

Mech 2701

Chapter 2701: Lessons Learned

The long and extensive salvaging operation finally came to an end.

After ten continuous days of picking apart the battlefield, the cargo holds of the expedition vessels were all bursting with loot.

During this time, all kinds of scouts, spies, mercenary outfits and even entire salvaging fleets dropped into the star system.

While they all maintained a respectful distance from the expeditionary fleet, Ves felt the pressure to leave nonetheless.

The alliance worked faster in order to grab as many drifting treasures as possible!

All kinds of shuttles, mechs and other vehicles had frantically chased after an uncountable amount of debris and wrecks, each ranked according to their approximate value.

Despite their great size and mass, starship hull plating actually ranked pretty low on the priority list. While the hull of a complete fleet carrier could be worth trillions of hex credits, they took up way too much space.

On a volume basis, a cubic meter of mech materials was worth much more than a cubic meter of starship materials.

Mech designers and shipwrights adopted divergent approaches to their work.

A mech designer always attempted to maximize the value in the smallest possible package. A mech that was oversized and bloated was not only uncompetitive in the market, but also terribly slow and unwieldy.

To a mech designer, a cost-efficient product had to utilize the least materials possible to achieve the strongest possible effect.

It was easy to cook a good meal with excellent, fresh ingredients.

It was a lot harder to achieve the same level of satisfaction when the chef only had access to nutrient packs!

This was also one of the main strengths of Ves. His iconic glow mechs provided a considerable degree of value without raising the cost to produce them. If making mechs alive demanded the inclusion of expensive materials or components that raised their

cost by 50 percent, then the LMC's sales and profit margin would only be a fraction of their current level!

Shipwrights abided by a different set of priorities.

While mech designers always had to abide by volume and mass constraints due to the difficulty of transporting mechs, shipwrights did not have to pay too much attention to these limitations as long as their budget and purpose could accommodate their visions.

Space was vast, so there was unlimited room for star-faring vessels. Whether a corvette was 80 meters long or 120 meters long didn't matter. There was a market for both. The Age of Mechs was a period of time where humanity spread across half the galaxy and beyond. Starships represented the dominant form of travel. The demand for ships was never sated!

Larger starships and especially capital ships always attempted to do as much as possible within the constraints of a given budget.

As long as a customer or client could afford a vessel, shipwrights possessed a wide latitude to configure them in a way that maximized their performance.

Oftentimes, that meant making the hull or key sections bigger. For example, hull plating was a typical area where shipwrights chose to pile up a lot of bulk materials instead of opting for higher-quality alloy formulas. The latter might be more effective, but they were too expensive when applied to the entire exterior of a starship.

As a result of all of these considerations, the expeditionary fleet prioritized mech salvage to a heavy degree.

In any case, most of the mechs fielded by both sides of the Battle of Reckoning consisted of premium or premier mechs.

The Larkinson Clan didn't even bother to pick up the pieces of its broken budget mechs. The Princess Jeckas, Vima Suns and Tamris Stellars were worth only an eighth or less than a typical Fridayman or a traitor clan mech!

It didn't matter to Ves if he filled his starships with mechs fielded by the enemy. There was no need for the Larkinsons to waste their time on trying to restore them for their own use.

The Golden Skull Alliance already contracted a mercenary organization to cover its security needs. This meant that his mech forces didn't need to worry too much about lacking enough strength to protect their fleet, at least for the duration of the contract.

In the next couple of months, Ves intended to address the greatest need of the Larkinson Clan by completing the crucial Giant Killer, Bright Warrior IB and Ferocious Piranha IB designs.

Once the new mech models entered service, the Larkinson Clan would finally gain the strength to fight against state-backed second-rate forces on a roughly equal basis!

Of course, mechs were hardly the only factor that made the previous opponents strong. The skill, teamwork and discipline exhibited by the Fridayman elite mech pilots was very impressive and brutally exposed the lack of accumulation on the part of the Larkinsons.

The harsh truth was that it took a lot more time and effort to nurture true second-class mech pilots!

So far, most of the Larkinson mech pilots just passed through the threshold. They weren't even that good at piloting the more powerful and complicated mechs at this performance level!

"This isn't an easy issue to address." Ves grimaced as he crossed his arms.

Fortunately, the Larkinsons received a lot of help on this aspect. The Penitent Sisters, Glory Seekers and Crossers generously dispatched trainers in order to instruct the eager Larkinson mech pilots.

While it was unrealistic to expect quick results, the Larkinsons would definitely be able to close the gap in a couple of years as long as this pattern continued!

In the medium term, the initial batches of mech cadets would graduate from the Larkinson Mech Academy.

Unlike the mech pilots the Larkinsons hired before, these promising graduates started off with a strong second-class foundation from the start! With the help of the Chiron model, Ves looked forward to witnessing the performance of mech pilots such as Lanie Larkinson.

"That will take some years." Ves grumbled. "For now, the best way to strengthen my troops in the shortest amount of time is to provide them with better mechs."

When the Golden Skull Alliance finally transitioned back into FTL travel, he convened the entire Design Department at the design lab.

The principal designer, the two lead designers and a small army of assistants gathered for the first time in over a week.

Ves even invited his four seeds. Maikel and Zanthar sat noticeably apart from Maisie Ann and Rennie.

Apparently, the young men hadn't made up with the young women as of yet. Considering how much the latter exuded some of the typical demeanor of Hexers, it was no mystery why the boys and girls didn't get along.

Ves dismissed the sight. This issue was beneath him. It may even be beneficial to maintain a strong sense of rivalry between the two groups.

Once the final stragglers entered the compartment, Ves began the meeting.

"Welcome back, everyone. I hope you all had a good time fixing up our broken machines. As mech designers, it is always crucial to accumulate hands-on experience with the products that you have dedicated your lives to develop. I hope that each of you recognize that this side duty is a precious learning opportunity for all of you. I'm no different. When your lives are on the line, you tend to learn much more than when you are safe."

Not every assistant saw the value in this. Their mixed expressions showed that they would rather be spending their time in a safe facility on a boring planet rather than sit in the front seats of a life-threatening event!

Ves merely smirked. They would get used to it one way or another, particularly for his Braves.

He waved his hand, causing a projection to come to life that displayed various clips of the prototypes in action.

"Anyway, the Battle of Reckoning and the aftermath has exposed all of us to how mechs fight, how they break and how they can be put back together. I won't talk about the general insights that you have gained. That is part of your own learning process. Today's meeting is centered around the performance of LMC mechs. The Battle of Reckoning has exposed the strengths and weaknesses of both our finished and unfinished designs in the most realistic test imaginable. Actual battle is always the best way to determine the true performance of any machine."

Everyone nodded. The prototypes of the Bright Warrior IB, Ferocious Piranha IB and other unfinished designs had truly taken part in the fighting.

Even though it wasn't entirely safe or responsible to field the flawed and rough mechs, the situation was too dire to leave them in the hangar bay.

Ves waved his hand, causing the projection to display selected footage of his prime mechs.

"Our prototypes aren't the only mechs that can yield useful insights on our current prototypes. The prime mechs that I have developed are all derived from our existing mech design projects. They are basically souped-up variants of our standard mechs

meant to serve as a stopgap for our expert pilots. The performance of these exceptional mechs may not be comparable to the prototypes, but they provide a good preview of how our mech designs perform at their maximum potential."

Expert pilots were a lot less bothered with the various flaws and inefficiencies in the unfinished mech designs. They either performed so great that these weaknesses simply didn't come into play or they easily compensated for the quirks.

Ketis raised her hand. "What are prime mechs exactly? Are they failed expert mechs or something?"

"They don't even come close." Ves shook his head. "Expert mechs are so much more than what I've managed to cobble together in a matter of weeks. To be honest, I expected a lot more from the prime mechs that I've invented, but I am happy with what I've got. Even if I didn't hit the jackpot, they are still considerably more powerful than standard mechs. They are just right for our current roster of expert pilots while they are waiting to receive their true expert mechs."

"Do you intend to make more prime mechs, sir?" Miles Tovar asked.

"Nope. These machines are just as demanding as expert mechs. Their material requirements are very excessive and they can only be utilized by expert pilots. Since none of our expert candidates broke through recently, there is no need to make more."

"Will you redesign your existing prime mechs?" Juliet Stameross asked a very important question.

Ves had to take his time to come up with his response.

"It's not worthwhile to do so. Upgrading the prime mechs takes too much time and effort. A much more efficient way to increase our comprehensive strength is to address the demand of quality standard mechs in our clan and to start designing expert mechs as soon as possible. The prime mechs are already sufficient as they are now, so I would rather go into detail on how we must alter our existing design projects."

Some of the assistants looked surprised.

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"I'm saying that our initial set of requirements for our mech design projects are flawed. Some of the assumptions that we have made to base our design choices do not match reality. What we must do now is to go over the performance of every prototype and prime mech and systematically identify their various shortcomings, particularly the ones that arise from their designs, and come up with solutions that hopefully lead to better results. Let's begin with the Bright Warrior Version B."

Ves honed in on the Bright Warrior IB straight away because it was already slated to become the mainstay of the Larkinson Clan. He had already identified a couple of subtle issues that he did not want to see in the final product!

He summoned a wireframe projection of the four configurations of the Bright Warrior IB design.

"Let's start with the weapon loadout." Ves began. "The battle has showed us that we need weapons with a bigger punch. The armor of the enemy mechs bounced off so many attacks from our budget mechs that the performance of our mech forces was simply embarrassing. As far as I'm concerned, we must upscale the weaponry of the Bright Warrior IB so that we will never end up in this situation again!"

Chapter 2702: Design Revisions

The initial review and respecification session was a great success.

Once it got going, the mech designers of the Design Department all provided their input on what they thought about the performance of the derivative products of their current design projects.

The Bright Warrior Mark I Version B design came under intense scrutiny. While it was technically unfinished, it was functionally complete.

Originally, the design teams working on this project thought they would just spend a month or so to put the prototypes through their paces and optimize the design based on the results.

This was no longer the plan.

Ves was so dissatisfied with the performance of his mech forces that he wanted to make sure that they carried their weight in battle next time.

The differences in performance had become especially stark when the mech designers all watched footage of the Larkinson mechs fighting side-by-side with Glory Seeker and Crosser mechs.

Whereas the latter two were roughly able to match the Fridayman and traitor clan mechs blow-for-blow, the Larkinson mechs were like kids trying to enter a sports match played by adults!

The others just thought that the Larkinson mech forces were rather cute. The budget mechs fielded by the Avatars of Myth, Living Sentinels and so on were so lacking in strength that the reputation of the Larkinson Clan should have been in shambles if not for some redeeming factors!

The only bright spots for the clan was the excellent performance of the Transcendent Punishers, the Valkyrie Redeemers, the prime mechs and most notably his battle networks.

These were the only reasons why the Larkinson Clan reluctantly managed to retain the respect of the powerful Crossers.

Of course, this was not a sustainable pattern. The Larkinsons urgently needed to carry their own weight in the expeditionary fleet or else it became untenable for them to maintain a leading position within the alliance.

It didn't matter if Ves possessed more MTA merits than Patriarch Reginald Cross. Battle strength was the ultimate indicator in whether they would be able to survive in the chaotic Red Ocean.

Without the strength to fight against strong opponents, the Larkinsons didn't even need to bother with passing through the beyonder gate. Their rivals and competitors could easily squash them whenever they wished if this was the case!

"Every version of the Bright Warrior IB aside from maybe the lancer mech configuration is deficient in terms of offensive power." Ves opined. "The rifleman mech configuration needs a more powerful rifle. The swordsman mech configuration needs a better weapon and a more powerful means to exert mechanical power through its limbs. While the need to improve the strength of the space knight configuration is not as great, it still shares a common root with the other ones so it will get stronger anyway."

The needs of every configuration was different from the others, so it was not easy to suggest changes that improved all of them at once.

What was particularly challenging was that the rifleman mech configuration possessed different priorities from the melee mech configurations. The mech designers had to be very creative about making changes to the modular components instead of the base platform.

