

Mech 3151

Chapter 3151: Job Interview

Ves treated the following discussion with Commodore Abigail Evern as a job interview.

The woman in question was already aware of the purpose of this meeting and the implications of becoming one of the first chief ministers of the Larkinson Clan. The power and authority this position conveyed was immense and would easily allow her to put the Penitent Sisters ahead.

At the very least, serving a term as chief minister would ensure that no one would damage the interests of the Penitent Sisters!

As a consequence, the naval officer controlled her behavior and made sure to supply Ves with the most diplomatic-sounding answers that she could muster.

Even though she used to be a Hexer, she was one of the few Larkinsons who truly came from upper-class stock. Similar to Calabast who originated from the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty, Abigail emerged from the Evern Matriarchal Dynasty.

That was where the similarities ended.

The Vrakens were much more rational and measured in their outlook while the Everns embraced hexism wholesale!

Calabast went on to become a DIVA agent before amicably parting ways with the Hegemony.

Abigail on the other hand became so caught up by religious fervor that she joined a cult that was too extreme even for other Hexers!

Though both of them eventually moved on and joined the Larkinson Clan, Ves would have preferred to put someone like Calabast in charge.

It was too bad that Ves couldn't rely on anyone else to lead the intelligence arm of the Larkinson Clan. No other clansman with an intelligence background could come close to Calabast's competence. He also trusted her to have his back, if only because his future was intertwined with hers. He wasn't sure if he could maintain the same degree of trust if he put someone else in charge of the Black Cats.

Ves took a good look at the middle-aged officer. The woman sat next to the conference table with a rigid, military posture. Unlike Calabast, Abigail's language and body language no longer contained any trace of elegance or class. After becoming a Penitent Sister, she embraced her military identity and largely abandoned her privileged heritage.

That didn't mean she forgot everything she learned when she was still a part of the Evers. As long as they didn't talk about the Superior Mother, Abigail was quite articulate.

"What do you think about the reforms of our military?" Ves quizzed. "According to Shederin's plan, our mech forces will turn into mech legions and will all fight under the banner of the Larkinson Army."

"It's a necessary development." Commodore Abigail replied. "We have expanded so much that it is becoming increasingly difficult to manage the logistics of all of the different troops. The mech legions should focus on addressing their immediate priorities while the Larkinson Army is best at establishing a central structure that can take care of our most common needs. Since we all pilot mechs designed by you, many of the parts and materials are interchangeable. This makes it more convenient for a central authority to procure these goods and supplies in bulk before allocating them to the individual mech legions."

Right now, the Military Bureau was not large enough, forcing the different mech troops to perform a lot of redundant work.

"We can also centralize many other functions such as allocating trained personnel, managing high-level ship affairs, and increasing coordination in battle. The latter is especially important as it appears that our mech legions are slowly developing their own specialties."

"Where do you think the Penitent Sisters fall into our battle lineup?"

"We deliver the wrath of the Superior Mother onto our enemies!" Abigail Evern grew fierce for a moment before calming down. "Our Penitent Sisters excel at assaults, but unlike the Swordmaidens we are not fragile. We are more than willing to take the toughest and most dangerous assignments that need to be completed. Whether it is breaking open a tough formation or flying head-long into the guns of a warship, no matter how arduous the mission, we shall unquestionably do what is necessary! To die is to be redeemed. To serve our purpose is to atone for guilt."

"I... see." Ves flatly replied. "What do you think about the other mech legions? If you want to become the chief minister, you need to be able to represent all of our soldiers, including ones that might not have a good opinion of former Hexers like your Penitent Sisters."

"I am a Larkinson." Abigail sincerely stated, her brown short ponytail swaying as she jerked her head. "We are aware of the distrust that clansmen have towards us, but we are completely committed to the clan. As long as you and the Superior Mother support the clan, we will never falter in our loyalty. If I become everyone's representative, I will not treat anyone unfairly, especially if they are committed to protecting and fighting for our fellow Larkinsons. We are an honorable clan."

As Abigail elaborated on her stances, Ves gained a better understanding of her mindset. In the past few months, the Penitent Sisters had indeed moved away from their roots. While they were still recognizable to Hexers, they held no loyalty to the Hegemony anymore. They completely transferred their fanatical devotion towards both Ves and his mother. This meant that each of them were extremely loyal and dependable.

Ves had no reason to question Abigail's loyalty, so she definitely ticked that box. Her stances and attitudes were a bit more iffy, but she was enough of a Larkinson for him to have some confidence that she would be able to serve as a responsible chief minister. She would also be able to serve as a strong counter-balance to Novilon Purnesse.

The only issue was that Ves didn't want to send the wrong message by rewarding a Penitent Sister with a high position. Who knew how much Hexer DNA was left.

One of the latent threats of the clan was the pervasive Hexer influence around them. The presence of the Glory Seekers, Penitent Sisters and even his own wife caused his clansmen to become more and more exposed to Hexer culture.

Familiarity bred complacency. Ves was afraid that if the Larkinsons continued to get used to the Hexers and their abnormal quirks, his people would slowly put women above men in subtle ways.

Suffice to say, Ves did not want this to happen.

In the end, the risk was too great. Even though he felt that Abigail possessed enough qualifications to lead a portion of the clan, the optics were not right. At the very least, he did not think it was a good idea to promote her too soon when the Penitent Sisters still had some ways to go before they completed their makeover.

He sighed. "Commodore Abigail, you are an insightful woman. I agree with General Verle that you can do more, especially when it comes to managing our growing fleet and ship assets. However, you... are not quite what I am looking for in a chief minister."

A subdued moment of silence followed as he issued his judgement. Commander Chancy and Commodore Abigail couldn't help but look a bit downcast. Although they did not dare to harbor too much hope, they gained a lot of confidence from General Verle's endorsement. They did not expect that Ves would make a different conclusion.

"May we know why?" Commander Chancy asked.

"Sure." Ves shrugged. "As much as I am willing to put my trust in you, Abigail, I can't ignore the elephant in the room. You may regard yourself as a Larkinson, but many people within the clan barely notice any difference between you and the Glory Seekers. It's not desirable to put you in charge because a lot of ordinary clansmen who don't know any better will develop the mistaken impression that the Hexers have taken over a

portion of our clan. I want to reduce the Hexer influence in our fleet. Appointing you as chief minister will send the opposite message."

"I am a Larkinson. We are different from our former sisters."

"You've already explained that." He said. "For what it's worth, I believe you, but a leadership position as sensitive as this is extra sensitive, especially for the first ones to assume office. The best candidate is not necessarily the most loyal or the most capable leader. I also need to pay attention to other factors such as public support, likability and political backing. Since you and your fellow Penitent Sisters stand further apart from the clan than the other mech legions, it is very hard to get everyone in the Larkinson Army to become enthused about your appointment."

He was being very open about his reasoning. Neither Chancy nor Abigail could refute what he said. Although it was unfair to allow subjective factors like bias and prejudice to drive his decision, this was how reality worked.

The two women no longer spoke up. They implicitly accepted his judgement.

Ves didn't feel so good about shooting Abigail down like this. He thought for a moment and decided to offer her a bit of hope.

"Look, the present circumstances aren't right for this, but that doesn't mean the situation will remain the same. There might be an opportunity in the future as long as certain variables change."

The mech commander looked hopeful. "What do we need to do to improve Commodore Abigail's qualifications?"

"Well, you women need to continue to move closer to the clan." He said. "While I won't insist that you should start hiring men en masse, it will help a lot if you can show you don't look down on them. There are many other ways you can show that you aren't Hexers anymore. The more you are able to convince the rest of our clansmen that you are able to embody our Larkinson values, the more acceptable it becomes to elevate your best people to higher offices."

"I see."

Ves inwardly smirked. He provided them with a powerful motivation to deepen their integration with the rest of the clan. If they were happy with their current state, then they didn't have to make any further changes, but if they held greater ambitions, then they needed to work hard to shed as many remaining Hexer-associated traits as possible!

While Ves did not expect any immediate results, over time the drive to increase their appeal would definitely prompt them to move closer to the center.

After answering a few more questions, Ves saw no point in staying. He stood up and moved to depart.

"I'm sorry that I can't give you the job you want, commodore, but work hard and try to make yourself more popular among our clansmen. As long as enough Larkinsons are willing to see you in charge, an appointment will come sooner or later."

"Understood, sir. I will endeavor to change our fellow clansmen's minds."

With that, Ves returned to his shuttle and left the Mother's Wrath.

"Bring me over to the Graveyard." He instructed. "I need to have a good talk with General Verle. Tell him to bring some alternative candidates for chief minister. There has to be more viable choices than a Penitent Sister."

All in all, this visit wasn't completely pointless. He not only refreshed his understanding of the Penitent Sisters, but also gave them a powerful incentive to moderate themselves further.

"Our clan won't have room for Hexers for much longer." He quietly muttered. "I can't do much about Gloriana, but I'll be damned if the rest of our clan continues to drag a piece of our old lives to the Red Ocean."

The Larkinson Clan's departure from the Komodo Star Sector was meant to make a clean break from the past. The Hexadric Hegemony's ability to influence Ves and the Larkinson Clan grew less and less effective as the distance continued to widen.

Though the Glory Seekers still exerted a certain amount of influence, they were too weak to pressure the Larkinson Clan all that much.

"Once we reach the Red Ocean, I can truly change the terms!"

Chapter 3152: Back to the Center

General Verle expressed disappointment at Ves' choice. He genuinely believed that Commodore Abigail Evern could do a good job in managing the affairs of the clan.

"That's the thing, general. It's not enough to have the capabilities to manage all of the heavy responsibilities that come with the job. They also have to gain the support of a majority of clansmen. The position of chief minister is one of the highest offices of the clan. Anyone who takes it up will become one of the faces that will represent all of us. I don't want to appoint someone who is either a Hexer or close to it to speak on our behalf."

"I see. I may have neglected this angle." He said. "I'm used to dictating orders to subordinates, but the political arena requires a different approach."

Verle should have been more sensitive to these considerations, but he had been in charge for such a long time now that he had lost some of the political acumen that he used to possess back when he was a Firestarter.

"I'm not writing Commodore Evern off, general. She already ticks most of the boxes. As long as she and the Penitent Sisters work harder in reforming their image, the barriers that are hindering her from ascending to higher office will become a lot easier to overcome."

"That's good to hear. While all of our clansmen are loyal, the Penitent Sisters are much more notable in this regard."

"That's mostly due to their religious nature. From what I've noticed during my previous visit, the Penitent Sisters are mainly devoted to the Superior Mother. Though they also have plenty of reasons to be loyal to me and the rest of the clan, sometimes I feel like they are only fervent because of our relation with the Superior Mother." Ves remarked.

"I know what you mean, but in the end our hold over them is solid. If there is any chance that they are drifting apart from our clan, we will definitely be able to pick up the signs early enough to do something about it. No matter what, the best way for them to grow closer to their object of worship is to pilot your mechs. Their dependence on you and your work is our best guarantee that they will never go back to their old ways."

That was true. Even if someone else was able to tie a design spirit to a mech design, Ves possessed a deep relationship with the avatar of his actual mother. As long as he issued a request, the Superior Mother would probably indulge him. He was her son, after all. Didn't he deserve to get spoiled once in a while?

"Ahem." Ves softly coughed. "Let us set Commodore Evern aside. What alternatives do you have?"

"That's... a bit of an issue, sir. The Larkinson Army is lacking in upper-level talent. While we do not necessarily have to settle on a senior officer, our remaining officer base is too young and brash to draw upon. The responsibility of leading the clan as a whole is so great that it is best that it is left to people with a certain level of maturity and life experience."

