

Mech 2071

Chapter 2071 Swirling Substance

Ranya Wodin's induction into the clan did not proceed smoothly.

Her pride as a Hexer and a member of the Wodin Dynasty caused her to be very reluctant to push those identities to the side.

While she would still be both, the Larkinson Clan demanded primacy. A clansmen was not allowed to put the interests of another state or organization above the interests of the clan! This was one of the primary rules that Ves had inserted in the pages of the Larkinson Mandate from the very start!

Ves abhorred double loyalties, especially when someone's loyalty to an enemy or rival power exceeded the loyalty to himself and the clan! He explicitly created and empowered the Larkinson Mandate to stifle the activities of any hostile spies, informants, traitors and saboteurs!

While the Wodin Dynasty wasn't hostile to the Larkinson Clan, it was its own separate entity that primarily looked out for its own interests. As long as their relationship remained this way, there was no way Ves could trust a Wodin like Ranya to an intimate degree!

The initial reluctance that Ranya displayed showed that it was difficult for her to shift her mentality. The oath failed to take effect as the Golden Cat inside the Larkinson Mandate sensed that the Wodin was still unwilling.

"Is it done?"

Ves shook his head. "No. Just saying the words is not enough. You need to mean it! I advise you to not hold any duplicitous thoughts. Whatever intentions you harbor, as long as they disadvantage our clan in any way, you can forget about becoming a part of us. When you become a Larkinson, you need to surrender to us in heart and mind! My book can tell if you are not sincere!"

Though Ranya was rather skeptical of his claim, she did observe a lot of weird behavior from the clansmen for some time. Each of them, both trueblood and adopted, exhibited a remarkable high degree of cohesion!

If she didn't know any better, she would have thought that Ves managed to drug or brainwash them somehow!

Perhaps the only reason she didn't freak out was because she extensively checked the health of many Larkinsons throughout the past months. None of the clansmen exhibited any traces of illicit handling.

Even if the Larkinson Clan did employ those means, Ranya was confident she could defeat them all! Aside from the standard anti-brainwashing augmentations she received as a Wodin, she also upgraded her body further with her own self-developed flora-based augmentations! Her green, leafy hair wasn't the only weird part about her altered physique!

"Let me try again." She composed herself.

"Open your heart. Let down your guard. Embrace the Larkinson Clan."

Once Ranya relaxed, she successfully managed to become a Larkinson!

Ves saw with his spiritual vision that the Golden Cat finally approved of her. The ancestral spirit generated a new spiritual bond with the Hexer with some difficulty.

It seemed that Ranya still harbored some other thoughts, but Ves didn't worry about that very much.

Once her mind hooked up to the Larkinson Network, she experienced a faint sensation that she gained access to something profound!

Her eyes widened as her insufficiently-spiritual mind tried and largely failed to parse the magnificence of a spiritual network filled with Larkinsons!

Not only that, but the warmth emanating from the Golden Cat felt a lot warmer and more significant to her! Once she considered herself a Larkinson, she experienced a kind of affection that she rarely felt in the cold and competitive confines of the Wodin Dynasty.

The Larkinsons prided themselves on their focus on family and fellowship! Within the clan, no Larkinson felt alone! Even if they were by themselves, they could always a hint of the collective they were a part of through their connection to the Larkinson Network!

Ves smiled as he felt an unusual sense of intimacy towards the Hexer. This was one of the many changes the new connection brought!

Through all of these subtle mental and spiritual influences, Ranya would slowly come to appreciate the Larkinson Clan even more. Ves predicted that she would gradually grow cooler towards her previous affiliations.

Being a part of a group with a spiritual network was vastly different from one that lacked such a magical benefit!

"Do you feel it?" Ves asked. "Can you sense the bond you share with your fellow kin?"

"This.. this is impossible! How can a mere oath induce such drastic effects!" She gasped.

She stared wide-eyed at Ves, Lucky, Nitaa and Major Verle! Each of them were part of the Larkinson Network as well. This caused her to feel the urge to treat them with a much closer degree of closeness than before!

It was as if they were akin to some of the closer Wodin relatives back in the Hegemony!

And that wasn't all! When she laid her eyes on the book she just withdrew her hand from, it somehow seemed to radiate a sense of belonging and worship that she had never experienced before!

As an exobiologist, she was a bit more aware that such strange emotional reactions was anything but normal!

"This book.."

"The Larkinson Mandate is the ancestral heirloom of the Larkinson Clan." Ves stated with pride. "It is the heart of our clan. As long as this book exists, our clan will never be extinguished!"

It took some time for her to regain her composure. Though she was still in shock, this was not the time to explore these inexplicable new sensations.

"I guess I'm a Larkinson now." She said in a helpless tone.

"Ranya Wodin-Larkinson." Ves recited her new name. "As a member of our clan, you are now qualified to get in touch with some of our closest secrets. However, that doesn't mean you can pass on what you know to any random clansman. Please keep what we are about to unveil to yourself. Don't tell ANYONE about this, not even my girlfriend, understood?"

"I understand." Ranya nodded seriously.

Her curiosity towards the mysterious object inside the armored container had grown. For Ves to go through all of this effort to rope her into the clan meant that it must truly be remarkable!

Once Ves obtained the necessary guarantees, he turned to the armed container and began to unlock it. As a cage built by himself, he implemented all kinds of advanced locking mechanisms.

It took a fair amount of time to disengage all of the locks. The armored container basically consisted of more than a dozen different layers, each with their separate locks!

By the time he passed through all of the barriers, he entered a very cramped compartment where a single box rested in the middle. It was held in place by a lot of cushioning and buffer materials.

It took several minutes to disentangle the head-sized metal box from all of those bonds. Once Ves finally pulled it away, he brought it out of the container before placing it on a table that had been brought into the enclosed compartment.

"You're up, Verle."

As the major began to utilize his codes and keys to disengage the locks of the box, Ves activated his signal jammer and checked to make sure it was working properly.

Ranya in the meantime observed all of the precautions with an increasing sense of foreboding.

"It's done." The major said. "Are you ready, Ves?"

"Open it." Ves commanded. "I never did manage to catch a glimpse of it when your men initially retrieved it from the Starlight Megalodon."

After a small pause, Major Verle finally lifted open the lid. Inside the protective confines rested a single vial.

Ves held his breath as his gaze landed on the high-quality transparent vial. He failed to identify the material, but whatever it was made of could probably resist the direct attack from a mech!

He soon peered through the surface material and observed the liquid substance contained within.

It was like an ocean in a bottle.

The liquid within was luminescent. It radiated a teal light that added a grand sense of mystique to the substance. Not only that, but it also swirled and moved as if it never rested!

"This!" Ranya practically shouted! "This can't be! How can you possibly obtain a dose life-prolonging treatment serum?! And this light.. this is not an entry-level serum."

"Correct." Ves grinned as his eyes lovingly studied the precious vial. "This serum is the key requirement to the third round of life-prolonging treatments! I didn't like when I said this vial is of incredible worth!"

Ranya was truly shocked! Such a vial should never fall into the hands of someone like Ves! It was simply impossible for him to be rich and powerful enough to redeem one from the MTA!

"Where did you get it?! What's its providence!?"

Ves looked at Major Verle, who briefly explained the Aeon Corona Mission.

"You looted it from a derelict CFA battleship?!"

"It's more than three-hundred years old?!"

Though Verle skipped a lot of details, what little he revealed already blew Ranya's mind! The story he recited sounded straight out of an action drama!

She grew incredibly serious all of a sudden. When she understood that the serum came from the CFA, she became less sure that it was some sort of counterfeit.

Selling 'smuggled' life-prolonging treatment serums was one of the oldest scams in the galaxy. As the key to extending their material existences, an incredible amount of elder people were willing to sacrifice everything they owned in order to stave off their deaths for another century!

When people became this desperate, they became very susceptible to ill-intentioned scammers looking to rip them off!

Yet the extreme quality of the vial alone along with the unique activity exhibited by its contents were both signs that the serum might be authentic.

She didn't know how to respond if that was the case.

"What do you require of me?" She asked in a shivering voice. Hardly any of her pride as a Hexer remained intact at this moment! "While I am confident of my research abilities, a serum of this grade is so ridiculously beyond my competences that I am afraid I might ruin its efficacy!"

Ves frowned a bit. "I want you to study it as carefully as possible. I want you to confirm it is exactly what we think. I also want you to explore the possible ways to utilize this dose to extend someone's lifespan."

"Impossible!" She immediately declared. "The study on how to extend a human's life and how to perform the treatments is exclusive to the Big Two! Only themselves or the people they have authorized to learn this restricted field are permitted to work with such a valuable serum! In addition, the higher grades of serum are much more difficult to work with, especially on a patient that is already of an advanced age! You need true specialists to make proper use of such a valuable substance!"

In other words, it simply wasn't possible for Ranya to be able to perform such a complex, high-level treatment on someone.

Ves looked disappointed. Did he rope her into the Larkinson Clan for nothing?

"Can you at least study the contents of the vial and tell me if it's the real deal?"

"I don't know." She frowned. If you would allow me to obtain a minute sample and perform some field research, I can tell you more."

This was a heavy request, but not an unacceptable one. After Ves weighed the pros and cons, he decided to extend some of his trust to the latest member of the Larkinson Clan

The vial came with a high-tech stopper that was able to extract a precise quantity of substances.

Ranya expertedly manipulated the advanced mechanism until a drop the size of a bacteria entered the chamber of the bioscanner she carried on her person.

Though the handheld scanner wasn't very powerful or sophisticated, it was enough for her to obtain some preliminary results.

In the meantime, Ves sensed something strange when Ranya extracted the tiny drop of serum.

He narrowed his eyes and picked up the vial. He lifted it close to his eyes and studied the inexplicably harmonious swirls of the glowing liquid.

On a hunch, Ves extended his spiritual senses.

Though he didn't sense anything at first, he tried to penetrate deeper. Once he powered through, he managed to come in touch with something absolutely astonishing!

He came in touch with something that contained the vibrancy of life!

"Ahhh!"

He immediately retracted his senses as the concentration and magnitude of life that was locked inside the serum surpassed his tolerance! It was as if he had flown too close to the sun!

The pain didn't bother him. He was too shocked at what he discovered back then. He never expected the life-prolonging treatment serum to contain such a humongous spiritual component!

"What!?" Ranya suddenly uttered in shock yet again!

"What is it, doctor!"

"This serum is partially made out of organic exoplant tissue! What little I have learned has already opened up my mind!"

Ves suddenly recalled something relevant.

The Five Scrolls Compact originally invented the treatment!

Chapter 2072 Research Material

The observations made by Ves and Ranya had shocked their entire views! Both descended into a silent stupor as their minds went into overdrive to parse the incredible discoveries they made.

Major Verle looked at them both with a perplexed expression.

"Nerds." He muttered. "As soon as they see something shiny, they get all lost."

As a former command officer, he had encountered sights like these before. He knew that there was no way of getting the two back in a short amount of time.

Right now, Ves and Ranya were fully consumed by the incredible insights they harvested from their brief observation!

Both of them realized that the serum was substantially different from what they imagined!

Not only that, but whatever they saw in it related very much to their respective interests!

Though Ves expected the serum to rock Ranya's boat, he never expected that his design philosophy and spiritual mastery possessed any relation to this highly-advanced product!

He held the vial with an amazed sense of wonder and began to extend his spiritual senses once again.

This time, he approached his inspection with much more care. He didn't barge his senses into the vial this time, but merely approached the edge and tried to get a faint impression of the majesty contained within.

After a bit of fumbling and exploration, he managed to gain a sense of the potent energy locked within.

He had never seen such a high concentration of spiritual energy in his life! This small vial contained enough energy to wipe out his Spirituality in an instant! There was simply no comparison!

That wasn't all. Aside from the extremely dense compression of spiritual energy, its spiritual attributes were remarkably similar.

"It's practically filled with life!"

The spiritual attributes all related to life in so many subtle varieties that Ves couldn't even tell what made them special. He had thought that life was rather simple and absolute, but the truth he saw within the vial made him realize that life came in vastly more forms than he conceived!

Though Ves wasn't able to inspect any of the life-related attributes in detail, he tried his best to sample the flavors from the periphery.

After some time, he roughly determined a few details.

First, the spiritual energy contained within the serum consisted completely of life attributes. No other attributes such as those related to mechs or perfections ruined its purity!

Second, the spiritual energy consisted of at least a hundred spiritual attributes! Each different attribute brought something different to the table while still remaining highly compatible with the other attributes!

It was like creating blended whiskey out of a large number of single malt whiskeys.

