the heart and soul of the expeditionary fleet. The clan did not wish to risk any of her precious crew and production equipment.

In the past month, the Spirit of Bentheim underwent a profound transformation.

From the inside, many temporary Hexer crew members traveled back to the Hexadric Hegemony. Thousands of Larkinson spacers took their place.

Since the Spirit of Bentheim was the most crucial ship in the Larkinson fleet, only the most talented, experienced and knowledgeable ship officers and ratings received the honor of serving aboard her. Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon even transferred a number of experienced specialists from other vessels in order to make sure the ship would fall under the control of the Larkinsons.

From the outside, the capital ship underwent a more drastic transformation!

The port and starboard side of the vessel proudly displayed her name in huge, white letters. Anyone who observed the red-coated vessel would not be able to mistake her identity!

Yet this was not the most drastic addition.

The huge, six-sided capital ship used to feature a rather standard-looking prow. The Hexer shipyard that built the Spirit of Bentheim did not deviate from the customized ship design that the Larkinsons and Hexers had agreed upon.

The prow of the factory ship used to resemble a normal-looking wedge. It was as if the shipbuilders affixed a giant ram on the front of the vessel.

Of course, the ram was absolutely not supposed to crash into other vessels. Even if the Spirit of Bentheim speared through the hull of another vessel, her internal structure simply couldn't withstand the enormous stresses unleashed upon impact!

The only instance where ramming was a valid battle tactic was if the initiating side was prepared to sacrifice a ship!

For these reasons, the prows of starships did not have to be optimized for ramming.

Many sub-capital ships adopted an aerodynamic profile in order to facilitate atmospheric flight. Of course, the ships did not need to be perfectly streamlined as their immense propulsion and levitation power played a much greater role than any lift they could possibly generate.

This was why most starships eschewed wings.

In any case, the Spirit of Bentheim was not designed to land on a gravity well, so there was even less of a demand to make her aerodynamic.

This allowed the Larkinson Clan to spruce up the appearance of their first and only capital ship.

The Glory Seekers, Crossers and the other natives and observers in the Cinach System witnessed an astonishing sight.

A number of logistical vessels parked next to the Spirit of Bentheim and began to work on her prow.

Precious, pre-processed alloy appeared from the bellies of various cargo vessels. The installation crews took these giants blocks and support struts and carefully affixed them onto the front of the factory ship.

The true purpose of the V-shaped prow became evident now. The shape presented a very convenient platform for the alloys that the Larkinsons were piling up on the front of their flagship!

In the span of several weeks, more and more dazzling alloy surrounded the original prow. Not a hint of the red-shaped wedge was visible as the Larkinsons slowly formed a very distinct shape with the gold-coated alloy blocks.

It was only in the final days when the Spirit of Bentheim revealed her new prow!

Tons and tons of gold-coated Breyer alloy stood out starkly against the red-coated hull. Hardly anyone who observed the new vessel could believe that the Larkinsons were extravagant enough to employ so many tons of valuable alloy to decorate the front of their factory ship!

Breyer alloy was more resilient than the bulk plating that armored the rest of the capital ship's hull. The Larkinson Clan pretty much emptied its entire reserve of this valuable and precious alloy in order to complete this vanity project!

The effect was obvious.

Both Larkinsons and outsiders couldn't help but be impressed at the transformation. The Spirit of Bentheim gained a ferocious air as her prow displayed a magnificent representation of the Golden Cat's head!

"Is that a lion?"

"It's supposed to be a cat."

"What? A housecat? Are you sure?"

Most outside observers mistakenly thought they were looking at a lion. Only the Larkinsons and those who were familiar with them knew that it was actually a cat!

No one understood the Larkinson Clan's obsession with cats. Even its own allies considered it to be an eccentric quirk.

Only the Larkinsons themselves knew better. The Golden Cat was more than just their symbol and mascot. The ancestral spirit actually existed, and she was present in every Larkinson's heart!

As Ves had concluded his speech, he gazed at a projection that showed off the Spirit of Bentheim's gleaming golden prow. He felt inordinately pleased his flagship gained such a unique and eye-catching appearance!

"It's too bad it's not alive." He muttered.

If he had his way, he would have turned the immense cat head into a giant totem dedicated to Goldie. However, there was no way to accomplish this unless Ves manually fabricated all of the alloy blocks by hand.

As far as he was aware of, only he possessed the capability to make spiritual energy-infused objects or totems. Unlike mechs which drew strength from his mech designs, totems did not enjoy this convenience.

Due to lack of time, he only fabricated a couple of alloy blocks in person. Their faint spiritual foundation wasn't enough to support Goldie's presence across the entire prow, but Ves hoped that might change one day.

The sound of heels approaching broke him from his reverie. A pleasant scent began to tickle his nose. He did not even have to turn around to recognize who walked up to his side.

"Hmph." Gloriana adopted a skeptical expression. "I don't know where you got so much Breyer alloy. If I knew you could obtain such quantities with ease, I would have insisted on using them on our mechs! Do you realize how many Valkyrie mechs we could have upgraded with this stellar material?"

"The effect of this prow is at least ten times more shocking than fielding a hundred Breyer alloy-clad mechs." Ves retorted. "Don't worry, Gloriana. I've already reserved enough Breyer alloy to clad the mechs of our expert pilots and expert candidates. That is sufficient for our purposes. Also, it is not as if the Bentheim's upgraded prow is useless. Any mech who attacks our factory ship from the front will have a very hard time getting through all of that alloy!"

The two continued to argue a bit while their cats sat silently next to each other.

"Meow." Lucky licked Clixie's ear.

"Miaow." The organic cat patted away the gem cat.

After a short time, a new projection appeared in front of the Miracle Couple. Major Verle saluted to Ves before issuing his report.

"Every ship in our expeditionary fleet is prepared to transition into FTL. We have just received word that the Glory Seeker fleet and the Crosser fleet are also prepared. The Barracuda and a number of other scout ships have already ventured ahead of us in order to give us advance warning of any irregularities at our emergence point."

It was quite dangerous for a huge fleet to travel to other destinations in a huge gathering. In order to be safe, the Golden Skull Alliance already dispatched a number of fast and agile starships beforehand so that they could relay their observations back to the main fleet over the galactic net.

Of course, it was also dangerous for scout ships to travel too far ahead. As long as any enemies were watching out for a vessel like the Barracuda, then they could receive advance warning of where the main fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance would arrive next!

For this reason, the scout vessels only departed a few hours ahead of time. Right now, they were nowhere close to the first stop of the journey.

"Have we left anything important behind?" Ves asked.

The major shook his head. "All our clansmen are accounted for. We are ready to transition at your command."

"Very well. Please commence our FTL drives. Our grand expedition starts here!"

Hundreds of starships began to spool their FTL drives. After several moments, they disappeared from the material realm at a predetermined order.

Combat vessels went first. Non-combat vessels went next. When the powerful Spirit of Bentheim warmed up one of her three heavy-duty FTL drives, Ves felt as if a very strong vibration ran throughout his body.

From the slightly-discomfited expressions of the bridge operators, he wasn't the only person who felt this way.

A sensation that felt similar to a pop ran through everyone's body as the immense capital ship finally transitioned into FTL!

The projections that displayed different views of the Cinach System instantly disappeared. Nothing came in its place as the visual appearance of higher-dimensional space technically didn't make sense to human eyes.

A sense of hope and wonder swept over everyone aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. After so many months of preparation, they were finally setting off for the Red Ocean!

Ves and Gloriana left the bridge and returned to their grand stateroom. Both of them looked excited as they thought about what they might encounter.

"So." Gloriana began as she held her cat. "Our first destination is the Life Research Association, right?"

"Correct. We need to beef up our biotech capabilities. I hope to hire a lot of doctors, geneticists, implant surgeons and exobiologists. We still need to provide the survivors of the Nyxian Gap Campaign with a free set of augmentations."

"It's not going to be easy to hire the best biotech experts, Ves. The researchers of the LRA are very content with their state. Do you know how many organizations like ours are recruiting highly-skilled personnel over there?"

Ves momentarily winced. "I know it's going to be difficult to attract some of the more arrogant scientists, but our clan is not a regular organization. I am confident that our prestige and our recent accomplishments will attract some ambitious Lifers. There has to be plenty of them who are willing to explore the Red Ocean with us. There are adventurous souls in every state."

"You may be right, but my point still stands. We can probably convince a lot of average doctors, but the best the LRA has to offer will not be swayed by ordinary promises. These accomplished elites have already established themselves in the upper hierarchy of their states. We need to adopt a specific approach to poach some of these top-tier researchers. The sooner we prepare a plan, the higher our chances of getting a top expert."

Ves slowed down his steps. "Why are you so insistent on getting the best? These are exactly the kind of people I don't want to recruit. These people have too many ties to the LRA. They're also older and very set in their ways. With their strong intellect and mental development, it's impossible to guarantee their loyalty to our clan! I would rather recruit a bunch of younger talents and develop them step by step."

"That's not enough!" She retorted. "We need the best straight away! If you don't want to bother with this issue, then leave the planning to me. I will make sure we can enjoy the best of care once we leave Majestic Teal."

"Fine then!"

Chapter 2613: Chief Fabricator Ziva Victrix

The Golden Skull Alliance had finally departed from the Cinach System!

After the excitement surrounding the official start of the grand expedition had passed, the Larkinsons slowly went back to work.

In the preceding weeks, they had already moved into their respective berths. While there were plenty of people who were still unaccustomed to living on a starship, at the very least they already managed to get over the initial adjustment periods.

The Larkinsons stationed on the larger ships enjoyed more comfort compared to those stationed aboard the smaller vessels.

Sub-capital ships such as combat carriers and logistical ships devoted most of their room towards essential functions. While they offered at least some comfort in the form of decently-sized crew quarters, they did not come close to the amenities offered by larger vessels.

The crew and dependents assigned to the Spirit of Bentheim all felt lucky for being assigned to this great factory ship! The 1st and 12th decks became the favorite destinations of many off-duty clansmen.

Those who sought peace and open space ventured into the gardens situated on the 1st deck. The Larkinsons who wanted to hang out and enjoy some fun visited the city within a ship on the 12th deck.

Of course, the Spirit of Bentheim did not center around these recreational facilities. They were merely added to the ship in order to increase the productivity of the crew.

The main purpose of a factory ship was to produce goods. Even though the Spirit of Bentheim spent most of her time in FTL travel, her production halls steadily churned out one mech after another.

Lately, Spirit of Bentheim produced less Valkyrie mechs and more Transcendent Punishers. In fact, the main reason why the ship's Production Department bothered to make the Valkyrie mechs at all was because they were relatively easier to make.

Once more and more production crews became used to operating the GAIA production lines, the production of Transcendent Punishers picked up speed.

By now, the Spirit of Bentheim already boasted a full complement of Transcendent Punishers. There was a heavy artillery mech for all 80 bunkers, but that only applied to the flagship of the Larkinson Clan.