Ves agreed with General Verle, though there was an argument to be had for younger and more flexible leaders. He himself was very young for a clan patriarch, but then again his entire life didn't make any sense.

Still, Ves prioritized stability and control. The clan was already developing well enough that it didn't need to take any further risks. He preferred to appoint a cooler head that wasn't so quick to take a lot of risks.

"Our clan might be lacking in senior leaders, but we have over 150,000 people in our midst. I seriously doubt that you can't find another eligible candidate from their midst. If necessary, we can set our sights on a retired veteran."

"Let's not be so quick to draw upon them. I have another name in mind that might suit your purposes."

The former commander of the Living Sentinels entered the conference room and presented herself to Ves.

"Patriarch." She saluted. "I am at your service."

Ves fell silent as he studied the older woman. Magdalena Larkinson used to be a lot stiffer. As a military veteran and a mech officer, she was accustomed to projecting strength and authority.

Yet now that she had passed on her previous command, she moved on to become a staff officer who worked directly under General Verle. The break from her former command seemed to have done wonders for her mood. She looked as if she had fully moved past her rather shameful departure.

"How are you doing, Magdalena?"

"I'm doing well, sir. Commander Casella Ingvar is a much more suitable figurehead for the Living Sentinels. I don't miss my former job."

"What do you do these days?"

"I serve as General Verle's deputy for the most part." She replied. "Due to my background, I mostly assist with mech-related problems. I supervise the logistics concerning the allocation and transfer of newly-produced mechs among other tasks."

It was a rather boring-sounding job to Ves, but it was people like Major Magdalena that ensured that the different mech troops kept running smoothly.

As the major continued to elaborate on her job, Ves found that she possessed a comprehensive understanding of the military machine of the Larkinson Clan. Her diverse experience allowed her to gain a good perspective on what the forward and rear sides of the Larkinson Army required from each other. This allowed her to anticipate problems before they blew up and meet the needs of many soldiers without waiting for them to voice their complaints.

All in all, her job wouldn't change all that much if she became a chief minister. She would still be working on the same problems. The only difference was that she would have to address issues plaguing the rest of the clan.

There was only one major caveat to choosing Major Magdalena.

"How popular is she among the clansmen?"

General Verle grimaced. "Not high. While she has been helpful inside the Military Bureau, much of our work is hidden in the background. There are thousands of Larkinsons who don't have a good impression of Major Magdalena. The Living Sentinels who survived the horrors of the Nyxian Gap will especially feel sour if we 'reward' her with a huge promotion."

Ves fell silent for a moment. "This... is indeed an issue, but... how many people are we talking about?"

"Sir?"

"Our clan was a lot smaller when we journeyed through the Nyxian Gap." Ves observed. "We didn't have all of the Lifers, Heavensworders, Purnessers, Ivenans and all of those other people on board yet. Do they have any bad impressions of Major Magdalena?"

"Hmmm... it is unlikely they even know she exists, sir." General Verle replied. "She's not a prominent presence in the clan at the moment. There are so many other clansmen who draw attention that Major Magdalena is outright invisible."

Ves smirked. "Then that's that. Compared to the few tens of thousands of Larkinsons who personally lived through the events of the Nyxian Gap, the hundred-thousand newcomers haven't developed any negative impressions of her. That means the opposition to her ascension won't be as strong as you fear."

"I'm not quite certain about that, sir. The clansmen who have been with us for a longer time are much more influential than those who came after. All of the new recruits look up to them. The negative impression will definitely spread once Major Magdalena enters the spotlight again."

Ves didn't look very worried. "There is a limit to hearsay. In any case, most of her responsibilities will likely concern background matters. As long as she doesn't show up in public too much, I bet that most of our clansmen will no longer pay attention to her. She needs to do a good job, though. If she slips up, then she'll only inflame and vindicate all of the criticism."

As Ves and General Verle discussed the merits of Major Magdalena's suitability as chief minister, the woman in question looked increasingly bewildered.

She never expected that the two leaders were seriously thinking about putting her in charge of the entire clan!

"Patriarch, with respect, I believe you should consider another candidate."

"Hmmm?" Ves turned his head. "Why would you say that?"

"I haven't done anything to deserve this honor. While I am aware that you are considering me because there are not enough choices, I can recommend several colleagues who will be able to serve your needs better."

Both Ves and General Verle smiled.

"You have learned a lot from your previous failures." Ves spoke. "I like that. It is only when you fail that you will truly understand the severity of your responsibilities. I would rather put someone humble in charge than some hotshot who wants to take bold action. At least I can be assured that you will not overreach in your decisions."

General Verle added his own words. "The Larkinson Army needs to send a representative that stands up for it and meets its needs. I am reluctant to nominate someone with more ambition because there is a greater chance that the resulting chief minister will seek to fulfill his own interests. With Major Magdalena, we can be assured that she will look after the needs of our soldiers with humility."

In the end, Ves made his decision. Despite the lack of merits and the negative sentiment towards Major Magdalena, he predicted that opposition to her ascension wouldn't be particularly strong.

As long as the backlash was limited, there shouldn't be a major problem. Ves didn't want to consider anyone else, not when he had a candidate who was competent, humble, experienced and trustworthy.

The fact that she was a trueblood Larkinson who came from the original Larkinson Family was icing on the cake.

With her appointment, that would mean that two of the three chief minister seats would be filled by trueblood Larkinsons!

Not only would this ensure that the Larkinson Clan would develop along the lines of his original ideals, the combination of Magdalena and Raymond would also serve as a powerful check against Novilon Purnesse!

The man would always be in a minority. If he wanted to implement any measures, he had to gain the approval of either Magdalena or Raymond. Both of these older Larkinsons were not so easy to fool and they were much more loyal to the Larkinson cause than adopted clansmen.

All in all, this arrangement sounded great to Ves. He did not hesitate in passing on the necessary instructions. Though Major Magdalena would not be able to take office straight away, it wouldn't take long before she would formally become one of the most powerful and influential Larkinsons in the clan.

Though the woman in question still expressed a lot of reluctance about her suitability, she eventually accepted the decision.

"If you need me in this position, then I will do my best to repay your trust." She said as fire began to spark in her eyes.

Once they handled this important matter, General Verle eventually dismissed the soon-to-be chief minister, leaving him alone with Ves and a number of bodyguards.

"Well, that's that." General Verle said as he put down his formality a bit. "I didn't expect you to embrace Major Magdalena, but if she is to your liking, then I support your choice."

Ves crossed his arms. "Our clan has to remain firmly in the hands of those who are authentic Larkinsons. We have taken a lot of people lately who come from vastly different states and backgrounds. While it is nice to see that we are all getting along with each other, we can't let that overshadow our original culture. We need to reassert our original values and make sure that we don't become too swayed by other outlooks. The minority groups need to stay in the minority."

"The minority is quite stubborn about clinging to their old culture and heritage. Also, it is quite helpful for us to host different groups who excel in different matters. Just look at the Ylvainains or the Swordmaidens, for example. We would have become a very different clan if we stamped out all of that uniqueness. In fact, we might not even be alive today."

Ves sighed. This was a recurring dilemma to Ves... The clan had swung too much in the other direction for his liking, but that was also what made it strong today.

Chapter 3153: Second Transformation

The clan experienced many changes after another in the next handful of weeks. Now that Ves approved of the selection of the three chief ministers, the clan could finally implement the meat of Shederin's reform plan.

A lot of formal induction ceremonies and other official rituals took place as many people received new appointments. In particular, a lot of members of the former Purnesse Family filled up newly-created administrative positions in order to help run the rapidly-expanding bureaucratic machine of the Larkinson Clan.

Many clan departments changed into ministries as the clan administration began to wear the coat of a state. There weren't many people that considered the Larkinson Clan to be an actual state, but that did not mean it was detrimental to get a head start on transitioning to a state structure.

The rank-and-file members of the Larkinson Clan didn't experience too many changes in their daily lives. Sure, the clan apparatus had grown bigger and more comprehensive, but the lower levels largely remained the same. At most, some of the instructions coming down from the top had changed because a lot more people got to be in charge.

The clan soon felt the short-term benefits of all of the reforms. The leadership deficit that had been plaguing the clan still existed, but became less severe. A lot of neglected issues were finally starting to be addressed and the clan was allocating more resources to priorities that had long been overdue.

The establishment of something that resembled a real government exerted a strong influence on the civilians of the Larkinson Clan.

Before the reforms, the Larkinsons felt as if they were subjected to a military rule of some sorts. Everyone knew that the clan largely moved when Ves dictated his commands. While there weren't many people who objected to his leadership, the lack of other prominent leaders meant that a lot of average clansmen felt as if they were in a situation where they had no choice but to obey orders.

Now, the extra layers in the hierarchy along with the opening of many new positions allowed average Larkinsons to feel more connected with those who ruled over them. The distance between had narrowed and a lot more initiatives started up due to the appointment of so many fresh and eager officials.

The Larkinson Army didn't undergo as much upheaval. The Military Bureau formally transitioned into Central Command, though most soldiers simply referred to it as headquarters or Central HQ.

While the expansion of Central Command had already begun prior to the huge wave of changes, a lot more support and staff functions had opened up before subsequently being filled by both old and new clansmen.

However, the most drastic change was the transformation of the mech forces into mech legions.

On the surface, this was largely a simple change in how they were being called.

In reality, the mech legions gained a lot more autonomy and power to decide on their own matters. However, they also become more dependent on Central HQ for matters such as personnel affairs and hardware transfers.

It was a rather paradoxical change at first, but as time went by, the changes started to make sense to people. The staff working the mech legions just had to focus on the tasks that directly affected their operation, assured that Central Command took care of all of the overhead.

This was a time of great change and progress. The Larkinson Clan ushered in its greatest transformation since it opened up its doors to adopted Larkinsons.

Though there was opposition to many different changes, none of them were overwhelming enough to stop the reforms from proceeding.

Not even Major Magdalena Larkinson's elevation to the position of chief minister stirred a lot of unrest. The opposition that Ves half-expected to emerge didn't really come to life.

Sure, there were a lot of disgruntled relatives of deceased Living Sentinels, their curmudgeonly complaints never gained any traction. There were simply too few clansmen who lived through the events that took place in the Nyxian Gap. Of those survivors, there were even fewer people who retained any strong feelings about something that happened a long time ago.

Time healed many wounds and the memories of the darkest days of their lives had faded. There was so much going on in the Larkinson Clan these days that there were not a lot of people who still wallowed in the past.

With Chief Minister Magdalena Larkinson, Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse and Chief Minister Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson taking over many of the duties that Ves had neglected, an entirely new energy infused the clan with forward momentum.

They were finally making real progress now! Even though the clan hadn't acquired any new capital ships or picked up a huge batch of recruits, the different organizations within the clan were making much better use of existing resources.

The Design Department largely remained unaffected by these changes, though. This was Ves' personal kingdom and he was still in charge of it while Gloriana continued to lead the current projects.

With his wife becoming increasingly more motivated to do a good job, she exhorted everyone else to complete the design of the Sentry Project as fast as possible.

The expert rifleman mech was a very different beast from the Dark Zephyr. While both of them were rather slim, the former fought in a completely different way than the latter.

The lack of defenses and the lackluster mobility of the Sentry Project caused it to be highly vulnerable to attacks up close. Ves and the other mech designers tried their best to give the ranged mech a bit of chance in winning a close-ranged battle, but it was a futile effort for the most part.

That said, the tradeoffs were more than worth it. The abundant amount of available capacity devoted to supplying as much power to the luminar crystal rifle was impressive.

Considering that the weapon that combined both alien technology and human ingenuity produced a lot less waste heat than comparable weapons, Ves was able to crank up the power of its shots to a high degree without worrying too much about melting the entire weapon.

