

The Mech Touch

Chapter 4701: Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration

Forging took a lot of time, patience, precision, strength, endurance and more.

Ves had witnessed Ketis at work in the advanced forge that he had installed in his workshop. He even utilized it himself in the rare occasions he wanted to produce an item in the old school way instead of letting his modern first-class superfab pump out a product with ease.

There were many differences between utilizing a forge and a superfab.

In modern times, large-scale industrial production machines remained dominant for many good reasons. They could produce gigantic objects, they could be automated to a high degree, they cut down on the error rate, they could exert a lot more precision at the smallest scale, they could work with all kinds of non-metallic materials including certain varieties of organic ones and they could shape items that could never be made in an old-fashioned forge.

Despite all of these technological advantages, forges had their merits as well.

First off, they had a long heritage and history in human civilization that dated back many millenia. The vast amount of knowledge and techniques that countless generations of human ancestors had painstakingly developed and refined over the ages had accumulated to a frightening level.

Sure, much of this accumulation was painfully vague, obscure, difficult and low-tech, but who cared as long as it worked?

In the ages where hyper-industrialization had completely elevated humanity from a primitive planet-bound society to an intergalactic supercivilization, it may seem that there was no place for blacksmithing anymore.

That may be correct if there was not a demand for 'luxury' items that were deliberately made by hand. The human race was an irrational race, and developed appreciation for all kinds of beauty and artisanal crafts that did not necessarily bring that much of a practical improvement to their lives.

The blacksmithing profession adapted to the ages and no longer focused on trying to compete against modern industrial production methods on mass production. There was no way to beat the latter in terms of pumping out lots of low-quality goods!

The blacksmiths that stubbornly clung to their crafts and traditions in the face of rising industrialization put down their long-standing rivalries and pooled their efforts together.

The result was a comprehensive redefinition and streamlining of their profession. Traditional blacksmithing encapsulated all of their best practices as well as the aspirations that its practitioners must fulfill in order to preserve the future of this ancient and noble heritage.

Master Blacksmith Rogha Dunnerholm was one of the many sincere and hardworking disciples of this craft.

Of course, he had reached much further ahead than many other blacksmiths given the title he earned through his hard work.

No matter whether a blacksmith was a normal human or a heavy gravity variant human, they all possessed the same reverence and ideals towards their struggling craft.

As Ves started to work together with Dunnerholm to produce a new set of blacksmithing tools, the mech designer gained a much more comprehensive and intimate understanding of the finer points as well as the struggles of a traditional blacksmith.

The dwarf did not hide these aspects from him. He extended a high degree of trust towards Ves and openly shared his own perspective to the mech designer.

It was as if Dunnerholm was treating Ves as an earnest blacksmithing apprentice, which was rather absurd.

Ves did not have much interest in mastering traditional blacksmithing. Although he appreciated and respected the craft, he constantly needed to remind himself that he was a mech designer. If the teachings did not have that much practical use in his main vocation, then he was better off learning more relevant skills!

Still, he did not object to learning a lot of techniques and insights for free. Together with the borrowed knowledge that he drew from Vulcan, Ves made full use of his powerful learning capabilities and quickly mastered the basic essence of traditional blacksmithing over the course of this production run!

The speed and efficiency in which Ves quickly mastered the basic processes of blacksmithing just by osmosis over the design network was frightening!

If Dunnerholm only suspected that Ves was the mortal descendant of Vulcan at the beginning, now he became increasingly convinced that the clan patriarch was a child directly blessed by the god he revered!

It was an incredible honor for the old dwarf to not only get in touch with Vulcan, but also pass on his humble teachings to the chosen representative of the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship.

Dunnerholm did not hide much from his perspective anymore and shared much more about what he knew about traditional blacksmithing, including the obscure and incredibly useful techniques that were only passed on from master to apprentice.

Although much of this proprietary knowledge wasn't as exclusive as Dunnerholm thought it was, there was a major difference between passive knowledge transfers and active teaching!

The dwarf's proactive teaching attitude not only helped Ves understand the knack of blacksmithing faster, but also allowed him to understand and master the knowledge he already possessed to a greater degree!

It was only after they were halfway into their forging run that Ves eventually noticed that there was a real and practical benefit to learning the difficult craft of traditional blacksmithing.

As he was in the process of inspecting the handles of the tools that Dunnerholm had put through an accelerated tempering process with the help of one of the few advanced devices that he was willing to use in this production run.

If Dunnerholm insisted on sticking to the most traditional form of blacksmithing, then they would both have to stick around for a week or more as they had to wait for the forged objects to cool down to normal temperatures.

That was obviously unacceptable to Ves, so the dwarven blacksmith relented by utilizing any equipment that could dramatically shorten the waiting time at the cost of increasing the failure rate.

Though a master blacksmith was able to minimize these occurrences, it was still important to scan all of the items that endured a lot of stress in a short amount of time.

So far, Ves had yet to spot any fractures or deformations. The extremely high resilience of first-class materials contributed a lot to keeping it all together. While they were extremely difficult and cumbersome to work with, their impressive properties could tolerate a lot of abuse.

What Ves noticed throughout this highly educational experience was that he was actually gaining more from Dunnerholm than pure knowledge!

A part of the dwarf's less tangible feelings and insights towards metals flowed to Ves.

As a mech designer, Ves already possessed a good feel and instinct towards metal, but his own efforts were incomparable to a master blacksmith who hammered and worked on many more varieties of metallic substances over his lifetime!

Ves was highly sensitive towards his own state and condition. This was why he eventually noticed a change in his spirituality.

His affinity towards metal was improving by a small but extremely significant rate!

This was a remarkable event as the metal attribute was much broader and more difficult to acquire than the mech attribute that was derived from the former!

Although Vulcan had already developed a small but strong affinity for metal in advance, that was because Ves forcibly integrated his external incarnation with some of the high-level metal energy released by Cassandra Breyer.

Ves always thought it would take a long while for him to transform his mech domain into a broader and more inclusive metal domain.

However, by taking advantage of Blinky's design network to intimately learn and work together with a genuine master blacksmith, Ves was able to acquire a fraction of all of the core accumulation of this respective craftsman!

This also included Dunnerholm's unique and powerful affinity and feel towards metal!

Although this was a fantastic development, Ves had to temper his excitement by reminding himself that the dwarven blacksmith's affinity was colored by his own biases and specialization.

What Dunnerholm understood best was the acoustic properties of metals.

In other words, he knew how to manipulate metal so that they produced the right tones and attained a specific harmony. He also knew how to configure different variables so that they produced specific forms of acoustic resonance.

Though Ves only became exposed to a part of this deep and extensive field, he already had a suspicion that he could start with making simple metallic products that would sound good when struck in a specific way!

"Well, if I ever get run out of the mech industry, I can still earn a living by making musical instruments, I guess."

No matter how weird it was to develop a better sense on how to produce melodic tones from metallic objects, Ves accepted it all as there was no such thing as useless knowledge.

Of course, Ves was not the only person who benefited from this exchange.

Just as how Dunnerholm shared much of his extensive understanding of blacksmithing, Ves also shared his own insights on totems, living products and even a few basic secrets about design spirits.

Though Ves did not share as much as Dunnerholm, the value was still high because his teachings were much more exclusive and difficult to acquire!

Though Ves wanted to repay Dunnerholm for his generosity, there was not much the old dwarf could learn about living products because of his many limitations.

Ves only contributed enough knowledge for the dwarf to make better use of his new blacksmithing tools to make more effective totems with the help of Vulcan.

Even so, that would definitely put the master blacksmith far ahead of his peers in this specific application!

Perhaps in time Dunnerholm may even be able to teach other artisans how to produce totems. It all depended on how well the dwarf was able to adapt what he learned from the mech designer into his own work methods.

"We are nearing completion." The old dwarf announced.

Several hours had already passed by, but the incredibly fruitful exchange benefited both participants so much that they hardly felt the passage of time!

Ves and Dunnerholm began to assemble the forged and rapidly cooled pieces. They also polished the surfaces and inspected their work for any misalignments and other faults that could still be corrected.

They gradually slowed down their pace until they finally put together the last pieces.

A dozen or so black gleaming tools of excellent quality neatly rested on a large work table.

Their appearances were remarkable. They not only incorporated the solidness of Vulcanite engineering, but also acquired the aesthetic symbolism of living products.

Ves had carved each of these tools with a modest amount of decorative elements that were based on Vulcanite cultural artwork.

Together with their strong and unified connections to Vulcan, the entire relic equipment set looked and felt as if they had been sanctified by the god himself!

Over half of them consisted of hammers of different sizes and weights. Dunnerholm would almost always have the right tool for the right hammering job with this new and wonderful collection.

A subtle sense of harmony and resonance suffused these tools, especially when they were placed next to each other. Both Ves and Dunnerholm could clearly sense that they were meant to stay together!

There was only one exception, though.

Dunnerholm slowly reached out and grasped the smallest and most delicate-looking hammer.

It clearly stood out from the crowd due to how much less functional it appeared compared to the other tools. There was no way it looked as if a strong and physically imposing dwarf could maintain a proper grip on the silly looking tool!

Nonetheless, the dwarven blacksmith held it with utter reverence as he inspected it for the final time.

Once he was satisfied that the toy-like hammer met his strict quality standards, the dwarf rested it on his palms and extended out his limbs as if he was serving a dish on a platter.

"It is my honor to present you with this gift, my lord. Please accept it with all of the sincerity of my heart."

Ves twitched his lips but did not bother to correct any of the misconceptions that Rogha Dunnerholm had formed over the last hours.

He simply snatched the beautiful hammer from the dwarf's thick palms and tested its weight and balance for a moment.

As he held it in a proper grip that just barely fit in his more normal human proportioned hand, he turned towards the metal work table and studied it for a moment.

He could feel his new hammer assisting his efforts with its intrinsic abilities.

Soon enough, Ves found what he sought for and began to strike a specific point on the work table with his new tool!

Ding!

A beautiful melodic tone spread throughout the air as the strike caused the table to sing in a way that seemed impossible through ordinary means!

As the table sounded a note, the other tools resting on the table seemed to vibrate as they resonated with the very same tone!

"Remarkable!" Ves gasped. "I am going to like this new hammer!"

Although the capabilities of the tiny hammer weren't all that powerful, it provided him with a glimpse of the wonderful world of harmony and resonance!

Chapter 4702: Ringing Hammers

All in all, Ves became incredibly satisfied with the gains he made today.

His coincidental meeting and cooperation with Master Blacksmith Rogha Dunnerholm had taught him an important lesson.

It was not a waste of time for mech designers to work together with other professionals who didn't necessarily have anything to do with the mech industry.

Hardly any mech designers bothered to collaborate with other professionals. In the Age of Mechs, the former was in the ascendancy while the latter had become more marginalized than ever.

As mechs became more popular and visible in human society, only a small minority of eccentrics and rich people still held a small amount of appreciation for traditional craftsmanship.

It was a rather sad state of affairs, but the demands of a progressing civilization dictated that any production method that did not do well in the areas of efficiency and mass production had to be set aside.

Mech designers were not only able to keep up with these demands and justify their existence, but could also take their jobs a step further and attain transcendence while incorporating more and more metaphysics into their works.

All of these unique and powerful advantages made it seem as if mech designers stood on top of everyone else!

Why would any mech designer condescend to lower himself to the level of a mere mortal craftsman?

This sounded as pointless as modern humans trying to treat a race of primitive, jungle-dwelling aliens as their equals!

However, Vesk knew quite well that even the less sophisticated alien races could develop their own unique strengths that may be of use to another technologically superior race.

It was the same case with the dwarven blacksmith. Rogha Dunnerholm may not be a transcendent, but he had succeeded in getting close to approaching the extreme of his own craft.

As far as Ves was concerned, the greatest benefit he gained from this experience was that he gained an even better feel and understanding of metal than before.

This was difficult to describe or quantify in scientific terms. Ves only vaguely felt that he could work with metal a bit more exquisitely than before. It was as if he had gained a small part of the benefit of spending many decades working with metal in a forge!