The goal was to achieve a balance where the resulting taste of the drink was substantially better.

What the creators of this serum had accomplished was roughly similar, but on a much grander scale!

Ves recognized the spiritual component inside the vial as a supreme application of spiritual engineering that could scarcely be accomplished on the fly!

To blend so many different spiritual attributes in such precise proportions and make them coexist and even interact with each other.

The result was a product of spiritual engineering that fueled all kinds of strange and unknown reactions!

As he continued to study the mysterious patterns of spiritual energy, he made a couple of guesses.

Perhaps the attributes kept the energy level of the serum constant.

Perhaps the attributes kept the spiritual energy compressed.

Above all, Ves was certain that they were essential to the mysterious processes that enabled a human to prolong their lives!

Ves made a very daring hypothesis. To extend someone's lifespan, it wasn't enough to upgrade their bodies.

They also needed to upgrade their spirits!

Why else would life-prolonging treatment serum contain such a high concentration of spiritual energy?

In a galaxy that was largely devoid of it, there was no way the MTA and CFA was able to generate it as easily as conventional energy!

Ves realized that he had come into contact with an unimaginably sensitive secret.

The life-prolonging treatment serum that originated from the CFA possessed an undeniable connection to the Five Scrolls Compact!

As the masters of biotechnology and spirituality in human space, the enormous cult had supposedly invented the treatments in the first place. The nature of the vial strongly hinted that this claim was true!

He never expected the serum to be a product of spiritual engineering as well as pharmaceutical engineering.

He always assumed that it was just a simple application of high technology. Even if the Big Two stole the technology from the Compact, they must have surely innovated it further until they incorporated their own methods!

"Maybe a lot has changed over the past three centuries." He whispered.

It had to be said that this serum was technically an outdated product. Three centuries was enough time for the best biotech researchers of the Big Two to make huge strides in developing better serums. Perhaps the third-round serum offered by the Rim Guardians in exchange for an astronomical amount of merits shared no resemblance to the older version that Ves held in the palm of his hands!

However, the fact that these serums seemed to depend so much on such an extreme concentration of life-attributed spiritual energy said otherwise.

The people who created these serums wouldn't add something so incredible if it wasn't needed!

The ultimate conclusion that Ves could make from this observation was something he could hardly wrap his mind around.

The serum was alive.

Yes. Though the extreme concentration of spiritual energy didn't resemble anything that Ves had seen before, he made enough contact with it to realize that it wasn't as inert as regular spiritual energy.

In a spiritual sense, Ves could quite confidently state that the serum was alive! Not only that, but the vitality it bore was of such a high strength that it handedly overpowered the life he infused in every single mech design to date!

"This substance is alive!"

"What?!" Ves turned to Dr. Ranya. "What did you say?!"

Her astonished eyes looked up the projected readout of her handheld scanner. "It's unlike anything I've seen before. This serum is not an ordinary medicine. It's.. organic..and alive, in a sense. It contains at least some of the characteristics that are ascribed to life."

"Such as..?"

"There are signs pointing to the presence of growth, reproduction, homeostasis, metabolism and more. This serum is made up of a large amount of tiny organic and inorganic particles, all of which temporarily combine into greater structures that act akin to cells and even organs!"

"What does that all mean?" Ves frowned. "Does that mean you can cultivate more of it out of this sample?"

She immediately shook her head. "Perhaps it's possible, and perhaps that is how this serum was originally made, but it is far from simple. At the very least, it's impossible for us to obtain all of the high-grade ingredients needed to produce more!"

"Ah."

It was a futile notion anyway. There was no way a substance as rare and precious as this could be reproduced in some kind of cheap lab!

"Did you learn anything else from your scans?"

She nodded obsessively. "I have detected the traces of many interesting organic compounds, most if not all of them come from plants! Even if I'll never be able to unlock the secrets to reproducing this serum, I can still derive a huge amount of insights by studying the nature and interaction of these organic compounds!"

"What use would that be? If you can't make more serum, then what is the point?"

"You don't know anything!" She huffed in a similar manner as Gloriana. "There are too many applications to count. If I can decipher the operation of even one of the sublime organic processes that take place within the serum, I can develop all kinds of flora-based augmentations! Don't forget that life-prolonging treatment serum is not something that is meant to exist by itself. The life contained within that vial is designed to blend with a human body!"

That statement was far more literal than Ranya realized. The serum was literally infused with the energies of life!

As Ves considered what he learned, he began to feel a bit troubled. He intuitively guessed that studying the serum on a spiritual level would allow him to make substantial gains in his understanding of spiritual engineering.

While he wasn't delusional enough to think he'd be able to reproduce such a valuable substance, he believed he was in the same situation as the Wodin doctor.

As long as he managed to figure out one of the many complex operations of this living concentration of spiritual energy, he could apply what he learned in all kinds of ways!

To the both of them, the vial contained the secrets of life.

If the serum was a book, most of its contents were incomprehensible to them. However, as long as they studied it extensively enough, they might be able to decipher some portions of a single page!

Though Ves realized the incredible gains that he could make, he forcefully drew himself back.

He was a mech designer. Only someone like Dr. Jutland would feel passionate about studying the intricacies of the serum!

As for Ves, his passion always lay in mechs. His design philosophy reflected this undeniable truth. His design seed wasn't only based around the attributes of life, but also the attributes of mechs!

Though the processes surrounding the life-prolonging treatment serum held an undeniable attraction to him, he severely doubted whether any of the insights he could gain was relevant to his profession.

If it didn't improve his ability to design mechs, why should he waste his time on studying so arcane?

Researching this vial might even distort his design philosophy and lead him astray!

This was what Ves feared the most. Right now, he believed in his design philosophy, and was determined to carry it forth!

"Hmm..." He slowly and reverently placed the vial back into the box. "I'll be keeping this serum safe and secure."

"You can't!" Dr. Ranya grew desperate! "I need it! Please, Mr. Larkinson! I can figure out so many high-level operations if I can study it for a year, no, a decade!"

Ves sighed and shook his head. "Didn't you extract a tiny sample? You can study it in your free time as long as you make sure you keep it confidential. In fact, hand over that scanner to me. I'll keep it with me until we build a secure biolab on this ship."

"No! That's too onerous!"

Ves did not budge on this matter. The Scarlet Rose was currently the most secure location to study the serum. Not even Ranya's own starship was as secure! Who knew how many backdoors the Wodin Dynasty built into the Frozen Leaf!

No matter how much Ranya pleaded, the power dynamic between them had reversed.

She was no longer a superior Hexer imposing her will on a boy from a lesser state.

Ves had become the patriarch of a rapidly-growing clan, while Ranya was merely a newly-adopted member of the same organization!

Aside from that, Ves had already gained far too much prominence to be considered inferior by someone of her stature.

All of this meant that all of the female supremacy instilled by her upbringing in the Hegemony had no effect anymore!

"I'll tell Gloriana!" She finally huffed!

"You agreed to keep the serum a secret." Ves shot back. "I told you that you are not allowed to pass it on to my girlfriend. Will you break your oath?"

As soon as the thought came to mind, Ranya suddenly grew uncomfortable! A sense of threat and guilt suffused her mind!

The strange part of it all was that the threat she sensed didn't come from the clan patriarch.

Instead, she felt as if it came from the book he held!

"I.. understand. My apologies. I will guard this secret."

The sense of threat subsided as soon as she said those words.

"Good." He nodded and peered at her carefully. "It isn't enough to keep your mouth shut. Don't act sloppy and write any notes that others can easily hack into or something. The entire point of building a new biolab here is because we have to ensure that every single tool you use to study this serum won't act as a source of propagation to unknown parties! Now give me that bioscanner so that I can secure the sample and feed the device to Lucky."

"Meow?"

Chapter 2073 Interconnected Industries

Conflict was eternal in the galaxy. Space was vast and covered such stupendous distances that hardly any authority possessed the ability to exert absolute order in their territories.

In general, only well-developed star systems with populations surpassing a billion residents featured decent patrols.

The less populous star systems and the ones devoid of any people featured much worse security conditions.

As a result, the starships traversing the stars constantly faced the risk of attacks.

In the current age, trading companies saturated the logistics industry. Hardly any planet or star system were self-sufficient these days. It was too difficult to cover every possible need when there were specialized trading partners who could cover the same need better at a substantially cheaper price!

Rural planets provided food and raw materials. Industrial planets converted raw materials into finished products. Highly populated planets consumed goods en masse.

Though the actual roles of planets were considerably more complicated and mixed than described, this simple classification was sufficient to describe the majority of trade that took place in a given region of space.

In the current day and age, trade was the glue that held billions of populated star systems together.

If trade across the entirety of human space collapsed one day, it was not an exaggeration to say that humanity might go extinct shortly afterwards!

At the very least, the prosperity and development of the human race as a whole would definitely degenerate to levels not seen in many millenia!

Trade was as essential to human civilization as blood in the human body.

Where there was money, crime quickly followed.

Though trade was ubiquitous, it was largely a slow and steady way of earning money. The profit margin was never very exciting.

Instead of earning a small profit from conducting a lot of trades, why not just steal the cargo and sell it at a much higher margin?

Unlike the company who purchased the goods, the pirates who absconded with the goods didn't have to invest any money to obtain their riches!

There were always people who possessed crooked minds. They saw the advantages of robbing trade ships and didn't hesitate to go pirate to earn a much greater fortune than they ever could in a legal society!

Of course, the dynamics of piracy was never so simple.

To obtain their ill-gotten goods, the pirates had to pay for them in other ways.

Most notably, their lives.

Piracy was a high-risk occupation that featured a disproportionately high death and capture rate!

Since their activities directly disrupted the profitability of trade and interrupted the economies of many star systems, the authorities did their best to make the lives of pirates as miserable as possible!

Only when the 'cost of doing business' in the 'piracy industry' remained high would the number of 'entrepreneurs' remain low!

This was not as easy to accomplish. Since the profit margin of transportation was so low, it was not very viable to provide escorts to every single ship that plied the stars.

Mechs were expensive, and so were the carriers that moved them around. The transportation and logistics industry often needed to make a detailed cost-benefit analysis to determine how to protect their trade ships in the most efficient manner possible!

A company that spent too much on protection never lasted long. Their profit margins rapidly shrunk due to fielding so many mechs or spending too much on security companies.

On the other hand, spending too little was not a good thing either!

Once the pirate community found out that a trade company was spending less than anyone else on security, they would immediately target the vulnerable ships before anyone else could take advantage of the bounty!

Therefore, in most cases, trade companies spent a moderate amount of money on security. Not too much, not too little.

However, that was still too little to go around.

From a macro perspective, a firm balance existed between both sides.

Pirates had to make a calculated risk when attacking any target, especially when most goods were being transported in organized trade convoys.

A large amount of trading vessels banded together in order to make it more viable to protect them. Even so, a typical small-scale convoy consisting of half-a-dozen cargo haulers generally only enjoyed the protection of a small outfit.

This meant that it was often possible for small bands of pirates to attack the convoy and capture just a single trade vessel before pulling back!

This was the preferred modus operandi for many pirates.

By avoiding going all-out, the pirates limited their losses while still securing a decent rate of return.

The guards assigned to protect the trade convoy would limit their losses as well while still being able to boast to their employers that they did their due diligence. After all, returning with 5 intact trade vessels was better than returning empty-handed!

Such incidents were common and reflected the helplessness of the protectors. Their budgets were limited and they could only do so much to do their jobs!

At this time, a new development disrupted this long-standing balance.

Throughout a portion of the Komodo Star Sector, a growing number of battles in space ended in a different fashion than before!

In one minor star system, a modest trade convoy consisting of 9 cargo haulers had transitioned out of FTL some time ago and needed six more hours to cycle their FTL drives.

This was far too long!

This was because a small fleet of pirates appeared out of nowhere!

The Steel Howlers was known as an up-and-coming pirate gang from the Nyxian Gap. Just like every other greedy pirate, they eagerly took advantage of the recent destabilization of the Sentinel Kingdom.

When order declined, piracy increased!

"Come on, boys!" Commander Rachel Feriz shouted over her command channel! "We outnumber the guards three-to-one! We're hijacking two vessels this time! I'll smash any pirate who runs before we secure our bonus!"

"AOOOOHHH!"

The Steel Howlers brought three mech companies as opposed to the single mech company fielded by a mercenary corps contracted to protect this trade convoy.

Standing inside the bridge of the sole light carrier of Norton's Shieldbearers, Commander Egon Norton scowled at the sight.

"I knew this contract was too good to be true."

"You needed the money, sir." The captain of the light carrier noted. "Our latest purchase put us deep in the red. I still don't understand why you spent this much on a new toy."