"The Sentry Project's firepower can only be surpassed by an expert artillery mech in the same class!"

Yet that didn't mean the Sentry Project was limited to firing a handful of discreet high-powered beams. Energy weapons were highly scalable and easily adjustable. This allowed Ves to enable the weapon to lower its energy output to a substantial degree. The lower energy draw along with the reduced stress of firing low-powered shots allowed the expert mech to fire a rapid barrage of weaker beams that should still be powerful enough to eliminate hundreds of regular second-class mechs.

Of course, a true mid-range expert rifleman mech such as the upcoming Star Dancer Mark II was able to make much better use of a rapid-firing gun than a more sniper-oriented machine like the Sentry Project.

Upon the final days of the project, the mech designers completed another intensive work session.

Mrow...

Blinky's star-streaking form had faded again as he reached the limit of his capacity. The invisible bonds that tied the minds of Ves, Gloriana and their assistants had all faded, causing them to feel a lot more diminished.

Still, the smiles on their faces signified that they were highly pleased with what they accomplished. Even with the bottleneck in processing power, there was still plenty of manual work that they could do to improve the design by another push.

Ves slowly approached his wife and pulled her into a warm embrace as her fading but still pleasant scent wafted in his face.

"We can finally start with fabricating our second expert mech." He remarked.

She nodded as she leaned her head against his shoulder. "Mhmm. I've already prepared all of the necessary materials and prepared all of our production equipment. I hope that this time we will be able to employ a lot more skill when trying to fabricate and assemble all of the complicated components of this expert mech."

"I have done my best to study up and practice with the production machines. I'm as ready as I can manage. The only thing I'm lacking is actual experience."

The two continued to cuddle together as they gazed at the almost-finished schematic of the Sentry Project. In fact, it was already good enough to be put in use, but Gloriana still wanted to address some final issues before she was comfortable with finalizing the design.

She looked down at her body. Her pregnancy was still at an early stage, so her belly didn't show any significant swelling as of yet. However, she wasn't looking at her body, but instead trying to imagine her growing daughter.

"I can feel her." She swore. "My baby daughter... I think I can feel her. She's so tiny, but... there is just something within me that I can't help but shower with love."

Ves scratched his head. "Are you sure?"

"I think that Blinky is helping me connect to my daughter. I swear that in the last few days, whenever your new pet performs his job, I feel more connected to everything, including my baby girl. It's... so magical. Whenever I feel troubled or frustrated, I just need to direct my concentration of what's inside my womb in order to regain the motivation to work hard again. She's been my greatest support."

Ves didn't know what to say. He was initially skeptical about her claims. Blinky most certainly did not poke his tail through Gloriana's stomach. How could his wife already feel the growing collection of cells that was quietly growing inside her body?

Then, he realized what might actually be happening. Whenever Blinky formed a design network, every participating mech designer shared some of their abilities to others.

Ves already knew for a while now that Gloriana obtained a portion of his sensitivity towards life, but she mostly relied on her own abilities in order to optimize her mech designs. There was hardly any room for her to make use of what she was able to borrow from her husband.

Only in their closest and most intimate synergy sessions was she able to understand his abilities to a degree where she could make better use of it. Outside of that, the advantages that he passed on to her only provided her with general benefits such as being able to make her work more in line with the spiritual design of her work.

Yet Ves overlooked that a sensitivity towards life also enabled Gloriana to pick up the growing presence of her remarkable daughter!

Compared to other fetuses who were in a similar stage of pregnancy, their daughter already developed a stronger spiritual presence. Ves infused it with his own spiritual energy every day so that his unborn child would quickly be able to develop to the point where Ves could impart her with a companion spirit seed.

She was far from reaching that point, but her presence had already grown strong enough that even someone with a weaker version of his sensitivity like Gloriana could feel her own daughter!

Ves could see how that was affecting his wife. Gloriana exuded the warmth that only mothers could convey. Her entire body and mind became filled with affection.

Love was a wondrous force that could never be quantified in numbers or described in words. Yet Ves did not mind that at all as he basked in the glow exuded by his partner in life.

Gloriana's daughter was his daughter as well. Neither of them wanted to see their little girl come to harm.

"We still have many months to go." She whispered.

"Yup." He nodded. "I really can't wait to hold her. The months go by too slowly for my tastes."

"We can speed it up as long as we do our best to finish our remaining expert mech designs."

"Hmmm, I'm not sure if we can complete the current round in time."

"Do your best. Do it for our daughter."

"I'll try."

Chapter 3154: Different Mech Pilot

The Dark Zephyr raced across a large volume of empty space and showcased the full speed and agility of the mech. It danced back and forth as it tried its best to evade hundreds of invisible energy beams.

At this stage, the Larkinson Army and more specifically the Hall of Heroes had refined Venerable Tusa's training regime.

The power of an expert mech was so great that the normal intensity of routine practice was completely inadequate.

Over multiple months, the live training sessions became increasingly more intense, systematic and professional.

For example, in order to conveniently provide a huge practice space where the Dark Zephyr could show its paces without exposing anything, the Black Cats specially procured and modified interference bots in huge batches. Thousands of tens of

thousands of them could jam and mess up most forms of detection in a volume that stretched out for plenty of kilometers!

If Venerable Tusa wanted to test the limits of his expert mech's speed, then the bots could be deployed in a long rectangular track so that the expert pilot would be able to gain precious experience in handling situations while accelerating forward.

In order to provide challenging exercises to Tusa without burdening the Larkinson Army too much, the Hall of Heroes also procured small and compact bots that were capable of firing weak, invisible beams that hardly did any damage but could be fired at an incredible frequency without worrying about inflicting any damage to anything. No matter if it hit a starship, a mech, a shuttle or even a human wearing a vacsuit, no one would come to any harm!

This enabled the practice scenarios to be omnidirectional, which meant that Tusa had to worry about dodging attacks from every angle.

The ranged bots came with a variety of targeting modes. They could rely on their awful inbuilt targeting systems. They could connect to a central automated targeting system aboard combat carriers and combat-oriented capital ships for much better results. Mech pilots and other people could even connect to them remotely in order to put their skills to the test against the most challenging foe they faced!

Through these tools and more, Venerable Tusa gained plenty of stimulation from having to dodge these attacks, especially when he did not rely on his mech's characteristic Perception Distortion ability.

At first, his performance wasn't exactly stellar. His ability to anticipate attacks started off rather poor when the ranged bots first came into service. The bots were small and numerous, so it was hard to keep track of their movements. What was worse was that it was hard for the Dark Zephyr to track the activity of their ultraweak energy projectors.

Without the capacity to reliably detect energy and heat buildup just before a weapon released a shot, Venerable Tusa had to rely on other measures in order to avoid getting hit!

He relied heavily on his instincts, intuition, experience and other intangible sources to judge where he should move in order to avoid an attack that he had no objective way of perceiving.

It was outright magical how the Dark Zephyr was able to glide away from a danger zone moments before an energy beam punched through the area!

Venerable Tusa was not only able to do this once, but hundreds of times before he finally slipped up and allowed his expert mech to get grazed.

His performance was drawing a lot of admiration from the other Larkinson mech pilots. Both old and new clansmen were continually amazed at all of the incredible maneuvers that Tusa was able to pull off. The parameters of his expert mech's excellent agility, responsiveness and thrust-to-mass ratio were so high that it was as if they were looking at the shadow of a first-class mech!

Currently, the practice session had become a little more interesting than other times due to the participation of other mechs.

Just over a dozen Ferocious Piranhas tried their best to chase after the Dark Zephyr while being subjected to the harmless beams of dozens of ranged bots.

Unfortunately, compared to the graceful and seemingly prescient Dark Zephyr, the ordinary second-class light skirmishers were doing a pretty bad job at evading the invisible beams!

It was not because the attacks weren't visible. The sophisticated sensor systems of second-class mechs were easily able to detect the weak energy beams, but by the time the systems passed their observations on to the mech pilot, the lightspeed attacks had already struck their targets!

Obviously, ordinary mech pilots did not possess the superhuman intuition and judgement of an expert pilot. This caused the mech pilots that Venerable Tusa took under his wing to struggle considerably.

"Alright, stop!" Tusa commanded.

The bots immediately ceased fire while the mechs turned around and accelerated in the other direction in order to stop going forward and shooting past the interference envelope.

As Venerable Tusa brought his expert mech in front of the Ferocious Piranhas, their respective glows and other influences mingled together. The glows of the Ferocious Piranhas were harmless towards friendlies, fortunately, but their presence still charged the surrounding space with an indefinable energy.

The combined pressure exuded by the Dark Zephyr was not as easy to endure to other people. The combination of an expert mech and prime mech produced a slightly more empowered aura that made the Speed Demons a little more light-headed.

It was fortunate that Tusa's force of will was actually the gentlest and least oppressive out of the Larkinson mech pilots. It was disturbingly easy to overlook Tusa and his expert mech when they wanted to attract as little attention as possible.

"I'm glad to see that you're making progress." He transmitted to the Larkinsons who received the privilege of receiving direct instruction from an expert pilot. "To become a

true Speed Demon, it is not enough to maximize the thrust power of your flight systems and waste a lot of power in vain. What truly matters is to anticipate attacks, move away from them before they even appear and to keep your mech alive. Excellent training can only take you so far. Just look at the performance of our latest addition. As much as I applaud his trained judgement and his technical piloting skills, he is not the best performer among your group."

The mech pilots all directed their sensors towards the Ferocious Piranha floating to their right.

This mech was different from the rest because it wasn't piloted by a Larkinson. Instead, its cockpit was occupied by Jessica Quentin, one of the twenty MTA mech pilots assigned to train with the Larkinson Clan.

The woman did not look pleased at her performance.

"If I was piloting my old service mech, I would have been able to respond a lot faster. This Ferocious Piranha is a fine mech by second-class standards, but it is not a machine that I am accustomed to working with. The delay between issuing a command and having it actually move is excruciating."

"Don't blame the machine for your poor showing, Jessica." Tusa admonished. The Dark Zephyr gestured towards another Ferocious Piranha. "Some of our own clansmen managed to outperform you despite possessing worse skills. Do you know why that is the case?"

"They were lucky. The results of a training exercise like this are highly randomized. We did not run it long enough to average out results to an adequate degree."

"We aren't statisticians here, Jessica. I don't give a crap about luck. No matter whether you're lucky or unlucky on the battlefield, you have no choice but to deal with whatever happens. Instead of thinking about factors outside of your control, you should be working on relying on measures you can actually take. Now, does anyone know why Jessica performed worse in this particular test?"

"She's not used to piloting our mechs." Someone suggested.

"Her intuition isn't as good."

"She's so used to piloting the good stuff that she doesn't know how to pilot our 'inferior' mechs."

Venerable Tusa smirked. "These are all valid reasons to me, but I think the biggest variable is something else. Let me ask you all a question. Do you love your mechs?"

"I do."

"The Ferocious Piranha is perfect for my style!"

"I just love to terrorize our foes with its glow."

Even the clansmen who preferred to pilot a swifter and more scouting-oriented light mech had come to embrace the Ferocious Piranha. The notorious mech model designed by their patriarch not only conveyed unique advantages through its nauseating glow, but also performed well in many different areas. The light skirmisher model's only major shortcoming was that its straight-line acceleration was not the best.

However, there was one property in particular that caused many if not all Larkinson mech pilots to love their respective mechs.

"Do you know what you are missing, Jessica?"

The MTA mech pilot frowned. "I don't love my mech as much as the rest?"

Tusa nodded. "I can see it in the way you treat, handle and speak about your mech. To you, the Ferocious Piranha is just an inferior, temporary machine to you. Even though you should be able to feel the living traits of your fine light skirmisher, you don't take advantage of them as much as the rest."