Of course, Ves also made a lot of practical gains as well. He felt a lot more confident in his ability to mimic a traditional blacksmith and work a forge. The only fault was that he lacked a lot of practical experience which could not be solved unless he spent a lot of time in the forge himself.

The little hammer that Dunnerholm gifted to Ves was another little benefit.

After testing it out on the work table, Ves confirmed that it could provide him with a lot of help and convenience in applying his newly gained knowledge on acoustic metallurgy.

The living tool had been shaped in a way that made it seem as if it was only good for ringing a bell, but it could do so much more than that with the help of its metaphysical properties.

What was even better was that it could grow over time and become much more useful in the future!

The same applied to the set of relic tools reserved for the master blacksmith himself.

As Dunnerholm reverently picked up the handles of the blacksmithing tools one by one, the grin on his bearded face could not be suppressed!

"Are you satisfied?" Ves asked as he skilfully twirled his second hammer around his fingers.

"More than you can ever know." The dwarf gasped in response as excitement coursed through his body. "I cannot wait to see how well I can channel Vulcan's blessing in making my next totems! I should be able to create magnificent works that properly honors the majesty and divinity of our god!"

"Uh huh. Just keep in mind that you need to earn your keep. Our clan literally fought alien battleships to secure the materials used to make your new set of fancy tools, and my expertise doesn't come for free either."

The old dwarf patted his chest with his strong fist. "I shall not squander these blessed gifts! You can count on that, patriarch! I will do my utmost to help your Creation Association obtain all of the totems it needs to spread the worship of Vulcan across the Red Ocean and beyond! The great works that I will be able to make with my new tools shall be celebrated among both humans and dwarves. This is my promise!"

Ves was satisfied with this earnest statement. This had been a highly productive experience for him today.

Through a half a day of collaborative work, he not only secured the loyalty of possibly the best totem maker for the Creation Association, but also empowered him to become even better at his primary responsibility.

By now, Rogha Dunnerholm had completely forgotten about any of the ambivalence he held. He no longer felt bothered by the Larkinson Patriarch's culpability in the tragedies that had befallen the Vulcan Empire and its many dwarven citizens.

In the old dwarf's mind, perhaps Ves Larkinson had merely been acting as an agent on behalf of Vulcan himself.

The god may have grown so disgusted by the degeneration of the Vulcan Empire that he would rather strike down his own people than let the misguided dwarves wallow in their own filth!

"Would you like the honor of bestowing a name to our new equipment set?" Dunnerholm asked the younger man.

"Hmm." Ves paused for a moment. "This is mostly your work. You should be the one to name the tools that you will be using for a long time."

"Then I would call it the Harmony Smith set. Each of these tools are made for the purpose of helping my products achieve harmony with Vulcan. I have yet to use any of them as of yet, but I am convinced that I can apply my own strengths much better than before!"

The Harmony Smith set sounded good. It became another set of living and growing heirlooms for the Creation Association.

The ownership of the tools was never in doubt. Dunnerholm already acknowledged without saying that he did not own the hammers and other instruments. He merely received the privilege of using them for as long as he was employed by the Creation Association.

If a day had come where Dunnerholm could no longer effectively lift his hammer, he would have to relinquish his right to use the Harmony Smith Relic Set. The clan would subsequently entrust the tools to another promising smith who could make good use of their distinctive properties.

The dwarf stared at the small hammer that Ves continued to twirl in his hand.

"If I may ask, have you considered a name for your own tool?"

Ves ceased to twirl his own new personal hammer and thought about it for a second. He smiled and lifted his other arm so that he could flick the surface of the delicate tool with his finger.

Ting~

The sound produced by flicking the hammer with his fingernail resembled that of a tuning fork. It was capable of doing so with the help of a hollow core along with carefully placed holes.

If he wanted to, Ves could even learn how to play the elegant hammer as a miniature instrument by manipulating it in different ways.

It was an interesting toy if nothing else.

"Hammer of Melody sounds fitting to me." Ves eventually decided. "It is a hammer as well as a musical instrument. It's practically a little sister to the Hammer of Brilliance."

Now that they settled this matter and wrapped up their short but incredibly fruitful project, Ves was ready to leave.

He only stayed around long enough to issue new instructions and make a few matters clear.

"You have two main responsibilities. Your main job is to meet the requests of Director Samandra Avikon and make the totems that she needs to expand the Creation Association. Your second job is to teach your craft and specialization to a number of apprentices."

The second responsibility caused the dwarf to frown.

"I am not certain I am ready to start mentoring apprentices again. The ones I taught before the fall of the Vulcan Empire did not meet a good end. I am afraid... I might not be able to guide my next students well."

Ves crossed his arms. "What happened to your last apprentices?"

"They were younger and much more fanatical than me. They did not stand by and let the fight unfold around them. Instead of heeding my advice and letting the soldiers do the fighting, they gave in to their youthful impulses and joined the fighting. All of my teachings had gone to waste!"

That sounded tough, but that didn't mean that Ves wanted this highly capable dwarf to keep all of his expertise to himself!

"That is in the past. You are living in a different galaxy and a different time now. Your skills and insights are too precious to be confined in your head. Go and select a bunch of young but talented smiths and teach them like you would do any apprentice. Make sure that they are not exclusively normal humans or heavy gravity variant humans. What you fear won't happen again if there is a greater diversity among your apprentices."

"I suppose you are correct, sir. I will need time to adjust to my new tools and learn exactly what I can do with them. I need to learn how to make other sets of tools with my new equipment so that my apprentices can begin to learn how to make their own totems in time. That should be the goal of their studies."

With that, Ves settled the future course of the Creation Association. Totems of Vulcan played an essential role in the business model and the expansion rate of the non-profit organization under his clan.

Now that Ves finally ensured that he could liberate himself from this tedious responsibility, he could go back to concentrating his time on his core research and design projects.

He finally exited the underground workshop floor after agreeing to meet with Dunnerholm again at a future date for future collaboration projects.

Director Samandra Avikon awaited his return. "I see your time with our master blacksmith has greatly satisfied you. Are you pleased with the state of the Creation Association?"

That was not as simple of a question to Ves than before.

"I guess it is not so bad." He conceded. "If more people like Dunnerholm come and work for us, then that would be great. We need a concentration of skilled and talented artisans to turn this arm of our clan into a facilitating influence that can further our footprint in the industrial sector of the Red Ocean."

"I understand your motives. It should be easy enough to build a following in most zones and colonial states by relying on the obvious benefits of our totems. Compared to many other faiths, the rewards for praying to Vulcan are much more tangible and noticeable. The main reason why our expansion has been so constrained over the years was

because we were bottlenecked by the supply of totems. Once Dunnerholm and our other craftsmen are able to resolve this issue, nothing will stand in the way of our spread through all of the lower and middle zones of the Red Ocean!"

"What about the upper zones?"

The priestess grew a lot more guarded at this mention. "I would highly advise against encroaching in the territories of first-raters. The religious organizations that operate there are much stronger, much more established and much more capable of crushing any challenges to their reign. Many of the oldest human churches with legacies that span back to the dawn of human civilization have entrenched themselves so well that not even god pilots and Star Designers can shake their rock-solid hegemony over the most powerful masses."

"I see. I guess it is a good idea for us to maintain our distance from them." Ves conceded.

Chapter 4703: Striking a Chord

Ves returned to the Royal Mansion by himself at the end of the day.

He still thought of all of the gains he made at the LMC's flagship store and the Enlightened Church of Vulcan.

Although his stay in the latter yielded much greater benefits to him, he did not forget about all of the feedback he collected from a diverse sample of customers of his mech company.

He needed to make various changes to his plans and add new items to his agenda if he wanted to act on the new information.

As he entered his mansion and headed into the dining room, his wife along with Lucky appeared to be waiting for his arrival.

"Meow..." The overstuffed cat greeted as he casually laid on the dining table.

"Have you finally returned to reality, Ves?"

He sighed. "Give me a break, Gloriana. I am aware that I interrupted a family moment, but I can make up for it. I saw an opportunity to improve myself and improve the circumstances of one of my daughter organizations, and I took it. You should know as well as I do that we can't always decide when we can achieve a breakthrough or take advantage of a fortuitous set of circumstances."

His wife still didn't look pleased. She crossed her legs and tapped her finger against her other arm while expression continued to express her profound disappointment at his antics.

"You are too whimsical, Ves. This has always been a bad habit of yours, but I have noticed that it has gotten worse in the last few years. It does not take much time and effort to plan your schedule properly and ahead of time. I do not begrudge you for pursuing any opportunities that can advance your work and design philosophy, but is it too much to ask for you to restrict your work to your work hours and devote your leisure time to your family? You are setting an awful example to our children!"

"That's not fair, Gloriana. I am doing my best to show that hard work pays off. Don't forget that it is through my efforts that we can enroll our kids into first-class virtual schools once our refitted Spirit of Bentheim returns from the Vulit Central Star Node."

"That is not relevant to our current discussion! What I am trying to bring to your attention is that your lack of proper planning and impulsive control is disrupting our family time! Sometimes, I have the impression that you are more of a child than Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine! I have at least done my best to raise them properly and respect the rules that we have set. As for you, Ves, you seem to enjoy breaking the rules whenever you are swayed by your own temptations!"

She was right. Ves did not act like the father today. He lowered his head and accepted her complaints.

Even though he was convinced that all of the gains and improvements he secured during his extensive visit to the Creation Association's association would ultimately improve the circumstances of his lovely little kids, that should not excuse his conduct.

As a father, he should be more mindful of how he spent his time with his children. They grew up so quickly and once they started to study alongside first-raters, they would become so busy with virtual classes and demanding homework that they would have even less time to enjoy their childhood with their mother and father!

Ves slowly approached his wife and sat down on the dining chair next to her own position. He reached out and grasped her small and delicate hand. The warm touch of skin soothed both of their nerves.

"I promise I will do better next time. Our children should never take a backseat. I will make sure to free up extra time in my schedule for the week so that we can go on another fun excursion."

His wife accepted his contrition. "Make certain that you do. I will hold you accountable if you break your promise again. Our children deserve better from you. I deserve better from you. From the moment you chose to become a father, you need to do your utmost

to balance your professional responsibilities with your parental responsibilities. I cannot keep cleaning up your messes all of the time."

Once his wife finished admonishing him, she finally gave in to her curiosity and asked about his latest results.

"What did you accomplish earlier today?"

"It's a lot. I never expected to gain so much from working together with a dwarven blacksmith."

He quickly summarized what he had done and also presented his new Hammer of Melody to his wife.

She dubiously picked it up. Though she could tell it was special in a sense, its shape was far too strange and unsuitable for actual metalworking.

"This hammer of yours is dense, but also small. What is it for, exactly? It looks more suitable to be used as a gavel in a courtroom than a smithing hammer in a forge."

Ves grinned and took the hammer back from her grasp. He then proceeded to slam the head of his new hammer against Lucky's back!

Dingggggggg~~~

A surprisingly long and beautiful-sounding metallic chord rang from Lucky's metallic body. The sudden attack along with the strange vibrations coursing through his body spooked the cat out of his wits!

"MEEEEOOOW!"

The tired cat practically jumped from the table and floated just out of the range of Ves' odd hammer. The aggrieved expression on the cat's face showed that Lucky did not appreciate being turned into a drum!

"Meow meow meow meow meow!"

"Oh come on, Lucky. It's not that bad! There's no freaky magic behind it or anything. The fact your body produced such a pleasant sound is good news! It indicates that you are not only intricately put together, but also particularly well-constructed. Would you like me to strike you again at a different angle to see whether you can produce a different tone?"

"Meeeoow!"

The cat flew up to the ceiling and phased through it in order to get away from this utter madman! Right now, Lucky wanted to do nothing more than to head to Andraste's bedroom and cuddle against her warm body.

Gloriana in the meantime looked at the small and slender hammer with a notable degree of shock.

"That's impossible. How could Lucky's body produce such an amazing sound? All the notes produced by his body were even perfectly in tune! There is no way that Lucky's body was designed with this purpose in mind."