Commander Norton sighed. "It sounded too good to pass on. This mech is the future as far as I'm concerned. If we don't get in early, we'll be at least two steps behind compared to our competitors!"

The mercenary industry was very volatile. In order to remain lucrative, Norton's Shieldbearers had to develop its reputation with every mission.

Despite being outnumbered by a considerable margin, the mercenaries were expected to stand their ground!

Their employers expected Norton's Shieldbearers to present an unmovable defense. They needed to discourage the attacking pirates as much as possible!

Fights never escalated to the bitter end. Not when both sides valued their lives so much.

That said, the pirates didn't come here to return empty-handed!

Soon enough, the Steel Howlers entered the range of Norton's Shieldbearers.

Stationing themselves a small distance from the vulnerable trade convoy, the Shieldbearers numbered much less mechs.

If not for the fact that the mercenary mechs were several times more expensive than the pirate mechs, Commander Norton wouldn't have the courage to put up a serious fight!

The Shieldbearers fielded an interesting mix of mechs. As suggested by their name, they fielded a larger amount of space knights than usual. A small but formidable-looking metal wall of shields emerged.

Floating behind the shield wall, An equal number of rifleman mechs extended their customized laser rifles and placed the muzzles through the customized holes drilled through the sides of the shields.

Then, they fired!

Powerful streaks of red pelted the weak and shabby-looking mechs of the Steel Howlers! The pirate mechs did their best to weave and dodge, but the mobility of their wasn't all that great and the training of their mech pilots wasn't very good!

Though the relative lethality of a laser beam was rather modest, the Shieldbearers cleverly concentrated their fire. At least five laser rifles focused on a single target with every volley!

The ramshackle mechs hit by the lasers weren't capable of withstanding that much firepower!

Commander Feriz didn't need to say anything. The Steel Howlers were already familiar with this routine. As soon as the damage to any single mech reached a certain threshold, their mech pilots automatically received permission to withdraw.

Piracy was a costly business. The Steel Howlers couldn't afford to lose too many mechs per assault. Letting a damaged mech retreat before it got wrecked was a good way to minimize the costs.

Though the Steel Howlers continuously bled more mechs as their opponents pelted them with fire, they had many more machines to go around!

As for the Shieldbearers, Commander Norton increasingly frowned despite the excellent performance of his mechs.

The pirates did their best to retaliate, but most of their ranged attacks impacted the shield wall without doing any further damage.

This didn't reassure the mercenary commander very much because the Steel Howlers fielded a lot more melee mechs!

"They're going to close in very soon! Prepare to enter the modified formation!" He shouted.

Norton used to be a former officer in the Sentinel Army. His knowledge of training, discipline and formation warfare partially carried over to his mercenaries!

Just as the pirates closed in, the Shieldbearers shifted their formation!

The mercenary mechs split into two. One group went left and one group went right! Both of them consisted of an equal mix of space knights, rifleman mechs and offensive melee mechs.

Their maneuvers seemed illogical at first. The Shieldbearers were hired to protect a trade convoy. Their current actions seemed akin to making way, providing the pirate mechs a straight path towards their lucrative prizes!

Yet even as the Shieldbearer mechs reoriented their formations at the sides, a small number of mechs remained in the middle.

One average-looking space knight flew protectively in front of a noticeably reddish mech. The head of the latter shone in an ominous red light.

It was too bad that the bulk of the defensive mech and its shield prevented the pirates from getting a good look of the mech floating behind.

"Are you ready, buddy?" The pilot of the space knight asked.

"Hahaha! I should be asking you that question!" The pilot of the newer mech laughed. "They don't call me Mad Jack for nothing! This mech is a breeze for me to pilot!"

"Do your thing, then. I can handle the pressure!"

The Steel Howlers didn't split their forces in response to the actions of their enemies. All they cared about was reaching the trade convoy and hijacking as many of them as possible! If the mercenaries didn't want to put up a fight against a numerically-superior foe, then that was even better!

"Hahaha!" Feriz exultingly cried. "Looks like the Shieldbearers have already given up. They even made way for us! Go run over those stubborn two mechs and grab our loot! AHOOOOO!"

"AHOOOO!"

The Steel Howlers didn't take the two Shieldbearer mechs in the middle seriously. Every outfit featured a number of stubborn, honor-bound fools who thought that retreat was unacceptable.

They usually didn't last very long in the mercenary business.

As a number of eager Howler mechs flew forward in order to batter the Shieldbearer mechs to pieces, the mech pilot of the brand-new Doom Guard flicked a switch.

A field of doom came into existence. As the wild pirate mech pilots haphazardly barged into this field, they began to experience a sudden palpitation in their hearts!

"What is this?!"

"It's so dark!"

"I can't go further!"

The massive charge rapidly faltered as the Howler mechs no longer accelerated forward. In fact, some mechs even started to turn around to fly backwards!

When Commander Feriz entered the range of the Doom Guard's glow, she quickly experienced the same sensations as the other Steel Howlers!

Her eyes almost popped out of her sockets!

Unlike her subordinates, she kept herself together. She experienced far more stressful situations during her rise to her current height!

"Pipe down, Howlers! This is a trick! Get yourselves together and push through! I bet that as long as we destroy those two mechs, this effect will end!"

Her guess was right. Though half of the Steel Howlers lost their marbles, enough of them were left to continue the assault.

However, just as Commander Feriz and her strongest subordinates came into the range, the Doom Guard finally unleashed its hellfire.

A huge, scarlet plume of flames bellowed from its Enison Spreader! A wide zone of hellish fire blocked the entire approach of the pirate mechs!

"AHHH!"

Combined with the increased potency of the Doom Guard's glow at closer ranges, almost every Steel Howlers aborted their assault!

"Cowards!"

Even as she said so, Commander Feriz quickly turned her mech around before her mech embraced the inferno!

"What is that new mech?!"

Chapter 2074 Gullible Suckers

The skirmish between Norton's Shieldbearers and the Steel Howlers was the first recorded case of a Doom Guard in action.

Not only did a single striker mech manage to repel the frontal assault of at least two mech companies, the disarray it evoked yielded an even greater result!

Commander Norton cleverly developed a plan that made maximum use of the Doom Guard's deterrence effect.

As a veteran of the Sentinel Army, he understood keenly that an enemy that aborted a charge in an abrupt and unplanned fashion was very vulnerable to follow-up attacks!

Just as Commander Feriz and her Steel Howlers turned around and tried to put themselves back together, the Shieldbearer mechs that positioned themselves at the sides suddenly pounced, sandwiching the pirate mechs from two sides!

Casualties rapidly mounted among the beleaguered Howlers as the pirate mech pilots still suffered from the lingering trauma of their exposure to the Doom Guard's aura!

With the striker mech still blocking the way forward, none of the Howlers dared to proceed any further!

Eventually, Commander Feriz realized that there was no profit to be made anymore. In fact, already suffered a lot of losses due to the Shieldbearers pressing her unorganized ranks of pirates from multiple directions!

"Retreat!"

In the end, the ferocious Steel Howlers tucked their tails between their legs and fled without anything to show for their efforts.

Meanwhile, the Shieldbearers earned big! They not only secured a decent amount of salvage and redeemed a number of bounties on the heads of the pirates they captured, but also received a generous combat and victory bonus from their contract. On top of that, their amazing victory propelled their reputation to new heights, allowing them to accept much more lucrative missions!

And it was all thanks to a single new mech.

As soon as this incident was made public, the demand of the mech in question rapidly soared!

More and more incidents where the new mech was put to use emerged onto the galactic net. Journalists who knew exactly what their audience wanted to know eagerly highlighted any battle where the Doom Guard was put to work!

Though a number of blunders and unavoidable defeats took place, most of the stories circulating in the mech publications backed up the promises made by the LMC.

It turned out that the Doom Guard's glow indeed worked remarkably well on pirates! The exaggerated demonstrations at the product reveal had a basis in truth after all!

Orders for the Doom Guard rapidly increased, though the months-long backlog meant that most customers wouldn't receive their copy for a fairly long time.

The LMC was already trying its best to partner up with more third-party manufacturers to meet the spiking demand, but the challenges relating to its production continued to pose a hindrance.

Regardless, money kept rolling in like no tomorrow!

To be honest, Ves was astounded by the amount of gains he made. When he initially conceived of the concept that would become the Doom Guard, he thought it would have a fairly limited market appeal. Striker mechs never sold in huge numbers, particularly the spaceborn models.

Yet due to its attractive combination of strengths, the Doom Guard provided substantially more utility than the typical striker mech. Its terror glow was so new, innovative and useful that the market basically elevated it into its market category!

This was an incredibly positive development. The LMC poured even more resources in facilitating the marketing, sales and support of its latest product.

The enormous publicity surrounding the release of the Doom Guard along with the astonishing successes of its early adopters constantly continued to make the mech model more famous.

In several states, the mech had practically turned into a household topic! Even people who never paid attention to mechs began to learn about this much-hyped product that they would never get to touch in their lives!

All the while, Ves could hardly keep up with the rewards he managed to gain. Though his Larkinson Clan's growing expenses immediately respent most of the earnings, there was plenty of money left to spend.

What surprised him the most was the amount of money the LMC made outside of the star sector. The Doom Guard was its first product that earned a substantial amount of money outside the Komodo Star Sector!

What was remarkable about this new income stream was that it wasn't based on the sale of mechs. At least not at first.

When the MTA validated the Doom Guard design, it set a very considerable price of 400 million hex credits for a standard 10-year production licence.

Any mech designer or mech company that wanted to play around with the unique design had to cough up a considerable amount of money upfront!

Though the mech industry of the Komodo Star Sector already learned the hard way that there was hardly any profit to be made out of developing variants of LMC products, the other star sectors weren't as informed!

A decent number of foreign mech designers with only a passing familiarity with the LMC refused to consider that they would suffer the same fate as the hicks from the frontier star sector!

These thoughts didn't just proliferate in the mech industry of just one star sector. A huge number of mech designers operated in the entire Yeina Star Cluster. Even if just a fraction of them were adventurous enough to invest in a product license, collectively they made for a considerable amount of people!

For this reason, the LMC suddenly earned a considerable windfall just from licensing the Doom Guard design!

Naturally, Ves strongly suspected that there were even more mech designers who simply pirated his design and experimented with it in private, but he couldn't do anything about it anyway.

What mattered was that there were enough upright and hopeful mech designers who wanted to develop their own commercially-viable variants of his Doom Guard design!

"Just look at these suckers!" Gavin exulted during a daily briefing. "We managed to scam over a hundred mech designers throughout the star cluster! That is the easiest 40 billion hex credits that we have earned in a week!"

"It's too bad the cluster-wide mech industry will quickly learn its lesson." Raymond noted. Due to the importance of this meeting, he decided to take some time off his very busy schedule to attend this meeting. With so much business activity, his leadership was needed more than ever! "There are still plenty of mech designers who studied the disastrous track records of those who tried before."

"Mech designers are all smart and educated." Ves said. "Those with the capability of throwing 400 million hex credits on a single mech production license haven't made it this far by being incompetent."

"While that's true, success is often paired with arrogance." Raymond succinctly noted.

Ves took a look at the list of the people and companies who licensed his Doom Guard design. Most of them did have the capital to be arrogant. Some of them even possessed specialties that synergized well with his product. There was a logic behind their choice.

It was too bad that the volatility of his glows in his mech designs was much more than they thought. Once they began to shift the design away from its original vision, its spiritual foundation would no longer conform as much to the design spirit. It became much harder for the combination of Zeigra and Nyxie to exert their individuals glows through the resulting variant.

"Well, we can still put this windfall to good use." Ves grinned. "I have already decided to expand the operation of the Larkinson Biotech Institute. We need to accommodate and provide a lot of medical facilities to Dr. Ranya and our newly-hired exobiologists, geneticists and medical specialists."

"You've invested 10 billion hex credits already!" Gavin complained. "We could have put that money to many other uses!"

"Augmentations are vital if we want to remain competitive at a greater stage. Merely relying on Ranya alone won't meet the needs of our growing clan. We need to build a dedicated arm within our clan that specializes in all of our medical, biological and augmentation needs."

The Larkinson Biotech Institute was the new incarnation of the Larkinson Exobiology Institute. The name change reflected the expanded scope of the institute. Ves had admittedly neglected it after its previous leader turned traitor.

The worsening financial outlook of the clan left Ves very reluctant to invest in its development.

Yet now that his Doom Guard design generated vastly more money than he had ever dreamt of, Ves could finally allocate money on some neglected priorities!