The entire concept of living mechs sounded a bit exaggerated to Jessica. How could machines made out of metal and composites be alive? What she felt whenever she piloted her mech could easily be dismissed as psychedelic illusions!

"I don't see how this has anything to do with my performance in this test."

"It has everything to do with your performance! Look, I can't exactly tell you how to become an expert pilot. You need to find your own way. What I can tell you however is that I think you are making it much harder for yourself by continuing to treat your mechs as tools."

"Mechs are instruments of war, Venerable."

"You're not wrong, pilot, but they can be more than that. The mechs designed by our patriarch especially embody this. I believe that your refusal or reluctance to bond with your mech is hindering you from improving any further. Don't take my word for it as I don't really know how this actually works, but in my opinion you are not worthy to go any further unless you drop your disaffection towards your current mech and begin to appreciate it for its merits!"

Though Jessica respected Venerable Tusa for his power and accomplishments, that didn't mean she was easily swayed by him. The systematic training she received from the MTA went into great detail about the different properties and possibilities of different mechs.

First-class mechs came in very great varieties and it was essential for every qualified MTA mech pilot to acquire some of the knowledge that typically belonged to mech designers.

She could make detailed comparisons between the Ferocious Piranha and her old first-class service mechs. The unquestionable gulf in performance between the two prevented her from developing a sincere appreciation for her weak and crippled machine.

It was as if she used to live in a mansion but suddenly had to room in a shabby student dorm. To her, the transition was so great that it was as if she was forced to reside in a small packing crate!

Venerable Tusa could sense Jessica's stubbornness. "Just think it over, Quentin. No good ever comes with disrespecting the machine that does its best to protect you and serve your needs in battle. One of the lessons that our patriarch has taught to us is that we are not separate from our mechs. We are two parts of the same whole. In order for one to grow stronger, the other has to cooperate. Otherwise the mech will serve to hold you back and pin you in place."

The other Larkinson mech pilots all nodded in agreement. They had no reason to question or reject these sage words of advice.

Jessica Quentin, who trained under a completely different mech culture, simply thought that the expert pilot was spewing fantasies. Perhaps there were a few nuggets of truth in his story, but the MTA was well aware that expert pilots never excelled in science and logic!

Chapter 3155: Outpacing the Rest

Venerable Tusa was quite disappointed by Jessica Quentin's lack of adjustment. The point of hosting them was to subject them to alternative training methods. Jessica was supposed to be one of the mech pilots who agreed to allow the Larkinsons to dictate her training program.

Yet despite instructing her for a few months, Jessica never blended in to the extent the Larkinson instructors desired.

She was hardly different as the other MTA mech pilots also exhibited varying degrees of resistance to the lessons taught by the Larkinson instructors.

This was not a difference that could easily be bridged. To the superior mech pilots who worked hard to become proficient at piloting an entirely different class of mechs, the machines utilized by the Larkinsons looked like toys in comparison.

Even though the second-class mechs employed by the Larkinson Clan were actually quite fantastic by the standards of the current region, they were as responsive as elephants and as sluggish as whales to those who once had the privilege of piloting real first-class mechs.

The mechs employed by the Big Two as well as every first-rate state were powerful works that were packed with so much high technology that not even Ves would be able to comprehend their full designs!

The latest advancements in neural interface, power transmission systems, processing capabilities, armor toughness, attack power and so on all conveyed so many advantages that first-class mech pilots had to learn an enormous amount of theory in order to be able to effectively pilot these beasts!

It was practically impossible for unaugmented humans to pilot a first-class mech. The prerequisites were so overwhelming that only superhumans were able to pilot them. That included both augmented mech pilots and extraordinary mech pilots such as Venerable Tusa.

As someone who received a robust suite of augments, Jessica Quentin's skill and knowledge exceeded that of pretty much every other mech pilot.

Even Tusa admired some of Jessica's knowledge and capabilities.

Yet it was exactly because of her amazing skills and powerful augments that he regretted her inability to adapt to piloting a living mech.

On the surface, there was no problem with the way she handled her Ferocious Piranha. She probably downloaded the entire manual in her fancy implant and memorized all of the instructions and specifications. She knew exactly how much she needed to push a system in order to achieve her desired result with less wasted energy and movements than others.

She even exhibited her unique flair by excelling in close-ranged duels. Her knife fighting skills were so good that she regularly kicked the butts of expert candidates in simulation battles!

"That makes it even worse."

From his understanding of the MTA mech pilot, Jessica was so confident in her own acquired skills and abilities that she fundamentally looked down on the methods taught by the Larkinsons.

Though Venerable Tusa didn't necessarily think it was wrong for mech pilots to stick to their own courses and try to achieve success in the manner that aligned with them best, the expert pilot nonetheless thought that Jessica could at least take over a bit of advice.

Her continual disdain and lack of appreciation of her Ferocious Piranha and any other mech fielded by the Larkinson Army were extremely regretful in his eyes. If the opposite was the case, then even if her chances of breaking through had hardly changed, she would at least be able to perform a lot better in some of the training sessions!

"She'll be able to dodge more attacks at the very least!"

The practice sessions with the ranged bots was one of his favorite moments. He not only got to exercise the skills that he valued most, but also made slow and steady progress in improving his extraordinary intuition. Even though facing an arsenal of harmless bots was not as stimulating as enduring actual enemy fire, the challenge of trying to anticipate and evade attacks before they even happened never got tiresome!

It was because he worked so hard to improve this aspect of his piloting abilities that he felt so bad about Jessica Quentin.

Unlike the close-minded MTA mech pilot, Venerable Tusa fully embraced what he said. He treated the Dark Zephyr like his partner and perhaps even his soulmate. He frequently slept inside its cockpit and constantly tried to convey his sentiments to the machine.

Whether his mech understood his words or not, he sincerely believed there was something inside of the Dark Zephyr that opened up to him. He could feel it in his bones. Already, the mech had become even more responsive to him despite already scoring high in this category. He also derived other benefits that were difficult to describe but should definitely make a difference in battle!

"What's even better is that there are two additional somethings inside my mech." He smiled.

He piloted and bonded with the Dark Zephyr long enough to understand most of its nuances. He was able to distinguish the sources of two different glows.

Tusa had mixed feelings about the stronger source. Its character was... different. It mostly came to play when he activated the Perception Distortion resonance ability. The stronger he channeled this ability, the more he felt as if he could mislead his attackers even more if he coordinated with this mysterious presence.

He never really managed to do so. He didn't have much in common with this meek and humble presence. Though he felt tempted to dismiss this presence entirely, it was part of his Dark Zephyr for a reason. If Venerable Tusa truly wanted to master his expert mech in its entirety, he had to find a way to work with all of its facets, including the ones he liked the least.

Compared to this obvious presence, Tusa much preferred to become attuned with the second presence.

Though it was weak to the point where he could easily miss it, this smaller influence sang to him to a much greater degree. From the first time he piloted the Dark Zephyr, he made an immediate connection to what he felt was some kind of young and innocent bird.

This little chick might not be as impressive as all of the other influences he managed to get in touch with, but none of them resonated with him quite as much as this humble little bird.

Tusa had already forged a solid connection with the bird after piloting his Dark Zephyr just a few more times. He could still feel him or her even when he left the cockpit.

"Trisk. Is that what you're called?"

Chirrup!

The little bird was like his muse. Even though he wasn't really sure how Trisk could help him out in battle, he never looked down on him or her because of that.

He knew that Trisk was still young and just beginning to develop his or her powers. Each time he started a new session, he sensed that he or she had become a bit stronger, a bit more mature and a bit more expressive.

The only irritation that nagged him was that he couldn't quite tell the gender of what he was bonding to. In one moment, Trisk showed tendencies that Tusa associates with males. In the other moment, Trisk became a lot more feminine for some reason!

The bird never remained static. He or she was constantly changing into different forms.

"Are you a boy bird or a girl bird?"

Chirrup?

"...Forget I asked anything."

This little confusion didn't affect his closeness to Trisk. Developing greater bonds with his expert mech and the additional presences watching over it not only made him feel more comfortable when piloting the Dark Zephyr, but also deepened his resonance!

The fruits of all of this progress started to become increasingly more clear.

As Tusa quietly attuned himself to his expert mech while it floated in open space, three distant mechs steadily approached the interference zone and came close.

Three prime mechs stopped a short distance away from the Dark Zephyr. Their forceful auras were quite powerful in their own right, but the Dark Zephyr's active resonance

practically turned the zone around it into a territory where only Tusa and his expert mech reigned.

"Joshua. Dise. I see you've brought a third partner this time."

"We're tired of getting beat up by you all of the time. You've improved so much lately that we can't keep up with your performance anymore." Venerable Joshua helplessly transmitted over the short-ranged communication channel.

"Heh, I've heard so much about these little practice duels of yours." Venerable Orfan chuckled. "My prime mech might not be as quick and agile as the others, but don't underestimate my spear."

Tusa curled his lips into a grin. "I'll be sure to take that into account. Now, let us check our practice weapons. I'll need to apply the right settings to my expert mech before we can begin."

There was always a considerable risk whenever mech pilots sparred against each other with real combat machines. Even with lots of precautions, there were still ways for mechs to collide against each other with such great force that mech pilots could lose their lives!

The expert pilots in question were not regular pilots, however. They were able to control their machines a lot better. Their mechs were also covered with solid Unending alloy plating, which was extremely difficult to break through incidental attacks.

Still, just to be sure, the mechs did not employ their standard armaments that were also made of Unending alloy. Instead, they wielded custom practice weapons made out of softer and weaker materials.

Such weapons did not provide them with an authentic dueling experience, but safety came first.

"You're lucky that you don't have to face my sharper pair of knives." Tusa said as his Dark Zephyr wielded a pair of weapons that were purposefully coated in red. "My real weapons could cut right through the weaker parts of your prime mechs!"

"Heh, let's see if you are still able to boast after we gang up on you, Tusa!" Orfan replied as her prime spearman mech wielded another brightly-colored weapon.

The four mechs all charged at each other without exchanging any more nonsense.

Though the Dark Zephyr should have easily been able to outpace and outmaneuver the three prime mechs by a huge margin, the expert mech was actually performing well below its previous standards.

In order to make this practice session fairer, Tusa had voluntarily activated a custom setting that artificially reduced the maximum performance of many of the Dark Zephyr's parameters so that it performed nearly identical to the now-defunct Piranha Prime!

This put all of the mechs on even ground in theory.

Though the handicap still left the Dark Zephyr with a distinct mobility advantage, Tusa's three opponents had already moved to surround the expert mech.

Though Venerable Tusa was sure that he could slip out from this cage, he deliberately allowed his foes to box him in. The point of this practice session was to test and exercise his close combat fighting capabilities.

"Come!"

Two spears and a sword closed in on the Dark Zephyr with impeccable timing and coordination that only expert pilots could accomplish.

Yet before they could strike their targets, the Dark Zephyr raised its weapons to deflect the two spear thrusts while easily moving out of the way to evade the sword strike.

"Not enough!"

After parrying a few more attacks that came from multiple directions, Tusa finally decided to go on the attack.

"It's my turn now!"

The Dark Zephyr, which still performed a lot worse than normal, was easily able to weave through the different attacks and somehow managed to reach the rear of the Valkyrie Prime.

Though Venerable Joshua responded remarkably quickly by reversing the Valkyrie Prime's spear and stabbing towards the back all the while moving away, the Dark Zephyr easily avoided the hasty defensive stab before striking lightly at the flight system of the Valkyrie Prime.

"Damn! Help me get this guy off my back!"