There were many other vessels whose bunkers were still empty. The Hexer-built combat carriers each boasted 3 to 6 bunkers depending on their ship class model.

While this didn't sound very impressive, it was a very good way to increase the firepower of the Larkinson Clan. The LMC had already stocked up an abundant amount of raw materials beforehand, so there was absolutely no worry of running out anytime soon. Many of the cargo ships traveling with the fleet were stuffed with expensive exotics and bulk materials!

As Ves dropped by the production decks one day, he became impressed by the immense amount of activity taking place within the halls.

The GAIA production lines consisted of a cluster of huge mech-sized production machines. Each of them generated an immense amount of heat as they performed various energy-intensive processes!

Fortunately, the Spirit of Bentheim was a state-of-the-art Hexer factory ship. Some of the best Hexer shipwrights optimized the power supply and heat management systems of the capital ship. The highly-regulated temperature did not rise above the most optimal level for the human physique.

In the event of an accident, a large number of bots and automated disaster suppression systems would automatically kick in to contain any fires, lethal radiation and other threats.

Ves met with the person in charge of all of the production halls.

Just like Grand Captain Daria-Maria Vraken, there was no way an average person could possibly run such an immense operation!

Every GAIA production line cost billions of hex credits. Every production machine, from the 3D printer to the alloy compressor, was so insanely complex that some mech technicians would have to spend a lifetime to master all of their operations.

Aside from Ves and maybe Gloriana, there was no one else in the Larkinson Clan who was qualified to oversee so many production operations.

For this reason, the position was occupied by another Hexer trainer.

Interim Chief Fabricator Ziva Victrix looked like a normal middle-aged woman. Yet behind this 70-ish year old woman's facade was a former mech designer who improved her fabrication and assembly skills to a level that the Miracle Couple could not even match!

Despite being just an Apprentice Mech Designer who failed to advance to Journeyman, Ziva once accomplished the supreme honor of fabricating a masterwork mech!

Such cases were rare but not unheard of. Each fabricator who earned a masterwork certificate was practically a national treasure to every state. Ves had no idea why the council of matriarchs appointed such an accomplished fabricator as a humble trainer aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

The only reason why he didn't question this mystery any further was because he was very happy with Ziva Victrix's results.

If not for her considerable expertise, the Spirit of Bentheim would have never been able to occupy all of her bunkers before the start of the grand expedition!

Even so, there were limits to her abilities.

"Theoretically, a full crew of mech technicians, engineers and low-ranking mech designers should be capable of outputting a Transcendent Punisher within 48 hours." The older woman calmly explained. "The GAIA production line is one of the fastest and most efficient sets of production equipment of its kind in the Hegemony. It is very good at putting together light mechs and heavy mechs alike. That said, the sequential production process that you insist on adopting means that it will take at least 72 hours to make a Transcendent Punisher."

In order to preserve as much spiritual foundation as possible, the production crews have to piece together the mechs one by one. The production halls were already set up for this approach, but the lack of intersection ruled out the use of more efficient approaches.

As the two toured the production halls, Ves remained nonchalant. "I already explained to you why we cannot switch to batch processing. Every LMC mech is alive. You can think of it as a child. The production crew are effectively its parents. If you want the mech to possess a strong and vigorous life, then the production crews must care for it like a true baby."

"I'm not arguing against your approach. I have felt the difference myself." Ziva responded. "You just have to be aware that we are wasting precious production capacity due to keeping most of our production machines idle. Right now, the average production times of the Transcendent Punisher model range from 4 to 5 days. There are some underperforming production crews that occasionally take even longer, but these are exceptions."

"How much time will it take to reduce that down to 3 days?" Ves asked.

"Months. Years. Probably the latter." Ziva answered. "I know you are impatient, but don't expect any quick results. Now that the production crews have gained some basic proficiency, it will take a lot more practice and study to achieve further gains. Every mech technician must devote a lot of time on self-study and constant repetition in order to develop a better feel for the production machines."

He knew that she was right. While he wanted to fill up the bunkers of his combat carriers with as many Transcendent Punishers as possible, the Spirit of Bentheim had to churn out at least 350 mechs!

This meant it would take about three months to complete this job!

Hopefully, the Larkinson fleet wouldn't bump into any troublemakers during this time. Ves did not entirely feel comfortable leaving so many bunkers empty.

Theoretically, the Larkinson Clan could fill up the bunkers with rifleman mechs or other ranged mechs instead. However, the effect was marginal compared to inserting a heavy artillery mech that was specifically designed to leverage this form of protection!

As Ves questioned Ziva about the various issues related to producing the Larkinson Clan's exclusive heavy artillery mech, she mentioned a strange phenomenon.

"As these mechs get put together, their glows become increasingly more evident." She mentioned.

"Is there a problem with that, chief? Our production crews should have received training on how to deal with glows. If any of the personnel cannot adjust to them, they are free to request reassignment."

"It's not that, sir. The truth is that some of the mech technicians... have become enamored with the glow of this mech model. They have converted to the Ylvainan Faith."

"...How much?"

"Only a couple of dozen so far." Ziva replied. "This is not a large amount considering that the Production Department consists of thousands of workers. I have examined the converted believers in question. They are all easily influenced and seek reassurance, so it should not be surprising that they have embraced a new faith. Other Larkinsons should not be easily swayed."

Ves grimaced. "The effect is still there, though. If our production lines are preoccupied with putting together Transcendent Punishers for three months straight, then I can easily imagine hundreds of workers following suit!"

"Do you wish to alter our production schedule? If we start producing Valkyrie mechs again, the production crews will not be exposed to a singular glow."

"Will that entail slowing down the production of Transcendent Punishers?"

"That will inevitably be the case."

Ves sighed. "Forget about it, then. The Transcendent Punishers come first. Aside from our custom mechs, the Transcendent Punishers are our most powerful mechs. I don't feel comfortable with slowing down their production. The more Punishers we have, the better."

As for converting more Larkinsons to the Ylvainan Faith, Ves didn't care too much about this problem. If these people were so gullible to fall for James' scam within 3 months of exposure, then they would have turned into a believer eventually. There was no saving these people.

He carefully glanced at Ziva's expression as he made his decision.

"Do you disapprove, chief?"

The Hexer fabricator did not reveal much emotion behind her professional mask. "It is not my place to judge."

"I thought you Victrix Hexers look down on boys the most in the Hegemony."

She coughed. "Properly speaking, I have never aligned myself with the Victrix Matriarchal Dynasty. I am disgusted at the conduct of my fellow sisters. I have no part in it. Only mechs and machines interest me. Whether they are male or female, it doesn't matter."

Ves blinked. "You're the first Hexer I've met that recognizes that mechs aren't divided by gender. Not even Gloriana is able to divorce herself from this assumption!"

"Did you expect something different from me because of my last name?"

"Well..."

"The matriarchs are wiser than you think, Mr. Larkinson. They wouldn't have put me in charge of the production halls of this ship if I was unable to accept taking orders from a.. 'man'."

The Victrix Matriarchal Dynasty was one of the most distasteful factions in the Hegemony. From what Ves heard about it, there were 7 women for every 3 boys among the Victrixes!

All-female couples were very common there. In fact, the family trees of a lot of Hexers living in the territories of the Victrix Dynasty did not mention a single boy over a stretch of several centuries!

The less a family tree was tainted by boys, the more purer it was in the eyes of the Victrix Dynasty.

However, the poorer and more average Hexers couldn't always afford the expensive medical procedures needed to develop a designer baby that inherited the genes of two female parents.

Boys still played a role in their society, though their lot was very cruel. They received some of the heaviest repression imaginable in the Hegemony.

One of the most ridiculous ones by far was the fact that they were universally castrated before they hit puberty!

Not a single boy living under the heel of the Victrixes was capable of reproducing naturally!

Fortunately, this process was still reversible. As long as a female Hexer submitted an application, the Victrix Dynasty was willing to restore the reproductive function of a boy for a limited amount of time.

It was too bad it never lasted!

Chapter 2614: Hotel Bentheim

As the reality of the grand expedition settled in, a lot of Larkinsons became annoyed at the inconveniences of space travel.

The time it took for the slowest FTL drive in the fleet to complete its cycle time determined how long the Golden Skull Alliance lingered in realspace.

Since none of the ships in the pioneering alliance was slow, that amounted to a wait time of just 6 hours.

Once this break time was over, the fleet transitioned into FTL travel yet again, isolating each and individual starship from each other.

As far as humanity was concerned, there was no way to transfer energy and matter from one starship to another in FTL. Even if they shifted into FTL travel while flying right next to each other, the workings of the higher dimensions was still a mystery to most people in the galaxy.

There were rumors that the CFA and perhaps the MTA had managed to crack the secret to breaking this isolation phenomenon through the use of phasewater.

There were whispers of CFA warfleets forming some kind of bubble that allowed entire fleets to shelter under the protection of a battleship.

There were even claims that these CFA warfleets were able to fight against other starships in FTL travel!

Such possibilities were mind-boggling to space peasants. Ves did not believe he had any chance of accessing such incredible high technology.

Most humans had to make due with regular FTL travel and all of the constraints that came with it. Still, what if phasewater become more ubiquitous? What if this substance's amazing phasing properties lowered the barrier of waging warfare in other dimensions?

Warfare might change forever!

The Red Ocean might become more exciting — and dangerous — than Ves initially realized if this was the case.

For now, Ves and the Larkinson Clan did not concern themselves with these risks. They became much more occupied with dealing with the issues of extended isolation.

Every starship turned into a solitary prison the moment they transitioned into FTL travel. Aside from being able to transmit and receive data over the galactic net, no physical transfer was possible.

This annoyed a lot of Larkinsons at first. Many of the new recruits used to be planetbound citizens who were accustomed to being able to travel wherever they liked.

They may have signed up to the grand expedition, but they didn't actually expect the restrictions would be so bad.

"There is nothing fun to be had on this ship!"

"Am I supposed to lie down in my cabin and play virtual games in my free hours?"

"There's no room for sports on this cramped ship!"

The complaints rapidly flooded the clan administration. Those who served aboard smaller and more limited starships expressed much more dissatisfaction than those who were assigned to larger vessels.

"There are remarkably few crew members who are dissatisfied with serving aboard the Spirit of Bentheim." Gavin reported as he held his data pad. "The larger the ship, the more livable she is, though there are many other variables as well. The point is that most of our starships aside from the Bentheim aren't really geared for permanent residency. The Hexer-built vessels were meant to be crewed by professionals on a short to medium-term basis."

Ves held his daily briefing at his main office on the 2nd deck. He had fallen in love with it soon after settling in. The interior looked stately, dignified and classy without going overboard. Though the decorations were rather bare for now, he had plenty of time to personalize his office further.

For now, his main office did the job of making him feel powerful while impressive every guest he invited.

