

## Mech 3011

### *Chapter 3011: The Potential of Luminar Technology*

Though the Journeymen of the Design Department argued quite extensively about the booster modules of the Disruptor Project, they had good reasons to focus on this aspect.

Light mechs depended heavily on mobility to perform their roles on the battlefield. This was even more important for their expert mech versions as it was literally the only reason why they were able to survive in fights against other deadly expert mechs.

The opponents that Venerable Tusa would face in the future were far different from the dummies he encountered during his most recent campaign.

His battles back on Prosperous Hill VI were no different from bullying children in his perspective. The biomechs he faced were sometimes decent, but were mostly lower-end models that could not keep up with the performance of a military-grade mech.

Their mech pilots were quite skilled, but that was only due to the fact that second-rate states were able to provide better training to its mech cadets. The criminals and members of various fringe groups that Tusa faced weren't comparable to the elites he fought during the Battle of Reckoning.

Since the main goal of the Disruptor Project was to enable Venerable Tusa to fight against other expert mechs, the design choices had to prioritize this need the most.

It was natural to sacrifice many other niceties in the process. Even if expert mechs possessed a lot more capacity and could integrate a lot more tech, when fighting against other high-end mechs, these advantages no longer seemed as powerful!

Gloriana insisted on maintaining a consistent approach to all of their projects, so Venerable Tusa's future expert mech had to give up a lot of staying power in order to ensure it possessed enough peak performance to defeat another expert mech.

"It's not ideal, but battles between expert mechs don't last too long in most cases." Gloriana stated. "It is very much worth it to compress all of the combat potential of our expert mechs so that they can eliminate opposing expert mechs quickly. We don't have to rely on our expert mechs to carry the rest of the battle. Our regular mech forces are already strong enough to win any conventional battle."

Everyone else nodded in agreement. Though there were flaws and holes to this logic, it was the most fitting choice to make under the circumstances.

The only reason why Ves felt a little queasy about this choice was that the Disruptor Project could potentially expend its resources very quickly if locked in a very difficult struggle. He felt it was actually a tad bit too short.

This was not a big deal if they fought against weaker opponents or those who were unfamiliar with the combat doctrines of the Larkinson Clan.

Yet if they fought against an enemies that possessed a thorough understanding of the clan's fighting approach, then they could easily employ strategies to drag out a battle and seek to exhaust Venerable Tusa's expert mech first!

This was a potential danger and one that might actually be used against the Larkinson Clan one day.

The only reason why Ves didn't speak up about it more was because his mech forces weren't completely helpless in extended battles.

His fleet enjoyed the protection of a formidable array of artillery mechs and cannoner mechs. The former was especially useful in attrition battles as they were much easier to supply and support when they were locked into bunkers rather than launched into open space.

Their formidable cannons were still effective against second-class expert mechs. It was just that it took a lot of time for them to deal significant damage against these well-armored machines.

In the future, Ves intended to design more mechs that possessed more staying power. He wanted to differentiate the Living Sentinels and encourage them to trade in their explosive power for stability.

That was a matter for another time, though.

Before Gloriana rounded up the discussion on the Disruptor Project, she briefly turned her attention to its weapon loadout.

"Ketis, how much progress have you made in refining the weapon design?"

The newest lead designer of the Design Department stopped caressing Bloodsinger for a moment.

"It's going well, all considered. There is not that much complexity as long as we rely on Unending alloy as the main material. It's incredibly hard, but aside from that it's not the ideal material to use for a pair of twin knives. It's a dense material and it's difficult to work with. I have no problem with determining the exact shape and length of the blades, but it's annoying to work around the constraints of a material that has already been set."

"Have you thought about enhancing the penetration capabilities of the knives by empowering them with heat or some other method that can allow them to pierce thicker armor?" Ves asked his student.

"I've already thought of those options, but I don't think they're necessary." Ketis shook her head. "Weaker augments aren't worth the trouble. They'll barely make a difference while significantly draining the mech's energy reserves. Stronger augments are even worse. While I recognize that they can enable the Disruptor Project to punch its knives through more resilient armor, just activating them for a single second already consumes a lot of energy. It's not feasible or even necessary in my opinion."

"Why is that?" Gloriana questioned with a critical expression. "Doesn't this go against our goal to enhance the peak performance of our expert mechs?"

"The Disruptor Project already consumed a lot of energy according to its current configuration. It can't really take anything more. Look, light skirmishers aren't swordsman mechs or spearman mechs. The latter two are much better equipped to pierce through frontal armor. A light skirmisher never does that. It utilizes speed and precision to outmaneuver an opponent and sink its short but sharp blades through the weak points of an enemy mech. The weapons don't actually have to be all that powerful for this approach."

"I understand that, Ketis, but some of the expert mechs we face might not be that easy for Venerable Tusa to outmaneuver. What if we face a high-tier expert mech?"

"Then I hope we outnumber the opponent in terms of expert mechs." Ves said.  
"Enough, Gloriana. I think Ketis has a good point here. The tradeoff that you're aiming to make isn't worth it. If you really want to empower the knives in some way, then we need to cut back on the other energy-draining options."

"That's unacceptable! The mobility of the Disruptor Project has to remain high!"

"Then we should just settle with simple, naked blades. Ketis excels in sharpness so she will definitely be able to ensure their performance is definitely up to par. If nothing else, we can just incorporate a resonating material in the knives so that Venerable Tusa can temporarily empower them with armor-piercing properties or something."

His wife reluctantly nodded. "Very well. I guess we will have to place even more faith in Venerable Tusa's piloting skill. Right now, the Disruptor Project is shaping up to be an expert mech that places an extreme amount of importance on skill. A good expert pilot will be able to create miracles with this mech, but a poorer one will cause it to collapse a lot faster than we anticipated."

Unending alloy or not, the Disruptor Project was still a light mech, with all of the inherent downsides that came with it. Ves had no doubt that other expert mechs would be able to

inflict significant internal damage to Venerable Tusa's expert mech if the latter was caught flat-footed.

The overall draft design of the Disruptor Project was almost set. The only remaining uncertainty was how the resonating materials that the Larkinson Clan was set to gather would enhance the expert mech.

Reesonating exotics and resonance abilities had the potential to completely transform the combat effectiveness of an expert mech. A more basic resonance ability only provided more generic boosts that weren't all that great, but the better ones often introduced more reality-defying effects that were highly effective in combating other expert mechs.

This was also why Gloriana worked so hard to get the best resonating materials she could. Their quantity and quality directly determined how easily the Larkinson Clan would be able to fight against other expert mechs in the future.

They only had to look at the medium and high-tier expert mechs of the Cross Clan to realize the difference!

After settling some other matters on the Disruptor Projects, Gloriana briefly turned her attention to another expert mech.

"Ves, how far are you into figuring out the design of the energy rifle for the Sentry Project."

"I'm still working on it. You know I've been busy lately. I'm also taking longer than I thought on how to generate higher-quality luminar crystals. I've been performing some experiments but I'm not yet satisfied with the quality that I've been able to produce."

"THAT'S NO EXCUSE!"

Ves raised his hands. "Calm down! I may have suffered some delays, but I am definitely getting closer to a viable solution. The Bright Beam Prime has already proven that blending prime mech properties with luminar crystals can produce a powerful enhancement. The only issue that is bothering me is that the luminar crystals that we can utilize are still too fragile for second-class expert mech standards."

Master Willix hadn't agreed to teach him how to synthesize second-class luminar crystals. Perhaps he might be able to change her mind by dropping to his knees and pressing his hands together, but he preferred to come up with his own solution.

He had already started to create better and more interesting luminar crystals whenever he was able to squeeze enough time to tinker in his personal workshop.

The crystal cube that he managed to salvage from the crystal ruins a long time ago was an essential piece of this. He had always used it to produce higher-quality luminar crystals than usual, but it turned out that he had been using it the wrong way all this time.

The Bright Beam Prime proved that luminar crystals were spiritually reactive. Everything this strange race made out of crystal was therefore designed to interact with spirituality from the start.

What if Ves tried to manipulate the crystal cube in the same fashion?

He soon discovered that the cube could act as a control interface that could manipulate the properties of every crystal he attempted to synthesize.

The only problem was that he didn't know how to use it. He was like a monkey sitting in front of a modern terminal. He could press all kinds of buttons and activate numerous random commands. Yet that did not mean he would be able to design a fully-functional mech this way!

Luminar technology was incomprehensible to Ves, but that was not the case for entities that were related to it. Blinky inherited a bit of luminar influence, but not enough to engage in advanced luminar engineering.

The Illustrious One was different. When Ves channeled or asked for help from this recently-promoted design spirit, he was able to manipulate the crystal cube in a much more targeted and effective manner.

The result was that he was starting to produce better luminar crystals!

Of course, there was still a lot of trial and error involved. It mainly had to do with the input materials he provided to the production process. The crystal cube could enable him to synthesize higher quality crystals, but if the input materials were crap, the end product wouldn't be much better!

Ves had ordered a diverse batch of materials that were typically used in the production of crystals in order to achieve a breakthrough on this front. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the Crown Uprising resulted in considerable shipping delays and disruption.

Hopefully, he wouldn't have to wait too long until he obtained what he needed to finish this essential chore... He had a hunch that luminar technology had a lot of potential, and that he was one of the few mech designers who could draw it out. The Sentry Project would be his first attempt to prove he could excel in this field!

*Chapter 3012: Deeper Studies*

Though Ves was taking longer to finish the configuration of the Sentry Project's energy rifle, he believed he was onto something.

"Luminar crystals have two distinct advantages compared to other energy weapon catalysts." He enthusiastically claimed to his wife. "They are very efficient and effective at their jobs. They can enhance the power of a laser beam without needing to input extra energy. They can also add special properties to the attack when combined with a prime mech. We're only scratching the surface of what we can do with luminar crystals now that I have figured out how to unlock their potential?"

Gloriana's face turned sour as she crossed her arms. The room in the design lab turned pretty tense as her heels clacked sharply against the metal deck.

She stepped closer to Ves until she loomed over his seated form.

"Ves?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I EXPECTED YOU TO SPEND YOUR TIME ON REFINING OUR DRAFT DESIGNS! I DID NOT GIVE YOU A LICENSE TO GET DISTRACTED BY A RANDOM STUDY THAT TAKES UP WAY TOO MUCH OF YOUR TIME!"

"Whoa whoa whoa! Calm down!" Ves hastily said. "You don't understand the benefits yet! Do you really think I'm just doing this to improve the Sentry Project?"

Gloriana narrowed her eyes. "What are you talking about, Ves?"

He was quite used to her blowing up in his face these days. He already prepared a good excuse.

"How many expert mechs will we arm with laser weapons? How many custom mechs and other special mechs will we arm with laser weapons? Each of them will be able to hit a lot harder if they are equipped with improved luminar crystals. Our fleet has plenty of melee expert mechs, but we are still deficient when it comes to ranged expert mechs. We can partially make up for this shortcoming if we can add some extra punch to our ranged expert mechs in this way."

"That sounds fine and dandy Ves, but COULDN'T YOU HAVE JUST WAITED UNTIL AFTER WE HAVE COMPLETED OUR CURRENT ROUND OF DESIGN PROJECTS?! We have to stay focused on what is important! We already have plenty of design problems to take care of. We'll only get bogged down even more if you add new ones on top of that! Stop chasing after every shiny toy just because you can't control your urges!"

Ves did not back off. He knew he was right and he had to convince his wife that he was on the right path.

"I can't just do it later. This is a core feature of the Sentry Project. It just wouldn't be the same if I develop this tech afterwards and integrate it with the finished expert mech. As long as I incorporate the new crystals into the Sentry Project from the start, I will not only be able to tune the improved energy rifle to the expert mech to a significantly greater degree, but I'll also be able to figure out how to best embed the crystals into the mech frame to produce the greatest possible synergy. It is a lot harder to do this when the expert mech is already complete. I'll have to perform a time-consuming overhaul that will take the expert mech out of commission for quite some time!"