The Dark Zephyr was already long gone by the time the Bright Sword Prime and the Bright Spear Prime had caught up. In fact, the expert mech had already circled around and managed to strike the rear of Venerable Dize's expert mech before the Swordmaiden expert pilot could move her sword around in time!

"You're in my way!"

"We'll never catch him at this rate."

"Damn, ganging up on Tusa is harder than it looks. He keeps circling around and forcing us to move around each other."

Though the Dark Zephyr operated at reduced strength and did not employ any of its resonance abilities, the gap in performance was still evident.

In just a couple of months, Venerable Tusa's growth had already outpaced the other expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan!

Chapter 3156: The Importance of a Good Weapon

The expert pilots ended their practice session and returned to the Spirit of Bentheim so that their mechs could be checked over by the best technicians of the Larkinson Clan.

The results of their little competitive duel were the same as before. The addition of Venerable Orfan and her Bright Spear Prime did not tip the balance against Tusa's favor.

In fact, it was the opposite. Because the three mechs all had to get close to the constrained Dark Zephyr in order to launch their attacks, there were frequent moments where their paths were blocked by their own allies. This forced them to go around, which produced significant delays in which Tusa could easily deal with the opponent immediately in front of his expert mech!

"We need to work on our positioning." Venerable Dise gruffly spoke as she and the rest entered a private ready room where the expert pilots could talk among themselves. "Our performance earlier was outright embarrassing. We can't keep getting in each other's way when we confront an actual enemy expert mech in battle."

Neither Venerable Orfan nor Venerable Joshua looked happy. They both sat down with downcast eyes and depressed force of wills.

It was hard to imagine them as valiant expert pilots who achieved dramatic results during the Battle of Reckoning.

Every Larkinson expert pilot knew that they only had to wait a little longer before they got their own turn. Yet seeing Tusa making the most out of his headstart to the point where he could completely beat down all of the other remaining expert pilots was a hard pill to stomach!

"Hey, it's just a couple of more months according to the Design Department." Venerable Tusa attempted to soothe his colleagues. "A good living expert mech is definitely worth the wait. While I got to receive my own machine first, that also means you guys will be better off. The next expert mechs will probably be even higher in quality."

Tusa was fine with that. Unlike ordinary mechs, expert mechs were never completely finished. They were under constant development and periodically received upgrades so that their performance would still be able to keep up with the overall trend.

Still, not every improvement was easy to implement. He expected the last batch of expert mechs to become a lot more impressive than his humble Dark Zephyr. He would have no choice but to live with that, he supposed.

Why are you so much stronger?" Venerable Joshua plainly asked. "Can piloting an expert mech as opposed to a prime mech really make such a difference?"

Venerable Tusa crossed his arms as he leaned against the bulkhead. "I can't even begin to describe all of the changes. The simplest way I can put it is that the Dark Zephyr is the first mech that I can truly merge and resonate with. There are many elements about the mech that makes it extremely easy for me to handle it as if it is my own body. The customized neural interface, the exceptional responsiveness, the powerful processors and the living mech itself are all so much better that I can fully exercise all of my skills without worrying about being held back by my own partner. Instead, we are both working together to achieve greater results together."

It was the cooperative and synergistic relationship that was the key to his rapidly improving performance. The other three expert pilots in the room envied Tusa for being able to pilot a machine that truly strengthened rather than hindered his performance.

Out of the three defeated expert pilots, Venerable Dise was the least affected. The stern expert pilot had drawn her personal greatsword out of its sheath and polished it with a simple cloth even though the weapon didn't even require such treatment.

"We are expert pilots." She stated. "We are warriors, not monsters. Unlike exobeasts and the like, we can't fight by relying on our own natural abilities. We need to wield a good, sharp weapon in order to exert our full strength and skills. It's just like wielding a sword. A stronger, sharper sword will yield better results than a fragile and duller blade that could easily fall apart if you hit something a little too hard. Right now, most of us are still stuck in this situation."

It was sad, but their prime mechs were simply not a good fit for their present strength. They were fantastic mechs compared to ordinary mechs, but they were ultimately not the right tool for the job. Even fabled swordmasters could be felled with ease if they were caught without swords in their hands.

The stark contrast between expert pilots with and without an expert mech caused all of them to realize the importance of a good machine even more.

"I'm glad we're part of the Larkinson Clan." Tusa said with a smile. "Even though we no longer serve in a military where the higher ups take care of everything, I think we're far better off here. We're in the company of a couple of great mech designers who can

design fantastic expert mechs that I'm certain can't be replicated by any other mech designer. I can't make any comparisons, but from what I have observed from other expert mechs such as those fielded by the Cross Clan, our machines are the only ones that actively cooperate with us. All of those other powerful machines are more like tools than partners."

Not every mech pilot had to respect their mechs in order to break through to expert pilot. If that was the case, then Ves' design philosophy would have already become a lot more prevalent!

Even so, Tusa still thought that Patriarch Reginald Cross could have taken another step forward if he adopted some more Larkinson ideas.

"How much has your resonance strength grown these days?" Venerable Joshua curiously asked.

"My current record is 6.34 laveses."

"Damn! So much?!"

Considering how little time had passed, Tusa had more than doubled his previous level. Dise, Orfan and Joshua might be powerful in their own right, but their prime mechs didn't offer nearly as much improvement as an actual expert mech.

"I'm still growing." Tusa revealed an important observation. "While my growth rate has slowed down after the first month, I'm not close to hitting a wall yet. I first thought that the warnings that the mech designers gave to me were right and that a mid-tier expert mech is a bit too arduous for me to pilot effectively. That didn't turn out to be the case. My expert mech fits me like a glove, and I think that is helping a lot with mastering its capabilities and sustaining my growth rate."

Though he wasn't sure about it, he attributed these effects to Gloriana. Throughout the design process of his expert mech, the infamous Hexer wife frequently requested his input. She took a lot of measurements, drafted up numerous different plans and allowed him to pick whatever he wanted even if his choices were not always normal.

The great effort she put into making the Dark Zephyr into a machine that completely complemented his piloting style and his inclinations was some of the most luxurious treatment that he had ever received as a mech pilot. He could feel the personal touches that went into designing and making the expert mech each time he took it out for a spin.

After sharing a few more thoughts with his fellow expert pilots, Tusa changed out of his cumbersome custom piloting suit and wore a rather understated uniform that was barely different from that of any other Larkinson.

He exited the hangar bay and navigated through the corridors, making sure not to make his presence felt by his passing clansmen. This was fairly easy for him to do as he could easily make his force of will as light as a breeze.

He ascended a couple of decks and reached the 2nd deck which was the fanciest of them all. This was where all of the ballrooms, formal meeting rooms, main offices and other impressive compartments were situated.

Tusa took a few turns and eventually entered a large office that was a bit lacking in decoration.

"Grandpa."

"Tusa." One of the three chief ministers looked up from his terminal. "Did you have a good time outside?"

"The Dark Zephyr is truly a joy to pilot." Tusa sighed as he sat next to his grandfather's desk.

The two chatted a bit. Though Raymond did not have a piloting background, his Larkinson heritage granted him a great understanding of what Tusa was going through. The latter was hardly the only expert pilot that carried the Larkinson name.

"How is the Larkinson Family doing these days?" Tusa changed the topic. "I've been wondering what they have been doing for some time."

"Couldn't you call them up yourselves?"

Tusa shrugged. "Eh, my old friends act all differently now that I'm an expert pilot. That's what I like about our clan. I can still hold a normal conversation with a fellow clansman, somewhat."

"Well, if you must know, the Larkinson Family has been quiet lately. Unlike us, they haven't grown and haven't entered any battles that I know of despite taking on mercenary contracts in the Garlen Empire. Our relatives are making good use of the Larkinson mechs that they have been permitted to make and utilize themselves, but they are hardly an equal to our Avatars and other mech legions."

The Larkinson Clan had improved so quickly that the Larkinson Family were forever stuck with playing catch up. It didn't help that the old family refused a lot of handouts offered by the clan in good faith.

"How is uncle Ark doing?"

"He still hasn't really shown up in public so far." Raymond said. "He's been in retreat for a long time. Maybe too long."

Tusa furrowed his brows. "If he's preparing to break through to ace pilot, then... I'm not sure if he'll be able to find his opportunity behind closed doors. He should seek out a battle. Combat has always been the best way for people like us to break our limits."

His grandfather shook his head. "Do you think that Ark can go off on a reckless adventure like our patriarch? He can't afford to push himself and his family members into danger. The entire reason why they refused to join our clan is because they reject our approach."

"Then why not leave the Larkinson Family behind for a time and take on a more exciting mercenary contract?"

"One of the reasons why the Larkinson Family remains respected in the Garlen Empire is because Ark is propping it up." Raymond pointed out. "While it is understandable for him to go out and seek a breakthrough opportunity, what if he enters the wrong battle or fights for the wrong side? Those Garleners are brutal, Tusa. The Crossers aren't the only ones who are lusting to challenge expert pilots. Though Ark can be considered to be among the strongest of expert pilots, his expert mech..."

Ark's original expert mech that he kept after deserting from the Mech Corps was a powerful machine, but only by third-class standards. It was barely adequate in second-class standards and could easily be crumpled by genuine second-class expert mechs.

One of the greatest difficulties he faced right now was the lack of a proper high-tier second-class expert mech that could fully keep up with the battles in the enormous second-rate state.

Though there were plenty of organizations in the Garlen Empire that were willing to supply an expert mech to an expert pilot, the troublesome part about Ark was that he required a machine on par with Patriarch Reginald's Bolvos Rage or stronger in order to do him justice!

Designing and fabricating such a powerful but expensive war machine was not cheap, and not every organization was capable of bearing the enormous cost!

"Can't the Larkinson Family come to us for help?"

The elder Larkinson snorted. "You can keep waiting, then. It's highly doubtful that they will drop their pride and ask for assistance from us. They need to prove to themselves that they can succeed on their own."

"That sounds stupid."

"That's pride for you. It's been the downfall of Venerable Ghanso and it might even deny your uncle Ark his greatest opportunity. I hope you'll be able to learn from their example. Don't think you're such a big hotshot now that you've become a supreme expert pilot."

You're still human enough that you need to rely on the weapons that we supply to you in order to kill all of those powerful enemies."

Venerable Tusa took his grandfather's words very seriously. No matter how strong he became, he vowed that he would never forget the people that made it possible for him to fulfill his dreams.

"I can only be free because my fellow clansmen enable me to spread my wings. It is only right to stick with them and protect them from their enemies."

Raymond looked pleased. "Hmmm. Spoken like a true Larkinson. The old family should have adopted your attitude... It's the only one worthy of our heritage and our ideals."

Chapter 3157: An Extra Touch

Ves and Gloriana stood side by side as they gazed up at a giant projection of a refined mech design.

After several months of intensive design work that involved a lot of number crunching, a lot of experimentation and a lot of adjustments, the mech designers finally completed their second expert mech design!

"What a powerful ranged mech." Gloriana sighed as she hugged Clixie against her chest. "Compared to ordinary expert rifleman mechs that militaries routinely issue to expert pilots, this one is definitely a cut above the rest!"

"Miaow."

"It's not a high-tier expert mech, but it comes close."

The greatest determinants of the tier of an expert mech was the material composition and design quality of the machine. Looking at the budget was another good way of determining the overall placement of the expert mech.

The Larkinson Clan did not skimp too much in designing the Sentry Project. The only reasons why the clan couldn't incorporate any better materials was because they were too prohibitive in cost or very difficult to obtain in the open market.

Regardless, the armor system, the structural parts and other physical aspects were actually quite decent by expert mech standards.

Against a horde of ordinary mechs, the Sentry Project should be able to withstand a barrage.