"He's right, Gavin." Raymond gently said. "The waiting list for augmentation procedures is too long. Too many Larkinsons are requesting upgrades and we can't make them wait too long. So far, we've been able to take advantage of the clinics on Cinach VI, but we won't always enjoy access to them. It's better if we meet this need in-house."

Ves smiled. "I'm glad you understand. The ten billion hex credits that we are investing in the Larkinson Biotech Institute will pay off in spades when it is finally capable of augmenting our clansmen with high-quality second-class implants!"

This was why it was important for him to secure the loyalty and services of Ranya. She possessed a much better grasp on these kinds of implants than the third-raters that made up the rest of the institute.

There was another reason why he invested such a huge sum of money in the institute at once. Part of the money was supposed to be spent on constructing a small but highly secure biolab aboard the Scarlet Rose.

Not only would the compartment be isolated from the rest of the ship, but all of its advanced lab equipment had to be carefully built by hand in order to ensure they did not possess any backdoors.

The high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum had to be studied!

Ves was very interested in cracking the mystery behind its remarkable spiritual properties, while Ranya wanted to decipher some of its profound activities.

Right now, Ves had locked the serum within the B-stone lockbox in the most secure section of the Scarlet Rose's vault.

He only allowed Ranya to study the tiny droplet of serum for only a couple of hours a week.

Ves knew that it held an intense attraction to her, and he used her obsession with it to motivate her. As long as she ran the Larkinson Biotech Institute well, she could gain more time with the sample!

Though Ranya reacted with disappointment with all of these restrictions, she also became more fired up than ever! As far as she was concerned, joining the Larkinson Clan was the best decision of her life!

"What do you want to do with the remaining windfall?" Gavin asked.

"I'll leave that up to the governing organs of the Larkinson Clan." Ves nodded to Raymond. "I know that there are plenty of projects and initiatives that need funding. This is the time to spend it all. There is not much point to skimping on our spending when we might be heading somewhere dangerous."

Ves didn't even preserve his own growing personal fortune. At this time, his fate was closely intertwined with the Larkinson Clan. Strengthening one automatically strengthened the other.

Every hex credit he spent at this time would pay back ten or a hundred times back in the future!

The three continued to discuss the possible ways of spending both the windfall and the growing amount of regular earnings.

Though it was still too premature to acquire an entire fleet of second-class starships, this time it didn't sound as outlandish as before!

"Let's wait until I've designed additional commercial mechs." Ves decided. "As long as our subsequent market offerings are able to coast off the success of our Doom Guard, I will personally reach out to a Hexer shipbuilding company!"

"Meow."

Ves chuckled as he looked down at the cat resting on his lap. "Don't worry. I haven't forgotten about you either. I'll provide plenty food for you as well!"

"Meow!"

Chapter 2075 Weighing Benefits

"Ves! Come here right this instant!"

As soon as he returned to the bedroom he shared with Gloriana, he blinked.

Lucky squirmed out of his grasp and flew towards Clixie. The two cats nuzzled their noses at each other before hugging their bodies together. They both looked at their owners as if they were about to witness a good show!

Ves slowly loosened the collar of his uniform while he approached his scowling girlfriend.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Ves?"

He scratched his head. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Don't play stupid with me! Don't you realize what you've done?!"

"Uhhh.. no?"

"You pressed my cousin into the Larkinson Clan!"

"You mean Ranya?" Ves finally realized what she was talking about. "I made an offer to her, and she accepted. What's the big deal?"

Gloriana marched in front of his face! "You.. you idiot! She's a Wodin! She's my relative! You should have broached your intentions to me first before you turned her into a

Larkinson? Don't you know how much noise I've heard from my relatives back home? Ranya will never be welcome at home again!"

"That's not a concern, because our clan won't be travelling to the Hegemony anytime soon. Once she pledged the oath, she became a Larkinson first and a Wodin second. That is the rule."

"I know that." Gloriana hissed. "What I am trying to say is that you could have gotten what you wanted in a much less controversial manner if you solicited my input first! Besides, Ranya is my cousin, and I should have been the one to raise this topic with her, not you! I still can't believe you went behind my back!"

Ves frowned and crossed his arms. "I am in charge of the Larkinson Clan. I make the decisions here. While I agree that I should have consulted you first, the agreement that we've made in the end only concerns Ranya, myself and the clan. Your involvement isn't needed."

"I'm a part of the clan as well! I have a say as well!"

He shook his head. "Officially, you are a lead designer of the LMC. That is your title in the clan. While you have a lot of say on what goes on in the Design Department, that does not give you the authority to decide on our other matters."

Gloriana didn't enjoy hearing that! She looked ready to explode!

Eventually, she turned around and huffed!

"Fine! Whatever! Just don't do it again, Ves!"

"Don't worry. It's not like I'm able to recruit Brutus."

"With your Devil Tongue, who knows."

Though Gloriana still remained pissed throughout the night, at least she didn't pursue the matter further.

She still remained catty for the next couple of days. The tension between them hindered them from focusing on their Hexer mech design project.

Even though the first iteration of this mech design had reached an advanced stage, they still had plenty more optimization to do! All of this was tedious work and couldn't entirely be passed on to their design teams due to the complexity and highly-advanced nature of the knight mech design.

Ves frowned and pressed his fingers against his forehead. There were so many more variables he needed to take into account that his brain matter couldn't keep up with the workload of his implant.

Right now, the pair were taking a break. While Gloriana went off to perform her irregular prayers, Ves thought about the many priorities he needed to address.

He looked around before sneaking his hand in his uniform pocket. His fingers reached a small container inside a small pouch made out of Synthra Umbra fabric.

Once he slipped his finger into the pouch, he extended his spiritual senses through it and felt the vibrant patterns of life churning inside the serum droplet he carried around!

Its value was too great for Ves to leave in Ranya's hands.

Aside from keeping it close and secure, he also had another reason for carrying it on his person.

He liked to observe its mysterious spiritual fluctuations frequently throughout the day.

While the minute sample of life-prolonging treatment serum had lots most of the insanely concentrated potency of the full dose, that was not necessarily a downside.

Sure, the sample only contained a fraction of the majesty of the entire vial, but its spiritual activity no longer burned his spiritual senses like a sun!

After comparing the spiritual power levels between the tiny sample and the main dose, Ves realized that the sample contained disproportionately less life than its quantity suggested.

Most of the life was locked in the main body. When Ves extracted the sample out of the vial, the droplet evidently became detached from the collective.

Its vastly-reduced complexity and power level allowed Ves to study it without suffering a backlash.

So far, Ves learned nothing useful. He had no idea what went on inside the serum. His foundation in spiritual engineering was incredibly shallow, so much so that he wasn't even aware of the basic ground rules behind the spiritual activity of the sample!

Ves might as well be a caveman looking at the propulsion system of a shuttle. The knowledge gap was simply too wide for him to gain a solid understanding of what he was looking at! Let alone figuring out its basic principles, Ves the caveman wouldn't even be able to take it apart in order to use one of the exhaust pipes as an improvised club!

Regardless, the serum was filled with the energies of life, and that fascinated him a lot. He spent hours staring at it. He didn't even attempt to study its patterns in the hopes of figuring out some rules. He simply regarded it as a piece of art and enjoyed its lively fluctuations as if he was watching an interesting drama.

It was difficult to describe his irrational obsession with the serum. Though he acknowledged its incredible value, that did not justify all of the hours he wasted! He could have spent that time on much more productive uses!

Yet... Ves still insisted on this seemingly-useless activity. There was something soothing and harmonious about carrying the sample on his person and observing its inscrutable motions with his senses.

His mind often wandered in strange tangents during these moments.

He seriously contemplated what would happen if he swallowed the droplet.

He also considered leeching its still-potent spiritual energy.

With so much life-attributed spiritual energy locked in a very intricate balance, Ves wanted to try and merge it with his design seed or infuse it in some sort of mech or mech design!

What would it be like to empower a mech with some of the most vibrant energies of life in the galaxy?

Was this the ultimate key to realizing his ambition of making mechs alive?

The possibilities were endless.. but so were the dangers.

At best, he would merely waste something of enormous value. At worse, his reckless experimentation might result in his death!

The truth of the matter was that he knew too little about the nature, properties and underlying rules behind the serum.

Though his intuition didn't know what to make of it, Ves had a hunch that he could derive a lot of gains if he experimented with it in various ways.

When Ves met with Ranya at the Scarlet Rose's new restricted biolab, the new Wodin-Larkinson voiced a similar desire.

"In my field, there is so much I can accomplish through passive observation." She stated to Ves as she paid close attention to the readouts of the current scanning operation. "While I'm very grateful for the opportunity to observe the sample, I.. can gain much more if I can manipulate it. If I can just extract some of its particles and use them

up in various experiments, the insights that I can gain are immeasurable! The more you give me, the greater the amount of value I can give in return!"

She looked carefully at Ves amidst the newly-installed lab machines.

Only a handful of lab equipment had been carried over from the Frozen Leaf so far. They had already ordered a whole set of advanced biotech equipment from the Hegemony, but it would take some time for them to be shipped to the Cinach System.

Ves knew why Ranya was being careful around this topic. A complete dose of life-prolonging treatment serum was of inestimate value to everyone, including himself!

Who didn't want to live forever? While the serum that fell into his possession was only able to add an extra hundred years to the life of a 300-year old, this was still an amazing benefit that cost a huge amount of merits to redeem from the MTA!

With such an amazing effect at his disposal, the very thought of using a portion of it in destructive experiments was blasphemous!

Any other person would have blown up at the mere suggestion!

Yet.. Ves didn't show any sign of dismissal. Instead, he looked thoughtful.

The truth was that Ves was in the same boat as Ranya. He recognized the value of the serum, both as a means to extend his lifespan and a priceless trade good that he could exchange for countless different benefits.

Yet.. those obvious options weren't as straightforward as they appeared.

He was still in his early thirties! Even without any life-prolonging serum, all of the gene optimizations he received had already extended his lifespan to an estimated 180 years!

This meant that pursuing life-prolonging treatments wouldn't be a priority to him for a very long time.

Even if it became relevant, he would have to be at least three centuries old before this specific serum became relevant!

Three-hundred years was a lot of time. To the less talented mech designers, it was far from enough, but Ves was different! He was a lot more confident in his abilities! With all of the advantages he enjoyed, he refused to believe that he would fail to advance to master within the first two centuries of his life!

In short, the primary use of the serum wasn't very relevant to him. By the time he became this old, he would probably be in a position to earn the serum through his own efforts!

The same applied to Gloriana!

Therefore, the only other uses of the serum was to extend the life of someone else or to trade it for a host of valuable concessions.

Ves already ruled out using it on others. The gains from extending the life of someone who wasn't in the position to earn it themselves was not a profitable transaction.

As for exchanging it for something else of value, Ves wasn't too hopeful about it. The biggest problem about the serum was two-fold.

First, it was stolen goods. Once the CFA got wind of its existence, Ves bet that he would immediately receive another visit from Lieutenant Stimmons!

Second, its value was so high that there was a high risk that his trading partner would renege on the deal! It was too painful to sacrifice so many valuables to obtain the serum.

It was a much better deal to bring a lot of mechs and rob the serum from his hands!

His distrust of strangers amplified this fear. If Ves was in their position, he wouldn't hesitate to do the same!

"Ugh." He eventually grunted. "It's way too early to consider such a contentious matter. For now, just make do with passive observations, and try your best to figure out any potential uses of making active use of the serum. I won't say I will approve of them if they sound good, but it would be nice to explore this option."

Dr. Ranya looked hopeful. "I'll do my best to develop a concrete use of a sample! It is not unreasonable to assume that this serum has many more uses than extending the life of a geezer."

The question was, would the potential benefits of experimenting on it outweigh the benefits of the other options?

Ves didn't know. This decision was fraught with uncertainty, and the risk of suffering was considerable!

Yet... compared to the more conventional options, he somehow yearned to experiment with it. Even if the gains he made was less than extending his life by a century in the future, the timing was incredibly relevant!

Giving up a substantial benefit in the future for a smaller benefit in the present was not his style.

In many of his previous decisions, he preferred to invest for the future and lay the groundwork of long-term success and profit.

Yet.. this was a different kind of investment. If he could develop a new application of his design philosophy or design some sort of amazing new mech, the gains he earned in the shorter term would eventually snowball into a considerable lead over his original trajectory!

This was a risky investment that could very well pay off handsomely! Being able to advance to Master sooner or rising into power faster were both possible if he could master some of the power of the serum!

What choice should he make?