Fortunately, Ves had the assistance of Gloriana and Juliet. Both women excelled at different aspects of technical design and provided workable solutions to many of the identified problems.

Overall, each configuration received comprehensive upgrades to their damage potential. Ves outright decided to raise the design budget by a fourth in order to allow for enough improvements to turn the Bright Warriors into a real threat against second-class military-grade mechs!

This was not a cheap decision to make. Ves felt a bit reluctant to increase the price of what was supposed to be the foundational mech of the Larkinson Clan.

To put it bluntly, the Bright Warrior IB was the 'beginner' mech model that many new recruits were initially supposed to pilot. While the mech model was rather bland and lacked pronounced strength, they were designed to be the ideal mechs to get new mech pilots accustomed to fighting alongside other Larkinsons.

Once the mech pilots 'leveled up' for a lack of a better description, they could move on to piloting the high-level mech models of the Larkinson Clan.

The Transcendent Punisher, the Valkyrie Redeemer, the Giant Killer and the Ferocious Piranha all fell into this category.

Each of them were advanced machines that could deliver much better performance due to their superior specs and vastly higher skill ceilings. Of course, their skill floors were raised as well, so inexperienced mech pilots wouldn't be able to use them at their full potential for quite some time.

That was very obvious when Ves compared the performance of the Ylvainan mech pilots with the performance of the Destiny Hammer mech pilots.

The latter were the real deal. Their marksmanship, control, knowledge and other traits were truly the most impressive that Ves had ever witnessed from heavy artillery specialists.

The duel between the Transcendent Punishers and the Destiny Hammers clearly exposed that just providing good mechs to his mech forces was not enough.

It was better than doing nothing, though.

After a long and fruitful discussion, the mech designers made many significant revisions to the Bright Warrior IB design.

The rifleman mech configuration received a larger and more powerful laser rifle.

"Why do you insist on keeping it paired with a laser rifle?" Gloriana asked. "With the Bright Warrior's current design budget, we can easily retool the design so that it can accommodate positron rifles or other types of energy rifles. Many of them pack a significantly greater punch than pure laser weapons, which is exactly what we are looking for in this revision."

The expressions of most of the assistants showed that the rest were wondering about this as well.

"There are three reasons why." Ves replied. "First, the energy efficiency of laser weapons is considerably higher than those other fancy guns. They don't inflict much damage per discharge, but they can keep going. Their damage output over time is very high, which makes them very suitable for battles of attrition. All of the other Larkinson

mechs that our clan will be utilizing will be tailored to our prevailing mech doctrines. This means that we will be trying our best to fight quick decisive battles that do not drag on for days. This also means that we will have few mechs that can take part in an endurance race. The Bright Warrior IB should be one of them due to its suitability with the Living Sentinels."

"I think it's better to design a dedicated rifleman mech that excels at attrition battles." His wife remarked.

"We don't have the time to design redundant mechs. The Bright Warrior IB may not perfectly fit this role, but it does the job well enough that we might as well proceed in this direction."

Ves partially agreed with Gloriana, but he simply couldn't help it. After they completed their current round of projects, they had to begin with designing their expert mechs straight away. There wasn't any room to design any additional mechs.

"Let me continue with the other reasons why I favor sticking with laser weapons. Their high accuracy and lightspeed characteristics makes them very easy to use. Our mech pilots can quickly become battle effective with the rifleman mech configuration if it is armed with a laser weapon."

Laser weapons were considered basic and even primitive by second-class and first-class mech pilots. While they were not completely unjustified in their beliefs, the laser technology was highly scalable, which meant they could still perform decently at higher levels.

As someone with a third-rate background, Ves felt much more at ease with laser weapons than positron weapons.

That was not to say he disliked the latter. He successfully incorporated them in the Transcendent Punisher design. It worked for this particular mech because it possessed so much capacity that Ves could easily put in a lot of support systems to deal with the higher demands of positron weapons.

The Bright Warrior was different from a heavy artillery mech. Its capacity was much more limited so it would come under heavy strain when paired with a positron rifle.

Its deployment time would suffer a lot as it would rapidly expend its energy cells in battle. This was not what Ves wanted to see in this particular design.

"There's also a third reason why I favor laser weapons." He spoke. "We have special tech and solutions that make our laser weapons a bit more effective than normal. The difference is just significant enough to make it worthwhile."

If not for luminar tech and the Illustrious One, Ves would have settled with positron weapons instead. This was because stronger and tougher second-class mechs were very good at defending against normal laser weapons. The weapons wielded by the Bright Warrior needed to pass a minimum threshold in order to make them viable against opponents comparable to Fridayman elites.

Once Ves pushed through this decision, the other mech designers helped with how to increase the threat level of the rifleman mech configuration as much as possible.

It was definitely going to be widely used as soon as the Bright Warrior IB design was complete. In the initial stages, this would become the primary ranged mech of the Larkinson Clan alongside the Transcendent Punisher.

Once the Design Department released some additional standard mech designs, a significant amount of mech pilots would transition over to more powerful and specialized mechs. However, the Living Sentinels would still be sticking with this model, so the rifleman mech had to be strong enough to remain relevant for at least decade.

Ves smiled wider and wider as the Bright Warrior IB design incorporated more and more improvements.

Not just the rifleman mech configuration, but the other configurations received various enhancements as well. While they didn't look very exciting, he estimated that all of the changes to the original design elevated its performance by 10 to 20 percent.

This was not bad!

In the end, the Bright Warrior IB Project was extended by another month in order to provide enough time to incorporate all of the revisions.

While Ves really didn't want to delay the completion of the project, he didn't want to rush it either. He would rather wait an extra month if that was what it took to obtain a proper design.

In the next couple of days, Ves held discussions on the other design projects.

The auxiliary mechs such as the Blinding mech and the Cherub didn't really get to show their potential during the Battle of Reckoning. The lack of data meant that the mech designers had little to add to these designs.

Fortunately, they still had the Ferocious Piranha IB, which performed admirably under the circumstances.

The Piranha Prime piloted by Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson and one of the prototypes piloted by Raella Larkinson really showed what it was capable of in different circumstances.

Tusa showcased the potential of the Ferocious Piranha as a solitary harasser. At one point in the Battle of Reckoning, Tusa single-handedly paralyzed the Corundian Giants!

As for Raella, she employed the Ferocious Piranha as an offensive support mech.

The footage of her and her mech in action showcased a shrewd way to use the mech in combination with other mechs.

"She isn't even getting close enough to launch attacks." Ketis stated the obvious. "Raella is just weaving between friendly and enemy lines. When her mech approaches any formation of hostile mechs, the Ferocious Piranha only sticks around for a few seconds before darting back to friendly lines."

Some might call this cowardly, but Ves didn't really mind this tactic as long as it was effective.

"The Ferocious Piranha is a valuable asset. Only by remaining intact will it be able to employ its glow the fullest. Look at the reactions of those enemy mech pilots. While the Fridyman mech pilots are strong enough to resist most of the effects, their reaction time and judgement still becomes impaired for a short moment. That is enough to doom some of the offensive mechs."

One of the frustrating aspects about Raella's approach was that her arrival and departure was unpredictable. The enemy mech pilots constantly had to remain on guard for her eventual arrival.

Yet when the Ferocious Piranha finally approached, the Fridayman mech pilots were still caught off-guard due to their overthinking!

Ves laid out what he learned from Raella's fighting methods.

"So far, our premise surrounding the Ferocious Piranha is that we expect it to be deployed in squads or larger units. That's why it's called after a piranha. However, we have not considered an approach like this. If we want to make this mech fit in seamlessly in units that consist of other mechs, then we need to make some tweaks to its design."

Chapter 2703: Sitting On A Bench

"So all of our upcoming mechs will become better, but it will take at least an extra month before our mech pilots will receive the final versions?"

Ketis nodded. "Yup. The previous battle has truly been an eye-opener for us. Aside from Gloriana and Juliet, the rest of the Design Department didn't really have a good grasp of high-level second-class combat. I think Ves and the others thought that they wouldn't be fighting against this caliber of opponents too soon."

Venerable Joshua chuckled. "Ves should have known better. He's a trouble magnet. He's making waves wherever he goes so there are bound to be people who want to get rid of him. We're not playing a virtual game here where our opponents get stronger step by step. Well, we all know better now. I look forward in seeing these new mechs in action. They sound quite promising."

Both of them sat together on a bench in the forward observation chamber on the 1st deck. It was a large, expansive and idyllic garden that provided any visitor with an abundant amount of space to relax or engage in recreational activities.

Since the forward observation chamber was limited to officers, VIPs and other high-ranking personnel, there weren't many clansmen around.

In fact, there were a lot more pets than humans scurrying about!

"Woof!"

A black pitbull eagerly wagged his tail as Ketis ruffled his head and neck.

"Maow. Maow. Maow."

A young cat rolled onto Joshua's lap and exposed his belly. When Joshua rubbed it, the pet softly purred.

The pets didn't belong to the couple. They were taken care of by other clansmen. It was just that when their owners were on shift, the cats and dogs didn't have much to do in their cabins. Most of them preferred to spend their time in the larger communal areas on the ship.

Every time Joshua and Ketis visited the observation deck or the city deck, they became inundated with pets. Joshua especially attracted them on a regular basis. They all brushed up against him to leave behind their scent or begged for pats.

It was fortunate that Joshua never got tired of the attention. As an expert pilot who was expected to shoulder the burden of defending the Larkinson Clan against powerful opponents, he could use the distraction.

"We never really got to be together after the battle until now." Ketis said as she adjusted her poofy beret on her head. "Are you doing okay?"

"We won, didn't we? I'm already happy with that. It's a shame that so many of our clansmen died. I felt like I could have done more to prevent them from dying."

"The battle was way too big for you to achieve more. You did the best you could."

"I know. I'm not doubting myself or anything." He replied. "I am just trying to figure out how I can perform better next time. The Valkyrie Prime is a great mech and what I was able to accomplish with the Hexers back then is indescribable."

The moments where he became an integral part of two battle formations was one of his best moments so far. He would always remember the times where he turned the tide of the battle by wiping out a swathe of Fridayman with the first try and disabling Venerable Ghanso with the second try.

He even looked forward to doing it again. A part of Joshua wished that some other enemy would come and provoke the Larkinson Clan. That way, he could get back into the Valkyrie Prime and lead another battle formation!

"Enough about me. How are you doing? Are you making any progress towards becoming a Journeyman?"

Ketis grinned. "The Battle of Reckoning is a goldmine for me! I have access to lots of footage and analyses on the performance of different sword-wielding mechs. I'm so happy that Venerable Dise managed to show her strength against the Jeanne D'Arc. My sisters held a huge grudge against Venerable Foster. It's great that we managed to avenge the sisters we've lost, but..."

"It doesn't bring back the dead."

She gently nodded. "The Swordmaidens are still as small as ever."

"Aren't the Swordmaidens training a batch of several hundred women?"

"That's true, but it will take at least several years or so to whip them into shape. It's not enough to be a female swordsman mech specialist. They need to be truly dedicated to the sword and our way of life. In battle, every sister must be able to trust each other without reserve. That not only takes time, but also considerable pressure. Not every trainee will live to the end of our training program."

In fact, the harsh demands of the Swordmaidens to their fellow trainees was a source of considerable controversy. The Larkinsons generally wanted every clansman to be treated well. There shouldn't be any room for excessive abuse and mistreatment within their ranks.

That put the Swordmaidens in an awkward position. The training regime they devised back when they were still pirates may be cruel, but it was reasonably effective at producing powerful mech pilots.

In the end, Ves personally had to grant them special permission to run their training program the way they wanted to. As far as he was concerned, the Swordmaidens could

do anything they wanted as long as the hopeful trainees agreed to subject themselves to the difficult circumstances.

Joshua frowned when he recalled what he heard about how the Swordmaidens raised their sisters.

"Are the Swordmaidens still intending to pit their prospective members against exobeasts while armed with nothing but a greatsword?"

"Of course! Why would you ever think we would stop with that? It's the ultimate test that separates true Swordmaidens from those who are too weak to be relied upon in battle."