"THAT IS BETTER THAN WASTING TIME RIGHT NOW AND CAUSING THE COMPLETION OF OUR EXPERT MECH DESIGNS TO BE DELAYED!"

"C'mon, Gloriana! Don't be like that! Didn't I tell you that it's fine to be a little more adventurous during our design process? The benefits of my little side study are absolutely worth it. Not only will the results immediately strengthen the offensive power of the Sentry Project, but it will also enhance the performance of the Chimera Project as well! After all, the rifle we're arming it with is also energy-based."

His wife briefly paused at that. If Ves chose to invest so much time and effort just to improve a single expert mech, then it was quite questionable whether it was worth it. If his efforts improved multiple expert mechs, then that was a different story.

Seeing that Gloriana was leaning towards the other direction, Ves smirked and brought out his killer argument.

"The expert mech design project you're collaborating with the Hexers is also an energy rifleman mech, right? I'm sure your lovely little brother Brutus would be able to ensure his survival a lot better if he's armed with a rifle that performs as much as thirty percent better than normal. The other expert mechs of our clan will also be able to provide him with more support on the battlefield. Think of how Venerable Davia was able to save your brother's life in the nick of time during the Battle of Reckoning. My attempt to integrate luminar crystals with prime technology is the key reason why the Bright Beam Prime possessed the power to divert a fatal resonance-empowered attack!"

That was the final push that tipped Gloriana over. Her eyes glazed over a bit before she regained her composure. She directed a measured look at Ves.

"If that is the case... I expect you to deliver solid results before Master Willix arrives to deliver our much-awaited batch of materials as well as the mech pilots we are supposed to take under our wing. Can you do that or do I need to revise my estimate of your research capabilities?"



"Hey! I'm a great researcher! I have made many interesting discoveries and came up with a lot of useful innovations! You can disparage whatever you want about me, but don't question my scientific credentials. I am absolutely certain that no one in the clan is better than me in this aspect! I'm the Larkinson Clan's version of the Supreme Sage in our fleet!"

An awkward silence fell in the room.

Gloriana blinked. "Didn't the Supreme Sage build a monstrous biojuggernaut that proceeded to go out of control, kill millions of civilians with its indiscriminate attacks, wipe out an entire mech division including all of its expert mechs before requiring direct MTA intervention to take down?"

"Uhm, you're not wrong, but you have to admit that the Supreme Sage is quite brilliant when he's on the right track."

After all, the former leader of the Life Research Association had successfully been able to produce a slightly inferior version of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum! Ves directly benefited from the success of Special Project 'V'!

His wife didn't seem very interested in pursuing this argument any further. She simply accepted his claims and expected him to deliver in a few weeks.

Though Ves was already distracted by numerous side projects, he was confident he could meet her expectations. He had a special affinity for luminar crystals that he was just starting to unfold.

The Journeymen talked a bit more about the Sentry Project and other expert mech design projects.

For example, they held a brief discussion on the armor layout of the Bulwark Project. None of the Journeymen present were true armor specialists. Gloriana came close, but her design choices sometimes led to disappointing outcomes.

Gloriana sighed. "I am already shouldering a lot of responsibilities, Ves. It would be nice if you can find a defense-oriented Journeyman."

"You know my policy on that, honey. It is hard to guarantee the loyalty and reliability of Journeymen when we add them to our clan. You don't want to take in a crown terrorist who will blow up our design lab from the inside, do you? Let's just wait until some of our assistant mech designers manage to break through."

"That will take years, if not decades. No one aside from Miles is close to the threshold."

This was an old argument to them, so Gloriana did not insist too much this time. She was confident she was able to handle this aspect by herself. She might not be able to



enhance the defensive properties of the expert mech through some mysterious method, but she was very confident in her ability to optimize the armor layouts of all of the expert mechs to perfection!

The Journeymen finally ended their lengthy meeting and went on to perform their individual tasks. Everyone had their hands full with work, and Ves even more so now that he committed to completing his studies on luminar crystals within a handful of weeks.

Even so, he still had to allocate his time on other necessary tasks.

One of them was checking up on the progress of the Larkinson seeds.

He hadn't been spending enough time on them as of late, and that was dangerous. Who knew what Maikel and Zanthar Larkinson were doing while there weren't any people to supervise their activities.

It was both fortunate and unfortunate that Ves wasn't responsible for Rennie and Maise Ann Larkinson. The two seeds who had briefly attended a Hexer university had turned into eager followers of Gloriana. For her part, his wife attentively guided their studies.

"You should have reached your second or third year of studies if you were following a normal curriculum." He began as he looked at the two brats across the work table.

"From what I have seen, the two of you haven't slacked off in the slightest. Good job. It's not easy to maintain your drive when you don't have as many peers around you. Are you still set on pursuing your chosen specialties?"

Both young men nodded. Ves felt a bit ambivalent towards their response because he wasn't fully comfortable with their chosen paths.

"Zanthar, how much progress have you made into deepening your understanding towards heavy firepower?"

"I've been mixing both theory and practice whenever possible." The eager adolescent said. "It helps a lot if I can study mechs with big guns in my free time. I practically visit the Transcender Punishers every day. Their huge gauss cannons and their formidable positron cannons are just so huge and imposing that I get inspired every time I look at them. The Eternal Redemption model is a lot harder to see, though. The Penitent Sisters don't visit or get close to the Spirit of Bentheim, so the only chance I can catch a glimpse of them is when our fleet has dropped into realspace. It's cool to see their big cannons blast distant asteroids to pieces."

Ves observed Zanthar carefully. The young student had grown even more passionate about extreme firepower. It didn't appear he would be changing his direction.

"Don't fixate around specific mech models." Ves gently admonished. "If you study the Transcendent Punisher and the Eternal Redemption too much, then all of the work you will make in the future will reflect the heavy weapons that you have admired for so long. This is not good for your future development. I suggest you study some of the more modest ranged weapons of our mech roster. You need to study what makes them different and what choices you can make to increase their firepower."

"Thank you, teacher. I don't exactly like the weaker guns, but I will do my best to study them, I guess."

"Every gun shares a common root. If you want to understand everything there is to cannons, then you need to understand their downscaled versions as well."

After he finished instructing Zanthar, Ves turned towards his more problematic student.

"Maikel. Are you still determined to design living mechs that possess more autonomy."

The other student nodded. "Yes, sir! I can program my own rudimentary AIs now and I can tweak the operating system of a mech to accept them. The results aren't so great, though. In every simulation that I run, the AIs always get trounced by the human mech pilots who volunteered to test my work."

Ves smirked and crossed his arms. "That's because you're pitting AIs with the skill of a beginner mech pilot against highly-trained human soldiers. You don't know what piloting a mech is like, let alone all of the factors that mech pilots are trained to take into account, so it is natural that your AIs are so easy to defeat. This isn't something that you'll be able to overturn unless you invest at least a decade or more on this topic. Are you willing to commit to that, Maikel?"

"I do! I knew from the start that I'm not pursuing a conventional specialty, but I've learned from your example... Besides, my AIs don't have to be good enough to fight against other human mech pilots by themselves. They're meant to complement friendly mech pilots!"

### *Chapter 3013: Weird Tech*

Ves didn't want to raise average mech designers.

Anyone who received his tutelage should follow a unique and exciting path. This was why he tried his best to help his students develop in more creative directions.

Ketis was a good example of someone who managed to do that. Though Ves wasn't directly responsible for her ascension to swordmaster, he had succeeded in laying the foundation to her successful rise.

As Ves listened to Maikel and Zanthar elaborate on how they had narrowed down their studies to their chosen specialties, he felt that the young men weren't quite there yet. Their ambitions weren't small, but they were still a distance away from setting unique and original goals.

Well, it wasn't as if he could expect anything more out of students who had yet to graduate. They still needed to learn how to walk before they could run.

For a moment, Ves thought about granting them companion spirits as a little experiment. Would he be able to turn them into the next versions of Ketis if he granted them a little spiritual assistance?

It was a viable idea. While he didn't want to accelerate the growth of their companion spirit seeds by using up a portion of potent universal life energy, it wasn't necessary to go that far. The two adolescents still needed years before they became ready to do some actual design work. This gave them plenty of time for them to grow alongside their companion spirits.

Perhaps this was a better way for them to develop the companion spirits that were most suitable to their specialties. Accelerated growth might provide instant power and allow a companion spirit to become immediately useful, but Ves was not ignorant of the downsides of this approach.

The bond between him and Blinky wasn't quite comparable to the bond between Ketis and Sharpie. Whenever he saw the pair, he noticed that they were a lot more in tune with each other.

Sharpie automatically assisted Ketis in whatever task she did in the most appropriate manner.

In comparison, Blinky spent most of his time sleeping in his mind, trying and failing to defeat Lucky in violent scuffles and trying to deepen his bond with Goldie instead of Ves. He was too much of a playful cat to provide any serious assistance to Ves during his design work!

"At least he's able to supply me with energy on demand." He muttered.

Ves knew that Blinky had a lot of untapped potential. Just his ability to manipulate the Worclaw energy in his body was extremely important to his future health.

Yet because Blinky grew so rapidly without learning any lessons in between, the Star Cat was like a newly-graduated mech pilot who just entered the cockpit of a Valkyrie Brunhild. The disparity was too big!

Though this was a serious problem, Ves knew he had to be patient. He could already feel Blinky growing more and more familiar with his new abilities. It would only be a matter of time before Blinky mastered his potential to the same degree as Sharpie.

As for granting companion spirits to his students, Ves decided to flesh out this idea later. He still had to find and combine some good ingredients in order to provide Maikel and Zanthar with spiritual assistants that fully complemented their future design philosophies.

This was the best way to transform them into exceptional mech designers!

If the pair managed to bloom under his tutelage, then he would enjoy a very stellar record as a teacher. By that time, Ves predicted that a lot of people would clamor to become his student!

"Sir, when will we be obtaining our cranial implants?" Maikel impatiently asked. "All of the assistant mech designers are already starting to get theirs. Once they recovered from their surgery, their learning speeds increased by multiple times! When will we get to enjoy this enhancement?"

Ves snapped out of his contemplations. He directed a disapproving glance at Maikel.

"You little brats. Are you that impatient to improve yourselves?"

The pair nodded like chicks.

"Well tough luck, because you're not getting any yet if I have anything to say about it." Ves grinned.

"What? Why?!"

"Because you already have enough augments! Look, the basic courses that you still have to go through aren't that difficult. It is worth slowing down a bit in order to go over them with plenty of attention to thought. Piling up a cranial implant on top of your already-formidable genetic augments is completely overboard for mech design students like you. I'm afraid that you'll just rush through the basics without experiencing the gradual revelations that any future mech designer enjoys. It is by thinking about and questioning the theory that design philosophies are born."

The two dummies didn't get it. They just thought that Ves wanted to make them suffer by denying them a powerful study aid.

As someone who possessed a cranial implant himself, Ves knew how it could distort the mind of someone who depended on knowledge to achieve success. While it was truly worth it to obtain one, it was better to wait until the recipient in question had matured to an extent.

Every student who aimed to reach Journeyman had to develop an intimate appreciation of the boundless field of mech design. At the same time, they needed to respect the knowledge that their predecessors had accumulated and made available to those that came after.

Knowledge had a price, and only those who worked hard to expand their understanding would have a better idea on how to forge their own path into uncharted territory.

Of course, this was all his own opinion on the learning process. It might be that he was just pulling guesses out of his butt without knowing whether they reflected reality. He based most of his theories out of his own personal journey into mech design, and that was hardly representative of what other mech designers had to go through.

Ves seriously doubted they possessed the System!

He finished the little session by handing over some long-term homework assignments to the pair. He was already preoccupied with several different projects and had no time to guide his students as closely as he liked.

It wasn't all that bad, though. Despite their complaints, Maikel and Zanthar ingested enough candy to turn themselves into formidable learning machines. They could navigate his library on their own. If they really needed clarification, they could always approach one of the Apprentices in the Design Department if necessary.