"We won't have these sub-capital ships for long, Benny. We won't be making this oversight again. After a couple of years, we'll reach the beyonder gate and get rid of the Hexer castoffs. we'll invest in more livable starships once we reach the Red Ocean."

Gavin looked a bit concerned. "That sounds great, boss, but that doesn't address our short-term problems. Let's face it. Over half of our 50,000 clansmen are way in over their heads. They went directly from living on a normal planet to being forced to live inside a metal box that is flinging through space. It's starting to make people crazy, and this is just the first week!"

That sounded quite concerning.

"I'm just a mech designer. How am I supposed to solve this complex sociological problem? Just throw the problem at the Larkinson Assembly or the relevant experts in our clan. I don't care what they do. Just make sure our clansmen are able to acclimatize to their new living conditions."

Gavin briefly looked at his data pad. "The Larkinson Assembly has already begun to debate on this issue. The assembly members came up with several proposals. One of them is to treat the Spirit of Bentheim as an ark ship, at least until we get the genuine article."

"What?"

"Ark ships are excellent living environments in space. That's why they are built. They are the best solution that people have come up with to solve the livability problems we are talking about. The issue is that ark ships aren't very productive in itself. You still need people crewing your combat carriers, logistical ships and so on. What usually happens is that the fleet sets up a rotation. A crew member must serve on a functional starship for 3 weeks straight before being allowed to relax on an ark ship for a single week. Something like that. If the crew member has a family, then the spouse and kids may be permanently living aboard the ark ship as well."

Ves was not unfamiliar with this rotating schedule. While it had its issues, it was a proven way to destress crew members serving aboard smaller vessels.

There was a problem, though.

"We don't have an ark ship. We may have New Dorum aboard the Spirit of Bentheim, but that is just a single deck."

The city erected on the 12th deck had become more and more popular. Even Ves liked to drop by every now and then due to its dynamic scene.

"A single deck on a capital ship is enough, boss." Gavin shook his head. "If you are willing to add more berths to the 39th and 40th decks, we can accommodate a lot more off-duty personnel. It would be like turning a small portion of our factory ship into a cruise ship or a secondary home. One of the problems we are facing is that the families of the crew members assigned to other ships don't have it easy over there. It's a lot

better if we allow the kids to live on an ark ship or the closest alternative so they can socialize with each other and enjoy a more normal upbringing."

Ves did not like this suggestion. "This is a huge security risk. If tens of thousands of Larkinsons start rotating in and out of our very important and very strategic factory ship, the possibility that someone or something will sneak into our production halls or design labs becomes a lot higher. While I trust our clansmen not to do anything stupid, it's very hard to ensure compliance."

The monitoring system on the Spirit of Bentheim was comprehensive, but not infallible. Even Ves could pull off a couple of tricks to fool some of its sensors. Lucky could practically run rings around it if he wished!

Gavin insisted on this option, though. "I highly recommend you keep an open mind. Our fleet simply doesn't have another ship aside from the Bentheim that can fill this void. If you truly trust your clansmen, then please allow them to move over their families if they have any and let them rotate here on a monthly basis. This is the best option we have to maintain everyone's quality of living."

"...You care quite a lot about this issue, it seems. I haven't heard you advocate for something this strong in quite some time, Benny."

The assistant looked indignant. "Hey, just because I enjoy the privilege of working and living on the Bentheim doesn't mean I am blind to what is taking place on other ships. I get in touch with a lot of different people due to my job. I get told a lot of stuff. From what I am hearing, we truly need to address this issue."

Ves thought about it and felt that Gavin may have a point. "Let me just say that I am open to solutions. I don't want the Spirit of Bentheim into a hotel or a holiday retreat, though. I will allow rotations to take place as long as there aren't too many movements."

"I'll tell the Larkinson Assembly the good news!"

"You do that. Is there any other item on the agenda?"

"Yes, boss. Do you remember the female Larkinsons seeds you sent off to study in the Hegemony?"

"Oh, you mean Rennie and Maisie Ann Larkinson?"

"Yeah. The two young ladies were supposed to return to Cinach before we began our journey, but they met with some delays. The deteriorating war conditions along with some navigational issues caused them to arrive a bit too late. The courier vessel that has brought them to the Sentinel Kingdom will catch up with us at our destination."

"Oh. Okay, then."

Now that the Larkinson Clan was leaving for the Red Ocean, it didn't make much sense to leave Rennie and Maisie Ann behind. While Ves wanted them to enjoy an orthodox, systematic education, it was impossible for the pair of aspiring mech designers to return to the clan once the expeditionary fleet passed through a beyonder gate.

In addition, the latest developments of the Komodo War meant that the Hexers weren't so confident in winning anymore. In the event they lost, Hippolyta War College and every other Hexer university would lose their foundations!

The two female Larkinsons seeds might not be able to finish their studies and earn their diplomas if the Fridaymen achieved a breakthrough.

Ves simply couldn't let the two young women run for their lives like a pair of homeless dogs!

"It's a shame for them to interrupt their schooling." Gavin sympathised with the two women. "Even though I only studied at a rural university on Cloudy Curtain, I enjoyed my college days."

"In hindsight, I shouldn't have sent the girls out. I never expected the Nyxian Gap Campaign to deliver so many Larkinson merits in my pockets at once, allowing me to accelerate my schedule. Oh well. I'll just take them back and teach them just like Maikel and Zanthar."

He didn't expect too many problems with this. While he didn't spend a lot of time tutoring his male students, they didn't need any hand holding. They were smart and motivated enough to work towards the goals that Ves had set.

"Don't expect the returning pair of students to be the same." Gavin cautiously warned. "Rennie and Maisie Ann attended Hippolyta War College for two full semesters. From what I have heard, they had difficulties integrating in the strict Hexer school in the beginning, but that soon changed once you released the Blessed Squire and the Valkyrie Redeemer."

"Are you saying..."

"I don't know, boss, but you know how Hexers are. Just take into account that they might prefer to study under Gloriana instead."

"Great."

Well, the Larkinson seeds were no longer as important to Ves and the clan as before. Previously, the four represented the best and brightest mech students the old Larkinson Family could muster. Now, the Larkinson Clan could easily foist hundreds of mech design seeds on his lap!

Ves didn't want to work himself to death, though. He only wanted to mentor the most promising and worthwhile students.

For now, the Larkinson Clan was still in the process of sorting out its schooling system. With all of the kids and teenagers running around across the fleet, it was imperative to set up internal schools and mech academies.

It was also vital to set up a proper university of higher education in order to raise the clan's future engineers, mech designers, managers, and starship captains. This was an immense endeavor that could not be rushed!

Chapter 2615: Education Plan

The Larkinson Assembly was the primary legislative body of the Larkinson Clan. There was no way they neglected the issues of educating the next generations of Larkinsons.

Instead of reading through some boring acts and proposals that were filled with incomprehensible legalese, Ves decided to call the speaker of the assembly.

The physical projection of Ovrin Larkinson appeared in the clan patriarch's main office.

"Nice office. It looks quite imposing."

"Thanks. It's supposed to have that effect."

They chatted a bit. Speaker Ovrin Larkinson didn't have it easy. His workload constantly increased as the clan continued to expand. He had to delegate more and more work to committees led by committee chairmen. While this meant that the latter gained a lot more power and influence, it was the only way to keep up with the expanding scope of the clan.

"The committee chairmen are all oldsters like myself. For now, we are all on the same page, so don't worry about any of them running wild." Ovrin reassured Ves. "I can't say this will remain the same over time. Once we are too old to exercise our duties, our successors may harbor some different ideas on how to run our affairs. As our clan continues to grow bigger, the interests get bigger as well. The Larkinson Assembly won't be as cordial and tranquil as before."

Ves briefly frowned. "Are you saying that the Assembly will be split up into factions?"

"That is already the case from day one, Ves. It just wasn't very obvious because we used to be too small to argue about anything important. Your influence was too great as well. Now..."

"The clan has grown a lot bigger."

Benjamin Larkinson's brother nodded. "Indeed. The direct control that you or any other Larkinson can exert over the clan has dropped as the clan kept growing. While you can still change the course of the clan, I doubt you are willing or able to sort out the growing number of dossiers."

"That's fine with me. There is no need for me to be in charge of everything. I just wanted to check up on the Assembly's plans with regards to schooling. We can't keep recruiting capable mech designers, engineers and other professions. We need to bring them up from within."

Ovrin immediately knew what Ves wanted to know.

"Let me send you some documents."

Ves quickly received some proposals. For now, the Larkinsons only managed to establish some primary schools. The clan was still in the process of setting up some secondary schools, the first of which would be founding in New Dorum.

"How are the teenagers in our clan getting by if we haven't set up a single high school?"

"The kids are not slacking off at home if that is what you're afraid of. For now, we have enrolled them into renowned virtual schools. While the boys and girls are getting quality second-class education, their curriculum is very neutral."

Virtual schooling was not any worse than physical schooling these days. Projection technology was so advanced that it was easy to give students the illusion of attending a physical school. Advanced testing, monitoring and progress trackers ensured that each student kept up their studies and achieved the expected results.

A lot of good virtual schools were especially geared to educating kids stuck on starships.

However, virtual schools weren't perfect.

"We need to set up the remaining educational institutions as soon as possible." Ves urged. "Socialization is important, so it is best to force the younger generation to gather at physical schools. We also need to exert greater control over the curriculum in order to shape their ideologies."

"That is what the proposals are for. Depending on the budget, we can set up a range of different institutions."

Ves took another look at the documents that Speaker Ovrin sent. The main proposal called for the formation of multiple primary and secondary schools on every capital ship. He had no problem with this. While the Larkinson Clan currently didn't have a lot of children, that would definitely change.

What was more noteworthy was the intention to set up multiple universities.

"Why do we need more universities?" Ves grew confused.

"It's not a priority in the beginning, but it will make sense in the future." Ovrin confidently replied. "In short, we want to set up universities on several different capital ships in order to establish superior work and learning environments. For example, the Larkinson University of Technology that is supposed to be based inside the Spirit of Bentheim should offer programmes related to technical professions."

Ves widened his eyes. "I see now! Our future engineers and mech designers can easily drop by the production halls in order to gain some practical experience. Once they graduate, they can immediately get going without requiring too much training. The Spirit of Bentheim offers so many different technical facilities that it is practically a dream to set up a technical university on this ship!"

"There is another benefit." Ovrin added. "The technical university can make use of the mech designers, engineers, chief technicians and other skilled personnel as part-time professors or lecturers. Since this is all taking place on the same ship, the barriers aren't significant."

This was a compelling idea. Ves could already imagine the Larkinson University of Technology once it got going. He could easily assign any assistant mech designer to teach some courses over there. Perhaps Ves might hold some classes himself in order to shape the next generation of mech designers in the clan. The students would also be able to gain plenty of practical experience by interning at the design labs or the production halls.