"Isn't that.. over-the-top?"

Ketis sighed and patted his arm. "Maybe it sounds crazy from the perspective of someone who grew up in civilized space, but the frontier is a completely different environment, at least back before the sandmen swept the entire region. There was no room for weaklings back then. You also have to take the training environment into account. The recruits we picked up from settlements and space stations were usually women without any prior training or preparation. Their genetic aptitude or other talents were almost always poor. How can you possibly turn them into strong Swordmaidens like Venerable Dise or myself?"

"Uhhh..."

"By training harder than everyone else! The Swordmaidens developed an effective method that worked well under the circumstances. Sure, the drop rate was not light, but those who passed our graduation ceremonies were always dependable. That is a quality that is exceedingly rare in any lawless region like the frontier and the Nyxian Gap."

Though Joshua was swayed by her arguments, he still disapproved of the Swordmaidens. His appreciation for life made it difficult for him to accept that trainees had to be subjected to so many risks in order to succeed.

"What are the recruits like?"

"Eager. Hardworking. You have to keep in mind that the Swordmaidens don't pay too much attention to talent or foundation. That means that mech pilots who aren't good enough to get selected by the Avatars can always approach the Swordmaidens."

"As long as they are women, right?"

"Well.. there's a bit of a discussion about that within the ranks. Given how urgent it is to replenish our ranks of mech pilots, some of my sisters have started to suggest we should open our doors to men."

"What? Really?"

Ketis did not look as if she was kidding. "It's just a discussion for now, so don't think it's already set. Personally, I'm not sure it will work out. We sisters trust each other to a large extent exactly because we're in a sisterhood. If we begin to take in men and other genders, I'm afraid we'll lose the closeness we had before. The Swordmaidens will never be the same if we embrace this change."

Joshua didn't know what to think on this matter. The part of him that was in favor of equality supported opening up the Swordmaidens. However, their all-female identity was clearly a point of strength for them, so losing that would dilute their fighting spirit.

"Maybe.. your sisters should just continue like this. It's not as if the men in the Larkinson Clan are stuck in a dead end. Maybe we need to raise an all-male force in order to counterbalance the Swordmaidens and Penitent Sisters."

"I don't see how that's useful." Ketis snorted. "Besides, who will lead this new group? Vincent Ricklin?"

"Nah. Vincent is already an expert candidate. He should be focusing on his own training."

"Heh. Of all of the mech pilots who broke through, it had to be this guy."

"It must be his custom mech." Joshua guessed. "I took a look at it as it's one of the few mechs designed by Ves that I never got to pilot. It had a unique glow and a special touch that's considerably different from his other products. It's a pity that I'll never get to pilot, it seems."

"If you really wanted to, I can gather a crew to fix it up. I'm not Ves, so I can't restore the mech to its original condition, but don't underestimate my abilities."

"You don't have to do that, Ketis. I know you are busy with trying to reach Journeyman and all. The Adonis Colossus is not a mech that suits your tastes."

He was already resigned to placing the Adonis Colossus in the list of LMC mechs that he never experienced. The achievement hunter within him felt quite annoyed with this, but it couldn't be helped.

As they continued to chat about other matters, they grew more comfortable in each other's presence. It had truly been too long since they set aside their responsibilities and spent some time alone with each other.

"I won't be able to meet with you very often in the coming weeks." She warned him. "My workload has increased due to the recent changes. Ves wants us all to redo a significant portion of our design work."

"Didn't you get an exemption in order to concentrate on trying to advance to Journeyman?"

"I need this, Joshua." She looked at him with a fiery passion. "Being able to work on the swordsman mech configuration of the Bright Warrior is a great opportunity to prepare for designing my own swordsman mechs! I'm still laying the groundwork for my Monster Slayer design. Once I embark on this project, I want to be familiar with every aspect of designing a second-class swordsman mech. This is going to be my first true breakout work. It will define the direction of my future designs just as how the Desolate Soldier design has shaped the subsequent designs of Ves!"

Ketis had a feeling that she had an opportunity to turn her Monster Slayer into an iconic mech. As long as she put in the effort and prepared as best as possible, the mech she designed with the Swordmaidens in mind would become their defining machine in any duel or land battle!

Her main concern was that the longer she delayed, the longer she might remain stuck as an Apprentice. While she was still young for a mech designer, she didn't want to lag too far behind Ves. Whenever she saw Gloriana and Juliet cooperate with Ves on an equal basis, she felt jealous!

Her competitive nature didn't allow her to linger behind for so long. One way or another, she vowed she would advance within a year from now! Just like Ves, she did not want to waste too much time!

She suddenly dove into Joshua and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Whoa! What's the occasion?"

"Hehe, it's nothing. I just felt like it. I feel our relationship is moving too slow. We haven't gone out on an actual date yet, you know."

"We're too busy and our schedules don't always overlap. We'll have time in the future. Once all of the excitement dies down, I think we'll have plenty of opportunities to spend time with each other."

"I hope so, Joshua. I hope so." Ketis trailed.

Chapter 2704: Head Start

"The prime mechs I've developed are not as practical as you think. Not only can they only be applied onto living mechs that conform to my design philosophy, they also rely on extremely harsh material requirements. If you have taken a look at the notes I've made, I only found two exotic materials that match my requirements. I'm not sure how available they are, but I have a hunch that one of them can only be found in the Nyxian Gap."

The projection of Master Willix did not look happy when she heard that. The woman tapped impatiently with her feet.

Ves did not hold this secure conversation on the Spirit of Bentheim. He did not dare to install such an advanced first-class device on the most important vessel of his fleet. He decided to keep the Darkbreak module aboard the Scarlet Rose so that he wouldn't feel that Master Willix was secretly snooping on him all the time.

"You have created an unprecedented product as far as I am aware of." She spoke in a measured tone. "I have searched throughout our database and I do not believe that any other mech designer has created anything that matches the characteristics of your prime mechs. In my judgement, there is great value in a mech that bridges the gap between standard mechs and expert mechs. Yet the practicality of your innovation is seriously in doubt if it is limited to the use of rare and exceedingly specific exotics."

Ves nonchalantly shrugged. "I never intended to revolutionize the mech community by propagating this new kind of mech. It's purely a stopgap measure to give my expert pilots something to play with until they finally receive their long-awaited expert mechs. There's no reason for us to keep our current prime mechs anymore. I think I will probably attempt to integrate some of their principles in the expert mechs."

He never intended to hide his prime mechs. It simply wasn't possible considering that they had just taken a starring role in a battle involving 16,000 mechs and more than a dozen expert pilots.

Even so, the Fridaymen, Praetors and Planats weren't eager to advertise their catastrophic defeat. They not only came across as the bad guys, but also got defeated by incomprehensible methods that made the Larkinsons look dazzling.

He didn't know to what extent his opponents had spread the battle footage, but he was sure it had already landed in the hands of important organizations like the MTA.

As Master Willix rapidly read through his mostly-honest reports, she became more and more discontent at her inability to reproduce what Ves had come up with. In the perspective of the Association, prime mechs actually held a lot of value considering that it was possible to combine it with expert mechs.

Yet even the greatest inventions in mech design was worth nothing in her eyes if it could not be reproduced by others!

She wasn't shy in making her displeasure known.

"Your selfish approach to your work is acceptable if you are just a Journeyman, but when you advance up the ranks, you will need to shake that mindset. When you become a Senior or Master, you are no longer just a maker and seller of products. Mech

designers who reach these heights must assume greater responsibilities. Spreading knowledge is a core responsibility that not even pirate designers dare to ignore."

"I don't see how that is relevant to me considering that I am decades away from reaching that point."

"There is nothing wrong with starting early." Master Willix advised. "Let me fill you in on a little secret. If you establish an entirely new school of thought within the mech industry or pass on your teachings to your apprentices at your current stage, you will begin with a considerable head start once you finally become a Senior. In the more optimistic cases, you shorten the time it takes for you to advance to Master by at least several decades or even centuries depending on your circumstances."

Ves widened his eyes. The implications of her advice was actually game-changing! He almost couldn't believe that Master Willix shared this secret so casually!

If he understood it correctly, this must be a key approach that gave mech designers a greater chance to realize their design philosophy before their lifespan came to an end!

For example, if a random mech designer progressed normally, he might need to reach the age of 350 years to reach Master.

It was not that easy for anyone to live that long. Even Seniors struggled to extend their life by two rounds.

What if the mech designer could only live up to 320 years after he exhausted all of his means of prolonging his life?

While there were ways to live longer than that, the cost was too prohibitive. Ordinary Seniors were very unlikely to be able to afford the required treatment.

Therefore, a gap of several decades could easily change the fate of many mech designers yearning to realize their design philosophy!

The difference in status between Seniors and Masters was so enormous that the former would probably be driven to do almost everything to go a step further.

The Skull Architect was a prime example of how this yearning could drive Seniors to desperation!

Ves scratched his smooth-shaven cheek.

"I think.. I understand your underlying message." He slowly replied to Master Willix as his thoughts were still churning. "The problem is that my design philosophy is.. not very transferable. It is based on rare preconditions that I haven't found in any other mech designer. While I am in the process of experimenting with nurturing at least one

aspirant, I don't think it will work out. As I'm sure you have already learnt, it takes a very specific outlook on mechs and life in order to grasp my unique design philosophy."

Ves didn't need to ask whether Master Willix succeeded in imitating his design philosophy. She wouldn't have issued her advice if she was already capable of designing living mechs herself.

Fortunately, the esteemed MTA mech designer acknowledged his circumstances. He wasn't to blame for developing a design philosophy that was incredibly obtuse and difficult for others to adopt.

Master Willix crossed her arms and shook her head. "I hope you have taken my previous warnings into account. The more unique and deviant your design philosophy, the harder it is to progress it once you reach Senior and Master. You are making your career trajectory steeper by going off the beaten track."

"It's worth it, though. I never would have enjoyed the success I have now if I chose to pursue a more conventional design philosophy. It's impossible to stand out in the mech market if I don't offer anything different from my competitors."

This was an old discussion, so they quickly moved on after they made their stance clear.

"Let's head back to the topic at hand." She looked at him with an intrigued expression. "My backer has expressed greater interest in your work. Despite the lack of practicality of your latest innovations, the fact that she recognizes your effort is a great honor."

Ah yes, the supposedly unidentified Star Designer paid close attention to the work of a single Journeyman. Yeah right. Even if Ves was bluffing the MTA by pretending to be the disciple of Mr. S., he seriously doubted that one of the top figures of human civilization would even bother spending more than a single second to study his mechs!

"I feel very honored." He replied flatly.

"Don't be cheeky, Mr. Larkinson. I am being very serious."

"It would help if you actually told me who this Star Designer actually is. So far, I only know she is a woman. That cuts down the list of possibilities but there are still dozens of names, and that applies only to the known ones."

The Master smiled coyly at him. "You can keep guessing. It is not my place to reveal her identity. What I am allowed to tell you is that she is currently preoccupied with matters of great import in the Red Ocean. If you manage to reach the dwarf galaxy, she may make some specific arrangements for you. It would be a shame for you to meet with disaster because you were too careless."

Ves immediately frowned. He didn't hide his adverse reaction to the possibility of meddling.

"I already told you that I work at my best when I am free to explore the cosmos. I get my inspiration from visiting many different sites and going through a lot of unique experiences. The situations I've faced have all stimulated me in developing much of my better works."

"We are not ignorant of that. Any possible intervention from us is not as serious as you think. We are only looking out for you, Ves. The battle that you have just fought is a situation that I do not wish to see from you again."

Ves awkwardly coughed. "I'm working on it. Our mech forces will become a lot stronger in the short term. I already have some great designs in the pipeline that will greatly alleviate our lack of quality mechs."

He briefly explained his upcoming mech designs such as the Bright Warrior IB. He might as well take advantage of the situation and see whether he could obtain feedback from one of the best mech designers that he knew of. Even a casual word of advice from a Master was enough to transform a mech design!

As Master Willix calmly listened to his impromptu presentation, she did not offer any strong response.