When Ves finally dismissed them, he contemplated whether he should bind them more closely to him in the future.

The alternative was to let them develop on their own without trying to push them into a direction of his choosing.

If he chose the former, then Maikel and Zanthar would very likely become eligible to join his inner circle in the future.

Ves turned his attention back to his various projects. Aside from spending time on fleshing out the Chimera Project and the Sentry Project further, he spent several hours trying to synthesize better luminar crystals.

His progress in the latter was rather inconsistent, but he was slowly learning how to get better at synthesizing luminar crystals through the process of trial and error.

Basically, he made a lot of mistakes and screwed up more times than he could count!

Fortunately, his workshop was so well-equipped that he could easily synthesize hundreds of modest-sized crystals a day, especially when he was just out to create samples instead of full-sized products.

"Damn. The hardness of this crystal has dropped by 27 percent compared to my current best." Ves muttered as he tossed another finger-sized crystal over his shoulder.

A pile of hundreds of crystals of different shapes, sizes and colors rested haphazardly on the deck. No cleaning bots had cleaned up this mess as of yet as Ves may needed to scan or revisit them afterwards.

After experiencing yet another failure, Ves started anew and studied the formulas that were heading in the right direction.

"Blinky, how do you think I can increase the hardness of my crystals?"

Mrow mrow mrow.

"Okay, let's try this then."

Ves reached across the work table and picked up three different samples of special materials that he recently received.

"Out of these three materials, which one will increase the hardness of the crystal when added to the formula?"

Blinky pointed at the sample in the middle.

Mrow!

"You sure?"

Mrow mrow!

In fact, Ves didn't need to ask. By focusing his attention on what his companion spirit was feeling and thinking, Ves would easily be able to notice a subtle affinity towards one of the materials.

"What about the Illustrious One? What does he think?"

When Ves briefly channeled the luminar design spirit, he temporarily viewed reality in a different fashion.

It was hard to describe how certain elements stood out more while other elements receded in importance.

Yet just because his senses became more freaky didn't mean he could easily piece together the formula to synthesize second-class luminar crystals.

"What is the damn ratio?! How should I balance out the different materials?!"

It wasn't enough to know the right materials. In order to create a truly superior product, he had to process them and combine them in numerous sophisticated ways. Only by following the right steps would he be able to synthesize crystals that were tough enough to survive the rigors of expert mech combat.

Yet in order to get closer to the correct proportions and processing method, Ves could not completely rely on Blinky and the Illustrious One to achieve a better result. The most they could do was to give him some hints and give him some sporadic warnings whenever he was doing something wrong.

Hence why he had to create a lot of different iterations and perform live tests on what he made. The more data he generated, the more prompts he received from Blinky and the Illustrious One.

His hand tapped on top of the crystal cube. "It would be nice if you came with an instruction manual."

This was the downside of working with alien technology. The crystal cube could strengthen many crystals by processing them in a way that caused them to acquire a lot of internal circuits.

These alien circuits were completely unfathomable and indecipherable to Ves. Yet they were also the primary reason why the crystals were able to exert additional power or impart different effects.

At the end of his session, Ves looked at the five new crystals that he deemed the best of the bunch.

He picked up a specially-fabricated laser rifle that he had specifically designed for testing purposes. He then proceeded to slot in the first crystal into a chamber that was also designed to accommodate the experimental products.

He didn't fire the rifle himself. That was too dangerous. Who knew if the crystal overloaded and caused the entire weapon to blow up in his face?

Instead, he handed the rifle over to one of his honor guards. The soldier moved to a shielded firing range further back that Ves had set up for this purpose.

When the guard fired the rifle, an invisible beam struck a metal dummy bot. Bubbles appeared across the poor target. Soon, the bot shattered as all of its metal surfaces were torn apart by strange bubbles!

Ves could only scratch his head at this result.

"Next one."



The second crystal slotted in the test rifle fired a purple beam that caused the target to erupt in corrosive fire. The fumes were so toxic that portions of the platform underneath started to get covered by holes!

"Next."

The third crystal fired an ordinary white beam that did not consist entirely of photons. Though the light beam traveled considerably slower than light, it was able to inflict a small but noticeable degree of physical damage towards the target dummy, causing it to get knocked back by a few meters!

"Next."

The fourth crystal produced a more esoteric effect. Whatever Ves put into it caused the energy beam to follow a spiralling trajectory towards its target. Other than that, it behaved like a normal laser beam, which meant the spirals were almost completely pointless.

"Useless. Next."

Ves perked up a bit after his honor guard slotted in the last crystal. The soldier carefully took aim and pulled the trigger.

PVOOMPH!

A surprisingly loud noise echoed across the firing range as a blinding white beam almost blinded the visual sensors in the space.

Ves couldn't even see the light beam that had slammed into the latest dummy bot and blasted it into lots of tiny pieces!

The power of this last crystal was the most formidable that he had ever witnessed so far, but it came with a very troublesome downside.

The honor guard had already let go of the rifle. Its entire middle section had melted from the excess heat released by the disintegrating crystal!

Ves could only sigh at this mixed result. "How the hell did you luminars come up with this weird tech?!"

*Chapter 3014: Complete Tech Base*

Though Ves had 'discovered' hundreds of odd applications of luminar technology, the crystals he made with the help of the crystal cube still failed in one aspect.

They broke too easily.

The MTA must have figured out a way to synthesize harder crystals that were at least comparable to other second-class materials, but Ves didn't have access to that know-how.

He felt tempted to contact Master Willix in order to beg her to grant him access to this crucial research, but he had a very strong hunch that he would return empty-handed.

She rejected his request before and had little reason to think it would be any different this time.

In general, the MTA did not like it when humans dabbled with alien tech.

It was one thing to develop technology derived from alien theories and applications.

It was another thing to directly make use of alien technology without understanding their fundamental mechanisms!

Right now, luminar technology was like a black box to Ves. The crystal cube along with the indecipherable crystal circuitry were so different from human tech that he would probably need centuries to understand all of its principles!

The most valuable component of luminar tech was how it seamlessly integrated and interacted with spirituality.

Ves was quite greedy to unlock this secret, but he did not intend to devote all his time to do so. He did not specialize in energy weapons or crystal technology. The only reason luminar technology was relevant to him was because of its relation to spiritual engineering. Yet that was not enough for him to single-handedly transform luminar technology into something that could be mastered by other humans.

"Fortunately, I don't have to achieve this much." He reminded himself. "I just need to make enough progress to add something of value to our ranged expert mech designs."

He was moving closer. Every day, he managed to synthesize crystals that were a little tougher. Even if only five out of five-hundred improved on this aspect, this was still a step in the right direction!

The only annoying part of it all was that Ves had no idea when he would be able to reach his goal. The Illustrious One was obviously able to manipulate luminar technology to a degree. Yet his theoretical understanding was still too spotty to provide consistent answers!

"Maybe I shouldn't have used up the fragment of the Blinding One." Ves muttered. "If I still retained a piece of the original dark god, I could have preserved his knowledge to the highest degree!"

The fact that he used it up as an upgrade material to another design spirit meant that much of that accumulated knowledge and memory became lost.

The Illustrious One was a separate entity from the Blinding One. It did not carry over most of the memories of the Blinding One because they defined one's personality. Ves did not want to resurrect the hostile dark god, so he made sure to cast those irrelevant bits aside in order to obtain his desired result.

"Perhaps I threw away too much, though."

If he knew that luminar technology became a lot more powerful and practical when combined with spirituality, he would have taken a different approach!

"Well, at least I'm making some progress. That's better than many other people. I doubt the MTA researchers are able to match my speed if they don't have my advantages!"

From the research documents that Ves had previously received from Master Willix, he did not get the impression that the MTA research team assigned to study luminar technology possessed anything comparable to the crystal cube. The elite researchers likely also lacked the ability to harness spirituality, thereby causing them to miss much of the potential of this powerful tech.

It was a mistake to underestimate their research prowess, though. Spirituality or not, the MTA's mastery of the sciences was so great that they were probably able to deepen their mastery of the more physical aspects of luminar technology!

As Ves continued to tinker with different crystal formulas, one day Calabast interrupted his current preoccupation.

"What's up?" He frowned as he faced her projection.

He didn't like it when someone came and interrupted his flow. He had already lost his previous mood. It would become a lot harder for him to get back into the groove for today.

The news she presented to him wiped away all of his annoyance.

"We've reached an agreement with the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan about imparting them with your so-called 'networks'. Both are willing to provide us with both immediate and ongoing concessions in exchange for your help. I think the deal we've settled upon is very favorable for you, but you should take a look at the terms."

"I'll be there right away!"

When Ves left his personal workshop in order to head over to Calabast's office, she had already prepared a brief presentation.

"My networks are absolutely unique, you know that?" He told her. "While I cannot guarantee that they will be able to discover crown terrorists that are already within the ranks of those organizations, it has at least proven to be effective at identifying those who mean harm when they attempt to join. Our two allies won't have to be so careful about recruiting new people anymore."

To be honest, Ves wasn't so eager to empower his allies. Why should he give up his advantage and share one of the core strengths of the Larkinson Clan to them? The most important consequence was that the Glory Seekers and Crossers would be able to catch up to the Larkinsons and gain more weight in the Golden Skull Alliance!

Yet the situation wasn't as simple as that. With the Crown Uprising still going strong, human space continued to deteriorate. The amount of incidents throughout the galaxy had exploded and even the most peaceful and prosperous states were beginning to experience difficulties.

The Larkinson Clan couldn't shoulder all of the future burdens alone. For better or worse, his clan would be better off if the rest of the alliance flourished as well.

Of course, Ves didn't want to give away his networks for free. Far from it. If he was about to grant his allies such a powerful capability, then he better get his money's worth!

"So what does the deal look like?" He asked as he sat down in front of Calabast's desk.

"Squeak."

Arnold noticed his arrival and rose up from his bed below the desk and scurried behind Calabast's boots. The exobeast wasn't comfortable whenever Ves was around for some reason. Perhaps it had to do with how the mech designer fantasized about performing experiments whenever he looked at the eight-legged beast.

A brief smile appeared on Calabast's face. She was not annoyed at her new pet's antics at all. She even allowed the alien critter to lick the surface of her boots.

Ves briefly wondered how much alien saliva had already covered her footwear. It must be hell for her cleaning bots to scrub Arnold's donations away every day.

"I've tried my best to put your priorities first." Calabast stated as she appeared unaware that Ves was staring at her boots. "First off, several terms of the treaty of the Golden Skull Alliance will be adjusted as long as the deal goes through and your networks are able to deliver on their promises."

"Tell me about the ones that matter."

"Let's talk about the capital ship quota." She said. "Right now, out of the 20 slots that are available, our clan has claimed 8, though technically we only have access to 7. We

gave away one slot to the Glory Seekers so that they can bring their Indigo Tremor along. The Cross Clan are entitled to 6 slots."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Six? I thought they only secured five."

"The Cross Clan's guest designer has been busy lately. Professor Benedict Cortez supposedly completed a big mission for the MTA and received at least 6 million MTA merits as a reward."

"Damn! And he did all of that while staying aboard the Hemmington Cross?"

Calabast nodded, which caused Ves to feel even more pissed.

The only way for him to earn that much merits was to complete high-risk missions in dangerous areas like the Nyxian Gap or somehow manage to convert 12 mech pilots into expert pilots!

No matter how Ves looked at it, he had to go above and beyond to earn so many merits in a relatively short amount of time.

Meanwhile, the man who used to be called the Skull Architect probably earned his merits by sitting behind his desk and working on some kind of advanced mech design or something!

It was too easy!

If Ves was able to earn merits in such a relaxed manner as Professor Benedict, he wouldn't have gotten involved in so many dangerous incidents!