And this was just the case for mech designers! There were lots of other vital professions that would also benefit from these synergies!

The Speaker of the Larkinson Assembly continued speaking. "Once we obtain other capital ships, we can establish other specialized institutions. For example, a fleet carrier is a good site for a naval academy to supply more spacers to our fleet. We can also set up our mech academy here to provide more opportunities for our mech cadets to pilot physical mechs."

The proposal mentioned other possibilities.

For example, a research ship was the perfect location for a science and biotech university. Future doctors, exobiologists, physicists and so on would be able to learn from and work alongside the established researchers working on the research vessel.

An ark ship on the other hand was a good site for a humanities and arts-focused institution. The Larkinson Clan did not entirely consist of mech designers and spacers.

Ves wanted his clan to become more rounded, so it was essential to raise a lot of managers, economists, musicians, artists and other miscellaneous personnel.

Naturally, setting up all of these universities couldn't be accomplished in a single month or year. The Larkinson Clan still needed to acquire the necessary capital ship. The universities also had to be staffed with professors, managers, councilors and other necessary personnel.

This wasn't something that Ves could handle. For someone who possessed no significant education background at all, all of these plans went right over his head. He believed the rest of the clan would be able to get this done.

"I support this initiative." Ves voiced his approval. "While it is a bit overboard to set up so many universities so quickly, it is best to prepare the infrastructure as soon as possible. Once we have five times as many clansmen in our fleet, we need to accommodate a lot of students."

He was very happy with this comprehensive plan. While the Larkinson Assembly still needed to hammer out the details, now that Ves offered his support, he was certain the assembly members would deliver something soon.

They continued to talk about other serious matters before the conversation turned personal.

The two were family. While they weren't particularly close, Ovrin was still Ves' great-uncle.

"You look older." Ves remarked.

"Heh. Everyone grows older, Ves. I'm not that young to begin with. You don't need to be concerned about my health. Even though I'm a former mech pilot, I still have enough years left to leave behind a good foundation for our clan. It's the least I can do. If I can't do it, then the other old fogies in the Assembly will pick up my work."

"What if there aren't any old fogies left?"

"Then the next generation takes over." Ovrin answered without any concern. "This is an inevitability. While we old fogies are largely in charge right now, the future rests in the hands of you younger folk."

Ves frowned. "I'm concerned the next generation won't be as restrained."

The original Larkinson elders adopted a restrained and cautious approach. They set up the necessary institutions and passed the necessary bills, but did not try to redefine the clan. The Larkinson elders weren't politicians by nature, so they did not pursue any extreme or controversial agendas.

Ovrin explained the overall objective of the oldsters in the Assembly.

"We try to maintain as much stability as possible. We are already growing very quickly. The last thing we need is to destabilize the clan even further by passing controversial initiatives that will please one half of the clan while completely riling up the other half of the clan. Instead of tearing the clan apart, we need to unify it even further. Some clansmen think that we aren't doing enough, but we don't think that is bad. By doing nothing, we aren't rocking the boat. We are trying to buy enough time to allow our institutions to grow up and turn into the supporting pillars of the clan. If we implement too many changes, those vital institutions won't be able to stand up for themselves."

The Larkinson Clan was turning more and more into a state. That meant that Ves and the other leaders had to make sure its institutions became strong enough to support the functions of a state.

This meant that once the next generation of assembly members came into power, they could pursue bolder agendas without tearing the clan apart.

Ves could also foresee the rise of factions. As long as any group of people gathered together, disagreements always followed. When one group of people with similar opinions gathered together, it was natural for them to gather around a leader and present a strong front in order to push their demands.

If one group could do so, others could do so as well.

For now, the political divisions within the Larkinson Clan were still too murky to determine what kind of factions might arise. Ves wasn't really interested in these squabbling tribes. He was only interested in pursuing his own agenda.

"How is the Larkinson Family?" Ves asked. "I've been too busy with clan affairs and mech design projects lately."

"They're doing well enough. It's a pity that they have traveled deeper into Vicious Mountain. Our detour through the star sector will only cause our fleet to pass through the periphery. There is no possibility of intersection between our two fleets."

"That's a shame. What is Uncle Ark up to these days?"

Ovrin shrugged. "I'm not sure. He has been in retreat as of late. For now, Benjamin and other Larkinson elders are handling the daily affairs of the family. We have heard that they are in the process of negotiating with a number of the tribes and clans of the Garlen Empire. The Garlaners appear to be very interested in sheltering or integrating the Larkinson Family. I believe the success of our clan has a lot to do with that. I hope we can continue to do well. Perhaps one day, the Larkinson Family will be the ones to support our clan."

"Hahaha! That's funny, grand-uncle, but that will never happen." Ves amusingly chuckled.

He had already written off the Larkinson Family. Though Ark was a good man and an inspirational leader, he didn't have much ambition. The family just wanted to serve another state like before.

Chapter 2616: Returning Girls

The Golden Skull Alliance had already left the Sentinel Kingdom. The combined fleet passed through a number of random star systems in other states as it slowly made its way to the Komodo-Vicious Mountain border.

At one of these stops, the ships of the Glory Seekers, Larkinson Clan and Cross Clan just transitioned out of FTL travel.

Thousands of mechs quickly emerged from the carriers in order to set up patrols. The starships all converged together in order to correct for the drift that occurred during their traversal.

A corvette that was already parked in the star system instantly approached the arriving fleet. The unknown vessel initially aroused a lot of vigilance from the fleet, but soon it became evident that the corvette belonged to the Hexers.

After some quick communication, the Larkinson fleet invited the corvette to approach the Spirit of Bentheim.

The vessel was only a hundred meters long. Along with her narrow hull, practically every other starship in the Larkinson fleet looked like a giant in comparison to this tiny courier vessel!

The Hexer corvette was not allowed to dock with the Spirit of Bentheim. Who knew if the ship was secretly packed with explosives or something?

Instead, the factory ship dispatched a shuttle that briefly mated with the Hexer vessel's passenger hatch.

Soon enough, the shuttle returned to the Spirit of Bentheim. Once the vehicle docked in the hangar bay, a number of Larkinsons dropped by in order to meet some returning people.

"Meow."

Lucky curiously looked at the shuttle as Maikel held the cat in his arms.

"Are you looking forward to seeing Maisie Ann and Rennie again?" Maikel asked.

"Meow."

"I wonder if they have become smarter than us." Zanthar wondered. "We need to show them that our teacher has taught us well!"

As Maikel and Zanthar shared their guesses, Ves calmly waited for the other two Larkinson seeds to emerge from the shuttle.

Even though the Larkinson seeds weren't as important anymore, Ves had still accepted the responsibility of turning them into qualified mech designers.

Every mech designer had a responsibility to teach the next generation. This custom was so ingrained in the mech industry that not even Ves wanted to defy this tradition.

While teaching others took up precious time, he gained plenty of benefits along the way. In the future, he would definitely step up his teaching. He might even get involved in the Larkinson University of Technology in order to disseminate some of his ideas.

That was not going to happen anytime soon, though. For now, it was already sufficient to provide one-on-one teaching or just make use of virtual schools.

"They're coming!"

The hatch finally slid open. Two women floated out and landed on the deck of the hangar bay.

A strange silence swept in the area.

The two young men studied the women carefully. Due to the latter's strict learning environment, Maisie Ann and Rennie weren't able to correspond very often with their families.

All four Larkinson seeds had changed over the course of a year.

The men had grown taller, though they still hadn't shed all of the traces of their youth. The main change lay in their demeanor.

Ever since Ves guided Maikel into discovering his main passion, the young man had become more driven. Maikel spent a lot of time brushing up his knowledge on programming and artificial intelligences. While he hadn't accrued enough expertise to speak with authority on these subjects, he seemed less like a mech design student and more like an actual mech designer as of late.

Zanthar's transformation was not as drastic. His interest in heavy firepower was not as unique and exciting. Nonetheless, his studies had definitely kept apace. No matter if it

was kinetic weapons, energy weapons or missiles, Zanthar had gained a lot of insight in heavy guns.

What particularly helped his progress was the release of the Transcendent Punishers!

The heavy artillery mech was practically perfect for Zanthar. The student frequently visited the mech stables where the Transcendent Punishers were stowed. Ves didn't actually know what he actually did over there, but it was fine as long as Zanthar kept up his progress.

"Hello boys." Maisie Ann greeted.

The two girls seemed to have enjoyed a growth spurt. They had grown significantly taller, so much so that Ves actually suspected they had undergone a Hexer procedure to raise their height!

That was not the extent of their physical changes. Though their sharp and militaristic Hippolyta uniforms did not show off their physique, Ves could tell that they were a lot more athletic than before.

It appeared the two girls also went through a lot of physical training, which was not typical for a mech design program.

Yet the biggest change was not how they looked, but how they acted. Even though Maisie Ann and Rennie hadn't spoken any other words, their stiff postures, confident body language and judging stares reminded Ves uncomfortably of his wife and other Hexers.

Was he greeting a pair of Larkinsons or a pair Hexers today?

As Maikel and Zanthar lost their voices, Ves stepped in to take over the greeting.

"Welcome back to the Larkinson Clan, girls. I wish you would have been able to attend Hippolyta longer, but..."

Both girls instantly loosened up a bit and bowed in front of Ves.

"It's okay, sir." Maisie Ann said. "Our professors recommended us to go back as well. If the Fridaymen ever manages to cross over into the Hegemony, our safety can't be guaranteed. Your mech models inflicted so much damage on our enemies that they might aim to kidnap us. It was better for us to leave."

"Have you made any plans or arrangements with regards to your future studies?"

Rennie nodded. "Hippolyta already placed us into a virtual class. Our professors also got in touch with Miss Gloriana. She promised to supplement our program with practical lessons and hands-on learning."

Ves did not expect to hear that. While he and his wife didn't discuss everything, she should have told him about this beforehand!

"Oh. I see." He replied. "I guess that is the best way to ensure continuity in your studies. It's too abrupt for the two of you to quit your orthodox education when you are already immersed in it for a year."

"We're happy to continue our studies with the professors at Hippolyta. Gloriana has also earned their approval to take over some of their lessons. We don't need any other arrangements."

"That's good to hear." Ves awkwardly replied.

His plan to take over their study programs died in his mind. It seemed that Ves didn't get to raise them into qualified mech designers anymore.

Well, it wasn't a big deal. If others already took care of Maisie Ann and Rennie, Ves wouldn't have to split up his teaching time among too many students.

"Well, Zanthar and Maikel can bring you to your new quarters. Since you are still students, you have been assigned to the lower accommodation decks."

"It's enough." Rennie spoke.

Since it didn't appear that Ves would become their mentors, he figured that he wasn't needed here anymore.

"Well, I have to get back to the design lab. I hope you enjoy your stay aboard this ship."