"Your mech designs suit the purpose of your clan. A mech design does not have to sound exciting to be effective."

Was that all? Ves expected to hear more, but the Master didn't even bother to go in depth about any aspect of his upcoming mech designs!

They talked a bit about other matters. Master Willix inquired a bit about his future plans. Ves hesitated for a moment but decided to voice one of the uncertainties that had been bothering for some time.

"I'm interested in paying a visit to the Smiling Samuel Star Sector. The people that live over there have developed an.. interesting society. It would be remiss of me to ignore their distinct culture when my route just happens to pass by this star sector."

Master Willix raised her eyebrow. "Hardly anyone expresses interest in the customs and way of life of the natives of Smiling Samuel. The Vulcan Empire is a highly insular state. Unless you are a heavy gravity variant human yourself, you will not be able to gain entry."

Ves grinned. "I'm aware of the difficulties, but I have never shied away from a challenge. I've already ventured into the Nyxian Gap, and while the trip was very dangerous, I've harvested a lot of useful insights along the way. It's a pity that not every star sector

hosts such an abnormal region of space. Much of the galactic rim is just an ordinary void. Smiling Samuel is one of the few truly interesting places that offers a strong contrast to normal human space."

He received a sceptical look from the MTA Master.

"I hardly took you for a fan of their stout mech designs."

"I'd love to examine their dwarf mechs up close!" Ves sincerely claimed, though he added a bit of exaggeration. "Their deviating body structure alters how they perform and how they are being utilized. I don't think I'll be able to visit a dwarf haven like the Vulcan Empire in my subsequent journeys, so I'd be remiss if I miss out on exploring these fantastic mechs!"

"I see. I must say that you have a bold taste of mechs, Mr. Larkinson. Why did you feel the need to share this particular desire?"

"I'd like to ask if you can help me obtain passage in the star sector." Ves finally asked. "While I'm already working on it, I heard that organizations like the MTA and CFA can issue special passes that can make the Vulcanites back off. Can you arrange a pass for me? I'd like to be able to travel freely in the star sector."

This was a bold request! Master Willix clearly didn't anticipate that Ves would make such a random request. She was rendered speechless for a moment.

Chapter 2705: Star Striders

While Master Willix clearly wasn't prepared to consider Ves' sudden request, her eyes quickly cleared up. She looked as if she just realized something that explained why he felt the urge to go on a sight-seeing tour in a star sector claimed by dwarves.

"I shall look into it." She slowly replied. "As far as I am aware, only long-standing associates are eligible to obtain the passes you are referring to. Each normal human that enters the Smiling Samuel Star Sector is another source of instability. The local heavy gravity variant humans do not take pleasure in hosting another guest from outside, particularly when the visitor is of the taller variety."

"If you can't arrange a pass for me, I'll find another way to get in. I'm not giving up on Smiling Samuel so easily. I might be leaving the Milky Way for good, so I want to experience at least a couple more interesting places in my native galaxy before I depart for another one. I've heard that there are other organizations who can arrange free passage to third parties."

Willix frowned. "Do not act too hastily, Mr. Larkinson. Smiling Samuel is of significant interest to our Association. A number of my other colleagues have long presided over the developments that take place in this special star sector, so they hold jurisdiction

over any matters related to it. They will not be pleased if I approach them with your request."

In other words, Smiling Samuel was someone else's turf. Even if Master Willix held more prestige within the MTA, it was not a trivial matter for her to approach another department.

Just like every other trans-galactic organization, the Mech Trade Association was split up into many different branches and hierarchies. It was impossible to centralize so many different operations and impose total uniformity in every single branch.

This meant that the regional bosses who were in charge of specific branches still possessed considerable autonomy in their seats of power. As long as the MTA branches exercised all of their necessary duties, they possessed some latitude to pursue their own policies.

The general idea behind this approach was that those on the ground knew better than some faceless bureaucrat sitting in a luxurious office 100,000 light-years away.

While that wasn't a wrong assumption, the distance between the sector headquarters and the core institutions of the MTA could easily give the former an opportunity to take some liberties.

While Master Willix didn't say any of this out loud, her troubled response caused Ves to imagine what must be going on behind the scenes.

Even if his guesses weren't entirely accurate, they should at least touch upon the truth. Ves already knew that the MTA was divided into rivalling factions. This proved that for all of its greatness, the Association was still prone to the same shortcomings that plagued any organization run by humans.

As long as humans were selfish, they always pursued their interests even if they weren't supposed to. Ves did it all the time.

After issuing his request, the call eventually ended. Ves didn't particularly enjoy chatting with his patron from the MTA, and he was sure that Master Willix had better things to do with her precious time.

Before he left the Scarlet Rose, Ves paid a brief visit to compartment G-13 which still held the 'automated' Breyer alloy production line.

Even after Ves used many months worth of accumulation to construct the dazzling prow of the Spirit of Bentheim, the 'renewable' source of Breyer alloy still churned out tons of useful material without interruption.

As Ves gazed at the escape pod that effortlessly slid inside the hot forging machine, he came no closer to lifting the veil of its creepy occupant.

"Who is Cassandra Breyer?"

This wasn't the first time he asked this question. The more he thought about it, the more he had the feeling that he was neglecting a very serious matter.

Yet no matter how closely Ves tried to examine the escape pod and the mummified corpse inside, this not-quite-dead witch kept mystifying him. Her existence and the fact that she continually regenerated without fail was a complete aberration to his life. She showed up without warning and haunted him for reasons that he couldn't even begin to guess.

His Spirituality grew stronger and he developed a bit more insight into the nature of spiritual energy. He developed a deeper comprehension of life and became more adept at manipulating it with his growing toolbox.

Yet despite all of this growth, he came no closer to answering this lingering question.

"How long can this continue?" Ves wondered.

Years? Decades? Centuries?

He did not dare to think he could keep exploiting Cassandra Breyer's powers for more than a decade, let alone a century.

"In a century, I can probably buy Breyer alloy in bulk. There is no need for me to rely on this absurd loop to spit out valuable materials."

What would happen if he decided to shut down this production line?

Would Cassandra Breyer enjoy a reprieve that allowed her to take revenge against Ves?

"I won't let that happen!"

His experiences with dangerous entities like Nyxie taught him that he needed to solve them one way or another. If he gave them too much time, they might be able to turn the tables.

Still, Ves was not at that point yet. Breyer alloy was still useful to him and he could still benefit from having free source of this material.

"I'll decide what to do with you when I am close to entering the Red Ocean." He decided. "I don't think I can smuggle you through the beyonder gate without getting noticed by the authorities."

The Gate Consortium and the Big Two thoroughly swept every starship that was slated to pass through the beyonder gate. This was a necessary procedure as the massive but incredibly precious beyonder gates weren't immune to damage.

It would be a tragedy if terrorists managed to blow up the only gate that allowed humanity to enter the Red Ocean!

While Ves was sure the Big Two gathered enough phasewater to build another gate by now, it was immensely costly to do so. So far, the Gate Consortium hadn't published any plans to build another greater beyonder gate.

Ves returned to the Spirit of Bentheim and went about his work. He invested a lot of time in fleshing out his revised mech designs.

Meanwhile, the Golden Skull Alliance continued to travel further and further away from the site of the battle.

It didn't take long for the expeditionary fleet to complete its previously-planned detour through the Vicious Mountain Star Sector. After curving around and passing through another sector border, the damaged and diminished armada of starships officially entered Majestic Teal!

This was a different environment. While Vicious Mountain was dominated by a single regional superpower in the form of the Garlen Empire, Majestic Teal was split up into smaller states that were usually called associations due to their origins.

In the view of people like Ves, Majestic Teal came under the sway of corporate-like entities.

While the local second-rate 'states' such as the Life Research Association, the Heavensword Association and the Harmony Association weren't run like companies, they still retained traces of their past incarnations.

"What is interesting about Majestic Teal is that no local state is truly dominant." Major Verle explained to him during a meeting. "There is nothing comparable to the Garlen Empire here. In addition, the star sector split up into greater states like the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony. What we have instead are more than a dozen small-to-medium-sized states that are strong enough to hold their own but aren't threatening enough to swallow the entire star sector."

Ves found this odd. "It's rather amazing that this has lasted for centuries. I would have thought that at least one of those states would have succeeded in taking over their neighbors before launching a war for supremacy."

"Majestic Teal doesn't have a tradition of waging total war. It's quite similar to Vicious Mountain in that regard. The reason why this is so is different, though we don't need to explore that considering we are just passing through."

They didn't meet in order to discuss the history of Majestic Teal. Instead, they gathered in order to discuss the impending arrival of the mercenaries that they contracted on an expensive monthly contract.

"Tell me about the fellows who will be arriving soon."

Major Verle waved his hand, causing a projection to appear that depicted the logo of the mercenary organization.

It depicted a purple star field where a man was walking off into the distance with his back facing the viewer.

Ves had no idea why such a symbol represented the name of a mercenary organization with a fixed base of operations.

"The Star Strider Security Group is a massive commercial enterprise that offers security solutions to clients on both a short-term and long-term basis." Verle began. "It's a reputable and upright mercenary organization that has never acted shady, at least that we know of. Its headquarters is located in the Grand Loxic Republic, which is a very powerful second-rate state in the Winged Serenade Star Sector."

That last part was important. Winged Serenade was the administrative center of the Yeina Star Cluster. It received greater investment than its neighboring star sectors so its development level was considerably higher.

This also meant that any organizations that were rooted there possessed a lot of power and influence. This was one of the many reasons why no one wanted to stir up trouble with the Star Striders.

"Do we know which unit within the Star Striders are assigned as our bodyguards?"

Major Verle nodded. "We do. The Star Striders informed us that they have dispatched their 14th Fleet, otherwise known as the Infinity Guards."

"That's an audacious name to take. What are they like?"

"As their name suggests, the Infinity Guards are defense-oriented. While they are lacking in mobile and flexible mech units, they are known for fielding an abundance of medium and heavy mechs that excel at defending fleets or fixed positions."

"Ah. I see. We can't ask them to perform raids or act proactively, but they are very difficult to dislodge as long as they stand their grounds."

"That's the Infinity Guards in a nutshell. What is reassuring is that the 14th Fleet has successfully completed many assignments but only failed four times throughout their entire existence. The main reason for those exceptions is because they got caught up in larger conflicts where their enemies weren't cowed by the deterrence exerted by the Star Striders."

No mercenary outfit was completely successful all the time. A few failures was normal and completely acceptable. Ves was completely assured by the low failure rate of the Infinity Guards.

"How many mechs are we talking about?"

"The Infinity Guards comprise a total of 2 mech regiments or around 4000 mechs. Their fleet consists of around 60 combat carriers with expanded capacity, so they are able to carry 60 mechs each. The flagship is a fleet carrier called the Indefatigable. She's nowhere comparable to the Auralis, but she's considerably cheaper and easier to maintain. According to the galactic net, the Indefatigable is a second-hand starship that the Star Striders happened to acquire from a state that sought to dispose of her. She's aged but well-maintained."

Even if the Star Striders were based in Winged Serenade, it was a bit of a stretch for them to make use of assets comparable to military-grade hardware. The Indefatigable was still an overpowering fleet carrier against any non-state entity, and that was enough for the mercenaries.

"All of this sounds fairly impressive, but how much do they cost on a monthly basis?"

"When converted to hex credits, their base pay amounts to 17 billion hex credits."

"..."

"You wanted the best we could get on short notice, Ves, remember? While it is higher than the prevailing market rates, the service provided by the Star Strider is the real deal."

Ves slowly sighed. "That's true. If we get what we paid for, then we shouldn't be afraid of any threat as long as the contract holds."

Chapter 2706: Infinity Guards

Paying 17 billion hex credits a month for protection was a very high price.

As long as Ves had enough time, he could raise a basic force that was just as strong. The best part about it was that as long as Ves paid all of the upfront costs, the monthly upkeep would be only a fraction as much.

Sure, it was expensive to pay tens of thousands of personnel. Sure, all of those mechs cost a lot of money to keep in shape. Sure, the Indefatigable along with those combat carriers and support ships also cost money to maintain.