"We're not the only ones who are making progress, Ves." The spymaster reminded him once again. "The Glory Seekers have absorbed a large batch of Hexer refugees while the Cross Clan has forced itself to open up to recruitment as well. In fact, the Cross Clan are finally beginning to enjoy the benefits of hosting a Senior Mech Designer. The Crossers have already swapped some of their older mech models with improved ones. The merits that Professor Benedict is able to contribute is also critical to the Cross Clan's reconstruction. I've heard that he is already paying for the clan's next capital ships."

This was just the beginning. Though Professor Benedict was anything but a conventional mech designer, now that the former pirate lord was settling down in civilized space, his formidable design capabilities were finally starting to be felt.

If not for the fact that Ves' design philosophy was so unique and irreplaceable, Professor Benedict would have become the highest-earning mech designer in the Golden Skull Alliance by now!

"Let's get back on topic." Ves said as he shook aside his worries concerning the rise of a rival within the alliance. "What was that about capital ships?"

"The Cross Clan is willing to give us 2 of their capital ship slots."

"..That's all?"

"Don't look down on this concession." Calabast snapped. "The Crossers are quite ambitious, and they know that entering the Red Ocean with as many capital ships as possible is vital to starting off on the right foot in the dangerous new frontier. Now, they have not only given away the equivalent of 10 million MTA merits worth of ship slots, but they have passed it on to us! The effect is therefore double of what is obvious at first glance."

Ves understood what she was getting at. This modest-sounding concession practically ruled any opportunity for the Cross Clan to become the dominant partner in the Golden Skull Alliance!

In this context, giving away 3 ship slots sounded rather excessive. That would weaken the Crossers too much while making the Larkinson Clan too dominant. From a neutral perspective, it was not good if the Larkinsons became strong to the point of never getting challenged or pressured by their rivals.

"This is far from enough to matching the value of my networks. What else do I get?" He asked.

"The complete component license libraries of both the Hexers and the Crossers. You will gain near-complete access to all of their exclusive component designs, at least the ones that they still retain. Please note that this also includes several tech that is usually hard to come by in public such as heavy mech weapons, stealth technology, starship systems, production equipment and other sophisticated designs that are not necessarily related to mechs. The only tech that they have excluded is either related to very fine applications of high technology or trump card designs for high-tier expert mechs. The rest is untouched. In short, what they have promised to us is almost the entire technological foundation of their states!"

This was a far more interesting concession to Ves! As a mech designer, how could he not be attracted by the prospect of gaining access to more tech?

The best part was that the transfer would be permanent! The Larkinsons were actually at a huge disadvantage in this aspect because it was too young and never enjoyed any sincere backing from any state.

Though the Larkinsons were able to make up for this shortfall by borrowing from the Hexers, this was a temporary and unstable arrangement. Ves felt a lot better now that

he wouldn't have to knock on the doors of the Hegemony each time he wanted to design a mech that made use of advanced Hexer components!

"I'm not surprised that the Cross Clan doesn't value its technological base as much anymore now that it has almost fallen, but what about the Glory Seekers? Is the Hegemony okay with this offer of theirs?"

"We've already cleared it with the Hegemony, Ves. I wouldn't have presented it to you if this wasn't the case. It's all okay. The Hexers pretty much treat you as one of their own by now. With the Fridaymen about to enter Hexer territory, the matriarchs have much bigger problems on their hands than worrying about whether you'll misuse their tech."

This was still a very generous concession regardless of the thoughts of the matriarchs. This was exactly what the Larkinson Clan needed in order to advance its engineering activities and form an immediate foundation and increase its independence!

#### *Chapter 3015: Temporal Benefits*

The Glory Seekers and Crossers were being quite sincere this time. Calabast did not disappoint him in trying to milk as many benefits as possible.

In a time where the entire galaxy became engulfed in mass unrest, it was quite wise for Colonel Ariadne Wodin and Patriarch Reginald Cross to pursue any means of increasing the security of their respective fleets!

Ves wasn't fully satisfied, though. He knew the value of his networks best. The advantages they bestowed were worth so much that even the Terrans and Rubarthans would be begging on their knees to obtain these powerful spiritual creations!

It was too bad that Ves would practically be committing suicide if he did so. The first-rate superstates had very powerful enemies who would stop at nothing to prevent the former hegemons of human space from rising up again.

There was also the Five Scrolls Compact to consider. Master Willix had already given him a pointed warning about that and he did not think she was kidding at the time.

As long as he and his partners were flying under the Compact's radar, it shouldn't be a big problem making use of spiritual networks.

However, as long as someone capable enough learned of their existence, the Compact would definitely look into his inventions. Since the cult was probably the most authoritative organization in human space with regards to spirituality, who knew how they would react!

This was why Ves thought it was best not to spread his spiritual networks that much, especially the more intimate ones like the one presided over by the Golden Cat.



It was already quite a risk to spread it out to two other organizations.

Technically, the Glory Seekers should have all become a part of the Superior Mother's network by now, but that one was different. The network governing the Hexers was much looser, did not require active acceptance from the Superior Mother, did not watch out for treacherous or harmful thoughts and did not make everyone who was a part of it more intimate with each other.

In other words, the Glory Seekers only enjoyed a very weak preview version of the more intimate spiritual network that was protecting the Larkinson Clan.

"What else did the Glory Seekers and Crossers promise?" He calmly asked as he adopted an expectant look. "What our allies have promised is already useful, but the scales aren't balanced in my eyes."

"Well, the third major concession they made is a solemn commitment to stand by the Larkinson Clan and defend us no matter the circumstances. They're even willing to hold a grand ceremony in order to formalize and honor this pact."

This was the first time since he entered Calabast's office that he snorted.

"They're simply bowing to reality. Once the Glory Seekers and Crossers adopt my networks, they become dependent on them. The only person who has the qualifications to tinker with them is me. This grants me a lot of power over the two organizations!"

In fact, Ves could easily abuse his access to their network to insert foreign values to their organizations or even cause them to view Ves with absolute respect! He could pull off so many shenanigans that he could practically collapse their foundation overnight!

If not for the fact that strong-minded expert pilots and other individuals were basically immune to the influence of spiritual networks, Ves would have actually felt tempted to pull off a scheme to turn them into vassals of the Larkinson Clan!

Still, as long as this arrangement went through, the price of falling out became too much for the two partners to bear. If they had any sense of intelligence in their minds, the leaders of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan would never risk the consequences of proceeding with an ugly breakup!

In that sense, the defense pact that the Glory Seekers and the Crossers generously proposed was nothing more than a recognizing reality rather than moving towards it. By making a commitment that was already a fact, the two allies lost nothing while being able to pretend they were magnanimous enough to entertain yet another demand of the Larkinson Clan.

From the intrigued expression on Calabast's face, she recognized the truth as well, but the forms still had to be obeyed. It would be a lot better if agreements like these were formalized in written agreements rather than remain unspoken.

"It looks like we'll be together for the long haul then." Ves murmured. "We won't merge into a single organization, but we won't be splitting off from each other anytime soon."

Calabast nodded. "I think this is good for us. No offense, Ves, but you tend to attract enemies a lot easier than others. It would be good if our allies become more committed to defending us. After all, if we fall, who knows what will happen to their networks? They need to keep the only source of tech support alive, which means that your wellbeing will become one of their core priorities!"

"That only matters as long as our allies can actually keep up with our growth. We've only just begun to ramp up. I don't even dare to guess how many capital ships and mech pilots we have under our control in a decade, but it will definitely dwarf what we have right now. Will the Glory Seekers and Crossers be able to match us or will they grow into non-entities down the line?"

"Hmm..." The spymaster fell in thought while she bumped the tip of her boot onto Arnold's nose.

"Squeak squeak!"

"My judgement is that they won't disappoint you." She eventually answered. "Let's take the Glory Seekers first. Ostensibly, they're a detached force of household troops of the Wodin Dynasty. We both know that 'detached' is defined rather loosely here. The influx of Hexer refugees in the past few months has indicated that it is actually functioning as an active arm of the Wodin Dynasty and by extension the rest of the Hegemony. That in turn means that the Hexer state is essentially backing the Glory Seekers. The implications of this will become more and more impactful over time, especially if the Hegemony loses the Komodo War and the remnants begin transferring all of their resources and hopes on its diaspora."

This was a realistic assessment. Ves had already noticed this in fact from the way that Gloriana was able to cooperate extensively with the Hegemony. No ordinary Journeyman would have been able to persuade a state to provide so much aid in ordinary times!

"As for the Cross Clan, I've already discussed this with you. Professor Benedict Cortez might not be blessed with an existing industrial and commercial base like yours, but a Senior Mech Designer is always a force to be reckoned with. Depending on his future business endeavors, he will definitely become the primary source of funding and innovation in the Cross Clan. His influence will rise and he will be able to drag the rest of the Crossers with him as well. Also, don't forget Patriarch Reginald Cross. I don't know if he'll ever be able to advance to ace pilot, but if he does..."

If Reginald Cross succeeded, he would become an existence that possessed the same amount of prestige as a Master Mech Designer!

In truth, this was something of a complicated subject. Ace pilots were generally equated to Senior Mech Designers first, but as they grew into their power, they quickly became existences that everyone would be forced to look up to. This was similar to a Master mech Designer.

This was why the mech community 'unofficially' divided ace pilots into two categories. Junior ace pilots were the ones who didn't have enough time to consolidate their power and master their new capabilities. Senior ace pilots were those who truly made use of their expanded capabilities to fight at a level that was far beyond that of an expert pilot!

No matter whether someone faced a junior or senior ace pilot, both of them were easily able to crush expert pilots with ease!

This was why the balance of power would definitely shift towards the Cross Clan if Reginald succeeded in accomplishing the improbable!

"Hmmm, maybe you're right." Ves said. "Our two allies do have the capital to keep up with us. From what it sounds like, we might be the ones who have to worry about getting left behind by them. It's a good thing that this agreement will cement our status no matter how much we fall behind."

He began to look more and more favorable to this deal. As Calabast proceeded to mention some other, less important concessions, Ves felt pretty good about selling his networks to the partners of the Larkinson Clan.

Yet Calabast did not sound completely optimistic.

"Before you go off to sign the new agreement, you should think about it more critically. While my team and I have tried to persuade the Glory Seekers and the Crossers to make more concessions, they are not inept when it comes to bargaining. Consider the temporal nature of the first and second major concession."

"Uh, what?" Ves almost wanted to scratch his head.

"The Cross Clan giving us two of their capital ship slots and both partners giving us full access to the CURRENT version of their tech libraries are extremely useful right from the beginning, but over time, they become less relevant."

He frowned at that. "You mean we're getting scammed?"

"I wouldn't say that. I am just trying to say that these concessions are mostly short and medium-term benefits rather than long-term ones." She clarified. "For example, giving us two capital ship slots is extremely critical in our first decade after entering the Red

Ocean. Capital ships are direct sources of power in the new frontier and their scarcity ensures that they will play a disproportionate role in every pioneering fleet during the early days of colonizing the dwarf galaxy. Yet what about fifty years later? What if the Red Ocean develops to the point where the production of capital ships isn't bottlenecked anymore?"

"Then... I guess two more or two less capital ships is a trivial matter to the Larkinson Clan." Ves slowly commented. "Well, it's not as if ship slots are relevant anymore once we enter the Red Ocean. The slots were only ever about using up the limited ship quota of a beyonder ticket."

"That is true, and it is also important to note that the early impact of extra capital ships is still extremely valuable. Gaining just a bit of greater power in our early period can make a huge difference in our growth down the line. It's an investment that can pay off a hundred or even a thousand times in a few generations from now. That is because we wouldn't be as constrained from the start, thereby allowing us to take greater risks in a period where the Red Ocean is still filled with rapid growth opportunities."

This was a rather complicated topic and one that was difficult to quantify, but Ves understood the gist of it. The concept was no different from a startup company borrowing lots of money in the hopes of becoming a unicorn in the future.