As Ves turned around and left, the four Larkinson seeds awkwardly faced each other.

"Lead the way."

"Uhm, okay. This way, please."

A bot carrying luggage floated out of the shuttle and followed behind the two girls. After Maisie Ann and Rennie made sure they hadn't left anything behind, they prodded the boys to move.

As the foursome exited the hangar bay and slowly made their way down the lower accommodation decks, the boys began to ask some questions.

"How is Hippolyta?"

"It's strict, but fair. Our professors pushed us as hard as we could, but we never let them down."

"Was it hard being a foreigner over there?"

"It was, at first. As I've already said, it got easier once our clan patriarch helped the Hex Army. Our classmates had begun to admire us in our second semester. It didn't matter that we used to be third-raters."

Rennie strode closer to Maikel and patted his shoulder. "Hand him over."

"Huh?"

"Lucky. Hand him over."

It would have been one thing if Rennie asked politely, but Maikel was affronted by her commanding tone.

"I'm in charge of him right now!"

"Meow?" Lucky looked confused.

Instead of arguing with him further, Rennie swept forward and wrenched apart his arms!

As soon as Maikel's grip loosened, the female mech design student instantly swept Lucky's body and dragged him away!

"Hey! He's mine!"

"Not anymore." Rennie harrumphed as she cuddled the befuddled gem cat against her chest. "Lucky is too cute to leave in your brutish hands."

"Who are you calling brute!? Did those Hexers brainwash you or something?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Maikel. We're still Larkinsons. We just gained more confidence as women."

Attitudes quickly worsened. Maikel and Zanthar quickly learned that Maisie Ann and Rennie were very different women now. Hippolyta had taught them more than how to design mechs!

"Give Lucky back!"

"Haha! No way! You're too weak!"

The Larkinson seeds didn't even make it to the lower accommodation decks. They descended into a chaotic wrestling match. By the time the security officers responded to an alert, they had to pry Maisie Ann and Rennie from the beaten boys!

Throughout the tussle, Lucky phased out of Rennie's shoulders and floated to the side. His tail aimlessly flicked back and forth as he looked at the impromptu wrestle match in confusion.

"Meow?"

As this small incident took place, Ves did not return to the design lab immediately. Instead, he veered off to his personal workshop, otherwise known as his mancave.

When Ves entered his personal working space, he lamented the lack of personalisation. Due to his design work, he hadn't been able to spend much time in his workshop as he liked. He hadn't even touched his ELKINE 3D printer!

Hopefully, that was about to change. As Ves looked around, he already planned to bring in some additions.

For now, he had more immediate concerns to deal with. As he strode forward to the assembly system, he viewed the mech that had just been brought into place.

The Quint was one of his most spiritually-developed mechs. Only the Devil Tiger and the Shield of Samar topped it in terms of spiritual development.

Soon enough, Ves felt a very harmonious force of will approaching from the other side. Venerable Joshua Larkinson walked up to Ves and opened his arms for a friendly hug.

"Patriarch!"

"You've come. Good!"

As the two men shared a brief hug, they separated and directed their gaze to the Quint.

"Sir, if I may ask, why did you order us to transfer the Quint to this workshop?"

"I'd like to perform an experiment. Maybe several." Ves answered.

Venerable Joshua looked uncertain. "Is it necessary to experiment on the Quint? It's working fine so far. While it is not entirely a second-class mech, its upgrades have made it quite competitive. The armor is especially good!"

It had better be considering that it was made out of Unending alloy!

Ves sighed. "The Quint is one of the toughest mechs we have, but it's offensive strength is too weak. Unless we replace its entire internal architecture, it won't be able to keep up against other second-class mechs. I think it's time to repurpose the Quint. I intend to reassign this mech and hand it over to another expert candidate."

"Oh." Joshua's mood lowered. "That.. makes sense. I will miss piloting the Quint, but if it will help another clansmen, then I guess it's for the best."

"Cheer up, Joshua." Ves patted his shoulder. "I've designed several second-class mechs that you might be interested in piloting."

Joshua looked up in realization. "Will you allow me to pilot the Transcendent Punisher?!"

"That's not exactly what I have in mind. A mech pilot as talented as you will fare much better with a mobile mech. I'd like to perform another experiment. Tell me, are you interested in piloting a Hexer mech?"

Chapter 2617: Augmentation Contract

Aside from designing mechs, Ves could strengthen the Larkinson Clan in other ways.

While his recent priorities left him too busy to spend his time on other priorities, his mech design projects had finally reached an advanced stage.

Ves, Gloriana and Juliet had already settled all of the difficult design choices. All six mech designs currently under development became functionally complete to the point where it became viable to fabricate some prototypes.

At this stage, the role of Journeymen was not as crucial anymore. Ves could simply assign some design teams to borrow a production line to fabricate a prototype before testing it whenever the fleet transitioned out of FTL travel.

Ves only needed to return to the design lab once the prototype testing sessions yielded the necessary hard data. That was when he needed to comb through all of the solid proof in order to derive solutions to the problems the simulations had overlooked.

If his assistants became more competent, then Ves didn't even need to spend much time on optimizing a mech design through this method. He could simply set an overall direction and let the design teams perform lots of calculations and simulate a lot of different outcomes to obtain a solution.

They weren't here yet, though, but Ves was hopeful his assistant mech designers would catch up once they obtained some augments.

The Braves who took part in the Nyxian Gap Campaign could technically redeem a set of free second-class augments straight away, but each of them chose to keep this option in reserve.

Not a single mech designer was stupid. They knew that the opportunity to upgrade their genes and to integrate their brains with cranial implants was an irreversible choice. While the gene mod templates and implant models offered by the Larkinson Biotech Institute were pretty decent, they were not considered high-end.

Those who upgraded earlier gained an immediate boost in capabilities. This would allow them to upgrade their productivity by several times, thereby allowing them to earn much more Larkinson merits.

However, in the future, their rash choice to settle for mediocre augments would likely bite them in the butt! Any colleague who waited patiently and obtained better augments would eventually overtake the early birds!

Of course, mech designers shouldn't delay their augmentation too long. Once they turned middle age or older, they already passed through the time where they could have developed rapidly. They also had less time to make use of their augmented capabilities.

What was even more important was that the Design Department wouldn't be able to squeeze as much work out of these slowpokes!

Therefore, every mech designer working for the Design Department had to make their own judgement about the right time to augment themselves.

Every assistant currently knew that the Golden Skull Alliance was heading for the Life Research Association to recruit some augmentation specialists. Therefore, choosing to augment themselves now was too premature.

"We should wait a couple of years until the new augmentation experts have settled down."

"A couple of years? We should wait at least a decade! Our clan will be much richer at that time. We'll also be in the Red Ocean where we have access to much better tech!"

"A decade is too long. We'll be in our forties and still be stuck as assistants."

"It's not as if extra genes and a brain chip can turn you into a Journeyman. There is much more to it than that."

The design team vigorously discussed this issue. More and more assistants became convinced they needed to wait until the Larkinson Clan found its footing in the Red Ocean before they chose to augment themselves. Some were even willing to wait 15 or 20 years in order to ensure they obtained the very best the clan had to offer at that time!

Suffice to say, this was a huge delay, not just to the mech designers in question, but also to the Design Department.

Ves did not want to see his assistants remain stuck at their baseline human levels for two whole decades!

He discussed the problem with Gloriana when they returned to their grand stateroom in the evening.

"Meow.."

Lucky, who had finished another shift as Calabast's sniffer, plopped tiredly on Gloriana's lap.

"Miaow!"

Clixie, who wanted to settle on Gloriana's lap as well, angrily pushed Lucky's body away before claiming the prized spot herself!

"Meow?"

Before Lucky could push Clixie out of the perch he claimed, a different cat squashed onto his back.

Nyaaaaa!

Goldie knew that it wasn't proper for her to materialize in the view of others, but she had less qualms about showing up in Ves and Gloriana's personal home. The monitoring system here was completely closed and the bodyguards such as Nitaa and the rest were all trustworthy.

In fact, Ves didn't have to obfuscate Goldie's existence anymore. It was easy to mistake her as a personal avatar.

Seeing that their cats were having fun, Ves summoned Bygul through his comm.

The electronic cat instantly appeared into existence.

[Mew.]

The other three cats instantly froze and stared.

"Miaow."

Nyaaaa?

"Meow!"

Before a jealous Lucky could swipe his claws at the latest cat, Ves issued a warning.

"Stop that! Bygul is here to stay. Get along with him, or else!"

Now that Lucky, Clixie and Goldie became preoccupied with Bygul, Ves turned back to his wife and continued to explain his concerns.

"The majority of our Braves and Erudites lack meaningful augmentations. Their productivity is too low as a result. I want to encourage them to augment themselves as soon as possible. Each year that passes while they remain pure is another year that passes where they can only perform a tenth of the work they can accomplish if they are brought up to a better standard."

Gloriana frowned a bit. "You can't force our assistants to make this choice sooner. To us, it's not a big deal if they settle for cheaper and lower-performing genes and implants. In a couple of decades, we can recruit another batch of assistants and foist higher-performing augments on them. Yet the obvious disparity in performance will upset many of our older mech designers. They aren't objects, Ves. They're people. If they have a choice, they don't want to ruin their future prospects for an immediate boost."

"We're not ruining their future." Ves retorted. "Newer gene mod templates and implants are released every day. Technology is constantly advancing forward. My Archimedes Rubal implant is in fact several centuries out of date compared to the implant models the CFA currently have access to. While I am upset about the fact that I missed out on those fancy toys, I simply don't have the qualifications to obtain them. I chose the lesser of two evils and improved my productivity to such a degree that I can design more mechs and progress my design philosophy much faster than before. This is a worthwhile result."

His words did not manage to convince his wife.

"That's easy for you to say. You don't need to put yourself down. Even I envy your Archimedes Rubal sometimes. The amount of data you can store in your mind is ridiculous! While my Erestal-015 is much more geared towards mech design, it's already out of date. The Erestal-016 implant model has already come out a few months ago. Do you know how that makes me feel?"

Technology was inherently in flux. People always wanted more. Better and better products came out all the time. Ves was not surprised to hear about the release of the Erestal-016.

If not for the fact that Tito Biosystems's current product catalog did not feature anything directly comparable to their ancient Archimedes Rubal model, even Ves would feel frustrated about the fact that a portion of him was becoming obsolete!

They turned back to the issue regarding their assistants.

After a bit of thinking, Gloriana came up with a suggestion.

"It's in our best interest if our assistants augment themselves quickly. While our Design Department will benefit if they obtain better augments, it's more important that they obtain them quickly."

This had to do with the law of diminishing returns. When the performance of an implant was already good, a model that was only 20 percent better might cost at least 10 times as much!

The ludicrous aspect about this phenomenon was that this pattern continued all the way to the top segment of the implant market. The implants utilized by the Big Two and the first-rate states were unimaginably huge, but their effective performance was not insanely better than second-class implants.