"You are correct, honey, but just because a product wasn't designed with a specific purpose in mind does not mean it can never happen. One of the valuable trade secrets that I've learned from the old dwarf is that everything can produce a harmonic tone when hit in a certain way. This also includes metal objects such as tools, mechanical hammers and even mechs."

"I know that, but this goes far more than producing a simple impact noise that happens whenever an object gets hit. Not only did you manage to produce a chord that is perfectly in tune, but the sound volume was much louder than normal!"

"That's the power of resonance." Ves grinned in reply. "Acoustic resonance, to be more precise. It is not a complicated concept, but Master Dunnerholm has delved so deep in this topic that he has developed a set of formulas as well as additional rules that can help him determine how to strike any object to produce the strongest possible sound through leveraging the power of resonance."

He expected his wife to mock such a banal specialty. After all, the practical uses of this specialization weren't that impressive. Perhaps Master Dunnerholm may be able to produce fantastic musical instruments, but that was hardly relevant to mechs!

However, his wife displayed genuine respect for this odd specialty.

"I cannot claim to understand the ins and outs of this strange theory, but I can understand how it can enrich the world of blacksmithing. I even suspect that acoustic resonance may share a relation to the phenomenon of generating true resonance in high-ranking mechs."

Now that certainly caught Ves' attention. He already considered this notion beforehand, but he understood so little on how mechs could be designed in a way that enabled them to resonate with their expert pilots that he could not continue his train of thought.

"Do you... understand how Senior Mech Designers and higher are able to satisfy the most important requirement of designing an expert mech?"

The grin on his wife's expression showed that she was exulting over her superiority over him! She couldn't look more smug even if she tried!

"Wouldn't you like to know, hihi!"

"What?! You actually know?! I thought you would have to advance to Senior in order to join the secret club of mech designers that have earned the right to learn this secret!"

Gloriana crossed her arms and shook her head. "That is indeed the case, but that is not enough to stop a remarkably intelligent mech designer whose expertise happens to center around high-quality mechs. Look, you have your strengths and I have mine. I know much more about how expert mechs work than you ever will, and that is because I almost exclusively focus my efforts on them. Meanwhile, you continue to follow every whim and keep bouncing around expert mechs and mass production mechs without any sense of order of cohesion."

"My expertise is a lot broader and more versatile because of that." Ves defended himself. "I can design a lot more mechs that would leave you stumped or feeling sick."

"I do not deny your own strengths. I am just reminding you that I have studied expert mechs to a much greater depth than you. Collaborating with the likes of Master Benedict Cortez on numerous tasks just as implementing incremental improvements onto the Mars has especially helped me decipher how resonance is presumably formed by the cooperation between an ace pilot and ace mech. This pair is so much more powerful than what we normally work with that their traits are especially obvious."

It sounded a lot more plausible for Gloriana to figure out the key to designing high-ranking mechs in advance.

Getting her to share that secret was another matter, though.

"Can you tell me the truth?"

"No." Gloriana shook her head again. "I cannot. The MTA's rules are clear, and I will not violate them and incur punishment as a consequence. It wouldn't help you much anyway. You should focus on what you can accomplish at your current rank."

She may be right. Ves may not be able to make effective use of this secret once he learned it. There was no need to force his wife to break a rule just to satisfy his curiosity.

"I guess I will do my best to hurry up and advance to Senior first."

"About that, Ves..."

"I am not spending 120 million MTA merits on a single first-class implant!" Ves immediately replied.

"I deserve compensation for the negligence that you have shown my children and I today!"

"That has nothing to do with your blasted implant!"

"Look, Ves, if you find it so hard to stomach the thought of spending 120 million MTA merits at once, then can you at least support your dearest wife and give me 60 million MTA merits instead?"

"Huh? You are actually willing to cut your demand in half? What are you going to do instead? Are you going for a budget version of your chosen implant?"

"I would never skimp out on the quality of my most important augment!" Gloriana replied. "I have secured an additional source of merits. After a long talk with my mother and Marshal Ariadne Wodin, the Glory Seekers have reluctantly agreed to contribute 60 million MTA merits to fund my upgrade."

"That's nice, honey. Why won't they go a step further and cover the full amount?"

"Because my brother Brutus needs a boost as well! Because the Wodin Dynasty could sorely use those precious merits to increase its strength and improve its standing within the Hex Federation!"

"I think the Wodins are better off if they invest all of their MTA merits into improving the Glory Seekers. This way, they can contribute more in future expeditions that can earn us a lot of rewards from the Association. Don't you think this is a more viable way for you to get what you want?"

"JUST GIVE ME THE 60 MILLION MTA MERITS ALREADY, VES!"

Chapter 4704: Greener Pastures

Everything was heading in the right direction.

Once Ves visited and inspected all of the important arms of the Larkinson Clan, he became satisfied that his growing organization were doing a good job at digesting the rich gains obtained by the expeditionary fleet.

The Larkinsons spent massive amounts of MTA credits, MTA merits and resources in a short interval of time to strengthen its fleet, its mech forces as well as its subsidiaries on the ground.

Although a significant chunk of that spending flowed into the pockets of the MTA and other foreign parties, the local Davutans most definitely noticed the immense wealth flowing into the regional economy!

Many businesses received massive orders, ranging from wild and formidable exobeasts to high-quality premium nutrient packs.

The Larkinson Clan as well as the other members of the Golden Skull Alliance threw around their wealth like there was no tomorrow!

This was not unusual in itself as the war fever that increasingly gripped the region under the sway of Davute also prompted many other pioneering organizations to invest in their own buildup of forces.

However, what was different about the partners of the Golden Skull Alliance was that they were more than willing to barter in extremely precious first-class materials!

While it was possible to obtain first-class materials by importing them from the upper zones, shipments were usually fraught with danger and the premiums charged by the suppliers were excessive.

In contrast, the Larkinson Clan exhibited so much haste in its urgency to obtain the necessary goods needed to upgrade its fleet and mech army that it had no choice but to dump a certain quantity of valuable plunder at a slight discount in order to close deals quickly!

This had triggered a mild frenzy where a small number of suppliers and service providers eagerly lined themselves up to complete the Larkinson Clan's orders at the fastest possible speed!

Companies knocked on the doors of the Larkinson Clan every day in order to earn a lucrative order. This was a good development as the increased competition allowed the Larkinsons to become a little more picky and gain more value from the payment they were willing to offer.

Shuttles and transports continued to fly to the Cat Nest and the expeditionary fleet in orbit on a regular basis. The scale of traffic flying to and from these Larkinson strongholds further amplified the impression that the clan had entered the big leagues!

Combined with the increasingly more aggressive expansion of its various daughter organizations, hardly anyone in the local scene could ignore the ripples produced by the Larkinsons!

It was inevitable for the clan to attract attention from higher places. Ves received regular reports from Shederin and Calabast that the Davute Alliance were already starting to mention the Golden Skull Alliance and its partners during different meetings.

"Our Black Cats have already received indications that the colonial administration has opened up a dialogue with the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan." Calabast informed Ves one day.

That caused the mech designer to raise an eyebrow. "They're already talking to each other? About what?"

"I don't need to be a foreign minister to tell you that there are many possible reasons for them to talk to each other, Ves. Davute has many needs and so do our allies. This creates the basis of trade and cooperation. We have already observed many signs that the colonial government is desperate to increase its chips. The powers behind Davute are so eager to win the upcoming war that they are willing to make serious concessions to gain the cooperation of as many powerful partners that they can reach."

"What are you trying to convey?"

"I have two points." She said. "First, the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan will eventually agree to cooperate with Davute on some level. It may be a big deal or it may only be a distraction to them, but the diplomats working for the colonial government are very good at their jobs, especially when they have the right to offer attractive concessions."

"What is the second point?"

"Sooner or later, Davute will come to us." Calabast stated.

"I can figure that out myself."

"That may be the case, but I do not think you understand how serious Davute will treat its coming dialogue with us. We have become bigshots, Ves. You are worth more to a state than any other individual mech designer, and our Larkinson Army is an extremely capable and battle-proven elite mech force. That makes our clan extremely attractive to the colonial government. I've shared my findings with Shederin and he has received his own indications that our clan will become a point of focus. It is almost certain that Davute will put a lot of effort into courting our clan."

That made it sound as if the colonial government was extremely eager to seduce the Larkinson Clan like a lover.

Ves became disgusted by the mental image. He was not a damsel that was waiting to get serenaded into someone else's bed!

He would much rather put on an adventurer's hat and embark on an expedition to the deeper parts of the frontier!

"Let's talk about another matter." Ves said as he dismissed this talk about courtship. "I told you during a previous meeting that I am getting tired of the Krakatoa Middle Zone. I think it would be better if we move a little further away from civilization and roam the less settled parts of human-occupied space. Now that the Adelaide Third Fleet and the Boojay Family are well on their way to joining our alliance, I think it has become viable for us to take a trip into the Torald Middle Zone. What do you think now that you have familiarized yourself a bit more with what is taking place in this region?"

Calabast moved across his office in the Royal Mansion and looked out of the large, expansive windows. She gazed across the forest and the larger structures in the distance.

"Torald is a risky zone. The situation over there is not an exact mirror of Krakatoa back when only a small amount of time had passed since the Big Two swept away the vast majority of alien residents. This time, the indigenous alien races are no longer as complacent as before. The front lines of humanity's invasion of the Red Ocean have stalled, which means that the zones that are close to the thick of the fighting will continue to get penetrated by alien incursions."

Ves nodded and tapped his finger against his large and ornate wooden desk. "That is exactly why I want to cross over to Torald. Krakatoa is a nice place, and it still offers plenty of opportunities, but it's like a low-level region that is more suitable to explore for weaker pioneers. Once we regain the Spirit of Bentheim and convert some of our mechs to quasi-first class standards, we can tackle more powerful opponents while incurring less damage. The addition of powerful allies should also enable us to confront strong alien foes and win with ease."

The female spymaster frowned. "I thought you already agreed to turn your Trailblazer Expedition down a notch."

"I know. I am still committed to that, but what we previously considered risky has now become safe with our rapid increase in strength. We shouldn't go too far in the other direction and get too complacent. I think it is best if we find a new balance by exploring the safer regions of Torald. That way, we won't get too close to the frontlines, but we will still be able to earn more profit because too many pioneers are still spooked by the idea of crossing over into this fresher middle zone."

His logic was sound. It could truly work out as long as the expeditionary fleet did not get ambushed by a giant alien warfleet that somehow managed to make its way past the Big Two's powerful forces.

Calabast didn't entirely like this plan for that reason. It was like playing Russian roulette with a gun that had 100 chambers in the cylinder. Even if 99 of them were completely empty and safe, there was no way to survive the game if the expeditionary fleet was unlucky enough to strike the one chamber that contained a lethal round!

The best way to survive this game was to not play it in the first place. It was much more rational for the expeditionary fleet to go no deeper into the frontier than the Krakatoa Middle Zone.

Still, seeing how much Ves had become fixated on Torald, Calabast understood that it was impossible to sway his mind on this issue at this junction.

She let out a sigh. "Fine. I have compiled a report that summarizes the up-to-date intelligence that we have gathered on what is going on over there. There is a huge difference in activity between the front and rear halves of the zone. The region is still in flux so the local circumstances are changing on a weekly basis. Proper intelligence gathering is vital to our continued survival in this contentious zone."

"I am sure your Black Cats are up to the task. I have already tasked the Diligent Ovenbird to begin with mass-producing large quantities of cheap and easy scout corvettes. They're nothing impressive and they don't even have enough capacity to hold a single mech, but they can cycle their FTL drives quickly and can gather a lot of observation data with their relatively extensive sensor suites."

"I will make sure to recruit additional naval personnel in the coming months." Calabast dutifully said. "It is a good idea to perform our own scouting. Relying on the intelligence provided by third parties not only leaves us open to the risk of getting lured into a trap, but we may also get led astray as more powerful competitors keep the best opportunities for themselves."