It was not a rugged expert mech by any means, though. Compared to melee mechs which didn't have to allocate as much capacity towards ammunition and energy cells,

the Sentry Project's structure resembled an egg. As long as an attack punched through its relatively thin surface, it could inflict serious internal damage, especially when it was empowered by resonance.

The parts density of the Sentry Project was nearly just as high as the Dark Zephyr. Both mechs contained a lot of powerful miniaturized components that were nearly pressed against each other like passengers riding a low-budget transit shuttle.

There was barely any space to incorporate any redundancy and compartmentalization in the interior!

As a result, the Sentry Project was quite vulnerable against penetrating attacks, which most offensive expert mechs could easily launch.

This was the great compromise of the sniper-oriented expert rifleman mech. In ideal situations, the Sentry Project should never be deployed too far forward. It's fantastic firepower along with its high precision allowed it to deal effective damage at ranges where most opponents simply couldn't retaliate!

"I'm quite proud of how my luminar crystal rifle turned out." Ves grinned. "It offers substantially greater firepower and efficiency compared to normal rifles. It's too bad that it's one of a kind in a sense."

The best luminar crystal rifles could only be made by him. His affinity for luminar crystal technology, his ability to merge with the Illustrious One and his possession of the crystal cube all combined into a unique capability that was probably unique!

"It's the prime materials and resonating exotics that truly makes this rifle stand out from the pack." He whispered.

Though the Dark Zephyr hadn't fully showcased the power of combining both prime resonance and true resonance in a single expert mech, Ves expected to witness a different result with the Sentry Project.

The Opticonium incorporated in the weapon was one of the more remarkable resonating alloys developed by a specialized material development company. When Ves studied the materials himself one day, he found out that it was neither a metal nor a crystal.

Instead, it combined the properties of both, no doubt due to the exceptional materials in its formula.

Though Ves had no idea how it worked, he admired the way that Master Willix seamlessly integrated this key material through the structure of the crystal luminar rifle. The transparent and reflective aesthetic of the mech-sized gun gained additional dimension and complexity with slightly darker and more opaque elements in its interior.

He couldn't wait to make this rifle for real and see how it looked when Venerable Stark finally piloted the Sentry Project for the first time. With all of the energies running through the crystal body, he predicted that the weapon would turn into quite an interesting light show.

Ves even bet that many energy weapon specialists throughout the mech industry would grow green with envy if they heard what the luminar crystal rifle was capable of. Despite his dependence on alien technology, the results were undeniably superior to the prevailing competition. Only other mech designers or weapon developers with access to exclusive technology could match the advantages of luminar crystal technology!

Gloriana admired the gun as well. "This weapon is the key piece to the ensemble. It's a dream for me to be able to work on an expert mech design that is paired with such a powerful rifle. The simulations don't do it justice at all. I'm so eager to see how much damage this expert mech can unleash with its perfectly-matched armament!"

The entire expert mech design revolved around the expert pilot and the luminar crystal rifle. The flight system, the targeting system, the sensors, the armor layout, the energy transmission system and so on were completely shaped in a way to support the expert pilot and her weapon.

All of this effort was worth it! Combined with the first true luminar crystal rifle of its kind, the Sentry Project was a truly unique work of art, craftsmanship and design. The expert mech's extreme parameters did not prevent it from looking sleek, refined and utterly deadly.

The only hidden flaw that Ves was truly worried about was whether Venerable Stark would be able to embrace the highly-unusual main weapon. Though she responded well enough when Ves explained the weapon system and allowed her to wield one of his infantry-grade luminar crystal rifles, there was an undeniable alien element to the mech.

Given Venerable Stark's awful history with the sandmen, he was afraid that she might develop a strong aversion to the luminar race and its signature technology. Would she reject the Sentry Project? Nobody knew.

The power and efficiency that luminar crystal weapons offered was too good to resist, but if Venerable Stark became so bone-headed to the point where she couldn't bring herself to make use of alien technology that belonged to an ancient extinct race, then Ves and the other mech designers would have to waste a lot of time to modify the expert mech!

Both Ves and Gloriana had done their best to increase the compatibility and comfort of the Sentry Project to its intended user. As long as Venerable Stark felt at home inside its cockpit, then the chances were high that this potential issue would never even come up in her mind!

Gloriana checked the schedule. "We've just entered FTL travel a day ago, so we have a couple of days to prepare for the fabrication attempt. I've already made the necessary preparations, but I think it is best to inspect the state of our machines and calibrate anything that has become misaligned."

"Don't be so quick to leave the design lab." He spoke. "Our design might be finished, but that doesn't necessarily mean it will be the version that we will turn into a reality. I think we have room to give our design an extra touch."

"What do you mean by that, Ves?" She furrowed her brows.

Even Clixie tilted her furry head. "Miaow?"

"I haven't considered this option for a while as I never thought it was necessary to consider it. However, I think this is a great opportunity for us to gain a lot of insights in how to design a high-spec mech. Do you remember what we did when we finished the original Bright Warrior design?"

Though it happened a long time ago, Gloriana could never forget what Ves had brought.

"Are you talking about... Letting Mr. S. perform a pass on our design?" She whispered as she widened her eyes.

"Yes." Ves smiled and nodded. "We shouldn't disturb 'him' too often, but there are three strong reasons why I think it is worthwhile to ask for his help this time. First, this is still one of our earlier expert mech designs. We still have several more to go, which means that we can incorporate many of the lessons and insights that we can learn from an improved Sentry Project to our other projects!"

Gloriana already looked eager when she heard this prospect. "That... that is a great idea! It's a pity that we completed the Dark Zephyr too soon, but we can always revisit it later on when it is time to update its design with everything we have gained since its initial completion."

This was a benefit that Ves but especially Gloriana had gained a lot from! Since the System's Superpublish function always employed the most direct way to upgrade a design implementation while staying true to the original design intent, the solutions it came up with often came into a form that an older and more experienced version of themselves might have developed!

Being able to study their future direction in advance was an incredibly powerful learning experience that would allow them to skip years of trial and error and immediately design mechs that were literally ahead of their time!

"The second reason why I think this is the right choice is because the Sentry Project is one of our most critical expert mechs in our lineup." Ves continued. "While I admit that I

am partial towards the Chimera Project, I won't deny how critical it is for us to field a strong expert mech that can form a powerful deterrent at range. In space battles, ranged combat is too predominant. If we don't score well in this area, then we'll definitely suffer disproportionate losses if the enemies we face bring their own ranged expert mechs along."

Gloriana cared less about this reason, but it was an important consideration for Ves. While he didn't think the melee expert mechs were useless, they usually came into play in the later stages of a space battle. At the start, the ranged duel that ensued between two distant forces could inflict quite a lot of damage. The outcome of this critical duel would have a heavy influence on how the remaining battle unfolded.

The Battle of Reckoning had taught Ves that it was extremely critical to maintain an advantage in this aspect. If the addition of a powerful expert rifleman mech could ensure that all of the Transcendent Punishers, Eternal Redemptions and Bright Warriors could suppress the enemy without too many concerns, then half the battle was already won!

"What's the third reason?" His wife asked.

Ves grinned and pointed his thumb at the rifle wielded by the projected expert mech design. "I'm curious to see how luminar crystal technology can be pushed further. I have already reached the limits of my knowledge when it comes to improving and optimizing the design of the luminar crystal rifle, but I feel there is a lot of depth that I haven't been able to explore as of yet. If I can gain a couple of insights on how this new weapon system can be elevated to the next level, then all of our subsequent mech designs armed with ranged weapons will benefit hugely from this gain!"

This was actually his primary motivation for choosing to make use of the Superpublish function! Working on the Sentry Project for such a long time had caused him to become more fascinated with this essential cornerstone technology. Since he didn't want to spend anymore DP on upgrading his Skills, this was the next-best way to gain an instant boost in how to apply the tech in a practical manner!

This was slightly different from dumping more theories in his mind. His recent improvement in this area already filled his head with a lot of knowledge, but he was sure that his utilization rate had dropped.

Luminar technology was spiritually reactive, which meant that Ves needed to manipulate it in a spiritual manner in order to bring out the best of its capabilities. Perhaps by Superpublishing the expert mech, Ves would be able to glimpse the System's own understanding of spirituality when it improved the expert mech design!

This kind of knowledge was probably something that wasn't contained in any of the Skills and Sub-Skills offered by the System! After all, it stole all of this knowledge from existing human works.

Chapter 3158: Active Chief Ministers

Ves originally wanted to save the Superpublish function for the Chimera Project.

He wanted to make sure that Venerable Joshua's expert mech would become the best out of the current batch of expert mechs that he designed and made. Directly improving the quality of the Chimera Project's complicated design would definitely yield a lot of results.

Yet... this was not exactly an efficient decision. Much of the gains that he could derive from Superpublishing a mech design was not the immediate improvement in a single work, but all of the methods and solutions that a different source had implemented onto the original work.

The latter meant that it was much more beneficial if he employed the Superpublish function earlier rather than later!

Though the Dark Zephyr preceded the Sentry Project, Ves thought it was a bad idea to Superpublish the expert light skirmisher.

The first time was the most special. Ves did not want to spoil the first expert mech that he had a significant part in designing and making. He did not regret this decision as he was more than happy with the Dark Zephyr's performance.

Could it have been better? Certainly. Was it desirable? Not if it came at the expense of more worthy choices.

The plain reality was that light mechs were simply less valuable and impactful than more substantial machines. They were smaller, cheaper, less demanding and less burdensome to design and craft. That made it an excellent starting point for Ves to dip his toes into expert mech.

Designing the Dark Zephyr was more of a trial than anything else. All of the problems and complications that Ves and the other Journeyman encountered during the fabrication run proved that it had been necessary for them to undergo this ordeal by themselves.

Now that Ves had experienced what it was like to complete an expert mech design project, he no longer needed to stick to this original approach.

It was fine to ask for help every once in a while. Though Ves did not like the fact that his ownership of a Superpublished design would definitely drop, this was a relatively small price to pay for all of the benefits that he and his fellow mech designers stood to gain.

"Besides, as much as I care about the Sentry Project, it's not dedicated to an actual Larkinson expert pilot.

Venerable Davia Stark may have pledged to fight on behalf of the Larkinson Clan, but her true loyalties remained uncertain. Ves did not expect her to stick with the clan permanently considering her motivations.

"Even if she sticks with us for a hundred years, she probably won't feel any reluctance to part ways with us once she has fulfilled her promise."

He knew better than most that expert pilots were incredibly stubborn about their choices. Their iron-clad wills essentially made it impossible for others to indoctrinate them! The survivor of a fallen and forgotten third-rate state definitely had greater objectives in mind, ones that would inevitably cause her to split ways with the Larkinson Clan!

Since this was the case, Ves felt a lot better about losing some ownership in the Sentry Project in exchange for receiving a lot of useful gains.

Once he announced his choice, his wife enthusiastically endorsed his decision. She was incredibly hungry for more guidance and practically shooed him away so that he could 'contact' Mr. S. and request the mysterious mech designer to make a pass on the latest iteration of the Sentry Project.

"I can't wait to receive the guidance of a supreme mech designer!" Gloriana exclaimed, completely ignoring the fact that the presumed Master or Star Designer was most probably a man rather than a woman. "Don't come back until you can deliver an improved mech design!"

Ves pretended to go somewhere private in order to make contact with his secret patron. In truth, he simply summoned his System comm, activated the Superpublish function and applied it to the Sentry Project.

After that, he suppressed his desire to study the transformed design and acted as if Mr. S. hadn't gotten back to him yet. He spent the remainder of the day attending his other duties.

One of the more important ones was checking up on what the newly-instated chief ministers were up to. He decided to head over to his main office and summoned them all in order to have a good talk.

