

Mech 2091

Chapter 2091 Master and Slave

A powerful rifleman mech maneuvered through space. With a powerful flight system and a slim construction, it moved with speed incarnate.

Yet as it deliberately let a number of positron beams hit its frame, the thinly plated armor of the mech proved to be deceptively tough! Though the power level of the beams had been tuned down, the sheer quantity of them hitting the mech was still a huge concern.

Various combat bots zipping about in space continued to deluge the rifleman mech with powerful beams of destruction, yet the most the rifleman mech suffered was just some scorch marks.

Soon enough, the mech pilot had enough. The mech brought its formidable-looking rifle to bear and fired a single shot.

The rifle's chamber glowed before the muzzle spat out a splintering bright beam that hit all of the bots at once!

If not for the fact that the rifle's power level had been forcefully reduced to an artificially low setting, a considerable amount of hardware would have been destroyed!

Nonetheless, each of the bots detected that they had been destroyed, so they no longer fired their potent positron weapons.

It was not that easy to disable so many bots at once! Each of them outputted an incredible amount of ECM. Other than hacking the bots or countering their ECM, hitting their small, nimble and fast-moving was easier said than done, especially all at the same time!

A regular second-class mech pilot could never accomplish such a feat with ease. Only those who touched the realm of the extraordinary could accomplish such an exceptional result!

Yet what happened in this corner of space was only a small part of the clandestine testing ground.

Adjacent to this zone were other zones!

Each of those zones featured an identical rifleman mech. Each of them let the bots hit them with numerous positron beam attacks before retaliating against them in a single blow, taking them all out with an unerringly-accurate blow!

More zones existed beyond these areas. If the view was zoomed out, then it turned out that a whopping fifty mechs delivered an identical performance!

What was even more remarkable was the mech in the center of it all. Occupying a much large zone than the other mechs, the machine glowed with the radiance of both an energy shield and a resonance shield!

A deluge of positron beams poured onto the shields of the mechs. Instead of letting one of the shields absorb the brunt of the attacks before reaching its limit, the mech instead alternated the absorption, allowing the two shields to support each other and thereby extending their longevity!

Just as the mech's two shields began to dim, the mech finally lifted its larger and much more powerful rifle. The entire surface of the weapon began to glow with resonance as an incredible amount of power accumulated inside the weapon.

The moment it fired, it was as if the entire surrounding environment was blinded by a flash!

The outcome was devastating.

Not a single drone survived.

The power of a resonating attack at this magnitude was too much for any of them to resist!

A lot of valuable hardware had been vaporized, leaving nothing but residual heat and scattered dust in their place. The cost of this single test was considerable, but the data recorded from this awe-inspiring display of power was worth it in the eyes of the organizers.

After years of planning and months of intensive development, the experimental new expert mech finally bared its fangs!

Once the lesser mechs completed their tests, they all left their zones and converged onto the expert mechs.

Though all fifty mechs exhibited the power reminiscent of an expert mech, their quality and performance paled in comparison to the real deal!

The mech in the center flew forward, and all of its escorts moved precisely in unison. It was rather disturbing how synchronized they moved. Only AIs could match this level of precision, but the fact of the matter was that every single mech was still under the control of their own mech pilots.

Each of them sat quietly in their cockpits. They exchanged no words or thoughts with each other. Their vacant, empty-eyed stares looked profoundly disturbing, yet the way they piloted their mechs was sublime.

This was an impossible sight as far as many people were concerned!

The formation of mechs flew a moderate distance before they reached a large hangar bay built into an asteroid. Once they entered, the mechs all stood down in unison.

Swarms of mech technicians began to approach the mechs.

Though the cockpits had all opened up, none of the mech pilots emerged aside from a single exception.

Venerable Ghanso Larkinson slowly climbed out of the cockpit of his expert mech and looked at the surrounding mechs with a troubled expression.

He saw how a team of mech technicians floated over to the open cockpits before gently pulling out the vacant-eyed mech pilots. Their piloting suits turned them weightless, causing the mech technicians to handle the unresponsive pilots as if they were objects.

Though the power of these mech pilots was considerable when they were fielded alongside Ghanso, now they were as weak as a kitten. Anyone could knock them out with ease!

The fact that every single mech pilot aside from himself acted like an idle bot disturbed Ghanso to no end.