Yet paying 17 billion hex credits to cover for protection for just a single month was a ripoff considering all the alternatives!

It was just that those other solutions required time, which was something that the Larkinson Clan and its partners were very short of. The Golden Skull Alliance wasn't the first to end up in this awkward situation.

Conflicts happened all the time in human space. A lot of outfits, fleets and other organizations incurred huge amounts of damage after they fought against serious opponents.

Even if these organizations possessed the means to rebuild their strength, their other enemies might not wait for them to recover!

Pouncing on a weakened target after enduring an enormous beating was one of the best ways to achieve a quick and profitable victory!

The galaxy wasn't fair. Without sufficient backing, there was no rule in effect that gave exhausted survivors a grace period to get back up to strength.

This was where mercenaries came in. They already built up their strength and readily lend their strength to those who could afford to pay their rates.

The client didn't have to invest any time and effort to borrow all of this protection. The mercenary corps had already done the hard work beforehand. The only contribution the customer had to make was to hand over enough money.

Considering that mercenaries didn't demand anything except for money, it was a given that this was always a hefty amount.

The costs ramped up massively as the mercenary organizations got bigger and bigger!

Their greater scale and numbers allowed them to field more powerful mechs and more professional mech pilots. They switched out their light carriers for combat carriers and also began to acquire fleet carriers to give their forces a lot of extra intimidation power.

At this level, the mercenaries were all about deterrence. While they were not shy about fighting, they generally disliked getting their hands dirty. Every battle not only entailed deaths, but also required them to repair or replace their combat assets.

Even if the mercenaries were able to cover these costs by demanding extra payment from their clients, it was still an undesirable outcome.

Therefore, large-scale mercenary organizations such as the Star Striders tended to puff themselves up as much as possible to scare any possible attackers as much as possible.

That became clear as their 14th Fleet finally arrived in the border system within Majestic Teal.

When Ves studied the composition of this renowned mercenary force, he became somewhat impressed.

"What a heavy fleet!"

The high-capacity combat carriers were not only larger than the ones of the Larkinson Clan, but also boasted substantially thicker hull plating. There was no doubt that they could all take a beating and still be able to venture onwards.

"There has to be a catch." He murmured.

Mercenaries always counted the money they earned and the money they had to spend. It was highly unlikely for them to splurge on quality ships with higher upkeep costs.

Soon, Ves figured out the shortcomings of the combat carriers of the Infinity Guards.

"They're slow!"

This was no understatement. The combat carriers were truly sluggish! Their sub-light propulsion systems simply weren't powerful enough to provide a lot of acceleration to the unwieldy ships.

It took far more time for the Infinity Guards to travel somewhere inside a star system than other fleets.

Ves even guessed that this was a deliberate choice.

"With these sluggish vessels, a client has to retain the services of the Infinity Guards for a longer period of time in order to get anywhere without being waylaid."

The only reason why Ves wasn't more upset about this scam was because the combat carriers truly looked intimidating.

Hardly any pirate wanted to try and pick a fight with just one of these tough bastards!

The Indefatigable flew in the center of the fleet. The fleet carrier was much as he expected. She featured moderate armor, mobility and capacity.

Already, the mercenaries trotted out their mechs from their starships. More than a thousand mechs appeared in space, giving their customers a good show of what 17 billion hex credits a month was worth.

Ves happened to be in the design lab when he studied the newly-arrived Infinity Guards, Gloriana helpfully shared her opinion on the mercenary mechs.

"They're commercial-grade mechs, alright." She snorted. "While it's clear that the designers know what they are doing, they were under obvious cost constraints. The Star Striders or the 14th Fleet in particular doesn't want to waste an excessive amount of money on servicing their mechs."

"In other words, they cut corners." Ves remarked.

"Exactly!" Gloriana pointed at a beefed-up rifleman mech. "Look at this mech for example. It's a stationary gunner that doesn't conform to the most dominant interpretation of rifleman mechs because it has to look larger and more intimidating than it actually is. All of that extra armor slows it down, which suggests that it can withstand a lot of damage."

"Is it, actually?"

"Partially. Maybe. The armor is real, but according to our initial scanning data it's likely a bulk alloy formula. The protection is largely based on quantity rather than quality. I can already guess that the other mechs of the Infinity Guards are designed according to the same principle. It's cheap and easy to fix the damage, but I bet the mercenaries will try and charge us as if their mechs are clad with premium armor."

Ves looked skeptical. "I don't think such an obvious scam will work. That's a bit too brazen if you ask me. This is especially when there are plenty of mech designers in our alliance. Professor Cortez will never let himself get taken advantage of like that. Besides, the Star Striders can't go too far or else they will ruin their credibility."

The reputation of the Star Striders was truly good for a reason. Perhaps they might act like other mercenaries and overcharge here or there, but Ves didn't believe they would outright seek compensation for something that didn't really exist.

"You'd be surprised what companies think they can get away with." Gloriana disagreed with her husband. "Anyway, it shouldn't be a problem as long as we show that we are attentive. Shall we change and prepare for the upcoming meeting?"

Ves nodded. "Let's go."

They exited the design lab in order to prepare for their first formal meeting with the head of the Infinity Guards.

Both of them changed into their formal wear. In the case of Ves, he wore a more elaborate version of his patriarch uniform complete with cape.

Gloriana opted to wear a sophisticated business suit in order to project a look that suggested that she meant business. The Hexer confidence she exuded while wearing this outfit caused her to look as if she was in charge instead of Ves!

"I look great, don't I, Clixie?"

"Miaow!"

"Hihi!"

When Ves beheld her outfit, he briefly became confused.

"Don't you usually wear dresses to these official meetings?"

"I dress according to the situation, Ves. Mercenaries will always try to upstage their clients. If our momentum isn't strong enough, they will gain the upper hand in our relationship and get a greater say in matters. We need to show that we are still capable of standing up to ourselves."

The mercenaries may not be their enemies, but it was still important to establish mutual respect.

Ves just thought that he was already capable of doing so on his own. He didn't need his wife to carry his weight. It wasn't as if he was a boy!

"Let's board our shuttle and head over the Hemmington Cross." He coughed. "I hope Patriarch Reginald is a good host."

"It'll be fine, Ves. Letting him host the initial meeting is a great choice."

The first in-person meeting with the leaders of the Infinity Guards had to take place in the right venue.

Since trust between the mercenaries and the clients wasn't solid yet, there was no way that Ves wanted to step aboard the Indefatigable. His paranoia simply didn't allow it no matter how trustworthy the Infinity Guards appeared.

While Ves felt tempted to host the meeting aboard the Spirit of Bentheim, a factory ship simply wasn't as impressive as a fleet carrier, especially one built for military purposes.

The Cross Clan may have fallen way below their peak, but much of their assets still reflected their prior glory.

When Ves entered the shuttle with his wife and bodyguards, Calabast and Lucky were already waiting inside.

Though Gloriana crinkled her nose at the other woman's appearance, she didn't take any further action. Instead, she sat down on her seat and began to cuddle with Clixie.

Ves on the other hand reached out to Lucky. "Hey there buddy."

"Meow."

The gem cat languidly rolled around on Calabast's lap.

Ves coughed. "You missed me, right?"

"Meow."

Lucky just closed his eyes and settled on a more comfortable position!

"It seems that your pet is fine where he is right now." Calabast amusingly said.

"Haha. That's just because he hasn't been away from me long enough. He'll miss me eventually."

After they completed their usual banter, they immediately moved on to the topic at hand.

"Who am I about to meet?"

"The leader of the Infinity Guards is Colonel Amos Pendulum." She briefly explained. "He is an experienced mech officer with military experience. He's a native of the Winged Serenade Star Sector and is aligned with the headquarters of the Star Striders."

That was an interesting detail to Ves.

"I see. So he's the company guy who makes sure that the local branch is dancing to the tune of headquarters."

"You can see it that way." Calabast nodded. "That is not to say that the relationship between him and the Majestic Tealers that comprise much of the 14th Fleet is bad. He wouldn't remain in charge if he didn't command the respect of his men. What is important for you to know is that he possessed an aristocratic background. I believe he is destined for a higher position once he completes his tour in this star sector and returns to headquarters."

That told Ves a lot. These kinds of high flyers were usually very ambitious. They received a lot of attention from the company and gained promotions a lot easier than those who attracted less attention.

Of course, the price for being in the spotlight all of the time was that they had to deliver excellent results or at least maintain the illusion of doing so. When Calabast told him that Colonel Pendulum was only 43 years old, that confirmed his suspicions.

"A 43 year old colonel, hmm?" Ves frowned. "Most of the officers I've met who are around this rank are a lot older. Colonel Ariadne Wodin is twice as old I believe."

"It's true that flag officers in established militaries or other armed organizations generally have to wait at least half a century before they reach this level, but mercenary organizations aren't as rigid. If Colonel Pendulum possesses real talent, then he may be up to the task despite his lack of experience."

For some reason, Ves thought another explanation was more likely.

"Maybe that's true, but it could also be that this fine colonel comes from a notable family from Winged Serenade. With such powerful backing, he can easily secure one cushy job after another."

Calabast pressed her lips. "Nepotism is a decent possibility in this case, but the Infinity Guards still enjoy a good track record under Colonel Pendulum's command."

"That's true, but keep in mind that not a single force dared to pick a fight against them in the last six years." Ves poignantly pointed out.

While he didn't go as far to believe that the Infinity Guards were mismanaged, he might have to revise his expectations of their battle readiness. Even if they trained diligently for all of these years, they were probably a bit rusty!

Chapter 2707: Increased Trust

When Ves stepped aboard the gargantuan Hemmington Cross once again, he noted that the Crossers had stuffed a lot of mechs in the hangar bay.

Every ship in the expeditionary fleet was in the same straits. The alliance picked up so much salvage from the battlefield that every space had to be utilized as efficiently as possible.

In fact, a lot of mech stables, hangar bays and cargo bays were stuffed with ugly wrecks and broken parts.

Of course, the crew of the Hemmington Cross didn't haphazardly toss their salvage in the hangar bay used to greet the incoming guests.

Instead, the best mechs of the Cross Clan stood in neat rows. When Ves and his wife studied their appearances, they instantly recognized that they had been deliberately fixed up and polished to a shine in order to present a magnificent image.

The sight of all of those military mechs that had proven themselves in battle was capable of impressing everyone, especially those who worked with them and knew about them. In fact, the more they knew about mechs, the more they appreciated the design and deadliness of these machines.

What was even more interesting was that these standard mechs only served as a backdrop to the expert mechs of the hosts.

The Amphis took up a prime position further ahead. The sturdy and dependable knight mech with its iconic chainsword had been the only Crosser expert mech to make it through the Battle of Reckoning intact.

As the Miracle Couple and cats moved closer, they eagerly studied the design characteristics of this solid machine.

"It's not the most sophisticated expert mech I've seen, but it definitely ranks at the top when it comes to sturdiness." Gloriana remarked.

She possessed substantially more experience with expert mechs than Ves. Her experience in certain Hexer development projects gave her a more critical understanding of their design principles.

"I can tell that the Amphis is a Senior-grade mech, which means that a Senior must have been its lead designer. This is obvious in how simple it is. While there is nothing wrong with aiming for simplicity, the mech clearly lacks additional features that can amp up the mech even further."

Ves nodded in understanding. "The previous battle showed that the Amphis possesses a distinct lack of mobility. While it doesn't have to be able to catch up to a light skirmisher, it could have benefited from having a short-duration booster system that allows it to jump on its opponents or catch them by surprise."

One of the lessons he learned from the previous battle was that the weaknesses of any expert mech became a lot more impactful.

In the case of larger forces, standard mechs which often fought alongside hundreds or thousands of different mechs. Different specialized mechs were able to cover each other's weaknesses, allowing them to make full play of their strengths.

For example, the Transcendent Punishers were extremely vulnerable against melee mechs, but the Ylvainan mech pilots never had to be afraid of that because other Larkinson mechs would fend off these threats on their behalf.