The chief ministers currently resided on the Spirit of Bentheim, but there was talk that this might change in the near future.

This was because the concentration of leaders was too high. If the factory ship ever blew up or fell out of contact, then the rest of the Larkinson fleet would momentarily fall in confusion!

In order to prevent a single decapitation strike from completely upending the clan, it was prudent to spread all of the chief ministers out. They just needed to work all of the details, but that was not something that Ves needed to be concerned about.

"Minister Magdalena. Minister Raymond, Minister Novilon." He nodded to each of the older clansmen who took their seats across his desk. "I've been hearing good things about the changes that are taking place. There are also rumblings of uncertainty as people aren't quite sure whether all of the changes will remain good. A lot of people's lives are affected by the decisions you make and the plans you are implementing. This is why I would like to hear from you what you are preoccupied with. What are your current priorities and what issues are you trying to resolve?"

The three ministers looked at each other before Novilon decided to speak up first. "We are still finding ways to approach our new positions. It is unusual for an organization like our clan to be governed by three equal decision-makers. Right now, we are attempting to test an approach that will compel us to vote on major decisions but leave the implementation to the most suitable chief minister."

This was the most common sense approach that allowed all three chief ministers to speak on behalf of their constituents but not waste too much of their time on redundant work.

"As long as you guys keep checking up on each other's work, I'm fine with that." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I'm more interested in hearing what kind of major changes you have in store. What new initiatives have you come up with or are planning to propose?"

Novilon decided to speak up first. "Since we are transitioning to a state, but lack actual territory to rule over, I believe it might be wise to organize our various ships like towns and cities. The sub-capital ships are small enough that these changes won't have a significant impact on people's daily lives, but it will likely assist with meeting the needs of all of the people who live aboard our capital ships. This is especially important once we discard all of our sub-capital ships in order to enter the Red Ocean.

The Larkinson Clan was slowly nearing 200,000 members and that was not even the limit. While the population density of Larkinson fleet was fairly low since everyone was spread out across hundreds of ships, once the fleet condensed into just ten or eleven capital ships, the amount of people stuffed aboard those ships would definitely lead to a very different atmosphere!

Even if the Larkinsons slowly acquired additional ships later on, the capital ships would still remain as dense population centers for a long time.

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven cheek. "I'm okay with this as long as the authority of these local governing institutions are limited and clearly defined. We can't have mayors or councilors demanding that the Spirit of Bentheim reduce the power output to the

shield generators or the production halls just so that they can start producing candy or something. The essential functions along with the defenses of our ships must never be compromised."

"Chief Minister Novilon has already consulted me from the start." Magdalena Larkinson spoke up. "I have been advising him on how to ensure that the new positions will not encroach on restricted territory."

Ves smiled. "That's good to hear."

Novilon proceeded to outline some additional plans, but none of them sounded exciting to Ves. As the highest leader of the Larkinson Clan, he lived above every other clansmen. He didn't share their toils and struggles, so it was hard for him to appreciate the initiatives meant to give them more conveniences.

Fortunately, Raymond soon took over.

"I have been looking at the finances of the clan." He said. "The LMC earns a lot of money, but most of it is channeled towards strategic acquisitions and heavy military expenditures. Only a fraction of it is left to improve the rest of the clan. Don't get me wrong. I am not proposing to reduce our military spending. What I am actually working on is finding ways to increase our sources of revenue, find better ways to spend our money and cut costs in areas that already receive plenty of funding."

"That sounds like a big task." Ves remarked.

Raymond sighed. "It is, and I am far from finished. So far, I can only share a number of tentative plans with you. One of the most impactful is to start our own central bank."

Ves blinked his eyes. "Pardon?"

"It's something that needs to be done sooner or later. Let me make an assumption. Up until now, you have always been thinking about prices and costs in terms of hex credits, correct?"

"I... yes." He admitted.

He hadn't even realized how ingrained it had become for him to measure everything of value by the currency of a state that was already many light-years away!

It made less and less sense to price everything in hex credits now that they were no longer purchasing goods from the Hexadric Hegemony.

"With the way the Komodo War is progressing, the hex credit might no longer exist as legal tender." Chief Minister Novilon added his own piece. "We don't have to worry about losing money since our cash reserves consists of many different local currencies,

but our continued use of the hex credit as our de facto currency prevents us from developing our identity as a sovereign clan."

Raymond proceeded to give a brief presentation that was rather heavy on economics. Knowing that Ves wasn't interested in learning about the technicalities of setting up a central bank and issuing a new currency, he quickly came to the point.

"If we want our clansmen to develop a greater sense of independence from other states and organizations, they need to adopt and develop confidence in our own currency. No matter what we call our own coin, spending it will increase the prosperity of our clan and make everyone feel that we can stand on our own while we continue to journey the stars."

In other words, implementing a currency that was exclusive to the Larkinson Clan was not just about economics. It was also about shaping and strengthening the distinct cultural pride and identity of the people.

A state that failed a population to spend its own currency was a state that could never truly serve its own people!

It was like living in a house without electricity. The basic shape of the home and the essential function of providing shelter was still there, but there was still something missing that would always make its residents feel as if they were missing out on something that other people took for granted.

"I think this is a good idea." Ves eventually nodded. "However, something as complex and impactful as introducing a new currency for our clan is doubtlessly a huge and disruptive shift. Take it slow and don't rush it. There is not much harm in continuing to use hex credits as our default currency for the moment."

"I plan to establish our central bank and have it ready to issue its own currency before we enter the Red Ocean..." Raymond promised.

Chapter 3159: Untapped Manpower

Ves never thought that something as simple as the currency used to make transactions could have such a profound effect on the clan.

Since he was primarily a mech designer who frequently brushed with danger, Ves mostly paid attention to the military and production aspects of his clan. As a result, the way it developed up to this point was disproportionately slanted towards productivity and military force.

Was this a bad development? Ves didn't think so. In the early days, the Larkinson Clan urgently needed to grow stronger. The best and most direct way to do that was to focus

on increasing the clan's income, bolstering the internal production capabilities of the clan and most importantly expanding its military might.

The downside to this constant focus on production, business, self-sufficiency and defense was that a lot of other priorities never really gained the attention they deserved. There were other leaders and decision makers in the clan, but their authority was not high enough and their expertise was not always remarkable.

The reforms that were still in the process of transforming the Larkinson Clan changed all of that. The addition of a lot of newly-appointed officials meant that there were finally people in the clan who could address all of those issues that Ves never thought about.

Since Raymond wanted to do it right, he was far from ready to establish a central bank, let alone have it issue the clan's new legal tender. It would take many months before the right people were put in place to set up a good structure for the new currency.

"Our currency can even become something more in the future." The oldest man in the room revealed one of his ambitions. "While there are risks involved, if we can make it circulate among the other states and organizations in the Red Ocean, we can derive an immense amount of economic benefits from this circumstance."

Ves looked incredibly skeptical. "What reason would others adopt our currency? Won't they be looking to do the same thing as us? I seriously doubt that our currency will become relevant to outsiders unless we engage in transactions or something, but even then we'll probably pay in Terran or Rubarthan coins."

"That is why we need to anchor our currency in something unique and valuable. We happen to have both in spades. For example, if you have become good in designing powerful and unique mechs that can only be produced in our fleet, we can demand our customers pay in our money rather than other currencies."

"Won't our customers simply change their foreign currencies into our own before transacting as normal? It sounds like we haven't gained much except for an opportunity to rip off our customers through manipulating fees and exchange rates."

"The actual implications of this change are far more than that, Ves, but I suppose I am getting ahead of myself. We should revisit this topic in a decade once we have managed to find our footing in the Red Ocean."

Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson came up with other ideas, some of which had to do with the LMC and others which affected other parts of the clan. They were less impactful than introducing a new currency, so Ves quickly lost interest.

Soon, Ves directed his attention to Magdalena Larkinson. She had developed a couple of ideas as well, but none of them were extreme. One proposal was to allow the older mech cadets to intern in various different mech legions. This not only allowed the future

mech pilots to know what to expect, but also helped them with deciding which elite mech troop suited them best.

"We should also be setting up a proper military reserve." The former commander of the Living Sentinels proposed. "There have been numerous incidents in the past where we have suffered heavy losses and couldn't get back up to strength fast enough. Since it is a lot more dangerous to remain understrength in regions such as the Red Ocean, we need to make preparations beforehand so that we will be able to bounce back in the event we have suffered significant losses."

Now this was a good suggestion! In a frontier region like the Red Oceans, friends were hard to come by and order was still nonexistent in many zones. Any fleet that roamed the dwarf galaxy had to maintain their strength at all cost or risk getting swamped by other rivals!

"Where will we find the additional manpower?" Ves asked.

"Well, we have a growing pool of retired and partially-disabled veterans." She said. "I've talked with the Lifer biotech experts over at the Dragon's Den, and they told me that they can apply many treatments and augments that can mitigate a lot of common injury and age-related ailments. As long as we invest in our retired mech pilots, they can regain enough fighting capability to fight once more if necessary."

Ves was not completely ignorant about this topic. As a mech designer, it was mandatory for him to know what kind of people were suitable to pilot certain kinds of mechs.

"The ability for older and severely injured mech pilots to interface with a mech once again is quite difficult to restore, at least from what I have learned. The act of mech piloting is not only a mental but also a physical burden. The reason why so many older and badly-injured mech pilots are forced to retire is because their brains have sustained a lot of wear and tear, either through decades worth of piloting mechs or undergoing a traumatic experience where they felt the deaths of their own machines."

He should know, as his own grandfather was among this group. Benjamin Larkinson used to hold the title of Venerable, but after suffering a defeat during one of the battles of the Bright-Vesia Wars, he had lost virtually all of his extraordinary capabilities.

It was a rather sad outcome for a once-promising expert pilot. The fact that Benjamin was unable to maintain his force of will to this day signified that this crippling had likely collapsed his will for battle.

Fortunately, the Larkinson Family's support structure provided him with enough warmth and love to find meaning past his military service.

Chief Minister Magdalena looked pensive. "The Lifers have conducted some preliminary studies on this, and it is indeed true that our retired veterans will not come close to

returning to their peak. Their effective genetic aptitude grade will probably range between D and E. Perhaps we'll find a number of exceptions who can achieve a C-grade, but those will be the exception rather than the rule."

Ves crossed his arms and thought about it. In many second-rate states, young potentates who received a score of D or lower weren't even allowed to attend a mech academy. While there were a lot of them, they simply weren't worth the effort to train and bring into service.

Even if a military organization implemented a rotation for mechs, it was still prohibitively expensive and troublesome to make sure that each trained mech pilot had the opportunity to pilot a machine.

It was far too expensive to produce a lot of mechs and assign them to awful mech pilots who could easily be defeated.

Yet... the Larkinson Clan's situation was not identical to other states. The demand for sufficient manpower in a place where it was a lot more difficult to poach mech pilots from other others meant that there might come a time where the clan needed to rely on these old and infirm veterans to hold the line!

"As long as these medical treatments aren't too costly, I guess it might be worth it to increase the readiness of this group." Ves commented. "However, there is a very major shortcoming to this plan. If we end up in a scenario where we have just survived a difficult battle, then we not only lost a lot of lives, but also a lot of mechs. With the way our fleet is configured, we don't have a lot of room for spare mechs that we can just stockpile and bring out whenever there are vacancies."

Magdalena already had an answer for that. "We have the Spirit of Bentheim, and in the future we will likely expand our fleet with other mech-producing vessels. As long as our stock of materials is sufficient, we should quickly be able to pump out a lot of new mechs."

"What if your assumption is wrong?"