Chapter 2076 The Purple Hangmen

The sales of the Doom Guard continued to explode in popularity. After some delays, practically every state in Hegemony-aligned space aside from the ones with extremely restrictive economies put the model on the market.

Sales continued to grow apace, though the constant production challenges related with production continued to hamper its supply.

The mech industry suddenly generated a huge demand for strong-willed mech technicians! After a lot of trial and error, the mech manufacturing companies finally concluded that veterans performed the best when assigned to fabricate the Doom Guard mechs.

It made a lot of sense. Those who had served in the military and experienced war should not be so easy to crack.

Even if the veterans hadn't seen much action, the discipline and confidence they gained during their service time was of inestimable value. Ordinarily civilians couldn't hope to match their resilience against hardships and adversity!

As the mech community continued to explore the Doom Guard model, more and more knowledge was being shared. Everyone realized that there were a lot of facets of the mechs that weren't immediately apparent.

A new community around the Doom Guard had sprung up. Enthusiasts and professionals both gathered together to drool over the model and swap various theories.

An increasing amount of guidelines formed from this community.

They described what kind of traits a mech pilot needed to have in order to pilot the Doom Guard at its best.

They outlined what kind of methods should be used to repair or service the mech.

They suggested various battle tactics and deployment strategies to make the best use of the Doom Guard in battle.

They also elaborated on the distances that people should stay from an active Doom Guard in order to train their minds without the risk of suffering breakdowns.

More importantly, the community also started to describe possible counters to the Doom Guard.

The most obvious counter to the Doom Guard was focusing on it with an abundance of ranged fire.

Though the Doom Guard was 'technically' a ranged mech, it effectively posed no threat to a mech that floated a kilometer away. The Enison Spreader at its tightest concentration simply couldn't reach that far ahead!

The Doom Guard fit the striker mech archetype too well. It inherited all of the strengths as well as the weaknesses of this mech type.

However, though its vulnerabilities were obvious to everyone, that didn't mean that the enemy could exploit it so easily!

Those who bought the Doom Guard never let this precious mech fend off the enemy alone. Oftentimes, the outfits who fielded this mech carefully covered it with a host of ranged mechs.

Additionally, in order to protect it from ranged fire, the mech commanders also deployed at least one space knight piloted by a strong-willed mech pilot to serve as its shield!

Such fortress formations soon began to proliferate among the buyers of the Doom Guard. The tactics they utilized rapidly began to frustrate the pirates beyond belief!

"Ves Larkinson deserves to be killed! I lost half my boys and mechs due to his damnable new mech!"

"I'm putting a bounty on his head! Oh, he already has one? Well, I'll add some more, then! I can't stand the sight of another Doom Guard!"

In a state close to the Sentinel Kingdom, a medium-sized asteroid mining base came under assault.

The base had been built into the structure of a large asteroid floating in a large belt. The mining company put the base in operation for over ten years now, expanding its fleet of mining vehicles on a steady basis.

Prospectors had long discovered the presence of various junk exotics and low-grade exotics in the asteroid belt. The only problem was that their concentration and incidence was rather low. The prospectors at the mining base had to scan and inspect new asteroids every day in order to find a rock with a meaningful quantity of valuable materials.

Even though the efficiency and scale of mining operations was rather low, the base still generated a tidy profit for the mining company.

However, due to the relatively low value of the minerals being mined, the company never invested too much in its security. It merely contracted a local security company to garrison the base and man its handful of turrets.

Since the establishment of the base, it had never suffered an attack.

Until now.

"Why are the pirates attacking us of all people?! We're just mining bulk exotics, for heaven's sake!"

"They must have heard our warehouses are almost full! The company was supposed to dispatch a convoy to us in less than a week!"

The pirate gang called the Purple Hangmen came prepared. Commander Brian Zecs was not an average criminal who worked his way up the ranks, but used to serve in a mech army before deserting!

Over the years, Commander Zecs managed to build a decent gang of pirates that employed a bit more tactics than was common among their ilk. Combined with the ferocity that was typical to their kind, the Hangmen made a name for themselves with their iconic purple mechs!

"Boss, you were right! The outdated guard mechs are no match against our new lasers!"

"Haha! Our inside man has come true! One of the turrets has just blown up and another is malfunctioning!"

Commander Zecs flicked his long silver hair and grinned as his axeman mech hung back. Two companies of melee mechs closed in. Though the makeshift shields they carried slowed down their advance, the firepower of the guard mechs weren't sufficient to repel the advance, especially since their turrets were rapidly being taken out through a combination of sabotage and focused fire.

While the defenders still fielded a lot of ranged mechs, the mining company had skimped on them and instead relied on a large number of stationary turrets to make up for the shortfall!

Now, that decision came to haunt the decision makers. Commander Zecs never initiated a blind assault. Owing to his officer training, he always researched his targets carefully and tried his best to stack the deck in his favor long before he launched his attack!

His favored tactic was to bribe a man on the inside to sabotage the defenses prior to an assault.

The deserter knew quite well that a typical security technician or security guard didn't earn that well. They worked long, monotonous jobs in isolated regions without any cities or settlements within reach. There wasn't much they could do in their off-time since they were pretty much stuck in the middle of nowhere!

The frustration of living in a drab environment combined with a lack of rich compensation always generated some malcontents.

For this attack, Zecs didn't just bribe a single worker. He threw money at several of them, each holding separate positions!

The money he spent on converting these greedy idiots was enough to add two or three cheap mechs to his lineup.

Yet the pirate commander knew very well that the benefit from adding a couple more mechs to his battle lineup paled in comparison to paying those bribes!

Even as the assault continued, the effects of the sabotage became more and more evident.

More and more turrets inexplicably lost power as some critical components malfunctioned.

A number of defending mechs faltered in their counterattacks as some of their rifles fizzled.

Though these disruptions weren't widespread, the fear and worry they caused in the ranks of the security personnel eroded their battle will!

As a former military officer, Commander Zecs recognized what that meant. A battle was not just about a contest of mechs!

It was also a contest of will and determination!

The signs of weakness within the ranks of defenders not only depressed their morale, but also boosted the morale of the attacking pirates!

His boys all smelled blood. Pirates all loved easy prey, and the declining trend of the defenders made it all the more easier to harvest a fortune!

Yet just as the melee mechs of the Purple Hangmen reached the defensive line in two prongs, a pair of mechs suddenly emerged from the ranks of security mechs.

The mining company had recently shipped the mechs to the base!

"Doom Guards!"

The ranks of pirate mechs shuddered a bit. By now, the notorious LMC mech model had already built up a dreadful reputation among the pirate community.

Yet to the surprise of the defenders, the pirates didn't let up on their assault!

"Continue the assault!" Commander Zecs hollared over the command channel. "We planned for this! We knew they would show up! Trust in my plan!"

"Yes, boss!"

The men on the inside already passed on word to Zecs that the base recently acquired a pair of Doom Guards.

When he heard the news, he almost aborted this raid.

Yet if he did so, he would waste months of preparations as well as the money he invested in bribes. In the end, he could bring himself to give up this long-anticipated attack!

In his military days, he learned the importance of intelligence and preparation. As long as he knew the mining base would field the Doom Guards, he could plan around this move!

After researching the Doom Guards extensively and trawling through all of the theories circulating on the galactic net, Commander Zecs decided to try out an interesting suggestion.

He grinned as his melee mechs closed in. As was typical in battles between pirates and security forces, the Purple Hangmen possessed an advantage in numbers, but their mechs were substantially weaker on average.

This didn't concern Commander Zecs too much because the disparity in numbers was often decisive in close-ranged battles! It was hard for a premium mech to defend against attacks from the front and back!

Just as the Purple Hangmen mechs neared the range of the Doom Guard, they decelerated!

The Doom Guards attacked anyway. Their large flamethrowers spewed hellish red flames in an expanding cone from their position, blanketing the surrounding space with persistent heat!

At the same time, the glow of the strikers already started to press on the minds of the pirates. Their high morale faltered a bit as they came under the impression that some awesome terror was looking into their souls!

If this continued, the Purple Hangmen might withdraw!

Yet before the situation reached this point, Commander Zecs issued a long-awaited command.

"Bring forth the Soldier mechs!"

Two mechs lingering behind his two mech companies suddenly moved forward!

The mechs looked second-hand and some of them bore marks of previous battles against the sandmen. The fresh purple coating applied to their exterior wouldn't be able to protect them much against the flames released by the Doom Guards!

However, the Desolate Soldier and Prideful Soldier weren't there to push through the wall of flames.

Commander Zecs merely acquired them in order to use their glows to counteract the glows of the Doom Guards!

"To fight monsters, we bought monsters of our own!" He viciously grinned.

One Desolate Soldier approached a Doom Guard while a Prideful Soldier approached the other Doom Guard!

Two different effects emerged.

The Desolate Soldier drawing closer to the enemy striker mech exhibited much less trouble. It seemed as if its mech pilot was much more capable of resisting the Doom Guard!

Unfortunately, the Purple Hangmen quickly found out that the Desolate Soldier's immunity only applied to itself. The mech pilot reported that the mech seemed to help with stiffening him up, but not much more.

The situation was a bit different with the Prideful Soldier. As soon as the mech approached the Doom Guard, the glow of both mechs started to change!

For some reason, the Prideful Soldier seemed to become a little more excited, while the glow of the Doom Guard gradually shifted in character!

The nauseous sensation along with the inexplicable sense of terror decreased. However, the Doom Guard soon began to grow more menacing, as if a slumbering exobeast had woken up in the depths of the striker mech!

It was too bad that the effect of this intimidating aura was less potent than the original glow of the Doom Guard!

Commander Zecs knew that this was the best he could get."

"Push through! The Doom Guards are neutered!"

The pirate mechs all accelerated forward even as their mech pilots came under the effect of a number of glows!

The positive glow of the Desolate Soldier seemed to pale in the presence of the Doom Guard. Though weak and feeble, the effect it had on the pirates was nonetheless useful as they became a little less prone to reaching their breaking points!

As for the Prideful Soldier, its glow had a very strange effect on the Doom Guard. Despite the latter's apparent weakness, it was still a very formidable mech. The flames it spewed seemed to have gained some life of their own!

The Doom Guards were still capable of functioning as regular striker mechs, and vigorously spread as many flames as possible!

The battle quickly grew chaotic and casualties rapidly mounted on both sides. In the confusion of all of the glows, every mech pilot fought different than usual!

Chapter 2077 Glow Interactions

The raid conducted by the Purple Hangmen quickly spread to the galactic net!

The battle was the first real example of a clash between glows!

Though battles between LMC mechs happened before, they mostly amounted to both sides pulling out their Soldier mechs.

Desolate Soldier against Desolate Soldier, Prideful Soldier against Prideful Soldier, Desolate Soldier against Prideful Soldier, the cases went on and on. The LMC continued to proliferate both mech throughout the Komodo Star Sector even after the end of the Sand War.

Most of these battles turned out to be rather tame and underwhelming. Both were ranged mechs that weren't very suited for battle against mechs. They were fragile and needed to enter medium range in order for their Sandbreaker rifles to land reliable hits.

Most outfits that fielded these mech models merely used them in a supportive capacity.

Legitimate organizations adored the duty-based glow of the Desolate Soldier. The presence of these mechs in a squad of mech company stiffened the sense of obligation of the career mech pilots, which meant that they were much less likely to slack off or put up a half-hearted fight!

In contrast, irregular and underground forces took a much greater fancy to the Prideful Soldier! The Desolate Soldier's glow was a bit too upright for their tastes. The Prideful Soldier was not only cheaper, but also more ferocious, which was exactly what scum relied on to win their battles!

As a result, a battle between a mercenary corps and a pirate gang usually devolved into a contest between defense and offense. The glows rarely came into range with each other, and even if they did, they largely focused on strengthening friendlies rather than weakening hostiles.

The Doom Guard was the first LMC mech with a negative glow. The mech was the first product designed by Ves and Gloriana that was meant to harm rather than help!

This meant that its interactions with the other mechs sold by the LMC became rather interesting! Depending on whether the different LMC mechs were being piloted by friendly or hostile mech pilots, the subsequent clashes between the glows produced some remarkable outcomes!

"The Doom Guard's glow isn't omnipotent!" Gavin stated with excitement, but not of the good kind! "The mech community is already experimenting. Some of the early adopters have already found ways to alter or suppress the Doom Guard's signature ability by fielding some of our older products!"

Ves blinked. To be honest, he never thought that something like this should happen.

Logically, he should have anticipated this outcome, but he never encountered this situation before in his previous mech designs.

In the past, the sales figures of his mech models weren't very impressive. The odds that two opponents would both field LMC against each other was rather slim.