Yet at the expert mech level, it was impractical to depend too much on mixing and matching. The low quantities of expert mechs involved in battle meant that every powerful machine was vulnerable.

This was especially the case when the opposing mechs were being piloted by expert pilots, who possessed the skill and acumen to exploit every identifiable weakness.

Ves thought that the performance of one-dimensional mechs was quite poor in the previous battle.

The Imperial Verdict was no doubt a lethal mech up close with its trident. Yet it spent much of its time trying to get within striking distance of the Crosser expert mechs while fending off attacks from multiple directions.

The Amphis possessed stellar defense and a surprising amount of threat within the range of its chainsword, but the Preator and Planat expert mechs weren't stupid enough to let it approach.

Hybrid mechs such as the Bolvos Rage and the Trost proved to be more flexible and more able to respond to different situations.

Even Venerable Damira Planat's Erin Tear displayed some enhanced mobility and ranged threat despite its excellence in melee combat.

This was why both Ves and Gloriana soon dismissed the Amphis in favor of admiring the Bolvos Rage.

Expert mechs were informally split up into different performance tiers. Low-tier expert mechs were the most common. They had to be designed with lower budgets in mind, so they utilized less resonating materials and didn't possess too many features.

The Bolvos Rage was different. Its entire frame was packed with either stellar parameters or extremely useful features.

"It looks like Professor Cortez worked overtime to repair the battle on this expert mech." Gloriana remarked. "I can still spot some of the signs of hasty repairs. Its chest projector may look operational, but I'm sure that's only the case on the surface. In truth, its overall effectiveness may have dropped by as much as a fifth."

Ves missed that particular detail, but now that his wife had pointed it out, he could see why she made this judgement. The Bolvos Rage was still a wounded mech underneath its shiny metal exterior.

Regardless, it was still the best hybrid mech that Ves had ever witnessed with his own eyes. He was mentally running back the battle performance of this expert mech as he examined each and every known weapon system.

Every aspect of the Bolvos Rage was meticulously designed. The more Ves studied it, the more he admired its nuances.

"It's amazing how the Bolvos Rage is able to accommodate so many integrated weapon systems." He expressed. "The expert mech is able to integrate all of these armaments seamlessly without overly compromising its defenses. Its other parameters are also up to par, and it can even fight up close with a pair of handheld weapons. Perhaps its only true shortcoming is that it doesn't possess any supremely powerful weapons."

Gloriana mentioned another weakness. "Don't forget about its short endurance. In the previous battle, the mech expended much of its weapon systems, leaving it with relatively few options at the end. I think Patriarch Reginald demanded a solution that excels in fighting against other expert mechs, either in a fair duel or in a short brawl between mechs of the same level."

"It clearly does the job considering that it managed to fight against the Erin Tear on an equal basis."

The two stopped their current discussion as they finally reached the greeting party.

Patriarch Reginald Cross, Professor Cortez, Venerable Linda Cross and some other important Crossers wore their best dress uniforms. Golden cords and epaulettes embellished their white and pale blue uniforms. Impressive-looking medals rested on their chests as if to emphasize the battle prowess of their wearers.

Ves felt distinctly underdressed in their company. While he still had a collection of old Brighter medals, he felt it was too shameless to show them off. After all, the people he was meeting with wouldn't be impressed by awards given out by a pitiful little third-rate state.

Still, he quickly suppressed this feeling. He was a mech designer. As far as he was concerned, his mech designs were his medals.

"Patriarch Ves. Welcome back to the Hemmington Cross."

The leader of the Cross Clan didn't appear to have sustained any lingering wounds from the previous battle. The older and larger man stepped forward and patted Ves on the shoulder.

"I truly feel vindicated for partnering up with you. The mechs your clan deployed are so remarkable that I truly cannot wait to receive an expert mech that has benefited from your input. If you can design a mech that allows me to slaughter the entire crew of a capital ship like the Auralis, I promise to fight your enemies unconditionally for the span of a decade!"

The other Crossers in the greeting party looked surprised at their patriarch's spontaneous offer. Reginald clearly hadn't discussed this demand with the rest of his people!

Professor Benedict Cortez quickly stepped forward. "I believe that some of the capabilities displayed by the Larkinson Clan are subject to very harsh requirements. We cannot expect Patriarch Ves to reveal his trump cards to us so casually. Isn't that right?"

"Your guest designer is correct." Ves nodded, but then proceeded to display a slight smile. "However, there is a possibility that I might be persuaded to offer some of my more exclusive services to your clan. Just take into account that the results might not be as drastic and the price will be steeper than you can imagine."

That left the Crossers with a lot of food for thought.

While Ves wanted to keep his trump cards for himself at first, the salesman within him recognized a potentially lucrative business opportunity. Patriarch Reginald badly wanted to obtain the strongest expert mech possible.

Ves just happened to have a couple of methods that could strengthen any mech in a unique fashion. These methods were not only strong, but unable to be replicated by any other competitor!

As a result, as long as his services were attractive enough, he could keep teasing Patriarch Reginald with possibilities, theory driving up his desire until he was willing to give up almost anything to empower his mech!

Of course, Ves didn't expect to sign a deal right away. He left his pitch at that and only answered a couple of questions.

"Can you truly enable our clan to perform an extraordinary group attack comparable to that of your Penitent Sisters and Swordmaidens?"

"It's possible, but it only works for close comrades who are all uniform to a degree." Ves openly explained. "They need to be closely aligned in thought, training, inclinations and so on. They don't have to be identical, but there has to be enough common ground to pool their strengths together. Also, there has to be someone powerful enough to enable this move. An expert pilot will do as far as I know."

Professor Cortez carefully memorized the revealing information. "This application reminds me of the neural networks of a certain Fridayman Master. Is there any relation?"

"I have a history of fighting against Master Huron. I had a few brushes with Master Huron's apprentice in the past." Ves calmly replied. "She even showed up during the previous battle, along with two different applications of neural networks. It's a shame that I haven't been able to capture the Master's research data."

"You wouldn't be able to comprehend his work anyway, Mr. Larkinson. Neural network tech is exceedingly obtuse to understand to those who do not specialize in this field. It isn't good for your development to spend an excessive amount of time on studying the work of another Maser."

"You do not need to remind me. I am still focused on making my own creations rather than copying someone else's work."

The two continued to chat about general mech designer topics. Patriarch Reginald quickly became bored as he could no longer keep up with the technical jargon.

Fortunately, his boredom soon passed as the next guests arrived.

Colonel Ariadne Wodin, Venerable Brutus Wodin and a couple of other senior officers of the Glory Seekers arrived.

"Good day, patriarchs." The older woman tactfully greeted them all. "I see your mechs are back in shape."

"We have been knocked down more times than we can count. We always get back up." Patriarch Reginald grinned.

The relations between the Larkinson Clan, Glory Seekers and Cross Clan had warmed up considerably after the Battle of Reckoning.

No matter what, fighting alongside each other brought them closer together. By combining their forces to take down their collective opponents, they learned they could trust their allies to cover each other's backs.

This was an important development to Ves. It was better to fight alongside friends rather than a bunch of strangers. While he still cared about binding allies together through mutual interests, he saw hope of forging more permanent bonds.

He didn't mind offering some extra benefits as long as his allies reciprocated. Besides, it was a good way to gain another batch of voluntary test subjects.

Chapter 2708: Colonel Amos Pendulum

The Larkinsons and Glory Seekers arrived earlier than the guests of honor. The Infinity Guards shuttle had to traverse a longer distance because their fleet kept a respectful distance from the expeditionary fleet.

Even though they already signed a contract that was recognized by the Mercenary Association, they were still strangers to each other.

This initial meeting was meant to break the ice and see whether the two sides would truly be able to get along with each other.

If this wasn't the case, then it was better to cancel the deal. The contract already incorporated this scenario. If the clients changed their mind, they only had to pay a relatively modest fee to compensate the mercenaries for mobilizing their fleet and travelling all the way out here.

"Meow."

"Hm? Oh. I see. Their shuttle is finally approaching."

Lucky and Clixie didn't do much aside from resting by the feet of their owners. They licked each other, sniffed the other people and remained on guard against any unanticipated threats.

The shuttle utilized by the Infinity Guards looked grander and more embellished than the vehicles used by the alliance.

Markings that belonged to both the Star Striders and the Infinity Guards prominently branded the armored shuttle.

The logo of the Infinity Guards consisted of rows of armored soldiers holding shields that were shaped like infinity symbols. The logo was designed in such a way that it suggested that there was an endless amount of identical soldiers.

The colors of the Infinity Guards were purple and black. Ordinarily, this should have given them a serious and martial impression.

However, as soon as the first mercenary stepped outside of the shuttle, Ves was taken aback at the amount of embellishments the lead figure wore.

The man that could only be Colonel Amos Pendulum wore a peaked cap that was as high as his own head, an embroidered uniform that was bedecked with gold and was covered by over thirty medals of all shapes, sizes, colors and materials.

Perhaps to most people, the leader of the Infinity Guards may come across as incredibly accomplished. His overflowing pride and confidence certainly helped convey a lot of strength.

The other Infinity Guard officers weren't as extravagant, fortunately. They wore less medals, though they still wore fancier uniforms than Ves was accustomed to. What they lacked in pomp, they made up in professionalism. It was good to see that the rest of the 14th Fleet was made up of warriors who knew their business.

Patriarch Reginald Cross stepped forward as soon as the honored guests almost reached the greeting party.

"Welcome to the Hemmington Cross! We have been awaiting your arrival with great anticipation. Thank you for reinforcing us on short notice. It must have been quite a rush to mobilize your forces and reach our side as soon as possible."

"That's what you are paying for." Colonel Pendulum smiled as much of his confidence was sapped out of his body.

Though people like Ves, Gloriana, Colonel Ariadne, Professor Benedict and so on were mentally resilient enough to hold their ground against Patriarch Reginald's forceful presence, this did not apply to the latest people who arrived.

Patriarch Reginald was the strongest and most developed expert pilot in the alliance. His force of will was so domineering that it practically demanded the submission of those who couldn't withstand his will.

Naturally, even weaker-willed individuals were able to mitigate the consequences after getting used to the effects. Otherwise, Patriarch Reginald wouldn't be able to get anything done if he met with his subordinates in person.

Still, the first impression was the strongest. Even though Ves was the most prominent leader of the alliance, they all agreed that Patriarch Reginald should become their spokesperson at this time.

It turned out to be a great choice. Let alone Colonel Pendulum, the rest of his entourage all lost their momentum!

Even though they were all grown men and women, they seemed to have been turned into kids who couldn't do anything in the presence of someone who was larger than life!

To his credit, Colonel Pendulum didn't completely blank out. His social training was still good enough to compel him to maintain appearances.

He even stepped forward to shake hands with the leader of the Cross Clan.

"I have heard great tales about your plight. While it is a tragedy that your clan has fallen to this point, you have still been able to retain your legacy. With a proven war leader and expert pilot like you in charge, I am certain that I will be hearing about your return to glory very soon."

Patriarch Reginald smiled. He felt flattered by the compliments.

"I appreciate your well wishes. We have gone through so much darkness that we have shed all of our weaknesses. Our enemies will rue the day they failed to finish us off. It's too late for them now. Under my leadership, my clan shall rise from the ashes and ascend to greater heights than ever before!"

As the patriarch kept ranting about his hopeful vision for the Cross Clan, Colonel Pendulum completely lost the opportunity to regain the initiative.

Ves and the rest who stood a small distance away couldn't help but be a little disappointed. While the strength of the person at the top did not necessarily reflect the performance of his underlings, it was nonetheless a sight they didn't wish to see.

Still, the meeting between the two leaders revealed some additional details. Colonel Pendulum was still someone who was trained to meet all kinds of forceful personalities. Even if he lacked enough exposure, he was eventually able to find a way to cope with the pressure.

Once he regained his own sense of self, he stood a little straighter and diverted his attention to the other members of the Golden Skull Alliance.

"Patriarch Larkinson, Colonel Wodin, it is a pleasure to meet the two of you as well."

He grasped the chance to distance himself from Patriarch Reginald's strong force of will and moved to the other two leaders.