They talked a bit more on how many scout vessels they needed to build and crew in order to form an extensive enough early warning network around the main expeditionary fleet.

Calabast wanted more. "We already have a decent collection of scouting vessels, but... if we truly want to ensure we are on top of everything that takes place in the surrounding regions, we will need to deploy well over 150 scouting vessels. Don't think that is excessive. There are truly too many star systems to cover in every single direction."

Ves looked troubled for a moment. "We don't have the shipbuilding capacity to make up for our shortage, but... I think our allies should be able to make up the difference. If not, then let's look if we can buy additional vessels from other parties. It is probably impossible for others to trade their combat carriers and capital ships, but they probably don't care as much for measly corvettes."

"I think you will be disappointed on that front. The importance of scouting vessels is obvious to many pioneers. Barring ignorant fools such as Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik, every decent pioneer above a certain level of strength will do the same as us. We will have to pay an expensive premium in order to convince anyone to trade their scouting vessels, and by my reckoning we are rapidly running out of salvaged goods to barter

with other parties. You will have to start trading other valuables such as phasewater if you want to obtain more strategic goods."

"We are not trading our phasewater! We need it all for ourselves!"

Ves decided to wait for further opportunities. If he couldn't obtain enough scouting vessels to form a completely spherical early warning network around the expeditionary fleet, then he would just have to make do with less complete coverage.

For example, the fleet could deploy most of its scouting vessels in the front half where the danger was the greatest.

Ves grinned in anticipation. He was not afraid of confrontation at all! As long as the scouts did a good job, the expeditionary fleet should always be able to pick and choose its own battles!

"This is the best way for us to gather more first-class salvage!"

Now that his clan experienced the many benefits of owning lots of salvage taken from powerful alien warships, Ves yearned to obtain more! He deeply wanted to resume his expedition so that he could convert more of existing mechs and ships into quasi-first-class equivalents!

Chapter 4705: New Tournaments

Several major developments took place that affected the Larkinson Clan!

For one, the colonial government had finally released a detailed agenda of the founding ceremony!

The information released by the authorities not only exposed how the historical occasion would proceed, but also contained plenty of additional details about all of the celebratory events that would ensue.

The Davute Alliance that would soon become the rulers of the new state spent lavishly in order to foster an optimistic mood and generate an increased sense of belonging to all of the upcoming citizens of the colonial state.

As such, Davute VII was about to host a large number of parties, performances, exhibitions and tournaments in the 7 days following the crucial day of founding!

Naturally, every Larkinson wanted to take part in the celebrations. The clan leaders hastily adjusted everyone's schedules so that most of them would be able to enjoy at least three days of shore leave.

Due to the sensitive nature of founding a new state, Ves and many other leaders of the clan did not want to hollow out the expeditionary fleet too much at this time. The Larkinsons needed to have enough forces on standby in order to respond to any possible terrorist attacks or other crises.

Of course, the highest-ranking personnel such as Ves and his fellow mech designers had nothing to worry about. They had all of the time in the Red Ocean to attend as many events as they wanted over this time period.

Ves decided to summon all of the lead designers of the Design Department to a meeting at the Genesis Lab in the Cat Nest.

With the temporary absence of the Spirit of Bentheim, the entire Design Department had temporarily moved its operations back to the design lab and workshop facility on Davute VII where they previously worked for 5 straight years.

To some of the mech designers who had joined the Larkinson Clan after its arrival in the Red Ocean, the Genesis Lab felt much more like home to them than the Spirit of Bentheim.

Once Ketis arrived from the training ground where she had just ended her swordsmanship practice, Ves nodded towards the people seated around the conference table.

"Alright, everyone is here. You all know what this is about, but just to make it clear, this is the schedule of events that Davute is planning to organize in the days following the founding ceremony."

The conference table projected a large and elaborate timetable. As Davute had grown into a large and bustling colony that also happened to host many additional guests, the colonial government had to organize thousands of large-scale events to give everyone a chance to bond with each other.

Many events happened in the same time slot but at different locations. It was impossible for any single person to attend all of them, so it was vitally important to make a careful selection.

The eyes of many mech designers lit up. Even if they did not possess much of an attachment to Davute, nobody disliked a fun and joyous festival. The parties alone were to die for, and an unprecedented amount of excellent people came within reach!

"Now, I am sure that you have already formed your own plans for the upcoming festival." Ves continued. "What I want to do today is to coordinate our registration for the upcoming mech design tournaments. There are not that many contests that can be held over the span of 7 days. Any of us can only participate in two at the most. My requirement for you is simple. As long as you are strong and flexible enough to

compete, I want you to compete in at least one tournament. My goal is to show the strength of our Design Department and prove that while we may be young, we are more than capable of taking on a challenge."

Silence spread after his announcement. Although a few mech designers already made plans to sign up for a few of the contests, it was still a bit annoying to be given an order to compete.

However, Ves was in charge, so he had the final say.

"Gloriana, Miles, Merrill and Cormaunt. The four of you can sit this one out. I won't object if you decide to register for a contest anyway, but I would prefer it if you wait until you have reached a state where you can at least attain a decent ranking. I don't want you to embarrass our clan."

Each of the mech designers mentioned by Ves had no objections to that. They understood their circumstances well enough that they would only perform shamefully in front of the public.

"What are your own plans, Ves?" Gloriana asked.

"I am planning to apply to two different mech design tournaments. The first is the Strange Lands Tournament that is held in the first 3 days of the festival. It's a solo contest that is centered around fighting in exotic and eventful terrain environments."

Not every mech design tournament followed the standard formula. That would get boring really fast and lose the interest of paying viewers and sponsors. This was why a lot of tournaments tried to play around with the variables in order to provide more entertainment and variety.

Ves was interested in this challenge because he felt that the weird conditions might stimulate him into designing an unusual competition mech.

"Once I am done with this solo game, I will proceed straight to the Twin Weapons Tournament that will take place in the following 4 days. For those of you who don't already know, it is a duo mech design tournament where pairs of Journeymen must design two mechs in unison, a melee mech and a ranged mech. Both will be deployed together in 2-on-2 matches. I will need a teammate in order to participate."

That was one of the goals of calling everyone together today. Ves needed to make a strategic choice in order to maximize his chances of earning a higher ranking.

The better he performed, the more renown and reputation he gained!

All of this would make it a lot easier for him to cooperate with different parties and convince more shipyards to produce scout ships and combat carriers for his clan.

He immediately set his sights on his first candidate.

Naturally, the person he had in mind was not Gloriana. Despite the fact that he collaborated extremely well with his wife on many projects, her vehement disgust at the thought of participating in any mech design tournament already ruled out any chance of participation.

"Ketis. We have always been able to work well together in our past collaborations." Ves told the swordsmaster. "The rules of the Twin Weapons Tournament also favor our combination. I am pretty good at designing ranged mechs armed with luminar crystal weapons, while your prowess in designing swordsman mechs is not in doubt. Even if there is no age limit to the Journeyman that are able to apply, I am confident that our combined strength can smash the efforts of every grandpas and grandmas that aim to win the top prizes."

Unlike many of the tournaments held in the Vulit Central Star Node, Davute did not set any age limits to its own contests. This was a deliberate choice on its part as the new colonial state wanted to show off its comprehensive strength and showcase the abilities of its best professionals!

As such, it was highly realistic for Ves and the other Larkinson mech designers to be facing off against seasoned mech designers who were three times older!

The Swordmaiden mech designer frowned. "I don't think that will work out this time, Ves. I need to take part in the Ultimate Warrior Tournament, which is held in the last three days of the event week. The finals of this personal combat competition is scheduled to be held on the final day in order to serve as an excellent climax to the festival. I need to prove my strength in the arena, Ves. It isn't often that I get to lock my blades against the best warriors and soldiers in Davute."

The strong desire to fight and win radiated so much from her Bloodsinger that it seemed as if her floating greatsword had turned into an avatar of bloodlust!

Ves quickly gave in. "Okay, okay! You can do what you want. It's unfortunate that the schedule doesn't work out better for us. We would have made for a great team in the Twin Weapons Tournament."

"Oh, don't worry about not meeting me or my work in the mech arena." Ketis deviously grinned. "I intend to register in the Strange Lands Tournament myself. Don't get knocked out too soon. My swordsman mech will be waiting to beat whatever oddball mech you have designed for this contest."

"I will look forward to testing how far your design skills have come." Ves replied as he looked forward to this possible confrontation as well.

Instead of moving on to his second choice and possibly offending some of his colleagues in the process, he decided to take a more open approach.

"Since Ketis won't be available to team up with me for the Twin Weapons Tournament, who among you wants to work together with me to beat the competition mechs of other interesting mech designers?"

A short silence ensued.

"I have already agreed to work together with my brother." Sara Voiken stated. "A good match in ranged and melee mech design is important, but good teamwork is even more important. There is so little time available that getting in sync with a fellow mech designer can allow us to design much better mechs regardless of our specializations."

Janassa Pellier also settled her teammate in advance. "Tifi and I have made the same conclusion. We might not offer the best combination of specialties for this tournament, but we cooperate much better with each other than with anyone else. We have already come up with a viable strategy to make up for our shortcomings in ranged mech design."

Ves grew a little disappointed. "I see. Is anyone else willing to work by my side? Juliet, how about you? Your specialty should come useful as I have heard that the mech arenas used for the contests will offer plenty of space to maneuver."

The Penitent Sister mech designer already expected to be called out from the moment the other four Journeymen declined the invitation.

Although she did not particularly look enthusiastic at the thought of performing in front of the crowd, the needs of the clan had to be met. Besides, the opportunity to work alongside the clan patriarch was also a great way to get closer to him and pose a few requests.

The woman slowly nodded. "Very well. I will team up with you if that is what you require."

"Good. I have just come up with a few possible mech concepts that we can use to design a pair of synergistic competition mechs. We can discuss this afterwards."

Ves not only satisfied his own tournament applications, but also confirmed that many of the Journeymen under his command would not remain idle.

None of the mech designers who registered to participate were weak, and Ves could count on them to perform decently enough to avoid early elimination.

In truth, it didn't matter if Ketis and the others did not manage to stand out from the crowd.

The only mech designer that had to do well was Ves himself. As the head of the clan, everyone held much higher expectations towards him. It would be devastating if he performed way below the standard that a prominent figure such as himself was supposed to reach.

That said, the rewards for meeting or exceeding those overblown expectations would definitely be stellar!

As Ves felt that he had come closer to advancing to Senior than ever, he became convinced that none of the other Journeymen in Davute could beat him at his own game.

His pride as a mech designer compelled him to win first place! He would settle for nothing less this time!

Chapter 4706: Tournament Sign Ups

Mech design tournaments may not be the focus of the festival, but the colonial government made sure to offer plenty of chances for mech designers to show off their design skills.

Not just Journeymen, but also Apprentices as well as Seniors got to show off what they were made off. Whether it was to satisfy their vanity, test their skills in a high-pressure environment or win the fantastic prizes reserved for the top, many mech designers signed up in droves!

This also included the Apprentices who assisted the Journeymen of the Design Department for numerous years.

"Good luck, Catherine."

"You too, Moltar."

"Would you like to team up, Mayer? I still need a teammate." Vela Tovar asked.

Mayer Torto shook his head. "I am flattered, but my specialty does not lend itself well to any competition. It is not as if incorporating better communication systems will directly make my mechs stronger in a mech arena. You should ask Estelle instead. I hear she is looking for a partner as well."

As the registrations increased, Ves did not stop them even if he had little confidence in their ability to do well. Each of them had failed to keep up with the likes of Miles Tovar and Merrill O'Brian.

Regardless if the remaining assistants possessed spiritual potential or not, they wouldn't be able to take a step further if they did not shake up their routines and open themselves up to radical new experiences.

Besides, even if the Larkinson Apprentices performed shamefully, it didn't matter too much as nobody begrudged them for failing. Low-ranking mech designers were afforded a lot more leeway, especially when they were young.

Ves only paid a bit more attention when Maikel Larkinson and Zanthar Larkinson walked up and informed him of their request to compete.