Therefore, from the perspective of a state or organization, it was much more worthwhile to buy affordable products in bulk.

Yet Gloriana recognized that individuals didn't see it that way.

"Our assistants don't care too much about achieving the best price-to-performance ratio. A good set of genes and implants directly affects their future accomplishments. To them, it is very much worth it to pay 100 times the price of a normal offering in order to obtain an augment that performs twice as good. As far as they are concerned, the benefits they receive as a result of their choice will definitely pay off in the later stages."

"That sounds good, but they can't afford it." Ves noted. "They'll have to work at least a couple of decades before they can obtain these high-end augments, and that brings us back to our problem."

"Isn't the solution obvious, then? If our assistants can't afford better augments, why don't we subsidize them? It will be expensive for us, but it will pay off in the end considering the assistants will pass on the benefits back to us. It's no different from investing in better hardware."

"Thiss..."

"If you are concerned about getting taken advantage of, then offer them a deal." She continued. "Back in the Hegemony, this is not an unusual practice among some of the mech companies and design studios that I have gotten in touch with. Regular Hexer mech designers can't afford an implant like my Erestal-015, but they can obtain something that is almost just as good by signing a contract with their employers."

That sounded interesting to Ves. "What do these contracts stipulate?"

"Oh, the usual. The employer promises to invest in the mech designer. In return, the mech designer gives up some rights and agrees to work for the employer on a long-term basis. The mech designer herself may not be valuable when they sign a contract, but once she has improved, she can continually deliver a lot of benefits to her employer. In the end, the latter will earn a lot of profit from this transaction, but it's okay, because the mech designer has benefited as well."

This was a win-win arrangement. While the employer was definitely taking advantage of the mech designer, it was not to the point where the weaker party would feel upset. After all, gaining a fantastic implant upfront simply wasn't possible without forking a lot of capital.

Ves developed a new augmentation contract as a result of this discussion.

The deal was simple. The Larkinson Clan would invest in some expensive genetic treatments and implants to improve the capabilities of a mech designer.

In exchange, the mech designer promised to work for the LMC for at least 50 years or longer depending on the prices of the augments.

The mech designer also gave up a bunch of rights and privileges. This meant that they gave up a proportion of their future earnings and could not refuse certain jobs or assignments.

What Ves cared about the most was that the contract also stipulated that any mech designer who advanced to Journeyman or higher would not be entitled to any shares in the LMC!

Fortunately for them, Ves hadn't made any changes to the Exemplar Plan. Regardless of whether they signed an augmentation contract, anyone who performed well enough would still have enough incentives to push themselves.

Once Ves unveiled this plan to the Design Department, it was if a bomb had detonated.

Pretty much every assistant mech designer, from Ketis to Dukan French, signed the contract shortly after they understood the terms!

Ves knew that as long as his clan reached the Red Ocean, his mech designers should quickly be able to augment themselves. At that time, the the design capabilities of the Design Department would skyrocket!

In fact, Major Verle and a number of other leaders took inspiration from the augmentation contract. They were already coming up with their own versions of it in order to upgrade their other personnel!

The biggest downside to this development was that the Larkinson Clan might not be able to afford all of these expensive augments!

Chapter 2618: Joshua's Next Steed

The sudden emergence of augmentation contracts excited the Larkinson Clan!

Not just mech designers, but also other professionals became interested in signing such a fantastic deal. Exobiologists, engineers, ship captains, mech pilots and other people were already applying to sign this new contract!

The storm that arose from this development was so disruptive that Ves was forced to cease his personal experiments and leave his mancave.

In order to avoid wasting too much time on pointless arguments, he decided to discuss this problem with his two closest confidantes.

"Major Verle. Calabast. Come in and take a seat." Ves called as the two leaders entered his main office.

Once they arrived in front of Ves' desk, they took their seats.

"You cooked up quite a huge problem for us." Major Verle began.

"You moved too rashly, Ves." Calabast leaned back on her chair.

The woman patted her lap with her palm, causing Lucky to wake up from his perch on the desk.

"Meow."

The gem cat flew over. When Calabast stretched one of her legs, Lucky plopped his body over her sinuous shin.

Ves called up a document that estimated the total cost of augmentations if everyone requested a high-class implant.

"I never expected that word of this contract would spread beyond the Design Department. While it is incredibly expensive to sign this deal with a mech designer, our profession is very good at making money. That makes this agreement worthwhile. As long as the mech designer doesn't die in an accident or something, our Design Department will definitely earn a high return on investment. This isn't necessarily the case in other sectors."

Major Verle sighed. "You're right. Investing 100 billion hex credits to augment a mech designer is definitely worth it because there is the possibility of earning back multiple

times this sum. The same cannot be said for a mech pilot. Perhaps in one battle, that pilot might die an ignominious death. That is 100 billion hex credits down the drain. Even if the mech pilot remains alive throughout his entire service, the actual benefit we get in return might not even be worth a billion credits. It makes a lot more sense to invest in a higher-performing mech. You'll get much more bang for your buck in this instance."

That was true. The fact of the matter was that the Larkison Clan simply couldn't provide so much welfare for every single clansman.

Calabast raised another object. "I don't like this contract, Ves. It has an element of exploitation in it. Have you forgotten what I said to you? What you've introduced will only bring the Larkinson Clan closer to the Vraken Dynasty. Treating your clansmen as investments and adopting a mentality that is largely centered around profit and loss will turn the entire clan into a hypercompetitive rat race. Larkinsons will be forced to outdo each other, or else they will be unable to pay off their debt in their lifetimes!"

She expressed a lot of ire. Ves realized that she had a point. While it wasn't wrong to improve the capabilities of his people, the wrong approach might do more harm than good.

"I don't want to sacrifice happiness for performance. That was never my intention." Ves quickly replied.

"Then figure something out."

The three of them swapped ideas with each other. They discussed several options and solutions. With the help of Calabast's personal insights, they came up with a new and more cohesive plan.

"Augmentation contracts can improve the performance of our key personnel, so we can't give them up." Ves summed up his thoughts. "However, there is no need to extend them to the general population. It's too excessive and puts too much strain on our finances. We will establish a very strict list of occupations that are eligible for this deal. For now, that includes mech designers, naval engineers, researchers, senior officers, expert candidates, expert pilots and a bunch of other people."

These professions all played an essential role to the clan. Boosting their capabilities either improved the profitability of the LMC or increased the survivability of the Larkinson fleet.

Even if augmenting certain people wouldn't actually deliver a profit to the Larkinson Clan, it was still worth it to do so for other reasons.

One of the most important principles added to the augmentation contract was that it did not impose a debt on the signee!

This was one of Calabast's main demands.

"If the Larkinson Clan begins to operate like a business, your clansmen will behave in a way that aligns with that. This is not conducive to the happiness of your people. A bit of competition is good, but too much of it will warp our culture."

"We can still lose a lot of money, though. The augmentation contracts are bound to become a burden to the balance sheet." Major Verle pointed out.

Calabast remained confident. "We can handle it. As long as Ves is around, we'll always be able to make more money."

It was very difficult to quantify the profits and losses with this new arrangement. Ves found it difficult to accept such a murky outcome.

Still, the price was not too big.

"As long as we limit the eligibility of this contract, our clan won't have to pay too much money upfront. Our finances will be able to bear it, though our spending on other assets will definitely be affected." Ves concluded.

This was the end of the matter. After Ves introduced the added rules, the excitement throughout the clan had died down. There simply weren't enough people who were important enough to apply for this deal.

Ves knew that in the future, the burden may even be less. As long as the clan grew more prosperous, the parents might be able to use their earnings to set their children up for success. Even regular clansmen might be able to earn enough Larkinson merits to obtain some decent augmentations early in their lives.

Since most augmentations were irreplaceable, this meant that augmentation contracts lost effect to those who already improved their capabilities.

All in all, the augmentation contract was tailored to poorer clansmen who managed to work their way up through a combination of hard work and talent. Augmenting their capabilities yielded the most drastic increase in benefits!

When Ves returned to his personal workshop, he resumed one of his personal projects.

Before he was ready to prepare the Quint for another mech pilot, he had to put together a new mech for Venerable Joshua.

While Ves could have assigned Joshua to one of the clan's many existing second-class mechs, this was a wasteful option.

An expert pilot was capable of unleashing much greater performance if he piloted a better mech.

It would have been best if Ves was able to deliver an expert mech to Venerable Joshua, but that was not an option in the short term.

He had no choice but to take a step back and give the expert pilot the best possible LMC mech that he had ever designed up to this point.

He actually had two mech models to choose from. The more unconventional one was fabricating another Devil Tiger to Joshua.

These days, ASMAS was no longer unaffordable to Ves. A basic batch of pure ASMAS cost as much as two to three Hexer combat carriers. Gloriana probably had to make a lot of sacrifices in order to deliver a batch to him, but that was in the past.

However, ASMAS at this price range was quite limited in performance. In fact, it couldn't even process Unending alloy! The only way to improve the capabilities of the initial batch of ASMAS was to upgrade it. This was insanely expensive, so much so that it was better for Ves to buy a more expensive brand of ASMAS right away.

Ves did not do so. No matter how much he paid, the nanomaterial he had access to simply wasn't capable of processing first-class alloys.

"Besides, the Devil Tiger is an outdated design. With my current design ability, I can design a second-class iteration that performs a lot better right out of the gate."

Even then, Ves rejected this option. The Devil Tiger was a one-off experiment in his mind. Ever since his mother snatched his first masterwork mech, it belonged solely to his father.

It wasn't safe to revisit his Devil Tiger design. The risk of someone associating the original with any derivative mechs was too great!

Ves had little choice but to switch his selection to one of the most powerful mobile mechs he designed.

The Valkyrie Redeemer and its variants immediately came to mind. He crossed out the base model and the regular variants. While each of them had their strong points, their overall performance was too average.

To be honest, he really wanted to build a Valkyrie Brunhild. Its production cost was around 1.6 billion credits. The Brunhild variant not only incorporated a shield generator, but also infused a modest quantity of Rorach's Bone in its frame!

The mech was incredibly suitable for Hexer expert candidates. The mech was powerful enough to protect the lives of future expert pilots, but not expensive enough to break the bank.

It was too bad that Ves lacked one of the most crucial requirements to fabricate a Valkyrie Brunhild. While it was not a problem for him to purchase the materials required to fabricate a second-class mech-grade shield generator, he didn't have any way of obtaining Rorach's Bone!

He knew that the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony harvested a lot of Rorach's Bone during the Glowing Planet Campaign. However, both states treated it as a strategic material, so they were very careful about using it up. For now, only expert mechs and other high-end mechs incorporated this incredibly useful material.

Ves turned his eyes to the stepped-down version, the Valkyrie Avenger. The Avenger variant cost half as much as the Brunhild variant. It employed a cheaper and non-regenerating armor system while also leaving out the shield generator.