The mercenary leader exhibited some of his slickness as he lightly bowed to the Glory Seekers. "We don't see many Hexers outside of the Komodo Star Sector. The rest of the galaxy holds many different states, each of which have developed their own unique way of life. I have always become fascinated with people who go against the status quo."

"We are just passing through here." Colonel Wodin spoke bluntly. "We have no intention of imposing our order on the locals here. We are aware that our ideology is difficult for others to embrace. This is of little concern to us. We much prefer to enlighten those who take the trouble to approach us. This is much easier to do in the Red Ocean where the powers haven't established themselves yet. The new frontier will be our true stage to spread our beliefs."

"Well.. I wish you good luck on your endeavors." Pendulum said before he quickly turned to Ves. His smile widened. "Patriarch Larkinson! Your fame precedes you. Even my colleagues back in Winged Serenade sing praises about you. I heard that you have just unveiled some very fantastic mechs during the last battle."

Though Ves felt flattered by the man's appreciative words, he did not lower his guard.

"I don't know where you got that information, but don't believe in all of the rumors. Our clan did indeed employ some new mechs and techniques, but they are not prepared for the market."

"That is a shame to hear." Pendulum expressed his disappointment. "Our security group has long been interested in your products, but your mech company doesn't offer anything suitable for customers such as us. Your third-class mechs are no doubt powerful, but the Star Striders don't do business at this level. When will you be publishing your promising second-class mech designs?"

"Thank you for expressing your interest, colonel, but we cannot discuss our business plans at this time." Ves gently pushed back the inquiry. "Entering the second-class mech market is a huge endeavor and not something to be taken lightly. We will not be offering any commercial second-class mechs anytime soon. You may have to wait a number of years before our company has grown to the point it is able to roll out more powerful mechs."

Colonel Pendulum likely sensed the underlying meaning behind the message. "Our security company has been in business for many decades. We can spend a few more years without benefiting from your products. I hope to hear the good news fairly soon, though."

"That time may come if some of our plans go right." Ves mysteriously replied.

Once the initial meet and greet was over, the entire group moved deeper into the Hemmington Cross. They passed by many spacious hallways and important-looking compartments before entering a formal dining hall.

The compartment was richly-furnished but conveyed a distinctly martial theme. Banners of fallen opponents, helmets of defeated enemies and pieces of fallen expert mechs took up positions of pride.

Each of these trophies had stories behind them. Ves even recognized the centerpiece of the grand display. Hovering atop some pedestals were pieces of recognizable debris that originated from the Erin Tear, the Imperial Verdict and the Trost.

When Patriarch Reginald approached his latest trophies, he smiled proudly and began to boast some of his feats to Colonel Pendulum.

Though the Crosser Patriarch was undoubtedly beating his own chest, he also revealed some details about the battle that they hadn't publicized before.

Ves didn't know whether that was good or bad.

Still, at least the tales put the expeditionary forces in a good light. They had to fight against qualitatively superior opponents who came for the express purpose of defeating their old foes.

The glorious battle impressed all of the Infinity Guards. They look like they wanted to take part in it as well, but that was just because Patriarch Reginald glosses over the considerable losses.

As bots began to fly in and deliver the first dishes, Colonel Pendulum turned to Ves and asked a question.

"There are a lot of rumors flying around in our circle. Is it true that you developed some sort of superweapon that could wipe out the crew of an entire fleet carrier at once?"

Ves hesitated a bit. How should he approach this question?

"Did you see that big golden capital ship in our fleet, Colonel Pendulum?"

"It's rather hard not to miss such an excellent fleet carrier."

Ves smirked. "The only reason we managed to capture her intact and in such a pristine condition is because none of the crew were left alive to activate any of her self-destruct mechanisms. If just one Fridayman crew member survived, he or she could have at least blown the core systems such as the data banks and the valuable long-range FTL drives."

He didn't need to say anything more. The truth was there for everyone to see. Colonel Pendulum and his command team all looked a little horrified!

After all, if such an attack could affect a vessel like the Auralis despite her shield generators and thick hull plating, then the Hemmington Cross or their own flagship were just as vulnerable!

It took at least a minute for them to push aside the frightful implications.

"Doesn't this qualify as a superweapon to the MTA?" A chief engineer of the Infinity Guards asked. "So far, the MTA has not made any announcements concerning your recent battle or your exploits."

Ves shrugged as he raised a spoon and took a sip of some thick vegetable soup that tasted far too bland to his taste buds.

"I have friends in high places. Besides, while my trump card is exceedingly powerful, its destructive potential isn't enough to wipe out entire cities. There are plenty of other mech designers and weapon developers who invented arms that can kill thousands of people in a city all at once. They aren't immediately banned from the onset."

"That is because the MTA likes to take its time on their investigations. That said, if the weapon is too powerful or used too often, the MTA may decide to issue their judgement within days."

"That's true." Ves acknowledged.

He wasn't sure what the MTA thought about his battle formations. It was very powerful but also very destructive. In the wrong hands, it could easily lead to a lot of loss of life.

Still, as long as the Larkinsons controlled this method, the issue shouldn't be a high priority. His clan just had to keep his battle formations in reserve in order to avoid raising the priority level on this powerful invention.

Also, Ves had to make sure he stayed chummy with Master Willix!

Chapter 2709: Parent Company

The initial banquet proceeded rather smoothly. It helped that the space between the tables was rather large in order to allow the Cross Clan's latest trophies to take up the best space.

As warriors themselves, the Infinity Guard officers all became fascinated by the debris and other spoils of war. They were especially impressed with the pieces that originated from the enemy expert mechs.

Mercenaries generally didn't retain the services of expert pilots.

They generally never fought against mech pilots of this caliber. They also found it too expensive to meet the needs of an expert pilot. If an outfit or group couldn't make an expert pilot happy, then much of their investment would go to waste if the demigod walked away!

Perhaps the larger mercenary organizations such as the Star Striders may be able to afford retaining some expert pilots, but their 14th Fleet obviously hadn't benefited. Their roster was completely filled with standard mech pilots.

There was nothing wrong with that. Though his recent experiences may have suggested otherwise, the vast majority of forces hailing from private individuals and organizations were pretty much in the same boat.

As long as everyone was on the same level, there was no need to make excessive investments.

States were fine with this as well. They hoarded as many expert pilots as possible and did not want to see any of them slip away in order to work for a bunch of mercenaries or something.

The superiority of mech militaries in this aspect was one of the many ways they maintained their dominance over private forces. The latter could only dream of fielding expert mechs but would never make the decision to change this aspect.

Unlike a military force, a private force had to generate a profit. Even if it didn't have to, it eventually belonged to an organization that had to be smart about its spending.

The Larkinson Clan was a good example of that. The LMC's current business success enabled the Larkinsons to invest in expert mechs. Yet business was volatile and the good times might not always last.

Expert pilots also had their standards. A mercenary career was not the most glamorous or honorable that mech pilots could choose. Generally, only those who weren't good enough to serve in the military to begin with considered jobs in the private sector.

Once an expert candidate or expert pilot emerged in the private sector, the state always moved to offer an opportunity to these previously-unnoticed mech pilots.

Ves had fallen victim to this treatment as well when they initially took away Jannzi.

Would she have ended up with a more mellow personality if she remained in his service?

"What is it about the Mech Corps, anyway?" He muttered in confusion. "On the one hand, it was able to facilitate the rise of a great expert pilot in the form of my uncle Ark. Then they go on to produce absolute terrors like Ghanso and Jannzi."

All three of them were Larkinsons, but the latter two somehow became awful for no reason. Was the Mech Corps incompetent or had someone in the ranks deliberately tried to sabotage the Larkinson Family?

"Hmm, that sounds like a stretch." He shook his head.

As Ves continued to eat and chat with a couple of Infinity Guard officers, Lucky looked a bit dejected.

The Cross Clan provided Clixie with a bowl of alien fish that many cat species loved for their taste.

As for Lucky, the hosts merely provided a portable battery so that a mechanical cat could plug in its tail and top off its energy reserves.

"Meow..."

"Just bear with it, buddy. Once you go back, you can eat a proper meal."

"Meow meow."

Ves ignored his cat and went back chatting to one of the chief engineers.

Pelmud Nurde was the chief engineer of the Indefatigable. He was a relatively older man at 70 years old. While he was not one of those 150-year old fossils who had lived through multiple generations of starship technology, he was still an incredibly knowledgeable man who possessed a wealth of technical knowledge on second-class ships.

"The Auralis is truly a fantastic ship that I would love to get my hands on." He complimented to Ves. "The quality of the materials used in her construction and the modern systems that I have been able to identify are all in the upper range. The Auralis makes our Indefatigable look like a discount product."

"Are the Infinity Guards or your parent company interested in acquiring the Auralis, perchance?" Ves asked.

The older man shook his head. "Headquarters will decide. My superiors may ask for my input, but that is hardly the only voice they listen to. While I would celebrate if our fleet can turn the Auralis into our new flagship, I shouldn't get my hopes up. A ship that incorporates so many advanced and demanding systems must have a very high upkeep cost."

In other words, the Auralis wasn't good value for money. Most organizations similar to the Star Striders weren't interested in acquiring her when they could already accomplish their goals with a more affordable capital ship.

"What are the capital ships in Majestic Teal like?"

"They are no different from the capital ships that are typical in the surrounding star clusters." Chief Nurde responded. "If I have to identify a distinguishing element, it is that we favor smaller and more affordable flagships. The economies of our star sector aren't poor, but their scale is not as big. The various states prefer to go for quantity over quality."

"Hmm. I can see how that can be the case. Is there anything else that is notable about the local capital ship market?"

"You can always buy a second-hand capital ship if you quickly need to expand your fleet. Visit any major port system and you can probably spot a number of capital ships anchored around a satellite."

"Is the demand for capital ships not high enough?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"I wouldn't say so. It's more accurate to say that the supply is too much. Quite a lot of factional struggles take place in these parts. Fleets regularly get defeated and their flagships sometimes fall into the hands of the victors."

Ah. Just like the Larkinson Clan, the winning side might not always want to take the risk of putting a captured ship to use. The security risks were too substantial.

In fact, this concern was giving Ves a lot of headaches. Unless a vendor was able to provide some solid guarantees, Ves preferred to exchange the Auralis for a new order.

The banquet quietly proceeded as the mercenary officers became more familiar with their clients and vice versa.

The relations between the two had thawed. Once the Golden Skull Alliance established its might and prestige, there was no need for the Larkinsons and Crossers to throw their weight around.

It was more important to establish a good working relationship with their new protectors. The Infinity Guards had to be able to mesh well with their clients in order to cooperate in any battle that might occur.

Colonel Pendulum soon began to talk shop with Colonel Ariadne. The two senior officers discussed basic arrangements such as the distance the Infinity Guard ships should keep to the expeditionary vessels, how many mechs were allowed to get close and other details.

Once these talks came to an end, both sides affirmed their commitment to the contract.

"The Infinity Guards are proud to take on the responsibility of guarding your fleet." Colonel Pendulum spoke with an officious voice. "We are eager to do business with you and serve as your companions during your stay in Majestic Teal."

The meeting soon came to an end. Neither side was in a hurry to deepen their shallow bond. There was plenty of time to do that in the days to come. For now, it was more important for them to head to safety and remove the risk of falling victim to an ambush yet again.

Once everyone returned to their own ships, the fleet briefly waited until every vessel cycled their FTL drives before leaving the star system.

"The mercs are actually quite decent." Ves summed up his thoughts. "They're better than I expected."

Gloriana didn't agree. "I'm not sure that you should put too much stock in your first impressions. Mercenaries are much more skilled at presenting themselves in a good light than putting up an actual fight."

"Hmm, you have a point, but I don't think the Infinity Guards are unreliable."

Perhaps they were judging the Infinity Guards too harshly. The Star Strider Security Group was a private company. It was unfair to compare its fighting prowess to that of a state-backed military.

After making it through the Battle of Reckoning, Ves had become too used to comparing his mechs and forces to that of the Fridaymen. Their elite mechs and expert mechs had turned into his internal measuring stick.