Yet he did not issue a word of complaint. Expert pilot or not, he knew when he should keep his mouth shut.

This was his duty now. As he floated from his mech, his uniform reflected his new identity.

He had become an expert pilot in the service of the Coalition Reserve Corps. Though the switch happened many months ago, Ghanso still couldn't get used to the fact that he no longer served under the banner of the Bright Republic.

In truth, many mech pilots would have envied him for moving up. Serving a superior state such as the Friday Coalition is a much grander choice than serving a weak and inconsequential lesser state!

Ghanso didn't think so. If not for his duty and his desire to protect the Bright Republic, he wouldn't have embraced this new job at all. Even if he had become one of his home state's biggest sinners, he still desired to protect it even now! This was the true meaning of his conviction!

Though his mood was dark, his mind was bright. He believed he had a duty to uphold the torch of the Bright Republic.

No matter how many incentives the Gauge Dynasty and the Coalition Reserve Corps offered him, Ghanso would always consider himself a Brighter even if his citizenship had changed!

"No change in record can override the conviction in my heart!"

He was a true Brighter! He was a true Larkinson! In fact, he considered nearly every other Larkinson to have gone astray!

"The responsibility of restoring the Larkinson Family rests on my shoulders." He muttered. "Not even Ark can be trusted to lead my relatives now. In the end, he betrayed the Bright Republic as well."

Ark Larkinson's desertion was unforgivable in Ghanso's eyes! No matter how strained the relations between the Larkinson Family and the Bright Republic had become, all of it could have been water under the bridge if his relatives had just been patient!

Yet all of it became moot when the majority of his relatives escaped. Only a scant few diehard loyalists remained, and most of them consisted of old and stubborn veterans. There were simply too few true Larkinsons left to restore the family to a semblance of its old self.

If Ghanso wanted to restore the honor of the Larkinson Family, then he had to catch up to the fleeing rats and capture them himself!

Right now, the only way to do that was to borrow the power of the Friday Coalition. As long as the Fridaymen defeated the Hexers, the entire Komodo Star Sector would fall into the Coalition's grasp!

At that time, it would be as easy as pie for Ghanso to round all of the scattered Larkinsons up if they hadn't left the star sector!

"Without a state backing you up, let me see if you can withstand power, Ark!"

The existence of the Larkinson Family's most powerful expert pilot of the generation before his own loomed very large in his mind. For as long as he lived, Venerable Ark had become the childhood hero of every Larkinson that grew up under the former mech colonel's shadow!

Now that the hero had become a villain in Ghanso's eyes, it took a considerable amount of courage for him to even think about challenging the family's most famous war hero.

Yet Ghanso dared to do so because he had a powerful state backing him up. The mech he had just test-piloted was just a taste of what would come!

After flying through some corridors, he eventually reached a debriefing room. He sat down on a comfortable chair while facing the young woman seated on the opposite side of the desk.

An extensive grid of screens and projections floated before her. Lady Aisling Curver studied them for a moment longer before facing the former Brighter.

"This was a good test." She enthusiastically smiled. "Every single slave in the neural network exhibited a nearly identical degree of performance. We have managed to smooth out most of the unstable elements and fixed all of the critical bugs. Not a single slave has shown signs of incompatibility! You are truly one of the most remarkable masters that we have ever had the pleasure of working with. Your great merit is noted."

Ghanso frowned. "Milady, I already told you that I don't prefer to hear that term. Calling them 'slaves' is very demeaning, and I don't fancy myself their 'master'."

"I mean no offense, Venerable Ghanso." Lady Curver showed no sign of reproach. "These terms are common in the programming and computer engineering disciplines. The only way to stop these terms from being used is if you can persuade Master Huron to change his mind."

That was a non-starter. Ghanso had only met the esteemed Master a few times, but everytime he did, he felt as if he was looked down by an inscrutable existence!

The power, wealth and influence wielded by a Master Mech Designer was not something a foreign-born expert pilot could match.

Ghanso bowed his head once more.

"I don't know if I can continue leading those.. clones. While I admit that this neural network is amazing, the burden to my mind is considerable. Even with all of the augmentations I've received, it is not so simple to share my power to fifty mechs! As of now, I can only keep it up for ten minutes at most!"

Aisling did not look disappointed. "Ten minutes is enough considering all of the progress you made. I'm sure we can train your limits further. As long as you can manage to hold on for twenty minutes, Unit L will finally be ready to debut on the battlefields of the Komodo War! With the first neural network centered around an expert pilot, we will all become famous!"