"The tech licenses we gain access to will also decrease in value over time." Calabast noted. "Our allies won't give us access to new licenses and innovations for good reasons. They don't mind giving away their existing tech because it doesn't hurt them, it's already there and it will become outdated in a number of years anyway. Granted, getting almost all of their current tech will definitely boost our clan's technical capabilities during our crucial rapid growth phase, so it is not as if we are being scammed. The only issue is that it is impossible for us to continue the development of all of this existing tech. We lack the huge amount of researchers, developers and engineers that can update all of the different pieces of tech."

This was true and this would always be the case so long as the Larkinson Clan was not able to match a true state in terms of population, development, territory, industry, commerce and so on. The Larkinsons would still have to depend on outside help to keep up with the newer generations of technology.

Still, this was better than their prior situation, so Ves was already happy with this benefit.

"Even if we can't update all of the licenses and so on over time, it is already useful to have the designs of so many different devices in our central database. This allows us to become self-sufficient because we can just make specific machines that can solve a lot of our problems. It won't matter if the performance of such machines lags behind the more modern ones. It beats having no solution!"

### *Chapter 3016: Alliance Considerations*

Although the deal negotiated by Calabast presented several caveats and problems, Ves leaned in favor of the terms.

So what did it matter if the concessions were slanted towards the short and medium term? This was exactly the most vulnerable period of the Larkinson Clan!

The previous battles and crises the Larkinsons had gone through had almost killed everyone. The clan's future came into question far too many times to count due to the fact that its military forces were still outmatched on a regular basis.

It took an extraordinary effort on the part of Ves and the current and future expert pilots of the clan to snatch victories from the jaws of defeat!

This was not a viable approach for the future. A small number of people shouldn't be forced to snatch victories under difficult circumstances over and over again. It was better if those victories never strayed close to the deadly jaws in the first place!

In order to accomplish that in the short term, it was okay for the Larkinsons to borrow the strength of others.

So far, Ves was quite satisfied with the reliability and competence of the Glory Seekers and Cross Clan.

Unlike the Larkinsons, the backgrounds of their two alliance partners were much more solid. They came from true second-class states and were not newcomers to the sort of battles that were being waged at this level. Their civil and intellectual development was also robust. In comparison, the Larkinson Clan grew too quickly to build up their foundation in this aspect and more.

So the concessions made by the two allies came in very handy. Ves wouldn't have to worry about the Larkinson Clan beginning to suffer all kinds of logistical deficiencies due to a lack of technical options.

Technology was the foundation of human civilization. Humanity's ability to make tools and machines to accomplish difficult goals and solve difficult problems was its basis for dominating the galaxy!

Therefore, it made a huge difference if the Larkinsons obtained a nearly-complete tech library. Even if many devices and technical designs could be bought from the open market, the more advanced designs were not so easily obtained.

In any case, it didn't matter if this tech library wouldn't be updated. With the current pace of technological development, the designs would still be useful and efficient for at least a century if not more for certain devices.

Mechs were rather special in that the smallest differences could potentially swing the outcome of entire wars. The mech industry had to work hard to meet the insatiable demand for better, stronger and more efficient mechs.

Anything that wasn't directly related to combat did not possess this urgency. Starship development was much more relaxed as many ships were built with the expectation that they would last at least a century or more under normal operation.

Perhaps competitive environments demanded constant progress and faster innovation. Yet if the Larkinsons were just operating a normal expeditionary fleet, it didn't matter that much if their mining machines were 10 percent slower or if their efficiency in synthesizing a complex fuel formula was 30 percent worse than the norm.

The point was that the Larkinsons possessed the capability to mine asteroids and synthesize fuel on a fully independent basis!

In frontier space, there was a huge lack of services. Whatever products and services the early pioneers made available would always be overpriced and in huge demand for at least the first two decades.

The capability to construct starships and capital ships was a good example. This was an industry with an extremely high barrier of entry due to all of the specialized tech and know-how required to construct the most advanced and modern vessels.

As long as the Larkinson Clan received all of the knowledge and specifications related to shipbuilding and many other industries, it would have no problem with building ships in-house straight away once the Larkinsons gained the right facilities!

Aside from this, Ves also valued the other implications of the deal. The long-term dependence on the new spiritual networks ensured that the Glory Seekers and the Crossers remained shackled to Ves and the Larkinsons.

As long as Ves was able to maintain his spiritual monopoly in this new and unique sector, it was extremely unwise for his existing customers to turn their backs on him! He knew his spiritual networks the best and he also possessed the keys to control many of their parameters.

Ves faced betrayal more times than he could count. The fundamental reason why people lied or screwed him over was because there were more benefits to doing so than to remain honest. Only a few groups of people like the Swordmaidens and the Kinners were able to resist this impulse and remain true to their principles.

As someone who did not fall into this rare and special category, Ves found it hard to trust other people's promises at face value.



To him, true trust and loyalty had to be paired with concrete interests in order to remain solid. The intertwining of real interests would naturally ensure that either or both sides of an agreement remained committed!

Ves already had various entanglements with the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan, but they were not strong enough for his liking.

For example, the Glory Seekers and Hexers liked him in general due to his contributions to the Komodo War, but this did not change the fundamental problem that he was a male. Who knew whether some radicalist would rise up among them who insisted that cooperating with boys was evil?

He had to ensure that the Hexers or at least the Glory Seekers in specific remained friendly to Ves and his clan!

The Cross Clan on the other hand was tied to the Larkinson Clan by only two flimsy bonds. Patriarch Reginald and Professor Benedict both latched on to the clan because they believed that Ves could help them break through their bottlenecks and advance to the next step of their careers.

What if they achieved their dreams? If both of them achieved their biggest goals, then the Cross Clan effectively turned into a much scarier beast now that it was led by both a Master Mech Designer and an ace pilot!

It would not make much sense anymore for the Cross Clan to continue to hang out with the Larkinson Clan, let alone take a lower position.

In this case, the existence of a spiritual network watching over the rank-and-file Crossers would ensure that the Larkinson Clan would never be suppressed even if it became the weakest partner in the Golden Skull Alliance.

A great example of what might happen if the partners of an alliance grew too weak was how the Friday Coalition changed since its establishment.

Out of the original nine Coalition partners that banded together in order to resist the Hexers, three of them had become history. Hardly anyone knew their names or their other characteristics in the Komodo Star Sector because they were losers who failed to secure their future!

Ves did not want his Larkinson Clan to fall off in a similar fashion. He needed to build up as many advantages as possible in order to ensure his clan could keep up with the development of the Golden Skull Alliance. He also had to make sure his clan would still retain the capital to remain independent as the Red Ocean became a playground for increasingly stronger organizations.



All of these considerations meant that Ves had many reasons to accept the deal and not that many arguments to reject it. There weren't many long-term benefits, but he was already happy with gaining an extra guarantee that his allies would remain friendly.

This was why he allowed Calabast to arrange a personal meeting with the leaders of the two alliance partners.

A short time went by as the three members of the Golden Skull Alliance arranged a small, informal meeting.

There was no need for pomp and ceremony in order to hammer out some final details.

After a brief discussion, the leaders all decided to meet with Ves aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. Since the focus of the meeting was the spiritual networks that he was able to provide, it was best to enter a ship whose crew was most strongly affected by this innovation.

When Ariadne Wodin and Reginald Cross discreetly shuttled over to the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim, they curiously studied the Larkinsons as they followed a guide who took them deeper into the bowels of the capital ship.

"Interesting." The nominal head of the Glory Seekers commented as she was assaulted by glows from various sources. "How can anyone work under these circumstances?"

Their female guide and attendant smiled. "You get used to it, ma'am. Most of these glows are quite pleasant to be around so we rarely shy away from them. It will be a lot less intense once we move away from the hangar bay. All of the mechs stationed here kind of blend in together to produce a stronger than usual effect."

Reginald Cross did not issue a word of complaint. He merely remained silent as he felt but remained unaffected by any nearby glows. He was more interested to observe how other Larkinsons interacted with each other.

As they moved through the long and spacious hallways, they no longer encountered any glows. While there were certain instances where golden cat statues had some limited effect, the two guests were able to observe the Larkinsons without feeling as if they were intruding into something private.

"These Larkinsons hardly act differently from when they are affected by glows." The older Hexer woman noticed.

"That's because we carry a piece of the Larkinson Clan everywhere, ma'am. Our Bright Warriors have the strongest effect, but the truth is that we already feel a portion of this glow in our minds. It's a lot less noticeable though, but that does not change the fact that we are constantly connected with our other clansmen. It's a magical feeling that I cannot truly describe to someone who has never felt this way."

"Has anyone ever wanted to remove this bond?"

"Not really, no." The guide shook her head. "It's like living without two legs. Getting rid of this comforting connection is no different from sawing off your own limb! Whenever we think back on the period where we lived without it, we feel as if we were living in poverty without even knowing it. There is no way that any Larkinson would ever want to go back to those times where we were alone and not sure if we could ever trust others."

Both Ariadne and Reginald frowned a bit at that. While it sounded as if the network watching over the Larkinsons was very helpful and desirable, it also came paired with a dependence or addiction that made it hard to turn back the clock!

If either of them chose to go through with receiving a network from the Larkinson Patriarch, then they needed to hope that everything remained fine in the future.

If the networks malfunctioned or if Ves tampered with them in malicious ways, then the Glory Seekers and the Crossers had few solutions to remedy the problem!

Fortunately, they were already aware that the networks were not omnipotent. Strong-minded people weren't as affected. While this was not as relevant to the Glory Seekers due to their lack of expert pilots, the Crossers were in a different position! Reginald Cross had full confidence that he would be able to spot anything amiss and be able to do something about it if Ves ever broke the rules.

"We've reached the conference room. Please head inside. Our patriarch is already inside."

When the two leaders entered, they saw that Ves wasn't preoccupied with greeting the newcomers.

Instead, he was busy with trying to separate Lucky from Blinky.

"I told you to cut it out already! Blinky, you're never going to beat Lucky due to your lack of combat experience, so don't pretend you have a chance."

Mrow!

"Lucky, don't be so harsh on the newest member of our cat family. He's still a kid!"

"Meow!"

*Chapter 3017: Kinship Networks*

Both Ariadne Wodin and Reginald Cross were taken aback at the antics of the cats.

They two visitors already knew that the Larkinsons loved their pets. They had already crossed paths with numerous cats, dogs, birds, lizards and other animals.

Ves was also famed for his love of cats. Lucky was practically a permanent fixture by his side.

What was different this time was that another pet had entered the stage.

Compared to the solid, mechanical form of Lucky, Blinky appeared to be a very different kind of cat.

He was obviously not organic. Not with the way his body was slightly translucent and how his entire form glowed and shimmered in front of everyone's eyes.

The bright purple exterior did not have the consistency of fur, nor the solidity of metal. The strange light points trailing across Blinky's body made it appear even more mysterious.

The closest guess that the visitors could come up with was that Blinky was an electronic cat.

In other words, he looked like a projection.

Yet neither the Hexer leader nor the Crosser leader thought it was as simple as that.

As a spiritual entity with considerable strength, Blinky actually possessed a fairly strong presence. This presence that could not be fully described with words was actually the source of the phenomenon known as glows.

Though Blinky's glow was currently mixed and nuanced, Patriarch Reginald was able to perceive more.

As a strong expert pilot, he developed a greater sensitivity towards unusual phenomena, especially when it was related to the strengths that expert pilots employed in battle.

Blinky had become a much greater existence to him as he instinctively perceived the energy and other traits locked inside the purple cat.

Unfortunately, his Hexer counterpart wasn't able to perceive as much. She was still a normal person and did not possess the senses of an expert pilot.

Both guests sat at the two chairs on the opposite side of an oval conference table. Ves stood at the far end as he finished admonishing his two cats.

"Meow!"

Lucky flipped his tail and floated to an empty chair in order to take a nap or something.

Mrow.

Blinky dishearteningly returned to Ves' mind in order to figure out a better way to beat Lucky next time.

The two visitors did not miss the fact that Blinky literally disappeared into the head of a human!