"As long as we are able to secure the original battle site, we should quickly be able to salvage the broken debris and reprocess them into materials that we can use to quickly fabricate new mechs. Quality isn't important and it shouldn't matter too much if we can't obtain all of the necessary materials. We just need to expand our numbers as fast as possible so that our mech legions look substantial again, so we shouldn't hesitate to kludge something together even if the resulting mech doesn't resemble one of our original designs."

"Even if we do that, our reservists aren't strong enough to utilize our Larkinson mechs effectively. Even the Bright Warrior, which is our most basic model, is actually an

advanced second-class mech that requires a mech pilot substantial training as well as a high minimum genetic aptitude in order to perform well."

One of the core mech doctrines of the Larkinson Army was elite development. The Larkinson fleet simply didn't have enough space to carry a lot of mechs on its ships, so instead the clan focused on making the most out of the limited slots available. This prompted Ves to design premium mechs that were considerably more powerful than a typical second-class mech.

He did so with the confidence that most if not all of the current mech pilot roster was trained and skilled enough to control these powerful machines. The recruiters had always maintained high standards of recruitment. Mech pilots with genetic aptitudes that were too low to pilot the current edition of the Bright Warrior simply couldn't go any further!

Now that Ves potentially had to consider the needs of a lot of previously-disqualified mech pilots who could barely go back in the saddle, he suddenly realized that he didn't even have a design ready for these reservists.

"If we want to be ready to activate the reservists, then we need to pair them with mechs that even the worst of them can pilot and become effective on the battlefield."

"How about a frontline mech? If you aren't able to design one yourself, then we should look into licensing one or borrowing one from the Hexers." Magdalena suggested.

"No." Ves immediately spat out. "We are not going to rely on the products of others. It's not necessary and not desirable. If we want to do a good job, we have to do it ourselves."

They quickly discussed the requirements of a potential Larkinson frontline mech model.

In order to serve the clan well in a crisis under difficult circumstances, it had to be quick and simple to fabricate. If Ves pared down the complexity of a second-class mech to its bare essentials, it might be possible for a production line to pump out a frontline mech within 24 hours.

This was already three to four times faster than usual!

Ves just gained a good idea. "Aside from that, by designing this frontline mech ourselves, we can reuse materials and even whole components that are used to make our other Larkinson mechs! This will allow us to quickly replenish our strength as long as we maintain control over the debris field at the end of the battle."

The more he thought about it, the more it sounded like a great idea. Though it wasn't certain whether the Larkinson Clan would ever have to resort to this measure, Ves wanted to have a complete contingency plan in place in case the worst had happened.

"Designing a basic frontline mech should not be difficult. It might even be an interesting exercise!"

Chapter 3160: Path of Least Resistance

The chief ministers all came up with lots of ideas, some of which sounded great to Ves. He was quite happy that they already showed a lot of initiative in addressing the various issues that the clan hadn't been paying attention to. He would have never come up with these solutions himself because a lot of underlying problems failed to enter his sights.

The advantages of appointing three chief ministers instead of one became apparent as well. Though Novilon was not able to exercise as much discretion as his father had hoped, working alongside three very different Larkinsons who came from different wings of the clan soundly covered the areas where the former Purnesser was not inclined to pay attention either.

This would probably become the model of the institution of chief ministers going forward.

The only minor complaint he had was that the title of chief minister itself sounded unwieldy, but that was not a big deal.

Obviously, Ves couldn't completely divest himself from his responsibilities as patriarch. Some of the proposals were so impactful and wide-reaching that he had to make sure that they aligned with his own ideas.

"I'm glad that we could all come together so that I can get up to date with the initiatives you are working on." He said at the end of the meeting. "I'm quite satisfied with what I have heard. Each of you have unique visions of what needs to be done, and I wouldn't have agreed to appoint you if I doubted your judgement."

"We try our best to make the clan better every day." Novilon spoke like a true politician. "It is a challenge but also a pleasure to lead a young and growing organization. As a space-faring clan, the problems we face are different and many solutions cannot be employed due to the absence of territory or fixed locations. This circumstance will grow much worse once we enter the Red Ocean. The only way for us to keep up is to become more inventive."

The Larkinson Clan was unique. From being led by a mech designer to entrusting recently-recruited personnel to important positions, the clan could not be equated to other spaceborn clans.

Ves stood up from his seat. "I don't have any further comments on most of your plans, but I have my own ideas about the proposal to mint our own coin and the initiative to set up a military reserve. I'll speak to you later about them when I have the time."

He had a couple of special ideas in mind to increase the effectiveness of both. While he could have allowed Raymond and Magdalena to implement these respective plans like normal, Ves did not want to stick to the normal approach when he was capable of doing more.

Once the chief ministers left his office, Ves spent the rest of his day on various other matters. He still had to pretend to wait until Mr. S. got back with a revised design. Though the System had already supplied him with the revised work, he tried his best to suppress his impulses.

Someone as sensitive as Gloriana would probably be able to tell if he had already spent hours on studying the Superpublished design. She would probably crucify him if she realized that he already held the improved design for a time but kept it out of her hands!

A long day passed before Ves felt that enough time had passed to present the design that had ostensibly been improved by a mysterious patron.

Ves didn't bother with informing the assistants. Instead, he called Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis over to a secure room inside the design lab and waited until his honor guard had jammed the entire space.

Gloriana looked incredibly excited. Even Clixie got caught up in the excitement as the furry cat received a lot of hugs and pets recently.

"Miaow."

"What's this all about, Ves?" Ketis asked. "I haven't been working on the Sentry Project at all these days, so why am I here?"

"I know that ranged mechs aren't your thing, but what I am about to show you will likely be able to teach you a thing or two on how to push your design ability to the next level. You did contribute to some of the mech in the earlier stages, so the Sentry Project is not completely irrelevant to you." Ves turned to Juliet. "Your contribution is a lot greater since you have worked a lot on the expert rifleman mech's flight system. Even if it isn't as powerful as that of the Dark Zephyr, I believe you'll be pleasantly surprised to see how it has transformed."

The two women looked confused.

"What do you mean, sir?" Juliet modestly asked. "Have you managed to convince Master Willix to optimize our expert mech design further?"

Ves grinned. "You're on the right track. I did entrust our expert mech design to a powerful mech designer. He... is my patron of sorts. While I can't tell you much about him, just know that this is a precious opportunity for you to look into a future mirror of yourself. Take advantage of what you will see and learn from this experience."

As he talked, Gloriana grew increasingly more impatient. Even though only a short amount of time had passed since they gathered together, she was already staring daggers in his direction!

He did not dare to delay any further and promptly activated a large projection that showed off the Superpublished Sentry Project in multiple different forms, from a realistic mockup to a detailed wireframe diagram that exposed all of its internal nuances.

Every mech designer including Ves fell completely silent as they studied the new mech design.

On the surface, not a lot had changed. The outwards appearance of the mech alone was more than 95 percent identical to the last iteration that the Design Department had developed. An average person on the street probably would probably think the two designs were identical!

Ves and the others weren't laymen, though. They were skilled and passionate mech designers who trained their vision for mechs to an exceptional degree.

An invisible ripple spread from this room. The subtle changes that were applied throughout the entire design were incredibly profound, so much so that all four Journeyman momentarily lost all of their situational awareness.

Their entire attention had been sucked into the beautiful and more refined mech design!

"This... this is exactly what I need..." Gloriana muttered to herself as her eyes became so wide that she practically looked crazed! "So this is what I could have accomplished! I was blind before, but now I can see again!"

Juliet and Ketis hadn't said anything, but that was because they were too flummoxed to spare any energy on reacting to the astonishing display. They had become fully invested in studying each and every improvement to the design elements they spent a lot of precious hours developing.

Even Ves did not spare any time on observing how much he managed to surprise his colleagues and eagerly studied how the System refined his own applications.

First of all, the Superpublish function did not disappoint. It truly improved the mech design in a way that its overall performance had truly improved by a margin of 10 percent and no more.

Though it didn't sound like much, the improvements applied to a design that Ves and the rest had already done their best to optimize. Even if they spent more months on iterating their work, they probably wouldn't be able to improve the Sentry Project's parameters by more than 1 percent.

In comparison to such a lackluster result, a jump that was at least an order of magnitude better was practically a revolution!

Ves first studied the overall frame of the design. The external contours had become a bit more streamlined, which not only allowed it to resist incoming attacks a little better, but also shifted around the dimensions so that the internals could be arranged to a more efficient architecture.

When Ves moved from studying the simulated appearance of the mech and shifted his gaze over to the wireframe diagram, he studied the guts of the machine.

The Superpublish function introduced minute but quite impactful tweaks to the core components such as the power reactor, the mech engine, the flight system and so on. Even smaller and less critical systems such as temperature regulators received a bit of attention.

All of these high-grade mech parts were designed exclusively for Hexer expert mechs, so the Hegemony's mech industry invested heavily in their development. It was quite amazing how the System easily managed to spot ways to improve them further when numerous Hexer Master Mech Designers and other highly qualified component developers had already poured many years into refining these component designs!

However, the improvements to these components were not as relevant to the mech designers as how they were combined and arranged into a cohesive mech system. As mech designers, their primary role was to select existing component designs and puzzle them together into an efficient and ideally synergistic package where the whole was always greater than the sum of its parts.

This was where the real brilliance in mech design lied. With regards to the refinements in the internal architecture, Gloriana had become a lot more crazed about them than Ves. Yet even he appreciated the elegance of the sublime architecture that he was able to study at his leisure.

What the Journeymen but especially Gloriana found miraculous was that the amount and magnitude of the design tweaks weren't even all that great. For example, one component had shifted to the left by a millimeter and another component gained a bit more reinforcement so that it could bear a slightly greater load.

The Superpublish function's approach to improving a mech design essentially emphasized maximum efficiency. It aimed to achieve the greatest possible impact with the minimum amount of adjustments.

Ves appreciated this very much. He was certain that the System could have thrown out large portions of their old work and completely filled up the cavities with new and original design elements, but it didn't. The current approach almost completely preserved the original design philosophies that gave the Sentry Project its unique

charm. Ves and the other three Journeymen still felt that the Sentry Project was their own work.

After studying the various improvements to the mech frame such as the cockpit, the sensors and the targeting system, he finally laid his eyes on the most crucial element of the Sentry Project.

When Ves originally designed the crystal luminar rifle, he already considered it a work of art in its own right.

The System added an extra touch to the weapon design that made it even more beautiful!

Sure, the rifle performed substantially better. Ves could quickly tell that the subtle tweaks to the layout made him feel incredibly stupid for missing these possibilities in the first place.

Yet his attention never lingered on the design of the rifle for long. This was an aspect that he could always improve as long as he designed more rifles and became more familiar with the feel and functioning of energy weapon systems.

What truly mattered to him was how the System treated the individual crystals that made up the weapon and bestowed it with powerful or unique capabilities.

The System did not disappoint his expectations. The alien crystals that Ves had only managed to cobble together through unorthodox methods had undergone small changes that nonetheless managed to set off bombs in his mind!

"So this is what I could have done to increase the effectiveness of my crystals!"

Though Ves did not understand all of the changes, he tentatively figured out the gist of the changes.

Just like with the other portions of the Sentry Project, the System sought to improve the rifle by following the path of least resistance.

In this case, the easiest and most efficient way to do so was to improve and optimize the material composition of the luminar crystals as well as cleaning up their intricate internal circuitry patterns.

However, since luminar crystals were inherently spiritually reactive, the improvements were undeniably related to the utilization of spiritual energy!

It was as if Ves received a brief crash course on how to leverage spiritual energy to create stronger and more exceptional luminar crystals!

As Ves and every Journeyman became more and more engrossed in the areas that sucked them in, the entire room buzzed with creative energy that gave birth to many new and profound insights...