"You don't need to ask for my permission." Ves told the pair of young trueblood Apprentices. "The two of you are no longer under my tutelage. You are your own person now. If you want to sign up for one of these competitions, then be my guest. The two of you are old enough to weigh the pros and cons of performing in public."

"We are certain, sir." Maikel seriously said. "When you were our age, you already competed in a few tournaments yourself. You managed to grow a lot from that. I think we need to go through this process ourselves. We never competed in a serious tournament in front of a live audience before. The most we have been able to do was sign up for those cheap virtual tournaments that aren't a big deal because everything is fake."

Mech design tournaments were not for everyone. Ves never forced his former students to sign up to them. There were multiple ways to become successful. Gloriana for example did just fine even though she never competed in any tournament in her life.

However, Maikel and Zanthar both took after Ves more than Gloriana. They possessed plenty of bravery and they did not exhibit any fear of the possibility of stumbling and falling.

"We can't shy away from challenges if we want to advance to Journeyman as early as you, sir." Zanthar Larkinson said. "Besides, our mech designs shouldn't be weak. We have learned so much after our graduation and our designs have been getting better with every year. I want to show everyone that you are not the only expert in luminar crystal technology anymore."

"Hehehe, if that is the case, then I wish you luck. I truly hope you will perform well enough to make the public remember your name."

"Do you think that my work will be allowed within the rules of the tournaments?" Maikel asked.

Ves shifted to his other former student. "That is a good question. From what I know about your progress, you have been moving further and further in the direction of autonomous and dual-controlled mechs. I am afraid that all tournament organizers have

never thought about your specific case. If they adopt the standard competition rules formulated by the MTA without any modifications, then you will have to restrict the autonomy of your mech below a strict threshold. Most people regard self-piloting mechs as cheating."

That bummed Maikel out for a bit, but he already knew that he had a tough struggle ahead of himself.

"I will do my best to work within the confines of the rules."

Ves grinned and patted Maikel's shoulder. "It may seem that every mech designer is like Ketis, but in practice it is a lot more complicated than that. Not all of us have to narrow our focus and limit our work to our direct specialization. I think it would be a good idea if you branch out and study another field in order to expand your range and versatility."

"I am not sure I can do that, sir... It takes a lot of time to become proficient in a different field. I am already spending a lot of time studying subjects related to autonomy and AIs. I don't think I can handle more without taking time away from developing my main specialty."

Maikel was in a difficult situation. Perhaps his dilemma could be alleviated if he implanted himself with a fancy first-class mech design-oriented cranial implant. His learning speed would gain a massive boost, allowing him to pay a much lower price to master lots of new knowledge!

This was an advantage that many first-class mech designers enjoyed. Knowledge came so easily for them that on average, each of them probably learned and mastered at least ten times as much theory as a second-class mech designer!

In fact, this was one of the main motivations why Gloriana wanted to replace her old second-class implant for a first-class version endorsed by the MTA!

She was being truthful when she claimed she felt it was unlikely that she could keep up with Ves if she continued to suffer a handicap in this aspect.

Ves talked a bit more with his two former students. He not only advised them on the tournaments they should apply for, but also offered general advice on how to proceed with developing their respective specializations.

Neither of them had made enough progress to advance to the rank of Journeyman Mech Designer, but Ves was not in a hurry. They would naturally advance when they had earned the right to do so, and not any sooner.

What gratified Ves a lot was that both of his former students managed to develop spiritual potential sometime after their graduation.

He hardly noticed that Maikel and Zanthar had invisibly cleared one of the most crucial requirements to become a high-ranking mech designer!

Ves actually found it rather suspicious at how easily the two cleared this secret hurdle. His intuition faintly suggested to him that it was not a coincidence that the pair both developed spiritual potential in roughly the same time frame.

The problem was that there could be many possible external factors that could have provided the two a crucial boost. The Larkinson Clan was toying with so many different spiritual influences and forces these days that it was impossible to isolate and test whether any single variable was responsible.

In any case, participating in a mech design tournament should be considerably more fruitful to the two Apprentices as a consequence. The excitement, pressure and strong emotional mood swings provided so much stimulation that their spiritual potential should definitely experience a decent amount of growth!

As word about the lively events continued to spread, more and more Larkinsons applied to join the party.

The upcoming festival also hosted many other tournaments that were targeted towards other people than mech designers.

The most popular of all were mech tournaments where mech pilots became the sole stars of these bombastic and gratuitously violent events.

Many mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan had already signed up for one of the many solo or team competitions held across the surface of Davute VII.

These affairs were bound to be expensive due to all of the real mechs that would get destroyed, but Davute could easily cover these costs.

Besides, the extremely high amount of guests pouring into Davute ensured that every tournament should be able to earn a fortune in ticket sales!

Few Larkinson mech pilots thought they would do badly in these tournaments. They had tussled against professional military mechs, alien starfighters, alien warships and even monstrosities such as the unclean whale in the last few months.

Dueling a bunch of competitors in a safe competition venue sounded like a milk run to them. How hard could it be to beat a bunch of pansies who had never faced the barrel of a warship main cannon in their lives?

One of the mech pilots who applied to join a tournament was Lanie Larkinson.

The young mech champion possessed a lot of confidence in her skill and potential, but so far she had yet to achieve a breakthrough.

Lanie felt that part of that had to do with the nature of the last battles. The opponents the expeditionary fleet fought against were so massive and overwhelming that it was difficult for a single ordinary mech pilot to make a meaningful difference.

Since that was the case, she would have to find her chance in a different venue.

Breaking through in tournaments was one of the time-honored traditions of the Larkinson Clan!

"Are you sure you want to sign up for this tournament, Lanie?"

The young woman formed a puzzled expression. "What's the matter, Melkor? I'm still young enough to qualify for the Rising Prodigy Tournament. With my skills, I should definitely have a good shot at beating all of the other young mech pilots and winning the top prize! I will definitely be able to bring home a lot of glory for the Larkinson Clan!"

The Avatar Commander thought for a moment. "You're right, Lanie, but... do you truly think it is worth your time to beat up a bunch of brats, many of whom have yet to fight a serious battle in their lives?"

"That makes them easier to defeat."

Melkor frowned. "You are not thinking this through. I agree with you that you have a large chance of winning the Rising Prodigy Tournament, but so what? The prestige of his contest is not that much as it is mainly organized for recent academy graduates to showcase their potential. It's a kid-level competition in the eyes of the higher ups. Most of the opponents you will duel against will be so weak that it is a waste of time to fight against them. Only the final contestants can give you a run for your money, but that is far too little to satisfy your appetite."

"What do you suggest, then?"

"Sign up for the Davute Star Tournament."

"What?!" Lanie reacted with shock. "That's the top solo mech tournament organized by the government! It lasts for the entire duration of the festivals. I also heard that the qualifiers will be long and brutal due to the huge number of mech pilots who want to fight in front of billions of viewers!"

The Avatar Commander smirked. "That's right. The Davute Star Tournament is a contest that is on an entirely different level than the Rising Prodigy Tournament. It will test you mentally and physically. You may get eliminated during the qualifiers due to

unfair circumstances. Every day is a struggle for you, which is exactly what you need to ignite your potential. Now that you have heard all of this, are you interested?"

"...Hell yeah! Sign me up, sir! I am not going to miss this for anything else!"

"That's the Lanie I know." Melkor smiled as he felt proud for the young trueblood Larkinson that he had tried to mentor over the years. "Be prepared and spend more time in the MSTs. Once you have registered for the Davute Star Tournament, you will fight the toughest and most experienced veterans in Davute outside of high-ranking mech pilots. There's a good chance that you will not only fight a lot of foreigners who come from places you have never heard of, but you may also stand on the opposite side of Larkinson, a Glory Seeker or a Crosser."

The possibility of competing against the pilots of her own side did not discourage Lanie.

"Great! On the battlefield, I won't hesitate to fight by their side! In the mech arena, I will never let my camaraderie get in the way of winning! Larkinson or not, I am the best, and I will prove it with my skills!"

Chapter 4707: Unfriendly Rules

The entire clan had fallen into a tournament fever.

Although the clansmen also showed plenty of interest in taking part in the parties and other fun events over the course of the founding festival, nothing got them more excited than competing against the best that Davute had to offer!

Their combat experiences, their training and their rapidly improving circumstances had given the Larkinson Clan's mech pilots boundless confidence in their fighting ability.

Sure, they only fought a relatively small amount of major battles.

Sure, their training was not as thorough and systematic as the elites who had been born and raised under a strong regime.

Sure, most of them lacked competitive experience and were not accustomed to fighting under the many cumbersome rules imposed by mech tournaments.

Nonetheless, after facing off against so many powerful and horrible enemies within a single year, the Larkinsons had completely lost their fear and apprehension at the thought of fighting against other strong mech pilots.

The death of fear was one of the most important prerequisites to doing well in tournaments!

Besides, it was not as if most Larkinson mech pilots lacked confidence in their own technical piloting ability.

Compared to many other mech forces, the Larkinson Army invested an unreasonably high amount of resources into training and enhancing its mech pilots.

From providing them with expensive genetic treatments to allowing them to challenge their limits within the highly realistic battle scenarios of the MSTS, hardly any other forces in Davute could match the effectiveness of this unique training regime!

The only true stumbling blocks the Larkinson mech pilots had to deal with were the overly limiting rules that severely limited their means.

"What?! We can't fight with our own mechs in any of the mech tournaments? That's unfair! Mechs have rights as well!"

Competitions such as the Davute Star Tournament and the Rising Prodigy Tournament completely had to be fought by using the mechs provided by the organizers themselves.

Most of them were pretty much generic machines that possessed balanced properties. No matter the mech type, every tournament model was devoid of any gimmicks or distinguishing properties.

In public, the colonial government stated that it wanted the mech tournaments to put the emphasis on the skills and fighting acumen of the mech pilots.

Davute already organized a sufficient number of mech design tournaments to showcase the kind of mech designs that the new colonial state could expect to field.

In actuality, the tournament organizers didn't want to deal with the burden of trying to regulate the sheer variety and destructiveness of many of the mechs fielded by so many different mech forces.

It was extremely difficult to guarantee the safety of the audience once weird and dangerous mechs entered the mech arena.

For example, a mech armed with a transphasic gauss rifle might miss a shot, only for the slug in question to phase right through the energy shields encompassing the arena and crush dozens of spectators into mush!

Another example was the phenomenon of glows. What if a bunch of Ferocious Piranhas flew alongside the edge of the mech arena? Hundreds of thousands of people in the stands would become subjected to awful mental torture!

A few Larkinsons even suspected that the existence of living mechs had been one of the driving reasons why the tournament organizers prohibited the use of third party mechs entirely.

Still, living mechs or not, the combative Larkinson mech pilots did not let this little restriction affect their confidence.

The colonial government at least gave the registered participants to purchase copies of all of the tournament mech models. Davute also released their virtual designs in a standard mech simulation format so that any mech force could plug them into their own simulation programs and train to their heart's content.

It took a bit of time and effort for the Design Department to convert and upload the tournament mech models to the MSTS, but once they became available, a lot of mech pilots eagerly hopped into the cockpit of their living mechs so that they could begin to master the completely different machines as best as possible!

Naturally, the living mechs were not pleased at all that their pilots had decided to 'cheat' on them. What was worse was that the Larkinson mechs had to facilitate the infidelity of their partners by acting as the interface that connected the mech pilots to the MSTS!

"YOU NEED TO TEACH THESE FELLOW HUMANS OF YOURS A GOOD LESSON ABOUT FIDELITY."

A strong hand touched the front console of the irate expert mech. "Our mech pilots aren't being unfaithful. They still love their living mechs as much as before. They are only forced to pilot the tournament mechs by necessity. You know our pilots would have loved to bring their own machines into the mech arena, but Davute is far too stingy for that. This place isn't as rich as Vulit."

The C-Man that Venerable Vincent Ricklin piloted at the moment showed a bit of irritation by vibrating his cockpit.