Ves smirked as he saw how he successfully managed to surprise his fellow leaders. He deliberately exposed Blinky to them in order to showcase what he was capable of. Since they were on the cusp of ordering spiritual networks from him, they needed to know what they were dealing with. Introducing a spiritual entity like Blinky to them would allow them to know that the Larkinson Patriarch possessed unusual talents.

This was a deliberate choice on his part. Ves knew that he couldn't keep everything hidden forever and he was willing to take a risk and reveal a portion of his capabilities to his allies.

"Welcome to the Spirit of Bentheim. I hope you have gotten a good glimpse of how her crew operates." Ves began.

"Is it like this aboard every Larkinson ship?" The Hexer woman asked.

"Not quite. The newcomers all possess different cultures and we are still in the process of integrating them. Our clan is large and diverse, and many ships are dominated by specific sub-organizations under our umbrella. For example, the mood aboard a combat carrier of the Flagrant Vandals is a lot looser and more informal than the norm. The Swordmaiden and Heavensworders are far more serious and constantly engaged in one form of training or another."

"That sounds like a state."

Ves pressed his lips. "Somewhat."

"It's quite impressive how your clan can bring all of these different people together without suffering many of the problems associated with doing so." Patriarch Reginald spoke up. "No organization that operates as a clan would recruit as freely as you Larkinsons. Yet you show no hesitation in breaking this convention."

"That is because we have the capital to accelerate our recruitment efforts. We don't have to be as thorough in rooting out traitors and people with impure intentions towards our clan. I believe that this is why the two of you have come here today. Both of you want to enjoy the same benefits "

Ves boasted a bit more about the benefits of the Larkinson Clan's spiritual network. He touted the inherent trust it fostered among the clansmen, the monitoring of treacherous thoughts and the easy identification of traitors who were committed to harming the clan.

"I believe that both of you have learned that not even the most committed and long-standing members of your organizations can be fully trusted." Ves smirked. "The Crown Uprising has revealed that everyone has traitors in their ranks. Whether these sleeper agents are unwitting victims who have undergone deep psycho-programming or hardened radicals who have deeply disguised themselves, the fact of the matter is that both the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan are compromised."

This was a heavy declaration and one that did not reflect well on his fellow leaders.

It wasn't their fault that crown terrorists lurked within their ranks. The Larkinson Clan could have easily ended up in the same position as well if not for the existence of its network!

After emphasizing the immediate value that his networks could bring, Ves finally addressed it directly.

"Colonel Ariadne, Patriarch Reginald, my special networks—"

"Marshal." The Hexer leaders spoke out.

"Pardon?"

"My new rank is marshal." Ariadne Wodin stated. "I received a promotion some time ago, though my role hasn't changed all that much. I am still in charge of the Glory Seekers."

"Oh. Congratulations, then." Ves blinked. "Anyway, the special network is a complicated and elaborate innovation that I have developed exclusively for the Larkinson Clan. While I can theoretically apply its model to your own organizations, you should know that it will cost quite a lot for me to establish it. This kind of intangible asset can't be made with ordinary materials. I have to use special resources that are very scarce and difficult to source."

That wasn't quite true anymore. Perhaps this used to be the case in the past, but the emergence of Blinky solved much of his energy problems. The only remaining materials that Ves might have trouble with was finding the right ingredients, but that was still a lot more manageable than the alternative.

"We are aware of the proprietary nature of your... special... networks." The recently-promoted marshal said. "However, we don't understand how it's made, nor what resources you need to make them. One of our goals for this visit is to part some of the veil and gain a greater understanding of these matters."

"That is... difficult." Ves deeply frowned. "It's not that I am hellbent on keeping my proprietary methods in the dark. It is just that you won't be able to see or understand anything without possessing a talent in this esoteric field. Did you see Blinky earlier?"

"You mean the glowing purple cat?"

"Yes. My new pet is just one of many examples of what I am talking about. If you don't understand anything about him, then you are not really qualified to delve further into this topic."

Patriarch Reginald looked as if he knew what Ves was talking about.

"The kid is right, marshal." The expert pilot affirmed. "I don't know too much about his specialty either, but I am aware that it goes beyond conventional technology. I bet this is the reason why Master Willix hovers around him so much. Anything that can interest the MTA is bound to be sensitive."

This remark actually strengthened the mystique of what Ves was capable of doing. Dragging in Master Willix and guessing that she endorsed it all was very useful in legitimizing his innovations!

"Then tell us what you can provide to us in a message that we can understand." Marshal Ariadne requested in a slightly impatient tone.

Ves waved his hand. He projected a rough diagram showing the hierarchy of the Larkinson Clan. It didn't go into details but it was enough to get his point across.

"Imagine that this is the Larkinson Clan. The names in the middle are all clansmen who have been with us for a long time. Those at the edge are not yet aligned with the mainstream of our clan. If nothing is done about them, they might drift apart or do something worse."

He waved his hand again, causing an animation to run that slowly brought the many names hovering around the edge to go closer to the center.

"One of the most important functions of my network is that it encourages closer alignment. While there are many details and nuances about this process, the short story is that it reduces differences over time. Not a lot, but enough to maintain harmony within our clan. This is actually why I like to call it a kinship network."

Kinship network was a new term that Ves had come up with after Calabast told him that he needed to label and differentiate his product.

It didn't matter before when Ves was the only one who really dealt with them, but now that he was selling it to others, he had to come up with a presentable name that did not reveal too much to others.

Ves briefly explained the other functions of the kinship network such as detecting malice from those attempting to join his clan, monitoring treacherous thoughts and so on. He did not dare to explain it all in too much detail so he mostly kept his explanations vague and short."

The two leaders still noticed a few important details, though.

"From my understanding of network systems, many of these functions can't be performed correctly unless there are people or intelligences in charge." Ariadne brought up. "Who or what controls your kinship networks?"

Ves smiled. "Ah, that is a rather important question. There is indeed an intelligence in place that sits at the center of our network. It is not me, nor a human or an AI for that matter. It is a special kind of existence that I have made for the purpose of uniting my clansmen and binding them together. Goldie, would you like to introduce yourself to our guests?"

Nyaaaaa.

Goldie materialized in front of Ves, catching Marshal Ariadne and Patriarch Reginald off-guard.

Compared to Blinky, Goldie's presence was a lot stronger. Not only that, her glow was very familiar to the guests as they had just felt it earlier from the Bright Warriors they walked past!

Several dots began to connect in the minds of the two leaders. They gazed at Goldie and instinctively knew that she was the heart of the Larkinson Clan!

Ves gently petted Goldie's head before scratching her chin. Though she overlooked over a hundred thousand Larkinsons, she did not show any strain of having to manage so many minds.

Nyaaa~

Goldie soon disappeared as Ves had already made his point without saying a lot.

It took some time before Patriarch Reginald asked a question.

"If we choose to acquire a kinship network from you, what kind of creature or intelligence will be in charge?"

"This is a very important and personal question for your clan." Ves carefully said. "I believe we should talk about this topic further in private. Suffice to say, I can customize one for you from scratch but I can also derive it out of an existing person or exobeast. Whatever you choose, the two most important criteria are that the nexus of your kinship



network should be absolutely loyal and committed to your organization and that it represents the values and principles which you aspire to. This nexus can grow and change over time as your organizations develop further so you don't have to be afraid that it will fall out of alignment in the future."

In other words, kinship networks were alive.

#### *Chapter 3018: Nexus Choices*

Ves was selling a product at the moment, and his first two prospective customers were already hooked.

He could tell that Marshal Ariadne and Patriarch Reginald were already determined to get their hands on kinship networks. Ves had dazzled them by showing off Blinky and Goldie before pulling them into his narrative as he continued to give his sales pitch.

Though there were plenty of risks and dangers associated with his products, the benefits were also very clear. Ves didn't have to work too hard to emphasize the advantages that he could bestow to their organizations.

Now that human space had become more turbulent, it became more crucial than ever to ensure greater loyalty and cohesion within organizations. If either leader rejected this unique product, then they would always have to face the question whether they could truly trust their brothers or sisters!

Ves knew that he had the support of the changing trends. A lot more powerful people and organizations were willing to pay much more to obtain their own networks.

Yet these huge benefits also came paired with the new reality that they would all become dependent on Ves to service, repair, update and protect their new kinship networks!

This condition alone sparked a lot of doubts in the Glory Seekers and the Crossers. Neither of these two groups were enthusiastic about the fact that their sole service provider could also become their greatest threats if relations ever soured.

Of course, the easiest way to prevent this nightmare scenario from happening was to keep everyone honest!

If everyone played by the rules and abided by their new agreement, then everyone benefited. This was a crucial dynamic that would ensure that everyone involved would feel reassured that no one had any strong desire to turn their backs on the others.

The only problem was it was mainly the Glory Seekers and Crossers that felt this way. The Larkinsons didn't have to worry about the fear of their network going out of control because Ves was confident he could solve any issues!

The acceptance of this difference was in fact a major concession on the part of his customers. Even though the Glory Seekers and Crossers didn't hand over anything solid to the Larkinson, the invisible bonds that formed between the different organizations became a lot stronger and tighter, and that was all that mattered to Ves!

After answering a number of questions and clarifying some details, Ves moved to the most critical topic of this meeting.

"Marshal Ariadne, Patriarch Reginald, if you are truly willing to receive your own kinship networks, then you will have to set some parameters." He said. "First, you need to determine the nexus that will influence your people and regulate their thoughts. This is a deeply personal decision and one that is extremely influential to the future development of your organizations. I suggest you make a list of criteria first by discussing this issue with your trusted subordinates. Once you know what you want, you can—"

"Ahem." Marshal Ariadne gently cleared her throat. "You don't need to bother with that, patriarch. We already know our choice. We would like nothing more than to allow the Superior Mother to watch over us. She is already doing so, I think, but some of our mech pilots possess a much deeper personal connection due to what you have done to them just before one of our previous battles. In fact, aren't they already connected to this kind of network?"

Ves shook his head. "Not quite. The mech pilots you are referring to are tied to a different network that does not have the functions of a kinship network but is much more applicable in battle. Before you ask, this product is not on the table. It is one the most powerful trump cards of our clan and it would be a dereliction of my duty if I sold it off like a prize horse."

Neither Ariadne nor Reginald pushed him any further on this topic. Though their eyes sparked with desire, they knew better than to touch someone else's trump card.

Besides, their most immediate need was to solve the traitors within their own ranks. Only by completely securing their interior would they have the luxury of thinking about anything else. Perhaps they might have an opportunity to obtain this secret product in the future.

Ariadne brought the conversation back to her original choice. "What do you think about letting the Superior Mother be in charge?"

"No problem." Ves easily answered. "She is a very capable entity and someone who already possesses an affinity with you all. She is already in charge of several networks, actually. She can accommodate an additional one without a problem with the power she wields."

Marshal Ariadne looked completely reassured. "Thank you. We welcome any opportunity to draw closer to your mother. She has been our people's unflinching support through these trying times."

The choice of the Glory Seekers was already clear from the beginning. The faint connection that they had already formed with the Superior Mother had slowly caused them to become more aligned with the Hexer ancestral spirit. Though this effect wasn't as strong as that of a kinship network, it was still influential enough to encourage every Hexer to develop an instinctive respect towards the Superior Mother and some of her values!

Ves actually welcomed this development as putting the Superior Mother in charge of the Glory Seekers only accelerated their transition to a more friendly and galaxy-ready version of Hexers.

He felt quite smug about the fact that the Super Mother's popularization had already caused the Hexers to deviate from their original trajectory. Though it would still take many years and a lot of effort for the Hexers to change their man-hating ways, he knew that many of the ardent women had already mellowed out after becoming more accepting to the alternative perspectives that Ves had programmed in the ancestral spirit.

It was a pity that there was a limit to this development. The Superior Mother still had to retain enough Hexer traits in order to make her relatable to the citizens of the Hegemony. She was also constantly being influenced by the values that the Hexer people unconsciously imposed on her. Though Ves made sure that the Superior Mother would not get easily affected, who knew what she was like after his mother intervened.