This was sufficient for most elite Hexer mech pilots, but Ves found it rather tasteless.

For an expert pilot like Joshua, the Valkyrie Avenger was too weak while the Valkyrie Brunhild was unattainable.

Since neither of these options were viable, Ves decided on a third solution.

He designed another variant.

In order to save time, Ves did not design a proper variant. Instead, he used the Valkyrie Brunhild as a base and stripped it of every element that Ves wasn't able to deliver. He replaced the entire armor system with one based entirely out of Unending alloy.

Even though Ves wanted to save up this precious material for Venerable Joshua's actual expert mech, it was not a big deal to make use of it straight away. He could always recycle the Unending alloy at a later date.

While Unending alloy possessed different properties than the mix of alloys employed by the armor system of the Brunhild, it was not very troublesome to perform a direct replacement.

"Bygul, please optimize the armor plating layout of the rear leg sections of this design." Ves commanded.

[Optimizing now. This process will take an estimated time of 5 minutes and 32 seconds.] The electronic cat dutifully said in his clipped voice.

Ves smirked. With the immense processing power of the ASTERA AI core at his disposal, this kind of work no longer took hours or days to complete.

If he wanted to, he could customize his new Valkyrie mech even further. While that was an attractive prospect, it took too much time to tailor the mech to Venerable Joshua.

Ves didn't want to spend weeks or months on what was supposed to be a temporary stopgap solution until Venerable Joshua obtained a proper expert mech.

There was another reason why he didn't want to design a custom mech. He wanted to pass on the mech to an expert candidate once Venerable Joshua moved on to an expert mech. The Valkyrie mech had to be universal enough to accommodate other mech pilots.

"Besides, if I want to customize the mech even further for a specific mech pilot, I'll have to bring in Gloriana."

That was not conducive to this little experiment!

Chapter 2619: Valkyrie Prime

Though Ves already decided to make his next Valkyrie mech universal, he still brought in Venerable Joshua in order to keep the latter in the loop. While the expert pilot didn't know a thing about the technical side of mech design, it was enough for him to gain a good impression of the overall idea behind the mech.

"The Valkyrie Prime has the potential to surpass the Valkyrie Brunhild." Ves explained as he operated a very sophisticated forging machine. "That said, it is not a certainty that it will deliver on its promise. It depends on whether my next experiment succeeds."

What he was doing right now was very amazing. The forging machine and other machines in the ELKINE production line were some of the most top-of-the-line workshop equipment the Hexers had ever made.

Ves had no confidence in manipulating a material as hard as Unending alloy with the GAIA production line. Yet now that Ves had access to extremely powerful gear, he gained a lot of new options!

Processing Unending alloy was one of them. Even though the forging machine experienced a lot of difficulties right now, the fact that Ves was able to shape this wonder material without needing to borrow Lucky's teeth was already an incredible improvement.

He no longer had to pretend to be a caveman in order to make use of Unending alloy!

The only downside was that the entire process took much more time than Ves expected. He had to spend days to complete a job that would have taken hours if he chose another material.

That was not what he wanted. While he could have made the Valkyrie Prime out of Breyer alloy, Ves wanted to utilize something more interesting.

Unending alloy possessed two invaluable properties. Aside from being incredibly hard, it was also capable of storing spiritual energy.

He wanted to leverage both properties in order to elevate the Valkyrie Prime!

Ever since Ves salvaged a lot of Unending alloy from the Nyxian Gap, he frequently tried to figure out how to utilize it better. While it was very simple to employ Unending alloy as a regular first-class alloy, that wasn't good enough for him. A spiritually-reactive material should be able to bring much more to the table!

For this reason, Ves decided that the Valkyrie Prime Project was a good opportunity to test out one of his hypotheses. If it didn't work, then no harm was done.

"This Unending alloy of yours is very precious, right? Will you leave it behind in the Valkyrie Prime once I move on?" Venerable Joshua curiously asked.

Ves immediately laughed. "Hahaha! No way. An expert candidate isn't worthy enough to pilot a mech that is clad by this alloy. What if an enemy recognizes its value and goes all out to capture the Valkyrie Prime? I'd be losing a priceless treasure! It's only because I'm not capable of delivering an expert mech yet that I'm using it on a non-expert mech. Don't think that this will happen again once our clan gains its first proper expert mechs."

"So you'll eventually strip the Unending alloy from the Prime?"

"Yup. Your expert mechs needs it more than the Prime. I don't have enough of it to go around, you know. Don't worry. The Prime won't be scrapped once it loses its exterior. I'll just clad it with Breyer alloy instead so that it can continue to be passed on to other worthy mech pilots."

"Doesn't that sound cruel, sir?" Joshua looked upset. "Mechs are alive. What you plan to do sounds no different from skinning someone alive only to graft the skin of another person afterwards."

Ves shook his head, though he made sure to keep a close eye on his current procedure. "There are different forms of life, Joshua. Don't make the mistake of humanizing mechs. They are a different form of existence that operates by different rules. For one, mechs are made to serve a specific purpose. Second, their mechanical nature means that there is nothing wrong with handling them like they are composed of many building blocks. Swapping one block with another block doesn't change the

essence of the mech. Their tolerance for change is quite high as long as the original character of the mech is preserved. This is why the mechs we have upgraded haven't lost their glows."

"I see.. I think."

"Every mech has a purpose, Joshua. Contrast that to humans like you and me. We are products of nature and random chance. Our purpose is actually very vague. We are biological organisms that evolved to our current form out of an instinctual and deeply-rooted desire to reproduce."

"So because mechs can't reproduce, they don't have as many rights as us?" Joshua asked in puzzlement.

Ves wanted to palm his face.

"No. That's not the point I'm trying to make. Look, all I am saying is that while I would like to treat a mech with as much respect as an actual human, it is not wrong to treat them as a machine whenever it is necessary. This is why they are built. You can rip off their arms and install a completely different one and they'll be fine."

Joshua finally comprehended what Ves was trying to say. His force of will fluctuated a bit as he internalized his latest lesson.

"Why do you call the mech you're making the Valkyrie Prime?"

"Because it will be the best Valkyrie mech that I will probably make, at least when it comes to the current generation. If the Valkyrie Redeemer is the starting point, the Valkyrie Prime will probably be the ending point of this generation of this product line. While I cannot say whether the experiment I have in mind will make the Valkyrie Prime successful, as long as my experiment is partially successful, it is not wrong to put it above the Valkyrie Brunhild!"

This was quite a bold claim! The Valkyrie Brunhild was the favorite mech of many Hexer expert candidates. Some of them had even managed to undergo apotheosis with the help of this premier mech!

As Ves slowly fabricated all of the armor plating for the Valkyrie Prime, he continued to chat with Venerable Joshua. He always wanted to exchange views with the remarkable expert pilot, but his heavy workload prevented him from doing so up until now. Both of them cherished the opportunity to learn from each other.

"Why are you working on the Valkyrie Prime by yourself?"

"I intend this to be a personal project." Ves answered. "While I collaborate with Gloriana all the time, I need to flex all of my muscles every once in a while. I'm also trying to do

something different with Valkyrie Prime. My wife won't be able to provide any help. Besides, at least one of us should stay behind in the design lab in order to direct our design teams."

"Will the Valkyrie Prime be worse without your wife's involvement."

"I wouldn't necessarily say that. It will be.. different."

The Valkyrie Prime did not undergo too many changes. Sure, there was room for optimization. Sure, Gloriana might be able to fabricate higher-quality parts than Ves. Sure, she may be more precise when it came to assembling the parts. Yet bringing her in for what was supposed to be a relatively quick job.

If Ves was being really honest, he wanted to exert total control over this project. He wanted to make a Valkyrie mech that conformed to 'his' vision instead of 'their' vision.

The fabrication run continued. Once Ves finally processed all of the Unending alloy into armor plating and structural components, he quickly moved on to fabricating the remaining parts of the mech.

While the Valkyrie Prime utilized a lot of expensive exotics, it was no problem for Ves to obtain them as long as they were sold on the open market.

During the fabrication process, Ves quickly familiarized himself with the advanced production equipment of the workshop. While the top-end Hexer machines demanded a lot of skill and expertise to operate to their fullest, he was a quick learner. His experience with operating other Hexer production equipment already provided him with a good foundation.

He only had to slow down when it was time for him to fabricate the shield generator. While he had never built a mech-grade shield generator before, he knew the theory and principles behind them. He worked carefully in order to make sure the shield generator did not become misaligned and produce an unstable energy shield.

"Phew. It's finally done!"

"Will you assemble the mech now, sir?"

"Yup! This is not going to take as long."

Both Ves and Venerable Joshua approached the assembly system which soon became active. The powerful equipment lifted up and put the parts into place with so much ease and precision that it took a lot less time than expected to assemble the Valkyrie Prime!

Once Ves installed the final part, the medium marauder mech had finally taken shape!

"Uhm..." Venerable Joshua looked up at the tall and feminine-shaped mech. "I'm not sure whether I'm ready to pilot this mech."

"What's wrong?"

"Isn't it a Hexer mech? Now that it's complete, I feel it's disrespectful for me to pilot it. You should lend it to the Penitent Sisters or Glory Seekers instead."

Ves frowned and turned around. He stepped closer to Venerable Joshua and completely ignored the expert pilot's wavering force of will.

"You once claimed to me that it is your desire to pilot every mech that I have ever designed, is that correct?"

"I did have that aspiration, but this is different!" Joshua nervously claimed.

"How can that be? You have never paid exclusivity in mind before. You successfully managed to pilot my Ylvainan mechs. Even though you have only reluctantly bonded with the Holy Soldier, Deliverer and Transcendent Punisher mechs, that is by far the best result that I have ever seen from a non-Ylvainan."

"That's just because I respect the Ylvainan Faith!" Joshua retorted. "As a Brighter, I don't believe in any religion, but that doesn't stop me from keeping an open mind. It's different when it comes to hexism and Hexer traditions. We're both men. How can we possibly be okay with women oppressing our kind? That is just not okay. I've been tempted to pilot the Valkyrie Redeemer a few times, but whenever I get close, I feel uncomfortable."

Normally, Ves agreed with Venerable Joshua, but this was a special situation!

"Describe what you mean by 'uncomfortable'. Is the mech repelling you or are you just squeamish about piloting a mech that is designed to be piloted by a woman?"

"Uhm... the latter." Venerable Joshua honestly admitted.

"Come over here, then."

Ves held the expert pilot's arm and dragged him over to the foot of the Valkyrie Prime.

At this distance, the dormant glow of the mech was already very strong!

Since Ves personally designed and fabricated the mech, there was no way its glow and spiritual foundation was weak!

The strong and imposing death-oriented glow did not discomfort Ves very much due to his intimate relationship with the Superior Mother.