"WE SHOULD HEAD TO WHEREVER THE RULERS OF THIS PLANET ARE HOLED UP AND CONVINCE THEM TO CHANGE THE RULES. I SWEAR THE DAVUTANS ARE OUT TO GET US. THEY ALL KNOW THAT NO ONE CAN STAND A CHANCE AGAINST US WHEN OUR MECH PILOTS JOIN FORCES WITH THEIR ASSIGNED LIVING MECHS."

Vincent sighed. He was more familiar with mech competitions than almost everyone else in the clan.

"Enough about this, C. We aren't the ones funding or taking responsibility for all of these tournaments. It is up to Davute to set the rules of its own games. We can at least be assured that our opponents won't be able to bring any unfair advantages into the mech arena either. It will be a completely level playing field for everyone."

As the C-Man started to stretch its legs across the expansive training ground. The clan-owned site was located in one of the remote grassy plains situated far away from any urban settlements.

Many other mechs stretched their legs as well. The difference this time was that most of them weren't living mechs, but rather brand-new copies of the infamous tournament mech models!

The Larkinson Clan had bought a substantial batch of tournament mechs that were sold at inflated prices in order to give its mech pilots plenty of chances to obtain real physical experience with piloting the machines.

As both Vincent and the C-Man observed the dull metallic gray mechs in combat, they could see that the Larkinson mech pilots did not need much time to acclimate to the machines.

"These mechs are simple and easy to pick up." Vincent remarked. "It will be difficult for them to outfight others, I think. These machines are so basic and limited that the mech pilots need to be clever in order to outthink their opponents."

"THE TOURNAMENT MECHS ARE AS SOULLESS AS A BAG OF SPOONS. WHOEVER DESIGNED THEM SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF THEMSELVES."

"Those mech designers were merely doing their jobs. It doesn't matter whether our patriarch or a Master Mech Designer is put in charge of designing the tournament mechs. It's the people in charge that set the rules, and they insisted on using the most boring mechs imaginable."

The gap between these tournament mechs and any Larkinson mech was enormous. This became especially clear on the training ground as plenty of machines from both categories started to exercise their capabilities.

Vibrant living mechs such as the Lucid Rages, the Second Swords and the Ferocious Piranhas moved nimbly and as fluently across the obstacles as they could. Anyone could see that their mech pilots were so in tune with their battle partners that they didn't even have to put any conscious thought into their movements.

The dull gray tournament mechs on the other hand exhibited much less fluency in the hands of the Larkinson mech pilots.

This was after the men and women in question had already trialed the virtual versions in the MSTs!

Although the pilots managed to master the basic movements and operations of the lower-performing machines, they still suffered from the complete absence of live feedback from their own machines.

"They're doing worse than I expected." Vincent noted with disappointment. "Have we become so used to living mechs that we have lost the ability to pilot normal mechs?"

"YOU SAY THAT LIKE IT IS A BAD THING."

"I am not saying that. I think it is great that we have specialized in making the most out of living mechs. It is just that these mech tournaments have nothing to do with our boss' work. All of the clansmen who have signed up for them will have to fight under a handicap that only applies to them. It's not fair, but that is the way these things go. Living mechs still have a long way to go before they become common enough to become standard issue in mech competitions."

The C-Man rumbled again. "I HOPE THAT DAY COMES SOON ENOUGH. SOME OF MY FELLOW LIVING MECHS ARE ALREADY GROWING TIRED OF PLAYING STUPID AND HIDING OUR TRUE SELVES IN THE PRESENCE OF OTHER HUMANS."

"Then you should give your blessing to the mech pilots that are hoping to do well in the upcoming tournaments. The more they excel in front of a massive crowd, the more people will admire what we have. I bet you that the LMC will be able to sell a lot more living mechs after this. Our pilots just have to win a few tournaments first."

Though Vincent had become less involved in the mech games scene after becoming an expert pilot, he hadn't completely lost touch with his former passion.

His wife still ran the various Larkinson-exclusive mech leagues that often attracted a large audience of fans, both inside and outside of the clan!

Lately, Raella Larkinson even started to share plans to expand the scope of the leagues to encompass the entire Golden Skull Alliance. This would enable the Larkinsons to match their skills against their fellow allies a lot more often and in a much more systematic fashion than the periodic joint training exercises.

Aside from that, Vincent's beloved also sought to work out a way to broadcast matches fought completely within the MSTs.

It was technically feasible to do so as Ves, the inventor of the MSTs, was able to project any fight that took place within its simulated environment.

The problem was that the footage immediately lost their thrill and sense of realism once they were broadcasted over conventional channels.

The matches looked no different from any other mech matches that took place in normal virtual reality environments.

That meant that there was no point in going through all of the extra effort into utilizing the MSTs.

If Raella wanted to turn this around, then she needed a way to broadcast matches held within the MSTs while retaining the full experience. This was a difficult technical problem that could only be solved by Ves, who didn't exactly have a lot of time on hand to waste on a relatively fringe matter.

As Vincent continued to observe the Larkinson mech pilots struggling to master their lifeless machines, a part of him wished he was one of them. He missed the competitions where he could forget about every distraction and focus solely on the fight.

"I really hate the fact that Davute hasn't organized any mech tournaments for expert candidates and expert pilots."

The C-Man's eyes flashed at that. "I CAN'T BLAME THEM, FOR ONCE. WE ARE TOO POWERFUL TO BE CONTAINED. CAN YOU IMAGINE THE SIGHT OF THE AMARANTO FIRING HER INSTRUMENT OF DOOM AT FULL POWER? THE ENERGY BEAM WOULD DRILL STRAIGHT THROUGH MULTIPLE ENERGY SHIELDS, THE STANDS, THE WALLS BEHIND THEM AND FINALLY PUNCH THROUGH A COUPLE OF OFFICE BUILDINGS IN THE DISTANCE BEFORE IT HAS EXHAUSTED ALL OF ITS DESTRUCTIVE POWER."

"...Well, now that you mention that, maybe it is for the better."

Vincent and the C-Man were still itching to punch a strong mech, though!

Chapter 4708: Life-Changing Decisions

Ever since Melinda and Ark Larkinson talked to Ves in person for the first time in years, the state of the Larkinson Family had gone through a huge upheaval.

The announcement that Venerable Ark Larkinson had already decided to resign as the patriarch of the Larkinson Family in order to join the clan detonated a huge bomb within the ranks!

Predictably, a lot of old-timers expressed strong disapproval at this radical and irresponsible decision.

The Larkinson Family had an honorable history that went back 4 centuries!

Nobody wanted to become responsible for ending this storied legacy.

Still, despite the overwhelming disapproval from the older generations of the clan, Venerable Ark remained committed to his choice.

"I fought and bled for the Bright Republic just as much as you!" He stated in front of a crowd of gathered Larkinsons. "I did my service and paid my obligations to both the state I used to pledge my loyalty to as well as the family that I still hold dear in my heart."

"Then why don't you stay and continue to protect our family as before?!"

"All good things must come to an end." Venerable Ark solemnly said. "Now that we have lost our direction and purpose, many of us are stuck with the burden of the past with little to look forward to in the future. That may not be much of an issue to those who have already fought their last battles, but I need more than that. I still haven't reached the limits of my career as a mech pilot. If I want to become an ace pilot and protect our family and legacy much more effectively than now, then I must seek my opportunities elsewhere."

"That doesn't mean you have to leave our family! We can still accept one of the many mercenary missions in the Red Ocean."

"It's too dangerous. We will get chewed up by the cruel frontier within the year. Let's face it. The clan has been much more successful in navigating this dangerous new environment and fostering the growth of all of its pilots. I know for certain that Ves can give me the mech and breakthrough chance I need to help our fellow Larkinsons to the best of their ability, no matter if they have our blood flowing through their veins."

Many family members continued to object to Ark's decision, but the high-tier expert pilot was so set on his course that the outcome hadn't changed.

It became increasingly more clear to everyone that Ark was not putting up a topic for discussion.

He instead made it clear that his departure was set in stone and that the rest of the family had to make a difficult choice on how they wished to proceed in the future.

"Although I have already resigned my position as patriarch with immediate effect, let me give you a word of advice from one concerned Larkinson to another." Ark addressed the crowd in a gentler manner. "The Larkinson Clan is not our enemy. The Larkinsons there are just as much our family as the people next to you. If any of you entertained any doubts beforehand and want to enjoy a change of scenery, the clan will open you with welcome arms. Even if you don't want to live your entire life on a ship and fight all manner of dangerous enemies, you can still enjoy a semblance of your old lives by joining the Davute Branch instead."

Although Ark did not make his next destination clear, a lot of Larkinsons gained the impression that he was strongly considering joining the side branch instead of the main branch of the Larkinson Clan.

That made it a lot more acceptable to join the splinter organization that had broken away from the original family.

Ves did not exert that much control over the side branch.

With Ark about to join the Davute Branch, he would definitely be able to become one of its leaders given his proven strength and command capabilities. This would ensure that the family members that followed in his footsteps would feel assured that they would not be treated badly.

Once the former patriarch of the old family had finally concluded the long and exhausting meeting, he retreated and met with Melinda in another room.

"That didn't go as badly as I thought." Melinda commented. "I thought the hardcore members of the family would have tried to put up a greater resistance."

Her uncle shook his head. "They respect me too much to oppose my wishes. I deserve to make my own choices, and they acknowledge that. Our elders are too honorable and principled to guilt me into staying with the family. Besides, they lack an expert pilot that can serve as a proper counterweight to my influence. If Ghanso was still around, he would have been able to rally the old fogeys into an effective opposition."

"If Ghanso was still around, our family wouldn't have even left the Komodo Star Sector."

Both Ark and Melinda fell silent for a moment. They mourned the loss of their family member. No matter what crimes he committed, it was still a matter of regret that Ghanso had fallen at the hands of another group of Larkinsons.

It was rather strange to realize that Ark was about to join that same group of kinslayers.

"What have you decided, Melinda? Will you come with me to the clan, or will you stay and do what you can to shepherd and take care of the stubborn relatives that insist on remaining here to the bitter end?"

This had been one of the most difficult decisions of Melinda's life. Though she no longer possessed much of an ambition to make the best out of the mech piloting career, she did not look forward to fighting someone else's battles, especially if the reasons were less than noble.

Still, she had faith that Ark would not allow the members of the Larkinson Family to be exploited by the clan.

"If you join the Davute Branch of Ves' clan, then I will join you there." Melinda said.
"Family must stick together. Out of all of the places where we can settle, this planet is not such a bad place. I think I am even beginning to like it that all of the gathered people are doing their best to found a state of their own. It makes me feel as if we are retracing the footsteps of our most ancient ancestor."

The mention of the ancestor put Ark in an odd mood.

The expert pilot had read the history books written about the legendary figure of their family. He had even read the secret chronicles written by the Larkinson Ancestor's wife.

Those chronicles depicted an entirely different time period for humanity.

Back when the ashes of the Age of Conquest had just begun to settle, humanity had become more wounded than ever. The drive to rebuild what they lost and destroyed at their own hands had become strong. A sense of collective responsibility quickly reemerged that prompted many survivors to shed the burdens of the past and start over on a blank slate.

The rapid rise of mechs as an alternate weapon of war also began to charm an immense population of humans who had developed an intense fear and hatred towards warships of any kind.

Compared to immense, kilometers-long battleships that could demolish entire cities with a single volley of their main cannons, the much smaller and less threatening mechs simply did not elicit the same negative reaction.

From the chronicles, Ark had learned that the Larkinson Ancestor initially embraced mechs because of idealism.

The man had been a dreamer whose values and desires clashed with the prevailing attitudes of the New Rubarth Empire.

Rather than keep his head down in order to retain the high standards of life within one of the most powerful surviving states of human civilization, the Larkinson Ancestor did not hesitate to pack his bags and move as far away from his home as possible.

This took true courage and conviction! The man genuinely believed that he and his descendants would end up happier and enjoy purer lives if they lived in a remote corner of the Milky Way than stay in one of the snake-filled centers of human society.