Even if they did, the glows of the mechs never explicitly clashed against each other. Combining them together produced mildly-interesting results, but they didn't significantly shift the outcome of battles.

It was different this time. The inventiveness of the pirates and the armchair generals on the galactic net exceeded his imagination!

"I need to see this for myself." Ves immediately announced. "Call Commander Melkor and tell him to ready a couple of copies of every LMC mech model in his roster. I need to do some experimenting!"

He soon left his office and entered a nearby training ground reserved for the Avatars.

Due to the importance of this issue, Ves reluctantly called up his girlfriend as well. She soon arrived with Clixie nuzzling against her neck.

"Miaow."

"Hey there, Clixie."

The cat jumped into his arms and enjoyed his petting.

Meanwhile, Gloriana looked around the yard and stared at the Avatar mechs that had gathered a short distance away.

"What is this about, Ves?"

"It's about the interaction between our mechs." Ves replied, and briefly explained the battle involving the Purple Hangmen.

She raised her eyebrows. "I admittedly didn't think about it either, but it makes a lot of sense if you think about it. The proto-gods that you have invested in the mech designs are living entities. Some of them get along pretty well with each other, but not all. In our case, a confrontation between different mech models is not just a contest of technical performance, but also a clash between divine personalities!"

Though Ves disliked her constant allusions to divinity, he had to admit that the image she evoked wasn't that off the mark in this case.

The glows of a mech basically represented the spiritual domain of the design spirit. Within the area of effect, a portion of the will and presence of the spiritual entity in question gained dominance.

Sometimes, different glows existed alongside each other with hardly any problem. For example, the glow of the Aurora Titan and the glow of the Desolate Soldier complimented fairly well with each other. One focused on protection and the other on duty.

While the mech pilots that came under the influence of both didn't suddenly become twice as courageous, they still derived a bit more strength than usual!

In order to investigate these interactions even further, Ves wanted to conduct an immediate field test.

He turned to Commander Melkor who approached with an eclectic group of mech pilots in tow.

"Our mechs are ready to be deployed." He spoke. "Most of our mechs are spaceborn units, so they won't fight well on land."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "I don't need them to fight. I need to test every possible interaction between different glows."

The Avatar Commander frowned. "This is your specialty. How can you not know?"

"It wasn't relevant before. It's different now." Ves shrugged.

This time, Commander Melkor pulled out all the stops. He wanted to show off the strength of the Avatars!

For this reason, he summoned some interesting mech pilots to pilot the LMC mechs.

He suited up in order to pilot a Doom Guard in person.

He assigned Joshua and a radically devout Ylvainan to a pair of Deliverer mechs.

He asked Jannzi Larkinson to participate with her Shield of Samar.

He even tracked down Vincent Ricklin-Larkinson in order to call up his Adonis Colossus.

What surprised Ves the most was that Melkor even brought along Taon and James so that they could field their Transcendent Messengers!

Seeing older mechs standing alongside the newer ones was an interesting experience. They stood close enough together for their glows to blend in with each other in interesting ways.

Ves turned to the familiar faces who had all joined the Larkinson Clan.

He nodded in a friendly manner towards Jannzi and Joshua before turning his attention to the resident baboon of his clan. "Melkor, when I told you to call up every LMC mech, I meant that you should bring every mech in your mech roster. As far as I know, the Adonis Colossus is not a part of the Avatars!"

If someone as vain and ignorant as Vincent was able to qualify for the Avatars, Ves might as well kill himself right away!

"Hey, bro, don't be like that!" Vincent complained. "My mech is a bona fide LMC mech! It's one of a kind!"

Ves grimaced. "Don't call me 'bro'. While we Larkinsons aren't too big on formality, it is unbecoming of you to resort to slang."

"Oh come on, we're brothers! Calling you bro is a compliment!"

"Whatever."

He turned to the Ylvainans. Taon Melin stood a half step behind James as if he was an attendant.

"Bright Martyr." Taon Melin-Larkinson greeted him. "It is an honor to be called up to service!"

Ves hadn't really paid attention to the former Ylvainan. In fact, he almost forgot about the chosen of Zeal in his quest to ignore the existence of the True Believers in his clan!

It didn't help that the Larkinson Clan recently shifted its focus towards spaceborn operations. The landbound contingents received much less attention in recent months.

He studied the Transcendent Messengers. The sight of the stolen prototype offended Ves a bit, but it happened such a long time ago that he was more inclined to let this matter slide.

"Your Transcendent Messengers are impressive machines, but I think they could use an update."

"This is not necessary, sir." Taon spoke. "There are more mech designs that require your attention. I am already used to my machine and it will fare well in the land battles to come. You should take the time to design other essential mechs."

"Uhhh.. okay."

Gloriana, who stood at his side, chirped up. "Maybe I can work on this project by myself, Ves. As long as you can make sure that its glow remains the same, I can upgrade it to a second-class standard on my own! It will save you some effort and I can exercise my solo design capabilities on a wonderful design."

"I'm not so sure about that. The Transcendent Messenger is a very picky design." Ves frowned.

"It will be fine." James reassured. "Your lover is more than capable of working around your quirks."

Ves automatically ignored the Living Prophet's remark.

"Enough socializing. Let's proceed with the tests. We need to know how the Doom Guard's glow reacts in the presence of other glows."

The tests soon began. They weren't anything fancy. Ves merely ordered the opposing mech to approach each other in the center of the practice field while doing their best to treat each other as hostiles.

This was an important step. Most LMC mechs exerted its glows differently to allies and opponents. This could be considered one of the hidden built-in features of his mechs.

The first test was the simplest one. Ves merely called for two Doom Guards to confront each other.

Commander Melkor and a veteran Avatar piloted both machines. As they slowly neared each other with their slow and underpowered legs, the glows of the two mechs started to blend and superimpose with each other.

It didn't matter if the two mech pilots regarded each other as enemies. The glows of the Doom Guards reacted similar to the time when Ves called up an entire squad to enter the podium!

They strengthened each other!

It became significantly more difficult for Melkor and the other Doom Guard pilot to maintain their composure. While they hadn't reached their limits, it became a bit harder for them to maintain their concentration!

"Describe everything you feel no matter how inconsequential it sounds." Ves commanded over the communication channel. "I need to gather as much data as possible. While I am already recording all of the telemetry, I can't read your minds."

Ves hated this subjective, biased and imprecise method of data collection, but it wasn't as if he could get anything better.

Once he had his fill of putting two Doom Guards together, he ordered one of them to retreat and another mech to come forth.

He first started with his older and aging mech models. The Blackbeak's ferocity was no match against the Doom Guard. The latter easily suppressed the former! The difference in strength was too great!

The same went for the Crystal Lord. It held up marginally better, but it was clear that its obsolescence turned it into a poor match against the newer model.

"I already expected this result." Ves noted to Gloriana.

"I think these old mech models deserve a boost."

Once he got these mechs out of the way, Ves proceeded to do something more exciting. He proceeded to test the Doom Guard against the Desolate Soldier and Prideful Soldier.

The Desolate Soldier exhibited a straightforward reaction. Its glow gave ground to the gloom emanated by the Doom Guard. However, the mech pilot of the ranged mech was largely protected by the design spirit, allowing him to retain much of his wits!

"It's only useful for self-protection." Ves muttered.

"That's not useful at all considering the likely battle scenarios for the two mechs." Gloriana pointed out. "The Doom Guard is an immobile defensive mech that should never take part in an offensive action. The Desolate Soldier is a fragile ranged mechs that belong in the rear lines of any formation. There should be no instance that the mechs would ever confront each other at a range where their glows interact with each other!"

Compared to the Desolate Soldier's mundane result, the Prideful Soldier interacted substantially differently against a Doom Guard!

Chapter 2078 Countering Doom

The interaction between the Doom Guard and the Prideful Soldier was incredibly interesting.

The Doom Guard hosted both Zeigra and Nyxie at equal strength.

The Prideful Soldier primarily held the Solemn Guardian, but was also supplemented by a spiritual mote taken from Zeigra!

Therefore, the two radically-different mechs actually shared something in common!

The presence of the Prideful Soldier excited the Doom Guard's glow by strengthening the strength exerted by Zeigra!

It was as if he suddenly got 5 percent stronger or so. While that didn't sound like much, the perfect balance of the Doom Guard suddenly experienced a disruption!

Zeigra gained the upper hand and pressed Nyxie back. When the latter gave ground, his strong and pervasive ability to inspire terror directly dropped.

In exchange, the Doom Guard in question became a bit more aligned with Zeigra. This meant that the mech resembled more of a predator instead of an eldritch horror.

It was too bad that Zeigra and Nyxie weren't even in strength at their full forms. The former was just the remnant spirituality of an experimental exobeast. How could he ever match the strength of an ancient alien tyrant?

The end result was that the Prideful Soldier not only skewed the glow of the Doom Guard, but also weakened it in absolute terms!

While the weakening effect wasn't all that strong, it still mattered to an extent as the deterrence factor of the Doom Guard decreased. Giving more power to Zeigra was a net loss.

What Ves found remarkable was that the effect of putting two Prideful Soldiers in the range of the Doom Guard weakened the latter even further.

"How many Prideful Soldiers will it take to drop the Doom Guard's glow to its lowest point?" Gloriana wondered.

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "The Prideful Soldiers can't negate the Doom Guard's glow entirely. At most, their presence will simply turn the Doom Guard mech into a machine that is exclusively dominated by Zeigra."

In other words, it would effectively possess the same glow as Devil Tiger. It could also be considered the original incarnation of the Doom Guard before Ves deemed it too weak.

"Let's proceed with the next test."

They subjected the Doom Guard to a variety of Ylvainan mechs. The Holy Soldier, Deliverer and Transcendent Messenger all hosted Ylvaine's influence at varying degrees.

The Holy Soldier was by far the weakest since the mech mostly leaned on the Solemn Guardian. Its performance against the Doom Guard didn't fundamentally differ from that of the Desolate Soldier.

It was when Ves put forth the Deliverer and Transcendent Messenger that the results became rather interesting.

Just like the crowd of Ylvainans who prayed in front of an active Dom Guard, the mechs that contained a strong presence of the Great Prophet appeared to be resistant against the striker mech's terror!

Every Ylvainan mech exhibited hardly any hindrance even as they marched right up to a fearsome Doom Guard!

The only difference Ves noted was the telemetry transmitted by the cockpits. The weaker mech pilots exhibited significantly more stress, which meant that they had to put a lot more effort into keeping their cool!

The worst performer was Joshua in the Deliverer mech. While he had gained its design spirit's acceptance, they weren't exactly best buddies. Joshua had to focus on too many priorities while piloting this mech. Faith didn't come easy to the former Brighter.

In contrast, the performance of Taon Melin-Larkinson and James Ylvaine-Larkinson exemplified their ardent faith!

When Ves observed the feeds of the two Ylvainans in their cockpits, he noted that they derived their strength from different sources.

The expression on Taon's face suggested that he was relying on his zeal to power himself through! No monster in the dark could ever affect his conviction!

James on the other hand maintained an easy smile and a confident expression. His fit with his stolen Transcendent Messenger was incredibly high! He was the mech and the mech was him. It didn't seem as if James resisted the Doom Guard's glow at all. Instead, he was letting his own mech resist the external influence!

When Gloriana asked how James managed to perform so well, the Living Prophet spun his usual line of nonsense.

"Faith can be a shield. Your beliefs have power. As long as you realize that you are not alone, you will never have to endure any burdens by yourself! Think about it, Miss Wodin."

Ves immediately switched off the communication channel. "Ignore everything he said."

"I don't know, Ves. His advice sounds rather interesting..."

"He's merely spouting superstition!"

They soon moved on. Once the Ylvainan mechs withdrew, Ves tested two more mechs. He first brought forth a Bright Warrior.

The one that approached was in its swordsman mech configuration, but Ves didn't expect any meaningful differences. The glows of every configuration were identical.

From a technical standpoint, the Bright Warrior could easily crush the Doom Guard.

Glow or not, the performance disparity was too great! The Bright Warrior's exterior comprised almost entirely of Breyer alloy. This incredibly tough and resilient material could cook in the Doom Guard's flames for an eternity before showing any signs of damage!

Just because Cassandra's escape pod melted inside the chamber of the forging machine aboard the Scarlet Rose didn't mean the Bright Warrior was weak against thermal damage.

The mech was clad with a much thicker layer of Breyer alloy, and its armor system also incorporated several other means of mitigating heat!

Aside from that, flamethrower weapons weren't comparable at all compared to industrial machines. The only common aspect they shared was that they both applied heat to metal. Every other variable was different!