Joshua reacted differently. He didn't have much exposure to the Superior Mother's glow. While his powerful will allowed him to block the glow entirely, that was not conducive to bonding with the mech.

When the expert pilot reluctantly lowered his guard, the Valkyrie Prime seemed to stare at his soul! He quickly solidified his will again!

"I don't think I'll be able to get along with this mech, patriarch. It.. doesn't seem to like me. I don't think I can do anything about that."

"Nonsense. The two of you are strangers right now. It's not a surprise that the mech is not that friendly to you. I think I have a way of remedying this issue. This is also related to my next experiment."

"And what is that?"

Ves didn't answer the expert pilot directly. Instead, he turned back to the Valkyrie Prime and raised his arms.

"Mother! Are you there? Come meet my friend over here!"

Joshua looked confused. "Didn't you lose your mother when you were— WAIT, WHAT IS THAT?!"

A giant, translucent hand seemed to materialize in existence. It quickly patted against Ves' back, causing him to lose his balance!

"Oof! You're too rough, mom! You're way too strong. Can't you be gentler to your son?"

Chapter 2620: Revelation

The Superior Mother had descended!

Normally, the spiritual product that Ves had made through a bizarre ritual directed her attention elsewhere. With the rapid rise in Hexer worshippers, the Superior Mother seemed to be preoccupied with attending her new flock.

Ves also repeatedly admonished her for showing up out of the blue. He did not want to go about his day only for a giant ghostly hand to appear out of nowhere and smack his body down!

It was fine if only his core bodyguard detail observed the Superior Mother's moves, but he did not want word of her existence to spread!

Fortunately, the Superior Mother must have inherited some of Cynthia's caution. The design spirit no longer manifested herself willy-nilly anymore, though Ves still noticed her peeking at him at times.

To be honest, Ves did not have a good understanding of the Superior Mother's personality. She seemed to embody his original vision of a Hexer ideal, but she might have inherited some of Cynthia's personality and abilities.

At the very least, the Superior Mother truly treated him like he was her son sometimes!

It made him feel quite exasperated. As her creator, Ves was supposed to be a father figure towards the ancestral spirit. Other spiritual products such as Goldie, Lufa, the Illustrious and so on all looked up to him despite possessing more spiritual strength than him. Only the Superior Mother deviated from this pattern!

It was unfortunate that Ves couldn't do anything about it. With trillions of Hexers providing her with spiritual feedback, she had rapidly grown to the point where Ves couldn't really do anything to deter her from doing anything. Despite her age, the Superior Mother already caught up and surpassed Qilanxo, who was previously his strongest design spirit!

If not for the fact that she bumped into a bottleneck, she would have been more insufferable!

Still, no matter how much the Superior Mother changed, she was still affectionate towards him. As long as she believed he was her 'son', Ves was confident he could ask for help.

After all, that was what a good mother should do for her child.

In order to perform his experiment and strengthen the defenses of his clan, Ves threw away his pride. It didn't matter if the Superior Mother treated him like her son instead of her father. Ves would even be willing to wear a dog collar and crawl on all fours if that was what it took for the Superior Mother to lend him her power!

Of course, just because Ves was accustomed to the Superior Mother didn't mean that others were accustomed to seeing a myth come to life!

"W-W-What is that, sir?!" Venerable Joshua reacted with shock!

Expert pilots were known to be fearless. Joshua showed nothing of that. As soon as the giant hand patted Ves to the deck of his personal workshop, the expert pilot jumped back and adopted a defensive posture. His force of will became agitated as well!

"Calm down, Joshua! She's friendly!"

"Are you sure?!"

"I am! There is no need to panic. Stay still and put down your guard. Let the Superior Mother get to know you know better. As long as you gain her approval, you'll be able to pilot the Valkyrie Prime and any other Hexer mech that I've designed with ease."

The prospect of being able to pilot a Hexer mech without feeling rejection aroused Joshua's obsession. His trust and belief in Ves overruled her vigilance against seeing a giant hand coming into existence.

"Really?"

Ves nodded. "Look, I can't explain who or what the Superior Mother truly is, but she is a friend, not an enemy. She is one of several entities who are responsible for helping us all. Have you ever wondered where glows truly come from? Now you know."

The revelation shocked Joshua! As the expert pilot realized the truth behind glows, he clarified some of the mysteries he had been grappling with. Comprehension dawned in his mind.

"No wonder your glow mechs are so remarkable. Ever since you released the Crystal Lord, your mech designs became a lot different. It turns out that you've been partnering up with these.. gods?"

"They are not gods!" Ves immediately insisted. "You can think of them as powerful, incorporeal entities. They are alive in a sense and they can die if they sustain too much damage. Do you remember the so-called 'dark gods' we defeated in the Nyxian Gap? They are a similar kind of existence."

"I see! So that alien woman that came at the end..."

Ves curtly nodded. "Reality is much more complicated than you think. What you see, hear, feel and smell is just the tip of the iceberg. Scientists and researchers have managed to expose more aspects of the multiverse, but they do not claim to have explored more than ten percent of all phenomena in existence. The existence of entities such as the Superior Mother is known to very few people. Now, you are one of them. Please don't disseminate what you have learned today. We can get into a lot of trouble if the Big Two becomes aware of some of the truths they want to keep hidden."

"This..." Venerable Joshua looked lost. "I don't know what to think about this. I never thought that your mechs would be hiding such a massive secret."

"You don't need to overthink this issue. Leave that to researchers such as myself. I will explain everything you need to know about the Superior Mother and my other 'design spirits', as I like to call my incorporeal friends. Let me introduce you to another one while

I am at it. I am sure you are already very familiar with her considering she fought alongside you in the previous battle."

Ves took the Larkinson Mandate from Nitaa and waved it in front of him. "Goldie! Come join the Superior Mother in welcoming Joshua to the fold!"

Nyaaaaa.

The Golden Cat materialized her body just above the book. Joshua looked shocked yet again!

"She.. I can feel her... no, that's not right. I always felt her, but I didn't realize she existed like this. She's not just the source of the glow of the Quint and the other Bright Warriors, right?"

Ves nodded. "She's the invisible glue that binds us Larkinsons together. She's the reason why tens of thousands of adopted clansmen such as you immediately develop a belonging to our clan. She is our invisible guardian against enemies like the dark gods."

Upon his prompting, the Golden Cat and the Superior Mother both drew closer to the expert pilot.

Now that Joshua did not mistake the spiritual entities as possible threats, his force of will no longer closed up like a wall.

Instead, he cautiously opened himself up. As his force of will interacted with both design spirits, Joshua suddenly realized that he was already familiar with them. The design spirits corresponded almost exactly with the glows he came in touch with on a regular basis!

Suffice to say, Venerable Joshua didn't need to be close to the Larkinson Mandate to recognize Goldie's familiar warmth. As Goldie's glowing form floated in his arms, he automatically stroked her back and scratched her chin. The young cat radiated pure affection as she luxuriated in Joshua's comfortable force of will.

Nyaaa~

The Superior Mother's giant hand slowly hovered closer. Though its enormous size intimidated Joshua a bit, his courage as an expert pilot finally asserted itself again.

Since Ves vouched for the giant hand, it shouldn't be a threat.

Fortunately, the Superior Mother did not touch the expert pilot too much. The hand stretched out a finger and softly poked Joshua's body at different angles. With each poke, the ancestral spirit seemed to become more friendly towards him. His will also became more accustomed to the entity's distinct presence.

Ves stood quietly to the side as the powerful spiritual entity seemed to be growing more familiar with his favorite expert pilot. It was as if Ves brought his playmate home one day and introduced him to his mother!

Eventually, his mother satisfied her curiosity. Her change of attitude became very evident as Venerable Joshua experienced remarkable changes in the glow he felt from the giant hand and the Valkyrie Prime that was standing behind him. The Hexer glow no longer felt weird to him. Instead, it became friendlier and more welcoming somehow.

Together with Goldie's warmth, Joshua had the illusion that he was visiting Ves' home!

Unfortunately, being welcomed by the design spirits didn't mean that Venerable Joshua could communicate with them. Ves actually thought that Joshua's life domain bestowed him with the same ability to communicate with other forms of life as him, but it turned out that his talents lied elsewhere.

It wasn't a big deal. The Superior Mother and the Golden Cat both approved of Venerable Joshua, and that was all he needed to leverage their strength the next time he piloted the mechs they watched over.

The truths and insights that Venerable Joshua learned today should be enough to give him an advantage over his fellow peers. Ves was not above playing favorites. It was in his best interest to give Joshua a leg up, if only for his rare and very compatible domain.

Eventually, Goldie went back into the Larkinson Mandate while the Superior Mother's enormous hand faded away.

"Where are they going?"

"Existences like them aren't native to the material realm." Ves answered.

Joshua responded with a dull stare.

"They are like.. ghosts." Ves tried to dumb down his explanation. "They belong to another plane of existence, one exclusive to intangible ghosts like them. While Goldie and the Superior Mother are strong enough to cross over into our physical reality and show up in the way they did, it's quite strenuous to them. They're strong, but they can't exert all of their strength on the dimensions we live in. They need help in order to do so, and that is where my mechs come in. My products are interfaces which connect different entities together."

That was too much for the expert pilot.

Ves helplessly groped his hands in the air. "Let me give you an example. Whenever you pilot the Quint, you form an invisible cooperation that consists of three different living entities. First, there is the mech pilot. You control the machine. Then there is the mech.

It not only serves as an interface, but is also alive in itself. In my early career, that was it. As you have already realized, I introduced a third element later on. Design spirits not only strengthen the mech, but also lend their glows to it. By combining your strengths whenever you pilot a mech, you are able to accomplish feats that you could never have accomplished by yourself. The Unity of Man and Machine that you've formed during the Battle against the Abyss is proof of that!"

This time, Venerable Joshua understood the gist of what Ves was trying to tell him. The continuous realizations enlightened him to such an extent that his willpower altered in character!

As Venerable Joshua turned around and looked up to the Valkyrie Prime, he no longer felt repelled by the Hexer mech. Instead, the dormant mech's glow seemed to embrace him. In turn, his force of will welcomed the glow with much less reserve.

"So a mech is actually like this..." He muttered in fascination.

Ves walked closer until he stood next to the expert pilot. "There is nothing hindering you from piloting the Valkyrie Prime now. The Superior Mother approves of you now that I told her that you are my protector."

"What about the mech itself?" Venerable Joshua cautiously asked.

"That shouldn't be a problem either. Ordinary, my Valkyrie mechs repel any mech pilots who aren't Hexers and who aren't women. However, I've altered that when I worked on the Valkyrie Prime. Since it is my work to begin with, it is easy for me to alter its character a bit. The mech might not completely open its doors to you, but it should at least tolerate your presence."

"Then can I try out this mech?"

"Not yet." Ves shook his head. "I need to perform one more procedure before the Valkyrie Prime is truly complete."