Though many Larkinsons who had been born after that time begrudged the Larkinson Ancestor for condemning them to the life of a third-rater, Ark did not necessarily think this way.

The simple life he enjoyed in the Bright Republic shaped him who he was today.

That said, human civilization was growing more dangerous over time. The downside to living in the remote corners of the Milky Way was that they would fall first if humanity's old enemies ever sought to resume their old wars.

The Sand War had given everyone a grim reminder that the Big Two was not as capable of protecting its borders as everyone thought.

"Strength is the fundamental truth of the cosmos." Ark gently told Melinda. "Being powerless means that you must completely surrender the initiative to other people who may not care as much about our family as us. That is unacceptable. If I want to become stronger and ensure my children and our other relatives will be able to live well in the future, I have to step up and utilize my talents on an actual battlefield."

They already had this discussion multiple times. Melinda received the same answers every time and saw no hope of changing Ark's mind about seeking confrontation and letting himself become a soldier in someone else's army.

It was during this time of change that Venerable Ark welcomed an important visitor one day.

It turned out that an important envoy from the colonial administration wanted to meet with the former patriarch of the Larkinson Family in person!

Ark and Melinda decided to meet the new arrival together in one of their offices.

"Greetings. I have heard and read much about your heroics, Venerable Ark Larkinson. I see that all of the rumors have undersold your presence. You would look much better if you wore a proper military uniform again."

Venerable Ark held up his arm and shook the woman's hand in a firm grip.

"My time in service has already passed, Madame Kernsk. I am merely a retired soldier now." The Larkinson expert pilot greeted the important official.

"You are far more than that, sir. You are one of the top mech pilots on this planet. Few people can confidently boast that they can defeat you in battle."

It was not every day that the chief of staff of the presumed leader of Davute paid a sudden and unannounced visit to the Larkinson Family!

Ark found it telling that Reina Kernsk chose to meet with him on a personal basis rather than the family as a whole. This suggested to him that Davute was well aware of the internal dynamics of the Larkinsons.

"To what do I owe you the pleasure for this visit, madame?"

"Eager to get to business, hm?" The female chief of staff smiled. "Very well, then. Let me be straight with you. We would like you to consider an offer that might interest you and give you what you truly need. What do you think about returning to honorable service and leading men into battle again?"

"That..."

Reina Kursk dared to interrupt the high-tier expert pilot by raising her palm. "Forgive me for interrupting you, Venerable, but please hear me out before you make any further judgments. Let me start with the allowances that we are willing to extend to you and possibly your other Larkinsons."

"First, we are prepared to give you extensive autonomy in how extensively you wish to become involved in our upcoming war against Karlach."

"Second, we will readily bestow you the rank of mech colonel in our armed forces. You will only have to answer to a few superiors from our camp, and they will never send you to certain death."

"Third, you may absorb any Larkinson mech pilot or other personnel that volunteer for service as well if they are willing. You can even retain the existing hierarchies and structures of the Larkinson mech units if you think that is best."

She wasn't even finished yet. The government official continued to list out other benefits and allowances. The offer presented by Davute became increasingly more alluring to the point that Ark could hardly muster the thought of saying no to the shrewd woman!

"Wait, wait, wait." Melinda interrupted Madame Kernsk. "All of these concessions sound great, but how will we be assured that you will keep your promises?"

"We do not blame you for harboring skepticism towards our goodwill. Rest assured that we will not discard you like your former government." Madame Kernsk gave out an answer that she replied in advance. "We can sign a contract enforced by the MTA at our charge. My superior is also willing to step forward and make a solemn promise to abide by the terms in the presence of multiple ace pilots. They are all highly principled warriors and will not fight for Davute anymore if our state ever breaks a serious promise."

This was one of the heaviest concessions a state could make! To make a promise while under the witness of the Saints in the service of a state meant that a ruler was truly being serious about sticking to the letter and the spirit of an agreement.

After all, if Davute ever decided to sell out the Larkinsons out of opportunism, its ace pilots would not hesitate to forsake the state as well, as it had already proven with its deeds that it was not worth defending anymore!

The willingness of Davute to go so far for Venerable Ark made him feel incredibly flattered. He no longer saw any reason to remain as guarded as before. His intuition could already sense the abundant sincerity flowing from the chief of staff.

Ark relaxed and became more receptive to the Davutan's words. "I think we can discuss this further."

Chapter 4709: Incurable

After a lot of preparation work and dancing around, Davute finally decided that the time was right to open up a dialogue with the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves had been waiting for this a long time. He had a strong suspicion that he would enter into an important talk with the future state centered around Davute. His recent tour through his clan's facilities along with the regular reports he received from his advisors strengthened this notion until it had become an absolute certainty in his mind!

He was expecting a visit from Madame Reina Kernsk any minute now. The Black Cats had kept careful track of her movements as she approached one party related to the Larkinson Clan after another.

If he didn't know any better, he would accuse Kernsk and the bigshot behind her of building an increasingly unescapable net around the Larkinson Clan!

It was a dastardly clever diplomatic approach and one that the clan could not easily counter.

After all, there was nothing wrong with stopping by and having a chat with the friends, allies and relatives of the Larkinson Clan.

As the colonial administration entered into secret talks with the Glory Seekers, the Cross Clan and even the Larkinson Family, Ves already started to consider how he should handle his own upcoming meeting with the Davutan officials.

There was no way to downplay his own importance this time. Using his age-old excuse of being 'just' a Journeyman Mech Designer wouldn't fly in the face of overwhelming evidence of his massive accomplishments!

Perhaps the only consolation was that his massive stature afforded him a lot more respect and caution than ever before.

No longer would states like the Bright Republic and the Friday Coalition make a careless decision to squash him as if he was a bug. His clan had grown too strong and his MTA backing became too solid for others to command him like he was their lackey.

Ves had worked hard to earn this kind of status and protection. He knew he still had a long way to go before he truly became impervious to external interests, but he was slowly getting closer with each passing day.

However, before the colonial government invited him for a direct talk, he still had plenty of other matters to concern himself with. One of them was highly personal.

"C'mon, kids, don't run around too much and especially don't raise your voice. The person we are about to meet isn't in a good shape these days, so let's make sure not to add more stress to his life, okay?"

"Okay, papa."

"I'll be good."

"Miaow."

Ves brought his family to another estate that was located a short distance away from the Royal Mansion.

The structure possessed a more subdued appearance, but that did not mean it was any less well-constructed.

After passing through the main entrance and taking the double stairs up the next floor, the group moved through the corridors until they stopped before the double doors at the end.

Melinda Larkinson along with a number of guards were already waiting for their arrival.

"Madame Gloriana." Melinda greeted the woman. "Children. The person inside is eager to meet with you all. Before you go in, let me give you a set of rules that you need to abide by. The last thing we want is to worsen his condition. He already has a few days left to live. Let us make his remaining days as pleasant as possible."

After everyone listened to the rules and confirmed they understood them all, they finally managed to pass through the final doors.

The bedroom was large, but not exaggeratingly so. A few doctors and other medical experts were quietly monitoring their patient, who was currently sitting on a custom chair that was placed before the tall windows.

As the little family walked closer, they gained a better glimpse of the garden below.

Older Larkinsons sat on the garden chairs while dozens of children played in the garden. The sight was highly reminiscent of the Larkinson Estate that had once housed the original family for centuries.

"Come closer." A soft and feeble voice called.

The well-dressed father, mother along with their three children slowly walked forward until they were able to face the old man sitting on the chair.

Though Benjamin's condition had worsened considerably over the last year, he still possessed some of the strength of a highly skilled warrior.

"Hehe... don't be afraid, children. Your great-grandpa won't die if you breathe on me. Now come closer... and give your family a hug."

"Is it okay, mama?" Andraste cautiously asked.

Ves called over a doctor dispatched by the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

"Can he handle the stress?" He quietly asked.

"Mr. Benjamin Larkinson's condition has improved in the last two days, though we cannot say how long that will last. That is also why we have permitted him to accept visitations today. It should be okay as long as you do not induce too much stress."

"Very well."

After a bit of encouragement, Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine both approached their great-grandfather and hugged him one by one with great care and attention.

Even Andraste who tended to be a lot more physical most of the time reined in her rambunctiousness and treated Benjamin as if he was an ancient porcelain vase!

Pure love flowed between the relatives with each and every cautious hug. The old man's condition seemed to improve a little more as he became more invigorated by the chance of holding his great-grandchildren for the first time!

"It is so lovely to finally meet you all in the flesh..." Benjamin smiled with pride and joy at the kids. "After meeting you so many times through projections and virtual meetings, it is refreshing for me to touch you all for real. I have satisfied my greatest wish. I feel like I can die happy today."

Ves quickly coughed. "I hope you can still stick around longer. Don't worry. My biotech experts should be able to formulate effective treatment that can slow the deterioration of your physical condition. After enough time, our doctors may even improve your physical state and allow you to live a little longer. If that doesn't work, I can always spend a few million MTA merits to acquire excellent treatment for you. Our clan is really powerful these days so nothing is impossible."

"Yeah, our papa is right! He can buy anything!" Andraste happily exclaimed.

The old and tired man sighed and shook his head even as he held little Marvaine on his lap. "Don't bother. Ark has already consulted plenty of doctors and studied me extensively with his own abilities. He has even exchanged a considerable amount of MTA merits to get one of the Association's doctors to perform an examination on me and recommend possible treatments. It turns out that not even life-prolonging treatment can remedy my wounds. The root of my condition does not lie within my body. It is my inner self that is failing."

"Huh?" Andraste looked confused as she held Benjamin's large, spotty and wrinkled hand. "You were an expert pilot in the past, right? You fought in a really big war and beat lots of bad guys, right?!"

"Hehehe... that was a long time ago, my great-granddaughter. It has been a lifetime since I last piloted a mech. Those days are long behind me, sweetling. When expert pilots get broken and dulled.... they no longer retain the qualities that make them special. I am sure that your father can sense that clearly. I am told he is good at that. What do you see in me, Ves?"

"...It's a little complicated to explain." Ves eventually said. "Well, to put it in the simplest terms, Benjamin is like a combination between a mech and a mech pilot. Both of them have incurred plenty of damage and grown considerably old. The problem is that they are not deteriorating at an equal rate. The 'mech pilot' in this analogy has suffered fatal damage at one point in the past and is slowly bleeding out. This in turns leads to the mech deteriorating faster as well as it is no longer receiving as much support from its partner as before. While my grandfather's physical condition does not look like it is at the end of its rope, in truth his spirit has already decayed by a considerable decree. It is... not a pleasant process."

He had only seen this kind of deterioration from the likes of truly decrepit people. It wouldn't take long at all before the spirit became so unstable that it simply... collapsed.

Gloriana quietly moved closer to him and leaned over.

"You are good at correcting problems in the head, correct? Are you able to do something for your grandfather?"

Ves shook his head. "Not to this extent. My grandfather used to be an expert pilot, but for some reason his extraordinary willpower has disappeared, making him powerless again. Now, there is no problem for norms to be without power, but the problem here is that my grandfather has lived for many years as an expert pilot, but suddenly lost over half of what made him who he was. What is left after he was forced to retire has so many gaping holes that it is like an open wound that has constantly festered and made things worse. You can't fix this kind of damage anymore."

If there was any reasonable hope that he could fix whatever ailed his grandfather, he wouldn't have entered into such a glum mood this time.

Even though Ves prided in his ability to be able to fix any problem through the correct application of engineering, he was truly at a loss at this time.

The only possible ideas that might stand a chance of working were all too radical and crazy even for Ves!

He could attempt to merge Benjamin's spirit with the remains of another powerful entity, but he was sure that the result would be an absolute desecration of his grandfather!

In particular, attempting to make up for the missing willpower of his grandfather by merging his spirit with the willpower remnant of Venerable Relia Foster sounded like a great way to potentially create a monster beyond reckoning!

Ves could also try and transplant Benjamin's wounded spirit into a baby clone made out of the same DNA, but Ves' intuition strongly warned him that messing around with life to this degree would definitely blow up in his face!