Therefore, as long as the mech pilot of the Bright Warrior wasn't a total coward, the bridge mech could easily crush the third-class striker mech!

Yet when it came to their glows, the roles were reversed!

The performance of the Bright Warrior's glow disappointed Ves. The Golden Cat's influence tried to resist the influence of Zeigra and Nyxie as best as possible, but the little cat simply couldn't contend against the two mature existences, especially in combination!

"Goldie needs time to ramp up." Ves shook his head. "Her strength is highly correlated to the state of the Larkinson Clan. Right now, we are just tens of thousands of clansmen. That is already rather big, but that isn't nearly enough to elevate her to the height of someone as formidable as Nyxie!"

It might take a decade or a century, but Ves was sure that the Golden Cat would be able to reach an astounding height some day!

That day was not today, though, and the Bright Warrior simply looked a bit sorry as it came closer to the Doom Guard.

"At the very least, the mech pilot of the Bright Warrior is faring such as well as the mech pilot of the Desolate Soldier." Ves concluded. "It's better than nothing."

Gloriana nodded. "We should just deploy the Bright Warriors in their rifleman mech configuration and blast the Doom Guard from a distance."

"That will take some time. The Illuminating Warrior features the weakest offense of the four configurations."

"Then a single Shining Warrior will do. When the lancer mech configuration charges a Doom Guard, the mech pilot of the former won't even have the time to experience the glow of the latter! By the time his mind has caught up, the striker mech should have already been pierced!"

"That's a viable point." Ves lit up a bit. "I think you don't even need to rely on a Bright Warrior. Any lancer mech model will do!"

The Doom Guard simply didn't possess the mobility to dodge an incoming charge from a decent lancer mech.

A lancer mech was a natural counter to a striker mech. Even knight mechs fared better because they could at least blunt some of the charging power by lifting their shields!

It was a bit fortunate that the pirates hadn't tried out this tactic yet. Lancer mechs tended to start at a relatively high price due to the need to make them sturdy enough to withstand the forces generated upon impact.

In addition, lancer mech pilots were considerably more difficult to find and raise. They needed to possess unmatched courage as well as excellent skill. It was too easy for them to kill themselves by botching their charges!

"We've seen enough. Start the final test."

An Aurora Titan stepped forth. This mech was rare even in the ranks of the Larkinson Clan. They were simply too limited in their application due to their abysmally low mobility.

In private, Ves also considered the mech to be rather outdated. It was a third-class space knight that forcefully tried to make use of a second-class gimmick. The polarizing module that took up so much space in the Aurora Titan could have easily come in a miniaturized form in a proper second-class defensive mech!

At least the Aurora Titan was fairly affordable as a result, but that was only relatively speaking.

Ves hadn't called up the Shield of Samar yet. He wanted to see how a regular copy fared against a Doom Guard.

He began to sense a lot of spiritual activity as the two diametrically-opposite mechs entered each other's influence.

The Aurora Titan began to come alive, and put more energy in its protective glow!

The mech pilot of the space pilot showed no strain! Even when the distance between the two mechs shrunk until they were practically touching each other, the Aurora Titan

and its mech pilot exhibited no discomfort at all! They were just like the Transcendent Messenger and James!

"This is promising!" Gloriana lit up as she observed the stress levels of the mech pilot. There was hardly any bump at all! "Unlike the Transcendent Messenger model which is only a private commission, the Aurora Titan is a commercial design! This is something that our customers can readily use to repel the glow of the Doom Guard!"

Both of them immediately saw the benefits. The LMC would easily be able to increase its earnings by boosting the sales of a seemingly-forgotten but incredibly profitable high-margin mech model!

Ves began to develop a suspicion. "Let me try something out."

He ordered the Blackbeaks, Crystal Lords, Desolate Soldiers and Bright Warriors to approach the Aurora Titan.

When the miscellaneous mech stood behind the space knight, Ves widened his eyes.

"The Aurora Titan is protecting the other mechs with its glow! It's strong enough to cover all of them in an umbrella!"

Qilanxo's strength bloomed in splendor in this test! Her spirit was roused and she keenly felt the threat from the Doom Guard. Nyxie especially caused her hackles to rise!

With her formidable strength as a centuries-old indigenous god when she was alive, Qilanxo's protective powers readily extended into the spiritual dimension!

"This is amazing!" Gloriana gushed. "If we let the public know, they'll surely take a second look at this mech!"

"My Aurora Titan design never achieved widespread popularity." Ves recalled the numbers. "It only sold in the low 10,000's if I recall, and that was mostly because my customers bought my other products and came to like my brand. It's not even on sale anymore in many states!"

Gloriana smiled. "It should be different now. The Aurora Titan looks as if you practically made it to resist the likes of the Doom Guard!"

To be honest, Ve felt rather bittersweet. It was rather disappointing for him to discover that a single mech negated the strongest selling point of the Doom Guard.

On the other hand, he recognized the benefit to this situation.

Apparently, it took an LMC mech to counter an LMC mech!

It was as if Ves was arming both sides of conflict. Regardless of which side won or lost, the LMC always profited in the end! The sales of one LMC mech encouraged the sales of another LMC mech!

"It's not so simple." Gloriana sadly remarked. "Both designs are low-mobility. The Aurora Titan isn't suited to attack, and neither is the Doom Guard. It will take ages for an attacking force to drag their Aurora Titans to the enemy battle line!"

Ves chuckled. "That's not as much of a problem as you think. Mech designers and mech technicians can be rather inventive if they need to be. We'll probably start hearing reports of Aurora Titans strapped to oversized boosters or being towed by a squad of mechs!"

Just because a mech's default configuration was rather slow didn't mean it had to stay that way! One of the biggest strengths of mechs was by how easily they could be modified!

Chapter 2079 Glow Arms Race

The confrontation of glows revealed a lot of new facets about the interaction between LMC mechs.

None of the outcomes broke any logic. Though Ves hadn't expected the Aurora Titan to be such a great defender against hostile glows, even that abided by some logic.

"As expected of a female proto-god." Gloriana smugly smirked as she petted her cat. "The Aurora Titan's proto-god is so powerful that she can fend off the two male proto-gods of the Doom Guard with ease! We women are the best and strongest gender, isn't that right, Clixie?"

"Miaow!"

Standing next to her, Ves palmed his face. "Zeigra is a lot younger than Qilanxo! Of course he's weaker! Meanwhile, Nyxie is heavily constrained and partially locked in slumber. If he is in his prime, he can crush us all with a single thought!"

His girlfriend didn't believe him. She threw a contemptuous look at him. "I expect our next mech design project to be stronger than the Doom Guard! As our first mech design for my home state, it has to be our best product to date, understood?! I won't allow you to shame our state by presenting something weak!"

"That... is a tall order. There's not that much we can do to make our knight mech stand out when we have to abide by so many restrictions."

Gloriana imperiously swept her hand towards the mechs on the practice field. "Look at your mechs. Our mechs. They're more powerful than other mechs because of your

glows. The domains they exude is the key to their success! I want you to make sure that our first Hexer mech design will not host a weak proto-god. We need to make a statement to the Hexadric Hegemony that we are not useless! Even at our current state, we can already contribute to the war effort! More importantly, we have to teach the Friday Coalition a lesson that their defeat is inevitable!"

"I get it!" Ves raised his hands. "I already planned some elaborate steps to ensure our remaining mech design project will result in something special. It will definitely surpass the Doom Guard in sophistication! Just make sure that you are ready to make a sacrifice."

"For our first collaborative Hexer mech design, I don't care about the price!"

The testing soon wound down. The final interesting interaction that took place was when Ves commanded Jannzi Larkinson to bring forth her Shield of Samar.

There was a qualitative difference between her performance with her customized Aurora Titan and the performance of a regular version of the model.

Her will had already been polished to a standard that was beyond human limits. Her degree of immersion with her own mech had reached an unparalleled standard for non-expert pilots.

The field of protection projected by the Shield of Samar reached much further out, and every individual affected by it enjoyed a considerably greater degree of protection against the Doom Guard's glow!

Ves and Gloriana made a couple of additional conclusions after they finished the tests.

First, the Aurora Titans and more specifically Qilanxo were practically made to shield against harmful glows. Unlike the other mechs, its focus on protecting others extended into the spiritual realm as well, thereby providing valuable protection to the minds of every vulnerable mech pilot within range!

Second, the effectiveness of glows that were able to resist harmful influences somewhat depended on the quality of the mech. However, the source of those glows mattered more. A powerful, protection-oriented spiritual entity like Qilanxo was vastly more suited to perform this role than a weaker offensive design spirit such as Zeigra!

The most the latter could do was to reduce the burden on the mech pilot of the mech. The amount of protection they offered to other friendlies around the mech was rather marginal!

Third, the strength of the mech pilot also mattered. Even if Jannzi Larkinson exited her Shield of Samar and boarded the cockpit of a regular Aurora Titan, she would still be

able to achieve more results due to her superior ability and excellent synergy with Qilanxo.

Putting a completely random mech pilot in a very advanced and eccentric mech like the Aurora Titan wouldn't end well!

A lot of new ideas swirled around in their heads. The release of the Doom Guard sparked an entirely new appreciation of the applications of Ves' design philosophy.

It was not enough to consider their effects on a standalone basis. From now on, Ves needed to take into account how they interacted with other existing glows!

"You know, Ves, we could start an arms race." Gloriana suggested with a grin. "When the Doom Guard gets more popular, mech buyers will either have to start fielding our strikers themselves or risk falling behind. At the same time, the demand for mechs that can counter its glow will increase. So far, only the LMC can give them what they need!"

"We already have the Aurora Titan."

"It's a defensive mech that is highly unsuited to confront the Doom Guard. In fact, the other way around applies as well. Both mechs are too sluggish. While you've already mentioned that their owners might solve this problem, this is way too troublesome and requires a lot of extraneous tinkering. The fact of the matter is that the market will gradually demand a mech from the LMC that can offer the same degree of protection as the Aurora Titan but in a much more mobile package."

This was the glow arms race that Gloriana described. Ves ran through the scenarios in his mind and saw an opportunity to milk the mech market by continually releasing mechs that countered each other!

For example, he could design an affordable lancer mech with a protective to counter the Doom Guard.

He could then design an offensive swordsman ranged mech that could shred the lancer mech's glow.

After that, he might design a rifleman mech that neutralized the swordsman mech's offensive glow.

Ves could wait a couple of years between these critical product releases in order to make sure the latest mech models provided maximum value to their customers. The longer they dominated, the more the market accumulated pent-up demand for effective counters!

These kinds of arms races happened throughout the galactic mech market in many different corners. Direct contests between a small number of competitors were fairly rare, though, and they almost always took place at the higher levels.

Ves recognized that he and his products were in an abnormal situation.

First, as far as he was aware of, he was the only mech designer capable of designing mechs with glows. He was also the only mech designer who could design mechs that countered them in battle!

These two conditions meant that any arms race that Ves possibly sparked would only involve a single player, himself!

He would become his own competitor in a market where he held a monopoly!

If his fellow mech designers figured out these conditions, they would probably grow green with envy!

That was because anyone in Ves' position could abuse them in a way that allowed them to constantly rip off their customers!

Right now, the product margin for the Doom Guard was 25 percent. For every 2 million hex credits the LMC received per sale, the company roughly profited by 0.5 million hex credits. This was already decently high in the mech industry for a Journeyman-level offering.

This was just the start.

If Ves designed a cheap, mobile and effective counter against the Doom Guard, then he could make it cost just 1 million credits, but sell it for as much as 2.5 million hex credits!

As long as the LMC made sure the Doom Guards proliferated everywhere, the demand for a lancer mech that was perfectly set up to counter the fearsome striker mechs would be a product that many customers would pay a fortune to obtain!

If Ves and the LMC were shameless enough to take advantage of their monopoly status, then selling such a cheap product at extortionary prices was viable! Even if their customers complained and hurled insults at them, they would still fork over the money to buy the overpriced mechs, because they needed their capabilities!

This product development cycle could go on and on. Any customers who wanted to stay on top of the glow arms race were destined to become the LMC repeat customers so long as Ves maintained his monopoly!

Just thinking about how much his customy could jack up the margins made him wild! Making 60 percent or even 100 percent profit on his products would rapidly build up his fortune as long as he made sure the sales volumes remained high!

However, there was more to it than earning eye-popping profits.

"It's not so simple." Ves soon regained his calm. "Reputation is more important as well. If we truly spark off an unscrupulous glow arms race, the market will come to know us, but hate us as well. There will doubtlessly be a lot of people who will start to resent us. Soon enough, they'll figure out that the most effective way of beating this arms race is by assassinating me! Without my support, there will be no new mechs with glows, thereby saving all of my customers a lot of money!"