This was also why he pushed to overhaul his current design projects. Mechs such as the Bright Warrior IB had to do more than fighting against a typical military mech on an equal basis.

It had to be stronger!

Only by giving his second-class mechs an advantage would they be able to keep more friendly mech pilots alive next time.

No more excitement took place after the Infinity Guards formally started their protection mission. The presence of these familiar mercs instantly changed the expeditionary fleet's security situation.

Previously, whenever the Golden Skull Alliance emerged out of FTL travel, they always attracted the attention of scout ships that just happened to be in the neighborhood.

Even though these innocent-looking corvettes were several light-hours away, it was obvious that they were scoping the expeditionary fleet out. The owners of these corvettes may be plotting something nefarious.

All of that changed once the Infinity Guards showed their presence. The 14th Fleet was a known presence in Majestic Teal, so the various forces that were showing interest in the foreign visitors tactfully withdrew their eyes.

The obvious changes brought a lot of relief to Ves and the other leaders. Their decision to hire the Infinity Guards turned out to be the correct one. None of the locals wanted to provoke a fight against the 14th Fleet or its parent organization.

Even if the Infinity Guards were beatable, what about the rest of the Star Striders? Their main fleet back in Winged Serenade was far more formidable than any of their branch fleets!

Ves found this to be an interesting dynamic. The strength of the parent organization effectively sheltered its branches. He believed he might one day make use of it as well. After all, it might not be possible to keep his entire fleet together all this time.

As the days went by, Ves no longer paid attention to the mercenaries and fully invested himself in his work.

He focused much of his attention on completing the Bright Warrior IB Project. By prioritizing this project, he hoped to be able to start with mass producing the new Larkinson mechs as soon as the expeditionary fleet arrived at its first stop in the Life Research Association.

The output of the Spirit of Bentheim was not good enough to meet the demands of the Larkinson Clan. Ves wanted to obtain thousands of his new Bright Warrior mechs, and that entailed purchasing a huge amount of raw materials as well as borrowing a lot of additional production capacity.

A port system was the ideal place to make this happen. The abundant amount of trade and industrial development would allow the Larkinsons to accomplish all of their production goals as long as they paid enough money.

"It's also a convenient place to sell our salvage."

Of course, the Larkinson Clan and its allies intended to do much more than that. They needed to perform a lot of repairs and recruit a lot of replacement personnel.

This presented Ves with a difficult question.

Should he allow his clan to recruit second-raters?

Previously, he resisted this decision. Talented and well-trained second-rate citizens were usually entangled with existing institutions. None of them were as clean and unentangled as third-raters.

Ves glanced at the Larkinson Mandate and shook his head. "Ah, what am I worrying about? I have the Larkinson Network! Spies and saboteurs won't get the chance to stir up any trouble!"

Chapter 2710: Rushing to Completion

After several weeks of intensive design effort, the Bright Warrior Mark I Version B Project almost reached completion.

It had not been easy. In order to rush the design work, Ves deliberately diverted additional design resources into the project in order to brute force its completion as fast as possible.

Optimization work that most often required both design ingenuity and raw processing power.

The former could be increased by allocating more manpower to the project, which he did. Not just Gloriana and Juliet, but many more assistants took part in performing the tedious work of solving all of the little faults and inefficiencies in the multiple configurations of the second-class modular mech platform.

The latter was even simpler to solve, but that made it even harder for Ves. The Spirit of Bentheim's powerful ASTERA AI core was capable of performing a huge amount of calculations every moment of the day. Additional processors took on this burden as well and served as backups in case the AI core became unavailable.

The issue was that the factory ship also needed to draw on these capabilities in order to run billions of major and minor systems that kept the entire vessel running.

On top of that, the other five design projects also needed to perform an immense amount of calculations to come up with better solutions to the myriad of problems they faced.

Ves decided that finishing the next incarnation of the Bright Warrior design was more important than anything else, so he straightforwardly doubled its allocation of computing power at the expense of other priorities.

Not everyone felt comfortable with this decision. Gloriana had a lot of words to say to him when he announced the change.

"You're delaying the completion of our Hexer mech designs!" She accused when they were just starting their session at the design lab. "Don't you care about the Komodo War anymore?!"

To be honest, the war did not occupy his thoughts as much as before. While he still wanted the Friday Coalition to lose, his own needs came first.

Ves crossed his arms. "Gloriana, before we help anyone else, we have to help ourselves first. The Battle of Reckoning almost squashed us, you know. Think about what would happen if the Fridaymen succeed. Not only would we all die, but the Komodo War won't be getting our upcoming Hexer mechs at all. So if you truly care about the plight of the Hexadric Hegemony, you should help me finish this important design project once and for all so that we can get back to finishing our other projects with minimal delay."

"I'm not blind to the circumstances we're facing, but we're not allocating our design resources efficiently anymore. Piling twice as much mech designers on the Bright Warrior Project won't double its progress. On the other hand, taking a few of them away from our other projects will slow their progress considerably enough that it will take at least several more weeks to finalize them even if we put back what we took."

"The Hex Army can hold out for a few more weeks. The war is not a conflict that is decided in a matter of weeks or months. Besides, the Hegemony is big and is probably working on other solutions. We're hardly the only ones who are trying to save it. Our next batch of Hexer designs are all auxiliary in nature so their effect on the war effort will likely be subtle."

It was difficult for Ves to placate Gloriana, but their safety was truly at risk this time. The only other way to solve their lack of powerful mechs was to purchase a huge batch of premium mechs from their upcoming destination.

Neither Ves nor Gloriana liked this solution. The Larkinson Clan should be making use of internally-developed LMC mechs. Otherwise, what was the point of running its own mech company?

Ves knew that his mechs possessed great advantages that could give his mech forces a decisive edge. He was so confident in his own work that he truly intended to replace any third-party mech in their roster with one of his own products over time.

As for Gloriana, she simply wanted to control everything. She had no involvement in the design of third-party mechs, so they possessed plenty of glaring traits that scarred her eyes whenever she looked at them. The Princess Jeckas, the Vima Suns and the Tamris Stellars had already sickened her to the point where she didn't visit the hangar bay on her own accord anymore.

The Bright Warrior concept may be bland and full of compromises, but it was much less objectionable than mechs designed by other competitors. She craved control, and being able to put her mark on the Larkinson Clan in this fashion was the best way to soothe her urges.

In the end, Ves managed to persuade Gloriana to play along. She didn't have to agree with him, but she shouldn't get in the way either.

"I'm the principal designer in this department." He reminded his wife. "It doesn't make much sense to give every project equal attention at this moment, so I've decided to shift resources around. That's all you need to know. I'm not deliberately delaying our Hexer mech design projects. They'll just have to sit in the back for now. If you want to remedy this situation, then do your utmost to complete our priority project."

She did just that. Due to how much time, effort and affection she invested in the Cherub, Blinding Mech and Devious Projects, she worked on the Bright Warrior IB Project as if her life depended on it! The energy she displayed helped a lot in hastening its progress!

All of their hard work eventually bore fruit. With the wealth of data provided by the logs and footage of the previous battle, their working conditions couldn't be better.

Mech designers always worked best with enough supporting data at their disposal. The entire point about fabricating prototypes and putting them through their paces was to verify what worked, what didn't, and what needed to be fixed.

Even though they only had a single battle to go on, the experiences the prototypes went through were so thorough and all-encompassing that none of the lead designers felt lost.

Gloriana pounced on every irregularity in the data and obsessively tried to solve or mitigate them no matter the difficulty!

There was no doubt that she contributed the most to the project at this stage.

She even tolerated the necessity of working together with Juliet in order to accelerate the project by a couple of days.

Now that she no longer behaved catty in the presence of the other Hexer mech designer, it turned out that the two women worked quite well together.

The collaboration between Ves and Gloriana was best described as a union designed to borrow each other's strengths while covering for each other's weaknesses.

The budding cooperation between Gloriana and Juliet generated a different dynamic.

Both of their interests and strengths overlapped to an extent. When it came to flight systems and anything related to mobility, Juliet held the upper hand against the Wodin scion, but that did not mean the latter had no way to be useful.

On the contrary. When Juliet developed a solution that allowed a given configuration of the Bright Warrior to accelerate faster, Gloriana took a look at the proposed solution and solved some of the problems and shortcomings that the changes introduced.

The overall result was that the mech's overall performance noticeably improved without introducing too many downsides!

"I'm quite impressed by how far we have been able to push the mobility of all four configurations." Juliet reported her progress to Ves one day. "While Gloriana still isn't the most pleasant person to be around, we are doing quite well for ourselves as long as our thoughts coincide."

"You want to finish the project as fast as possible as well?" Ves asked.

"Why wouldn't I? My fellow Penitent Sisters didn't suffer as badly in the last battle as the rest, but our numbers keep growing smaller. The best way to prevent us from losing any further sisters is to make the other mech forces stronger so that they can hold their ground much better next time. This Bright Warrior of yours will definitely help with that. Besides, completing this project faster allows me to get back to working on the Giant Killer design. Our Penitent Sisters need its firepower."

That was another good reason to work hard on the current project.

He thought about the opinions that others held about the Bright Warrior IB. Neither Gloriana nor Juliet exhibited much passion for the future backbone of the Larkinson Clan. Aside from Ves himself, only a handful of assistant mech designers exhibited any passion in the mech design.

"Is the Bright Warrior IB a bad mech?" He questioned himself.

He didn't think so. It was a good performer by any objective measure. It just didn't have the pronounced strength and star power of his more flamboyant designs such as the Doom Guard, Valkyrie Redeemer and Crystal Lord Mark II.

The reactions of the other mech designers reflected the reality that the mech industry and the mech market simply didn't care too much for boring but serviceable products.

The Bright Warrior IB ticked all of the boxes, yet that was nothing special in the eyes of others.

Even its glow was rather bland and lacking in distinct features. Whereas the Piranha Prime could destabilize any opponent that got close while the Valkyrie Redeemer could do something similar at a distance, the Bright Warrior merely boosted the sense of belonging of a Larkinson mech pilot.

"That does sound kind of weak." Ves belatedly admitted.

The Golden Cat may be a key factor in increasing the cohesion of the Larkinson Clan, but she was not that impressive when employed as a design spirit.

She simply didn't bring as much benefits as some of his other design spirits such as the Superior Mother or the Illustrious One.

It was not as if he considered the option of inserting another design spirit in the Bright Warrior IB. Yet every time he thought about it, he instinctively felt it was wrong.

"The Bright Warrior product line must remain as a pure representation of the Larkinson Clan."

The mech had to prove that the Larkinson Clan did not necessarily need to borrow the power of other grand and powerful entities in order to hold its own. If the Bright Warrior mechs were weak, then that simply meant that his clan still had a long way to go before the machines actually became good.

In a way, the Bright Warrior product line served as a mirror to the Larkinsons. It presented an unvarnished view of the actual state and strength of their clan.

"It doesn't matter if the Bright Warrior's glow is a bit lackluster for the moment. Goldie has already grown a lot and she'll definitely enjoy an even greater growth spurt now that we have gained a bunch of expert pilots."

The high-quality spiritual feedback provided by Venerable Joshua, Venerable Jannzi and so on invigorated the Golden Cat. Her strength and capabilities constantly rose every day. She was slowly catching up to the likes of Qilanxo and the Superior Mother.

Ves smiled. He no longer felt insecure about the Bright Warrior IB anymore. Perhaps the only spiritual aspect it was truly lacking in was that Ves hadn't succeeded in incorporating a working spiritual construct.

"My original Bright Warriors never managed to trigger the Ancestral Possession or Ancestral Assistance abilities I've developed." He frowned.

Their conditions were too harsh and Ves overestimated his capabilities. While Ves still felt that there was a chance those abilities had a chance of working, perhaps he should go back to the drawing board.

Should he discard the non-working abilities and replace them with simpler spiritual constructs? What iconic spiritual feature should he add to the mechs instead?

Ves turned his gaze towards the Larkinson Mandate.

"What can you do these days, Goldie?"

Nyaaaaa?