Unit L was one of the latest brainchilds of Master Huron! Instead of forming a neural network among a group of regular mech pilots in an equal fashion, the Master instead formed an unequal neural network around a single expert mech!

Ghanso had gradually found out that this project had long been stalled due to Huron's inability to solicit a Fridayman expert pilot for this radical new innovation.

It was only when he came along that Master Huron could finally embark on this research project!

There had been plenty of bumps along the way. The most troubling of which was the sheer amount of clones that had been tested. Thousands of them had shown up in the previous months, but only fifty made it through the end.

Ghanso didn't ask where these clones came from.

Ghanso didn't ask how a few of them were able to arouse a measure of resonance after syncing up to his mind.

Ghanso didn't ask what was being done to the clones when they turned out to be 'defective'.

He preferred to steer his thoughts towards safer subjects, such as the state of his expert mech.

"The prototype has performed better than last time." He remarked. "I can't wait to pilot the completed version of the Charlemagne. In terms of firepower and mobility, I can't say enough good things about it. In fact, I'm still getting used to the power level of a mech of this caliber."

"Don't take too long. While the frontlines are relatively stable now, the Hexers might launch a surprise on us at any moment. We need Unit L to be battle ready as fast as possible. A single expert mech might not make much of a difference, but an expert mech acting in sync with fifty quasi-expert mechs can be a real game changer in a critical battle!"

It wouldn't be long before Venerable Ghanso Larkinson fought his first battle on behalf of his new masters!

Chapter 2092 Pay To Win

Ves had come a long way since he initially got his hands on the Mech Designer System. Just glancing at the sheer amount of Skills and Sub-Skills on his Status page was enough to make any other Journeyman jealous!

Nonetheless, Ves did not feel particularly proud. He knew that there were plenty of prodigies who could have accomplished the same without resorting to such a powerful aid.

Their natural intellect combined with a few modest implants and genetic tampering was enough to propel them to the top of their generation!

In comparison, the original Ves did not even have the qualifications to become an independent mech designer!

Even now, Gloriana showed little signs of falling behind. Ves genuinely admired his girlfriend for being able to improve every day without the ability to spend DP on acquiring a vast amount of knowledge in an instant.

She worked much harder than him when it came to expanding their knowledge base!

That did not mean that Ves necessarily wanted to follow in her footsteps. While he knew that it was worth it for him to spend at least some time on immersing himself in academic literature, that was mostly because he needed to learn something specific in order to solve a difficult problem.

As someone who was perennially short of time, Ves abhorred wasting it on an activity that could easily be substituted with DP. As long as he had enough points, he could skip years of diligent study!

Right now, Ves knew that it was time to take a few more steps towards the rank of Senior.

While it was unrealistic to believe he would be able to advance within five or ten years, all of those Senior-level Skills still provided a lot of benefits to a Journeyman.

At the very least, he would be able to design his mechs faster and with much more technical refinement than before!

"It's not a waste to spend 100,000 DP to upgrade a Main Skill. I can easily earn them all back once I embark on parallel mech design!"

As long as Ves made a good effort, he could earn 100,000 DP per completed mech design.

That didn't sound like much when it took three or four months to design a mech.

Yet with the addition of fifty new mech designers, it was no longer out of the question to engage in five mech design projects at the same time!

This effectively meant that Ves would be able to earn half a million Design Points in a couple of months!

Though he previously intended to retain a few hundred-thousand DP for emergencies, he was no longer as adamant about it. His life hadn't been threatened in months and

with the Glory Battalion and the Penitent Sisters hanging around, no one was stupid enough to try anything against him and his clan.

Instead, Ves felt an increasing urge to spend his points. Designing a second-class mech was not easy at all, and as someone who had just been a third-class mech designer until recently, he still lacked the depth of accumulation of someone like Gloriana.

He was still not a match compared to genuine second-class mech designers, and that had always bothered him when he designed his Hexer mech!

Though the System did not explicitly delineate its Skills and Sub-Skills by class, upgrading some of his Skills to Senior would definitely go a long way!

Now, Ves had to make a choice. Which Skills should he upgrade?

"Hmmm. Assembly will probably help me operate advanced production equipment even better, but that is only relevant after a mech design has been finalized."