"Oh." Gloriana blinked. "I don't know. Assassinations aren't exactly common in the mech industry, and we're already growing stronger every day."

"I don't want to attract too much hatred." Ves shook his head. "In addition, there is morality to consider. I designed the Doom Guard explicitly to counter pirates and other irregular forces. Their penchant for fielding large quantities of cheap mechs is something that a defensive striker mech with a terror glow is perfectly suited to fend off. However, our Doom Guard is not very suited to go on the offensive, which is a deliberate design choice we've made to make sure it will largely be used by legitimate customers."

The point suddenly dawned upon Gloriana. "You don't want to empower the pirates!"

"Yes. There is something special about my design philosophy. The effectiveness of my glows is unrelated to the cost of a mech design. I can attach a glow that counters the Doom Guard to an incredibly affordable mech that costs just 150,000 hex credits. A mech that is ten times cheaper than a mech that a lot of defensive forces will begin to yield is perfect for pirates and all sorts of people who prefer to perform offensive missions! It will be easy to spread such a mech around and achieve a huge sales volume, but..."

"It's not necessarily the right thing to do. If such a product becomes associated with pirates..." Gloriana trailed off. There was no need for her to finish the sentence.

It wasn't as if Ves had any objections to doing business with pirates and scum. If there was a lot of profit to be made, he was very willing to pounce on the opportunities!

The problem was that it only benefited him in the short-term. As long as Ves continued to do business in such an ugly fashion, his reputation would sour to the point where he couldn't resist the inevitable backlash from the market!

Besides, despite the huge potential windfalls that pirates often earned, they were actually pretty poor on the whole. Their lack of market access and their many

inefficiencies meant that they truly didn't have much to spend. Even if they wanted something, they were much more inclined to steal what they wanted rather than pay for them honestly!

"The same rationale also applies to the reason why I haven't designed a new version of the Desolate Soldier." Ves reminded his girlfriend. "It was a necessary product for the Sand War, but now that this crisis has passed, I don't want it to spread too much. The potential for abuse by authorities is enormous and it doesn't help that the model is so cheap!"

"Your glows should have a price." She stated.

"Correct. I need to train the market to appreciate the premium bestowed by my glows. Even if I can attach it to cheap and disposable mech design, I will likely not release such a product. The cheaper the mech, the greater it devalues my glows. Such a mech will also easily fall within the budgets of various pirate forces, which are customers we should satisfy as little as possible."

In the end, Ves and Gloriana put away their fantasies. Sparking a glow arms race and exploiting it to its maximum potential sounded great, but neither of them could bear the ultimate cost of implementing it in an unscrupulous fashion.

"Don't get me wrong, a glow arms race still sounds like something we should do." Ves softly spoke. "We just have to be careful and rein ourselves in. We can't allow our greed for immediate profits to harm our long-term development. Money lasts until the moment you spend it. An excellent brand is something that can deliver lasting profits as long as we keep it intact!"

Another reason to rein in the glow arms race was the threat of competition. The greater demand for a counter to his glows, the greater the chance a mech designer might emerge who could shatter his spiritual component monopoly!

Chapter 2080 Poor Businessman

The whole excitement surrounding the newly-discovered interactions between different glows was just getting started.

The mech market gained an entirely new appreciation of LMC mechs, and many customers in foreign states who hadn't been exposed to them before began to dip into them for the very first time.

The LMC's market reach expanded every day as the demand for the Doom Guard and other products skyrocketed.

The Aurora Titan model, which had long been accumulating dust in the LMC's mech catalog, suddenly turned into a hot commodity!

The LMC quickly published a statement that described it as its most effective counter to the Doom Guard's glow!

Plenty of early adopters of the LMC's latest product felt pissed. Their seemingly-undefeatable striker mechs turned out to be easily countered by an old, existing product!

Soon enough, their complaints died down once they realized how unsuited the Aurora Titan was for offensive operations.

Only the defending side could make effective use of the Doom Guard and the Aurora Titan! As long as the enemy had to come to them, the relatively immobile mechs could employ their strengths to maximum effect!

In that sense, the Aurora Titan was far more useful to the customers who already bought a Doom Guard. The former mech could shield a lot of friendlies from the indiscriminate glow of the latter.

The addition of such a useful mech vastly increased the tactical flexibility of the outfit in question. It became easier to deploy more mechs around the Doom Guards in order to cover the striker mechs.

By cleverly positioning the Aurora Titans in relation to the Doom Guards, it was possible to form a solid line of mechs that hovered right behind the Doom Guards.

The only caveat was that a single Aurora Titan already cost a fortune!

"What the hell? This overengineered piece of crap that is as slow as slow costs 3 million hex credits to purchase? That's a ripoff!"

"I could buy three Doom Guards for the cost of two Aurora Titans!"

"Who cares about this polarizing module gimmick? Why doesn't the LMC release a cheaper version that skips this useless feature?!"

The glow arms race had already started. The LMC slightly jacked up the price of the Aurora Titan, but not too much considering its margin had already started off high to begin with. This was standard practice for a low-volume, high-margin niche product.

In fact, the LMC had actually dropped its price before when the new mech generation settled in. Now, the mech company reversed its decision as the orders for the product multiplied by a factor of 10,000!

That 'low-volume' description might not apply to the outdated mech model anymore, but the LMC was insistent on retaining its 'high-margin' nature!

In fact, Gavin even suggested that the LMC could still afford to pump up the price of the Aurora Titan to 4 million hex credits!

Ves immediately shot it down.

"Unacceptable! The current price bump can still be excused with reasonable arguments. Jacking it up by another million hex credits will just appear as naked profiteering! No one in the market will be stupid enough to realize that the LMC is just treating them as cash cows. I don't want my mech company to develop so much animosity from our customer base."

His assistant frowned. "I don't understand your obsession with reputation. Many mech companies in your position would have long taken advantage of our unique situation. So what if we exploit our monopoly? There is no right and wrong in business! There is only supply and demand! We offer something that is in huge demand, so it is only proper for us to raise our prices. Even if the buyers hurl insults at us, they will still value our products!"

"It will be ten times harder to build up the high esteem we've accumulated after we have torn it down. The market won't forget our transgressions so easily."

"Frankly, boss, I disagree. Your products will only become more useful over time as you develop your design philosophy further. The LMC's growing success already proves that your mech designs are desirable to a wide portion of the market. We could earn five to ten times as much profit if we actually do something useful with our monopoly!"

As a businessman, Ves agreed with Gavin.

As a mech designer, Ves did not agree with Gavin.

Throughout his career, Ves always considered himself to be a mech designer first. His progression and his desire to realize his ambition surpassed his desire to maximize his money-making potential!

"You don't understand, Benny, but you are not required to. I'm calling the shots here. The price of the Aurora Titan must not exceed the current price barring market-specific complications such as tariffs or surcharges."

Gavin looked disappointed, but Ves took no notice of it at all. This was the perk of being his own boss!

As the Larkinson Clan and the customers of the LMC avidly explored the myriad of interactions between different glows, Ves turned his attention back to his current priorities.

Right now, Ves wanted to finish the Hexer mech design project as quickly as possible. It had already suffered some delays due to all of the excitement surrounding the new Doom Guard design.

However, when Ves returned to the design lab, something else emerged that demanded his attention.

"The recruiters have finished sorting the mech designers who want to work for us?" Ves uttered with surprise.

Gloriana nodded. "I've already taken a brief look at them. They're all pretty good. Most notably, the applicants are all young, educated and vetted. Their personalities are neither too timid nor too arrogant. A considerable amount of them are fans of our work and dream of becoming Larkinsons."

"How many of them are locals and how many of them are foreigners?"

"A disproportionate number of commoners from the Sentinel Kingdom have applied." She explained. "In fact, we even received some applications from some promising nobles, but we rejected them out of hand due to their strong loyalties to their current houses. Despite this, almost a third of the foreigners make up the current list. The best and most confident citizens of neighboring states had to pay a considerable price to travel to the Cinach System. On average, their quality is higher, so we've been able to approve more of them than we thought."

"I see. So all of the prior vetting has been performed, right?"

"Yup. We even tested their integrity with our Bright Warriors. We didn't allow them to pledge an oath. It was enough to see if our clan god approves of them. In fact, we even threw out hundreds of spies and informants after exposing their true nature."

The Golden Cat was Ves' killer weapon against spies and other malicious people! Before her creation, Ves hated the constant infiltration that took place in his organizations.

His obsession with foiling spies and saboteurs was one of the most important reasons why he created the ancestral spirit! Even though he wasn't sure if everything turned out well, he was glad he succeeded in establishing a spiritual network that was intrinsically tied to the Larkinsons.

The existence of Goldie and the Larkinson Network was one of the biggest contributors to the stability of his rapidly-growing clan! Even if the number of adopted Larkinsons surpassed 20,000, there was little sign the newcomers were overwhelming the truebloods!

Of course, good vetting and thorough selection already weeded out a huge amount of unsuitable applicants.

"When will the final selection begin?"

"We can start tomorrow if that is what you want. The mech designers who passed all of our tests are all residing in a nearby hotel."

"Alright." Ves nodded. "Then let's send them a notice to show up tomorrow morning."

"How will we decide which ones to pick?" She asked. "There are a thousand mech designers to choose from. Each of them are desirable in their own way. What will be our criteria?"

Many more mech designers tried their luck, but failed to meet the standards of the LMC. With their current level of prestige, Ves and Gloriana no longer had to set their sights on average Novices and Apprentices.

Only the ones with higher potential deserved their consideration!

Of course, the truly talented mech designers were still scarce. Most of them either found success by starting their own businesses or had already been locked in by other rivals.

Even so, plenty of diamonds in the rough remained.

"Hmm.." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin for a while. "The ones who are most loyal and talented get priority. While I don't particularly care about their design philosophies, we should ensure we have a good amount of variety. I'll also keep my eye out on those with remarkable traits."

He didn't exactly explain the latter to Gloriana. What he truly meant was that he wanted to recruit at least a couple mech designers with spiritual potential!

In a massive group of thousand, reasonably talented mech designers, he refused to believe that none of them had the potential to advance to Journeyman!

Of course, hiring too many of them wasn't necessary. Ves mainly wanted to bolster his design teams right now. Obedience and humility mattered the most in this case. There was no room for egos in his design teams!

"I don't want you to hog all of the mech designers." Gloriana added. "Let me choose as well. I want at least half!"

"Alright, but don't go overboard."

"Incompetence is the last thing I want in my mech designers. By the way, I think we should increase the goal we set. Adding four more design teams sounds rather conservative. I think we can handle double this amount!"

"What?! You want to recruit eight design teams at once? Our Design Department will become a madhouse if we bring in so many mech designers at once!"

"Are you doubting our leadership ability?" Gloriana frowned and crossed her arms. "Our status is incomparable to theirs! Our authority is absolute. What you fear won't come true, especially considering the quality of the remaining applicants."

"I'm not thinking about that. I'm more concerned with the added burden of managing them all. Mech designers can't be led like other professionals. It is already a burden for me to manage the two design teams we have at the moment."

Gloriana shook her head. "That is why you should delegate, silly. Isn't that your favored solution to many of your problems within your company and your clan? Just hand over some authority to Ketis, Miles and anyone else you trust."

He already thought about that. Ves had a lot of doubts about this solution because none of his subordinate mech designers stood out in their management ability. The best out of the bunch was Miles, who already ran his own mech business for a time.

As for someone like Ketis, all she knew was hacking her problems with her greatsword!

"Trust in your people, Ves. They aren't as incapable as you think and they don't need to be coddled. Give them a challenge, and they will rise to the occasion."

While her words sounded wishy-washy, Ves was inclined to agree with her. He had treated his subordinate mech designers like children too much. While their professional capabilities weren't as good as his, they were still adults who worked hard to get to this point.

"I'll consider it." He eventually decided. "Hiring enough mech designers to fill up eight design teams is a rather huge change for us. With the size that we have adopted for our teams, that amounts to 48 mech designers!"

"We might as well round it up to fifty in that case."

"Yeah."

The thought of adding fifty new mech designers to the LMC's Design Department filled him with both dread and anticipation.

As long as he managed to keep them under control, they could contribute immensely to his design efforts!

"Let's see what tomorrow will bring."

Mech designs were vital to mech companies. The LMC had long been constrained by the limited output of mech designs from its undersized Design Department. Now that they were about to rectify this situation, Ves and Gloriana almost couldn't wait!