In fact, the biggest influence that could induce change in the Superior Mother was not actually Ves or the Hexer people.

It was Cynthia Larkinson!

Ever since the Superior Mother's trajectory became skewed after a mutation had occurred during her creation ceremony, Ves already felt that he had lost control of his spiritual product.

The Superior Mother lives a life of her own and was more than powerful enough to resist any change that Ves wanted to make!

The only way he could affect her at all these days was to propose changes that earned her approval. That was why the Superior Mother didn't push back when he fashioned a crown for her to serve as the nexus of her battle network.

Regardless, allowing the Glory Seekers to become more attached to the Superior Mother was a very reassuring choice to Ves. After all, she was his mother in some way, so deepening their loyalty to the Supreme was also deepening their loyalty to her son!

After making sure that Marshal Ariadne was willing to subject the Glory Seekers to closer scrutiny from the Superior Mother, Ves turned to the other leader in the conference room.

"What about you, Patriarch Reginald? Your clan doesn't have a figure like the Superior Mother, so the question of who will become the nexus of your kinship network is not an easy matter."

The Cross Patriarch shook his head. "You are wrong. We do have a hero who we can all accept."

"Who are you talking about?"

"My father."

Ves looked perplexed. He briefly recalled the namesake of the flagship of the Cross Clan.

Saint Hemmington Cross was the greatest leader of the Cross Clan. He was a rare ace pilot and one who possessed unimaginable strength on the battlefield.

It was too bad that his competence on the battlefield did not extend to governance. As the leader of a clan that governed a lot of territory in the Vicious Mountain Star Sector, Saint Hemmington became consumed by his desire to earn more glory and initiated reckless wars against his neighbors.

After the Saint's death, the once-prosperous clan suffered a dramatic decline. What Ves found perplexing was that despite losing an astronomical amount of territory, people and assets, the Crossers still worshipped the solitary cause of all of their suffering!

None of the Crossers ever harbored any spite or blame towards the greater Crossers who had lived among them. Even his son, Reginald, still approved and admired the deceased ace pilot despite the latter's fatal flaws!

If Saint Hemmington turned into the Cross Clan's version of the Superior Mother, Ves would become incredibly worried about the future of one of his allies.

He could not allow the Cross Clan to repeat the mistakes of its past!

Ves plastered a brittle smile on his face. "Patriarch Reginald, while I would love to accommodate your request, we should let sleeping dogs lie. Saint Hemmington has already fought his last battle. He deserves to rest now. Besides, becoming the nexus of

a kinship network is a highly technical and sophisticated position that requires a different specialty. It's like commanding a fleet carrier. You wouldn't put a mech pilot in charge. The Superior Mother can function as the nexus of her own network because she is smart, clever and knowledgeable enough to perform her functions, but Saint Hemmington is just a very good mech pilot. As great as he was on the battlefield, you can't expect him to design your mechs or heal wounded soldiers from the brink of death!"

Patriarch Reginald Cross looked very disappointed at his answer, but only briefly.

"You make a good point, but my father is a great man. He is much closer to a god than myself and the little expert pilots in your ranks. He will be able to master the functions that you have described. I am confident in his ability."

Ves firmly shook his head. "You are not listening to me, Reginald. No one is good at every job. Everyone has different specialties. Your father will not be helpful in managing your kinship network. You should pick out someone else or allow me to create one according to your needs."

Unfortunately, the Cross Patriarch dug in his heels.

"I don't want anyone else. Our entire clan will unanimously reject any other influence. We will only accept my father as our guardian and watcher. If it doesn't work out, we can revisit this discussion, but for now, I do not accept any other answer. Our deal is off if you cannot accommodate this demand."

The man drove a hard bargain all of a sudden. Ves was taken aback at the Cross Clan's stubbornness, but in hindsight he shouldn't have expected anything different from an expert pilot.

Ves still had another excuse, though.

"There is another reason why Saint Hemmington Cross is not an option. He's dead and gone. I don't have anything to work with if he isn't around anymore and all traces of him are gone. The Superior Mother is different because she is alive, if in a different way."

"That won't be a problem either. If you are willing to follow me back to the Hemmington Cross, I will grant you the exclusive right to step into our inner shrine. I will bring you to my father's tomb so that you can ask him in person whether he is able and willing to take on this responsibility."

"...Uhm, okay. We'll do that, I guess." Ves answered.

He needed to harvest a spiritual ingredient related to the Cross Clan anyway. Shrines and any other site of worship were great places to pick them up. Once he harvested a

remnant or something, he could use it as the basis of a new spiritual product that was aligned with the Cross Clan.

Maybe he would shape it into a dog this time.

### *Chapter 3019: Inner Shrine*

The mood aboard the Hemmington Cross had changed since his last visit to the large fleet carrier.

Ves could sense an increasing degree of pride and strength from the mech pilots and crew. The Crossers had been falling and losing strength ever since the remnants of their clan fled from Vicious Mountain. They lost so much after this frenzied period that it was hard for them to feel assured of their own future!

All of that had changed. The Cross Clan ceased trending downwards and instead began to grow again. The prosperity offered by Professor Benedict Cortez and the constant fighting spirit shown by Patriarch Reginald Cross had become the twin pillars that supported the clan after its precipitous fall.

Yet not everything went fine. The Crown Uprising and the surprising actions of a few traitors in their midst shattered the wave of cautious optimism that had swept the Crossers.

Many Crossers died unjustly as the ships they were stationed on blew up without warning. The former Garleners had to bid farewell to the deceased by sending empty coffins in space because it was too difficult to salvage any remaining body tissue from the debris fields!

After performing an intensive investigation, the Crossers discovered that the traitors who managed to rig extremely powerful explosives on their ships did not consist entirely of recent recruits.

A considerable proportion of traitors who were almost certainly involved in preparing for the terrorist attacks were old-timers who had spent their entire lives in the Cross Clan!

It was very hard for the loyalists to imagine how one of their own blood kin could become a shadow agent to some dark and hidden organization. Wasn't it already great for them to be a part of the Cross Clan? There shouldn't be any reason for them to pledge their loyalty to another state!

The only viable answer to the traitors in their midst was that they had been brainwashed against their will. The tech already existed. It was just rarely seen and very taboo in civilized space.

That did not mean that this phenomenon simply didn't happen in the more secure and civilized parts of the galaxy. Clearly the only way for these loyal and content Crossers to turn themselves into suicidal fanatics was because evil people kidnapped them and forcibly reprogrammed their brains!

Ves was well aware that not just the Crossers, but many other people affected by the Crown Uprising believed in this theory.

He was a bit more skeptical though. The Five Scrolls Compact was immensely powerful and was very good at spreading its tentacles everywhere. The unconventional power it offered to people was extremely alluring to individuals who weren't born with extraordinary talent or ability.

Regardless, a lot of organizations were already trying their best to root out the dormant crown terrorists that were assuredly still present among the general populations. Yet whatever means of 'brainwashing' the mysterious organization utilized, no scanning method succeeded in identifying a clear and common marker!

The brains of the few crown terrorists that had been caught in stasis before they could unleash their deadly attacks were pretty much normal for the most part. They exhibited none of the stress and signs of intensive data transfer that ordinary brainwashing methods typically left behind.

If not even the Big Two could preemptively identify crown terrorists, then the Cross Clan certainly wasn't better off! This explained why the Crosser crew members also looked a lot less cheerful and a lot more grim.

They were proud soldiers, but it was difficult for them to keep their chins high when they knew that not every brother and sister at their side was loyal.

As Ves walked through the long and spacious hallways of the Hemmington Cross, Patriarch Reginald noticed what his guest was trying to observe.

"Please do not mind this shameful sight." The gruff, older man spoke in a rare display of shame. "My men are not as assured as yours. Even if there are only a handful of traitors left alive in my fleet, their presence has already ruined the cohesion among my people. As soldiers, we Crossers have been trained to place our unreserved trust in our fellow comrades. This approach has always served us well because every fighter who bears the Cross name can always be counted upon in battle. Now that this assumption has come into question..."

The older patriarch did not need to say anything more. His usually-boisterous force of will had actually deflated quite a bit as he admitted this frailty.

Under ordinary circumstances, Patriarch Reginald shouldn't be talking about this at all. The only reason why he felt compelled to do so was because Ves needed to



understand exactly what he needed to solve. If the promised kinship network did not address this fundamental trust problem, then that would have been a waste of a transaction!

The contrast between the Larkinsons and the Crossers couldn't be more clear.

The former still acted as if they were taking part in the greatest venture of their lives. Their dreams were slowly coming true with each step they took towards the Red Ocean.

The Crossers acted as if they had traveled back to the bad old days of the collapse of their original territory. They were beset by enemies on all sides and even their own relatives and core personnel abandoned the failing clan in droves in order to save their own hides!

Perhaps this prior trauma caused the Crossers to appear a lot more morose than other people. Their first-hand experience with treachery and attacks from within caused them to evoke unpleasant memories.

"It's not your fault." Ves softly spoke as he continued to walk by the patriarch's side. "Our clan would have been in the same position in any other case. Everyone else in human space is gripped by the same fears and uncertainty that your people are suffering from right now. As this crisis continues, I'm sure that everyone will eventually toughen up and get used to it all. Life has to go on, and humans are adaptable."

"I hope that will be the case."

His bodyguards and Lucky were silently trailing behind him in order to give the two leaders space to talk frankly.

As they ventured deeper and deeper into the upper decks of the Hemmington Cross, they encountered fewer and fewer crew members. They stopped before a fortified checkpoint where over forty elite infantrymen stood guard before a thick and massive gate.

If that wasn't enough, numerous heavy turrets offered additional insurance against intrusion. Ves could already glean that these turrets were all manually operated and completely closed. Even if the rest of the fleet carrier was failing, the defense of the inner shrine would still be guaranteed!

Ves mentally scratched his head at the sight. The allocation of all of this hardware as well as forty extremely well-armed footsoldiers was a considerable commitment even to the Cross Clan.

All of the manpower and resources spent on bulking up the security of a purely ceremonial compartment could have been spent on improving the defenses of the bridge or the engineering bays!

The shrine was just an elaborate grave for an ace pilot that had almost driven the Cross Clan to extinction. How much honor did he really deserve?

They went through a mandatory security check before being allowed inside. Since entering the inner shrine was an extremely solemn honor that was reserved for only the best and most exemplary Crossers, Ves had to leave his cat and everyone else behind.

As soon as the pair of patriarchs stepped through the opened gates, they both entered a space where the air was different.

Ves first looked around the wide open hall.

"How glorious." He couldn't help but comment.

The entire hall was set up like a museum dedicated to exhibiting the accomplishments of Saint Hemmington Cross.

Statues, carvings and projections displayed the most notable phases in the ace pilot's life. His graduation from the mech academy, the aftermath of his first battle and the moments of his numerous breakthroughs were all immortalized in one form or another.

Another purpose of the shrine was to showcase the many trophies that Saint Hemmington Cross had claimed from his long list of defeated foes. Tattered banners of fallen mech regiments hung from invisible flagpoles. Burnt and shattered pieces of defeated expert mechs were proudly put on display. Ves could read the backstory behind each of the battles where the expert pilot fell before the former leader of the once-ascendant Cross Clan.

The ace pilot constantly fought and challenged himself. The Garlen Empire was filled with warlords that all sought to earn glory in battle, so there was never any shortage of battles in this massive but divided state.

Patriarch Reginald gazed at these trophies with pride.

"When my father was my age, he already defeated multiple times more expert mechs than myself. Do you know that challenging other expert mechs is the best way for true warriors like us to advance?"

Ves turned around in surprise. "I haven't heard of that."

"I'm surprised. Doesn't your clan have a rich heritage of expert pilots as well?"