The most viable idea that had the highest chance of working was to beseech Gaia to employ her formidable power over life to inject vitality into Benjamin's mind, spirit and body.

However, as Ves discreetly concentrated his mind and conveyed his request to the powerful and somewhat uncontrollable design spirit, the powerful entity replied with a remarkably thoughtful message.

His expression dropped even further.

It turned out that mindlessly injecting vitality into Benjamin was no use. He was a broken demigod. Though he wielded far greater strength than mortals during the height of his career, once his source of power got damaged, it was pretty much impossible to mend it again after so much time had passed without any proper treatment!

Ves had no choice but to accept the inevitable truth. He moved closer and gently placed his hand on his grandfather's skinny and feeble shoulder.

"You don't have many days left to live, grandfather, but I am sure you know at least that much."

Benjamin nodded. "All good things must come to an end. Don't feel sorry for me, and don't feel guilty that you cannot cure my condition. I have lived longer than many of my comrades from back then. I have been able to start a family, raise my children and see them become successful in their own ways, greet and hold my grandchildren and now I am able to do the same to their children in turn. I am more happy and content than I could have ever imagined. Why should I fear the inevitable onset of death when I am blessed with so much life?"

He was right. Ves could genuinely sense that his grandfather did not regret anything despite his immensely painful fall from grace.

All of that was history as far as Benjamin was concerned. Nowadays, he only cared about his family. This was why hugging Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine in turn gave him so much joy and satisfaction!

Meeting his great-grandchildren had definitely reinvigorated the old Larkinson a bit. He probably bought a few extra days of lease on his life, but that was the extent to how much his condition could improve.

Gloriana gently placed her own hand on Ves' shoulder.

"Your grandfather is right, Ves. Death is not the end of the road. There is still life after death. I am sure that your lovely sister Helena will safely shepherd him to his next destination."

Benjamin gradually began to frown as he heard that. "Wait... what is this about a sister, Ves?"

"Uh, it's nothing."

"Oh, you don't know, sir? Your grandson has a new sister!"

"Wait... did that scoundrel Ryncol father another child without informing the rest of our family?!"

"Wait, it is not what you think! Calm down, grandfather! Your vital signs are already starting to show excessive strain!"

Chapter 4710: Broken Promise

Ves and his little family spent more than an hour in his grandfather's company.

He could clearly sense that Benjamin Larkinson gained a lot of joy and contentment when he interacted with his youngest descendants.

Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine were all excellent children. Gloriana had put a lot of effort into raising them into proper children, and it showed as they all behaved in a manner that pleased their great-grandfather the best.

Benjamin spent most of his life in the Bright Republic, so he was not accustomed to transhumanism as the other Larkinsons. This was why he constantly expressed amazement at the incredible comprehension of the three munchkins.

The intelligence of each of them clearly exceeded the standards of their age!

"Hahaha! I see now why your father feels confident about enrolling you into a first-class virtual school. I hope that by the time the three of you graduate from your studies, you won't forget about the family who supported you and loved you all of the way. Please make sure to help out your relatives when you can, okay?"

The kids dutifully nodded. "We know, great-grandpa. Family goes first!"

"You don't need to sound so serious." Benjamin corrected the three. "Our family tenets aren't meant to deprive you of what you deserve. Just look at your father. Ves has earned far more wealth than I could ever imagine. It is his right to keep most if not all of his earnings, but I can clearly see he loves his fellow Larkinsons so much that he has passed on much of what belongs to him to the clan. Do you know why he is being so generous?"

Andraste and Marvaine looked confused, but Aurelia already knew the answer to this question.

"No single human can do everything by themselves." She said in her know-it-all tone of voice that strongly reminded everyone of her mother "Papa can design really good mechs, but he can't pilot them or waste all of his time on handling the administration. He needs to delegate much of these responsibilities to other people, but not just anyone. This is why papa chose to entrust the clan with his money and resources. Compared to outsiders, he can almost always count on Larkinsons to do what is best for the family."

"That is an excellent answer, Aurelia!" Gloriana proudly stroked her oldest daughter's head. "It isn't just the Larkinsons that value the importance of family. The Wodin Dynasty that I am a part of also works the same way. Each and every female Wodin must learn how to stand on their own. It is only once they have built up a solid life and career for themselves that they begin to think about giving back to our dynasty and especially its weaker members."

"Not every family or family member is worth supporting." Ves warned as he was afraid that his children would become too trusting for their own good. "Even with long-standing traditions and additional safeguards in place, you need to be careful about offering help too freely. You need to learn how to use your judgment as subsidizing someone who is lazy or unwilling to work for themselves will only breed greater dependency. This is why the actual rules in the clan are a bit complicated. Well, you will learn about all of this when you grow older."

By the time that the visitation period was about to end, the children all said goodbye to the oldest relative they had met on their father's side.

They all leaned in and kissed Benjamin's cheek one by one. This truly gratified the old and infirm Larkinson.

"Hahaha!" Benjamin seemed to grow a little sprier! "This is one of the happiest moments of my life, and let me tell you that I have experienced a lot of happy times. I feel fortunate that I am still able to hang around long enough to meet and hug you three cuties at least once in person."

Ves smiled in a melancholic manner. The implicit meaning in his grandfather's statement was that he may not be around to spend much further time with his great-grandchildren.

"Children."

"Yes, papa?"

"You should visit your great-grandfather more often while we are still in Davute." He said. "Once our expeditionary fleet leaves for the deeper parts of the frontier, you won't have much of a chance to spend time with him anymore. Let's make sure you are able to spend enough time with one of your relatives while we are still living close to each other, okay?"

"Okay~"

After Gloriana gently led their children and the cats out of the bedroom, Ves stayed behind with his grandfather.

Although the two didn't enjoy true privacy due to the presence of numerous doctors and bodyguards, there was no reason to drive them out. Ves just didn't want his wife and children to learn too much messy information.

As soon as they were gone, his grandfather looked wearier and more tired than ever.

In truth, Benjamin was always tired. His physical state was much better than his non-physical state, which meant that his earlier exuberance was partially an act.

Now that the youngest had left the room, there was no need for the aging Larkinson to put up a kid-friendly act.

"Ves... I am proud of you. I wish that your father Ryncol was here as well. It would have been a great reunion..."

"Grandfather..." Ves hesitated for a moment. "If you really want to spend more time with your descendents, then I may be able to offer a solution... multiple solutions even..."

"Extending one's life is never simple. This is especially the case for a crippled former soldier like myself. I take it that those potential solutions of yours bear a terrible price?"

Benjamin twitched before directing a knowing look at his grandson. "As I have said before, I am already satisfied with the life I have been blessed with. I do not want to ruin the purity of my memories and destroy everything that I have stood for. I know little of what goes on above my head, but I have seen powerful men go bad due to succumbing to the naked pursuit of longevity. I have no desire to follow the same route. All I long for is peace. I have lived long enough. Let me enjoy an ending of my choosing."

As his grandfather spoke, Ves could feel the strong conviction and determination in those words. Benjamin had many decades to think about his own mortality, and he had long decided to accept his death with calm.

His mentality actually wasn't all that unusual among many elderly people. It was natural for them to think about how to handle the onset of their passing.

It was just that certain older figures exhibited a lot more resistance towards their death than others. Human civilization had advanced so much that there were many possible ways to prolong one's life and stave off an early death.

However, one of the reasons why Benjamin could accept his nearing fate so readily was because he knew his situation quite well.

"Can you tell me why you believe there is no hope in extending your life?" Ves carefully asked.

"I am not a doctor, but... I used to be an expert pilot, you know." Benjamin slowly said as his eyes began to relive the moments of his past. "I was active on the battlefield long before you were born. I was brasher, more confident and more committed to defending the Bright Republic than you can imagine. I possessed a lot of talent back then as well. I performed well in training and grew even faster when the war against the Vesia Kingdom broke out again."

Ves was already familiar with this part of his grandfather's history. Benjamin went on to become one of the heroes of that war, especially after he eventually triggered his apotheosis and became a new expert pilot.

"It is because of my rapid rise that my fall hurt me the most." Benjamin closed his eyes as if trying to shake himself from his awful memories. "Victory and defeat goes hand-in-hand. No one is able to win forever. My luck ran out and the Vesians prepared a more vicious and targeted offensive than the Mech Corps expected. I stepped up. I fought. I lost. Though I managed to come back from the battlefield intact, unlike many of my comrades, you know what happened to my brain."

Ves slowly nodded. "You incurred too much brain damage due to suffering from the feedback of an immensely powerful blow that broke your expert mech too quickly. The safeties of your neural interface hadn't been able to prevent the excessive feedback from overstraining your nerves."

"Do you know what it is like for an expert pilot to hear that he cannot pilot even the simplest industrial mech anymore?"

"It must have been devastating."

"It broke me." Benjamin wearily admitted. "The weeks after learning that I can never physically interface with a mech again was one of my darkest and most shameful periods of my life. It affected me much more than you can imagine. I lost my faith. I lost my confidence. I lost my motivation."

This was probably the time where Venerable Benjamin Larkinson lost his extraordinary willpower and turned into a broken man.

"Grandfather..."

Benjamin smiled at his descendant. "Don't feel sad for me. As I have already said before, I got over it. This is nothing more than an event that shifted the course of my life. After my discharge, I spent a long time at the Larkinson Estate. Slowly but surely, I recovered. None of the family members over there scorned me or mocked me for being a failure. All they saw was a Larkinson who needed their help to get his life back together. They succeeded. Once I regained a semblance of normalcy, I proceeded to start my own family and work with other Larkinsons."

This was why Benjamin possessed such a strong attachment to the notion of family. His relatives had saved him in his darkest and most vulnerable period of his eventful life.

"I am glad to hear that the Larkinson Family supported you. I am doing my best to ensure our clan will also be ready to assist any Larkinson that is experiencing similar sorts of problems."

"I know, and I am happy to hear that, Ves. The point I am trying to make is that while I have managed to pick myself up again, I always knew that I was living on borrowed time."

"What do you mean by that, grandfather?"

Benjamin let out another weary sigh. "Do you think I am an expert pilot or a norm?"

"You're a norm now according to what I can sense."

"That is not entirely correct. I am technically an expert pilot, but a crippled one that has slowly been dying."

"What?"

"It has to do with the nature of expert pilots." Benjamin solemnly spoke. "We aren't called demigods without a reason. Part of what makes us stronger and more capable than normal humans is that we take on additional obligations that have become sacred to us. Now think about this. Expert pilots can always push themselves to get stronger in order to complete a goal or a dream. What if they still have the willingness to pursue their goals, but no longer possess the physical ability to do so anymore? What if they have become so injured that they can never exert their full strength by piloting a mech in their lives?"

"That... would mean that you can't go forward anymore."

Ves started to understand what his grandfather was trying to convey.

"It is deeper than that." Benjamin said. "When an expert pilot makes a vow that he wants to fulfill at all cost, he has made a life-changing choice that compels him to complete his ultimate goal. If there is any change that prevents him from doing so, he has effectively broken his promise. As you know, we expert pilots take that extremely seriously."

"That... that's not fair! While it is true that you can't abide by your vow anymore, the reason why that is the case is not your fault."

The dying Larkinson shook his head. "It doesn't matter what excuses you can apply to a situation. A broken promise is a broken promise. From the moment we step up to become a demigod, we do so with the awareness that we have entered a road we can never get back from. Our only choice is to fight our way forward, because if we do not, we will get punished and lose the power that we have previously earned."

"Is there no way to reverse this?" Ves frowned. "You have heard about Venerable Davia Stark before, right? She lost her power as well, but she managed to pick herself back up again."

"That is a different case than mine." Benjamin said. "She is still in good health, so she still had a chance of making a comeback as long as she adjusted her mentality. Also, she was still young enough to have plenty of time left to fight more battles. In my case, no amount of physical treatment or mental gymnastics will get me back into the cockpit again. My ending is already set in stone. Nothing in our reality can reverse my condition."

"..."