"We split off from our original family. Most of the original Larkinsons who moved away with me are...less well-versed in the traditions regarding expert pilots. It may be that my uncle and grandfather know more, but haven't passed their knowledge to us. The alternative is that they don't really know this rule on a conscious level. Perhaps they just

think that serving in the military and defending our state against invaders is how we are able to find our true calling."

He was much more inclined to believe in the latter. The Larkinson Family, while fairly impressive in the past, was just a relatively modest military family of a simple third-rate state.

The Cross Clan was the equivalent of a noble house of a massive second-rate state! It not only possessed a lot more direct and indirect members, but also held vast swathes of territory. With so many professionals working for the clan, it was certain that the Crossers knew a lot more secrets than the original Larkinsons!

"It's not an important detail to know." Patriarch Reginald shrugged. "Expert pilots and those who are committed to earn glory will eventually get confronted by an expert mech sooner or later. Facing them directly is a life-changing event, especially to those who have yet to make any progress to becoming an expert pilot. Many mech pilots break. Others come away with an incurable sense of awe towards the demigods they fought."

"Isn't that normal?" Ves raised his eyebrow as he briefly turned away from a display that showed off a piece of wreckage from a high-tier expert mech. "Everyone in the galaxy looks up to expert pilots. The only ones who don't are high-ranking mech designers and mech pilots."

"You don't understand, kid." The older man tiredly shook his head. "Not everyone can become an expert pilot. Fanboys can never become the idols they admire. No matter how much they try, they can only become a pale imitation at best. The truly successful mech pilots are all warriors or soldiers who possess the heart of courage. Only by boldly confronting the strong is it possible for mech pilot to become someone greater. The moment you bend down, concede or give in to your fears, you lose the qualifications to become anything more than a normal mech pilot."

Ves nodded in acceptance. From his own understanding, mech pilots with spiritual potential didn't always succeed in drawing out their hidden strength. Their willpower had to be strong, and maintaining your sense of defiance in the face of a vastly more powerful enemy was a good way to stimulate that potential!

He once heard that Venerable Ghanso once walked this path after surviving an encounter against a hostile Vesian expert mech.

A special display suddenly caused Ves to pause. The display was put in a central position and featured a lot more security precautions than usual. He could even sense an active energy shield!

The large display only exhibited a mangled finger of a humanoid mech. Compared to the other pieces of wreckage, this one was a lot more special. The material quality as

well as the craftsmanship were much more impressive than what Ves encountered from a typical expert mech.

"Is that...?"

Patriarch Reginald looked solemn. "It's as you guess. It is one of the few remnant pieces that we have been able to retrieve from my father's ace mech after his final fatal battle."

This single mech finger was the real deal. Ves could tell, because he could feel something special from this broken remnant!

*Chapter 3020: Tomb of Saint Hemmington Cross*

Ves never saw an ace mech or ace pilot in the flesh.

What he knew about them was mostly theory and second-hand information. It was hard to know what was actually true about them because ace pilots were too distant from the general population.

It didn't appear the MTA was too keen on teaching everyone what ace pilots and ace mechs were actually capable of. They just allowed entertainment companies to publish action-packed dramas that were filled with wildly-unrealistic battles and depictions of mech pilots.

The only facts that Ves knew for certain was that ace pilots were much stronger than expert pilots and that they all had the opportunity to advance to god pilot.

That was it. Everything else he knew came from unreliable or uncertain sources.

For example, while James Ylvaine once told him that ace pilots depended much less on their spirituality and much more on their willpower, how could Ves know that this was actually the case?

It sounded rather far-fetched that mech pilots or any person could sustain their existence by relying on a different extraordinary characteristic. It was like saying that humans could keep themselves hydrated by drinking oil!

However, after sensing the remnants of a will that was more powerful than anything that Ves had ever encountered, he felt that James might actually be on to something.

Patriarch Reginald stood still and allowed Ves to behold this broken mech finger for as long as he wanted.

Everyone who viewed this surviving remnant had a similar reaction. Ace pilots were surrounded with mystique and it was too difficult for most people to get close to them when they were alive.

"What a shame." Ves whispered. "I would gladly kill to gain the opportunity to see your father's ace mech when it was still whole. I bet it is at least a thousand times more impactful than viewing this sorry detached finger."

"We sacrificed a lot of good men to sneak away this finger while there were still hostile ace mechs on the battlefield. We could not allow my father to die without leaving a trace behind for us. He is still our greatest leader even in death."

Ves furrowed his brows for a moment. "How did you get back his body if it was already difficult for your clan to retrieve this single piece?"

"The traitors passed my father's corpse to us on their own accord. They had already acted disgracefully by deceiving and stabbing a Saint in the back. The Praetor and Planat Clan had to make large gestures in order to limit the damage and salvage what scraps of honor they could still cling to. Giving us back his body is a relatively cheap and easy way for them to regain some goodwill. The cockpits of ace pilots are extremely well-protected so it is not that difficult to retrieve a relatively intact body after defeating an ace mech."

"I see."

Ves found this story to be very questionable at certain points. He would be seeing the ace pilot's deceased body soon enough, so he'll be able to verify his guesses at that time.

He focused instead on the extraordinary characteristics of this broken remnant.

The impression he got was... rather disappointing to him. It was like looking at a sand depression of a massive whale that had beached onto the shore. He could sense several signs that something powerful had once occupied the finger. All of that was gone now, and the only traces left were merely echoes of what had once infused this mech finger.

He still managed to sense a spiritual remnant that was stubbornly clinging to the object. This remnant, while small in quantity, was still a lot more potent than Ves was accustomed to. He could also sense a lingering will that was still clinging to life within the object.

"Ah!"

"What's the matter, Ves?"

"It's nothing, Reginald."

Ves received a painful shock as soon as he attempted to examine this remnant willpower more deeply!

It wasn't exactly alive as far as he could tell, but it was extremely strong and territorial for its size and shabby state.

Even in death, the remnant of Saint Hemmington did not allow for others to intrude upon its space!

If this little remnant was already as strong as this, a true ace pilot should be a lot more powerful. Ves mentally shuddered at the thought of receiving a backlash for attempting to poke their minds while they were still in their prime!

Ves had the sense that ace pilots were just as strong as the dark gods, but developed their powers in a different direction.

This was just a vague guess of his, but one that he instinctively felt was right. When the remnant of Saint Hemmington shocked him, Ves briefly felt the same degree of threat and apprehension as that of the Blinding One or the Unending One!

It seemed that humans did have a way of matching the combat prowess of a dark god. The Battle against the Abyss could have taken a completely different turn if the Larkison Clan was able to field ace mechs!

Of course, this was just an extravagant fantasy. The Larkinson Clan was nowhere close to hosting its own ace pilot. The expert pilots under his care didn't even receive their expert mechs as of yet! Thinking about anything beyond this point was completely pointless!

"How strong was his ace mech?" Ves softly asked as his mind recovered from the sting it just received.

"How can I possibly describe my father's war steed with any accuracy? It is a great work designed by some of the most renowned Masters of the Garlen Empire. As soon as my father advanced to ace pilot, five great Masters all offered to provide him with an ace mech for free."

"Huh? Your clan actually didn't pay anything to obtain such a powerful machine?!"

"Ace pilots are people who stand at the top of the Garlen Empire. My father has gained so much power and status that plenty of Masters are more than willing to fund the development of an ace mech out of their own pockets!"

Ves could imagine that this was the case. Working on an expert mech was already exciting and challenging to him. Ace mechs were so much greater that each of them were probably the greatest individual works that mech designers had ever completed! Such impressive machines were fully qualified to become the crowning achievements of their long careers!

He noticed something odd about his explanation.

"These Masters... I take it they don't owe any fealty to the Cross Clan."

"That's correct." Reginald nodded. "The greatest and most experienced Masters of our state offer their services to all ace pilots regardless of which tribe or clan they belong to. They have even supplied the ace mechs to the enemies who defeated us battle."

What?!

"And you guys are okay with that?"

"It is a long-standing tradition in the Garlen Empire, Ves. It is not that we are short of Master Mech Designers. There are plenty of them in our state. The issue is that ace pilots should receive the best ace mechs possible. While any Master can design an ace mech, there are still differences between the works of a younger one and an older one. It is unconscionable for us to turn to lesser Masters for a solution."

Ves had several issues with this 'tradition'! As a professional mech designer, he valued the benefits of competition. Just like expert mechs, ace mechs should be designed by different groups of mech designers. This not only meant that they were diverse in terms of design choices, but also ensured that many more Masters possessed the knowledge and experience of working on ace mechs.

"Let me get this straight. The process of developing an ace pilot is concentrated in the hands of just a small group of Master Mech Designers, is that right?"

"Yes. This 'small group' you are referring to is an extremely prestigious gathering. Hardly anyone is ever able to pass through its demanding tests. This ensures that everyone who is a part of it is good enough to carry the responsibility of designing the most important combat partner of an ace pilot!"

This was an interesting arrangement, to say the least. It was yet another example of the backwardness of the Garlen Empire. Their mech industry could have become a lot more vigorous at the top if more Masters gained the opportunity to work on ace mechs themselves!

Well, it wasn't his business. Their fleet was constantly moving away from that corner of space so he didn't have to be bothered by how the Garleners managed their mech industry.



"I've seen enough. Please bring me to his body."

"Very well." Patriarch Reginald solemnly nodded. "Please remain respectful in front of his presence. This is the second time I have brought someone other than a Crosser in front of his tomb."

"Who is the first one?"

"Professor Benedict, of course. He deserved to pay tribute to my father for all of the contributions he has made to our clan. He told me he had become quite inspired after his visit."

Anticipation welled up inside Ves. Perhaps he might be able to gain some inspiration as well. Knowing what ace mechs and ace pilots were truly like would help him know what he was working towards.

They moved past the central display and passed through a broad hall that finally led to an enlarged chamber.

The tomb space looked suitably grand. The bare metal walls were covered by golden filigree that showcased more-than-human displays of the Saint and his ace pilot accomplishing unimaginably powerful feats.

From slaughtering a dozen expert mechs over the course of a battle to dealing the deathblow against over five-hundred mechs at once, Saint Hemmington Cross fully showcased the terror of an ace pilot in battle!

Yet these stylized depictions paled in comparison to the grand coffin that lay in the center.

Surrounded by torches that would never snuff out, the body of the once-powerful ace pilot laid in dignity in a coffin made out of rich and rare crystal materials.

The top of the crystal tomb was transparent, allowing those outside to see the preserved body of Saint Hemmington in full clarity.

Ves didn't know how the man eventually died, but evidently his enemies did not hack his body to pieces. It looked remarkably intact and completely undamaged at first glance. Of course, the full dress uniform adorning the body also did a good job at hiding any injuries on his body. The impressive array of medals pinned to the ace pilot's chest only served to complement the Saint's incredibly important identity.

As Ves solemnly followed Patriarch Reginald, he slowly approached the large and massive tomb. When they finally stopped in front of it, the son of the deceased ace pilot did not bow or show any sign of respect.

Instead, the expert pilot's eyes burned with desire and ambition. He followed his own words by not giving in to the awe of a more powerful mech pilot. He wanted to match and surpass the accomplishments of his father!

"One day, I will fully inherit his mantle." Reginald vowed. "I shall lead the Cross Clan to greater heights and make sure my father's legacy will not be forgotten."

That was interesting and all, but as soon as Ves began to look past the impressive tomb and decorations, he became distracted by a surprising finding.

Even though Saint Hemmington Cross had died years ago, his body used to be a vessel of one of the more powerful extraordinary existences in the galaxy.

Traces of the Saint's incredibly powerful force of will should have lingered! At the very least, the remnant that was left in his body should have been stronger than the lingering will that was locked inside the giant ace mech finger!

Yet instead of perceiving all of that, Ves only felt... hollowness.

Only a small trace of strong willpower still clung to the body, but Ves had a lot of doubts about that. It was concentrated on a very small part of his head. The rest of the ace pilot's corpse didn't seem to mesh with it that well.

Ves began to develop a dreadful suspicion.

Was he looking at the body of a clone?