Upgrading it would probably increase his odds of fabricating a masterwork mech, but that was not a critical priority at the moment.

"My Battle Mechatronics Skill is still at Apprentice-level. That is pretty bad."

To be fair, this Skill was not comparable to the other ones in terms of fundamentals. It was very interdisciplinary and was inexorably tied to other fields of science and engineering.

Still, it was incredibly useful in designing original mechs from scratch. Ves knew that it would also increase his understanding of non-humanoid mech models.

While Ves did not have a burning desire to design a lot of bestial mechs, understanding their principles to a greater degree was still helpful in many ways.

"I should at least upgrade it once."

[Battle Mechatronics - Journeyman]: 25,000 DP

The price was very affordable. Once Ves confirmed his selection, his DP balance immediately decreased, and a huge influx of knowledge suddenly entered his mind!

Surprisingly, Ves felt no strain at all. The transfer process happened at an instance!

"Huh?" He frowned in confusion. "Is this Skill truly that easy to learn?"

No. Once Ves looked into his mind, he discovered why acquiring so much knowledge hadn't exerted his mind at all. It turned out that his Archimedes Rubal implant pretty much received the entire dump of data!

"It stored everything!"

That wasn't all. Once his implant received every scrap of knowledge related to Journeyman-level Battle Mechatronics, it slowly started to feed the data to his partially-digitized mind.

The entire process proceeded in an unnaturally smooth and gentle fashion. Though Ves didn't feel anything, once his thoughts wandered to this field, he immediately called up a bunch of theories that he definitely hadn't mastered before!

His eyes widened. "This is incredible!"

The entire process didn't last that long. Though his implant tried its best to prevent his mind from becoming strained, the bandwidth of data transfer was actually pretty scary!

Due to the partial digitization of his mind, Ves had become very good at processing and internalizing a lot of data.

In the end, Ves acquired all of the knowledge in an incredibly controlled and efficient manner. It was a lot better than before!

He momentarily closed his eyes and tried to test the acuity of his new knowledge. He found out that he could already make use of it, just like before. Though his utilization rate remained lower than someone who had already applied the knowledge in their work, at the very least he was a lot better off than those who simply learned everything by rote memorization!

"This is great!"

His excitement quickly died down. Journeyman-level Skills no longer bothered him even without his implant. Only Senior-level Skills caused him to feel a lot of dread. Previously, it took weeks to internalize the sheer amount of knowledge!

"Hmmm. I have 300,000 DP in reserve. That's enough to upgrade two Senior-level Skills and pick up some valuable Sub-Skills that are highly relevant to my remaining project."

After spending so much DP, he would hardly have any DP left to buy a couple of attribute candies, but Ves believed he could soon make it up after he completed his Hexer mech design.

"What I've learned just now is already incredibly insightful. I should upgrade it once more!"

[Battle Mechatronics - Senior]: 100,000 DP

As soon as Ves spent a considerable amount of DP, the System immediately served him with a mission notice.

[Upgrade Mission]

Mission: Design a Non-Humanoid Amphibian Mech

Difficulty: C-Rank

Prerequisites: [Battle Mechatronics - Journeyman]

Description

Humanoid mechs are not the only mechs in existence. The advantage of machines is that they are not constrained by a specific form. In many cases, mechs that differ from the human aesthetic can adapt to a specific battlefield than bipedal mechs with articulating limbs.

Design a non-humanoid mech that is suited for battle in an amphibian environment. Fabricate at least one copy of your amphibian mech design and sell it to a customer who makes use of it in an amphibian battle environment.

The mech design must be up to standard and exhibit your profound understanding of Battle Mechatronics.

Reward:

[Battle Mechatronics - Senior]

His face immediately turned ugly. He didn't forget about the Upgrade Missions that showed up whenever he wanted to acquire a new Senior-level Skill.

He had hoped the System would skip them on account of his strength. At the very least, he hoped to gain an easy mission that he could complete in a matter of days!

Sadly, the System was as strict as ever. Depending on its standards, Ves had no choice to but to invest months in designing a proper non-humanoid amphibian mech!

"What a strange mission. I don't even know where to begin. I don't think I have ever designed an amphibian mech. I can count the number of non-humanoid mechs I've designed with a single hand."

Battle Mechatronics was all about studying how the form and dimensions of a mech impacted its performance. It was quite important to the design of humanoid mechs, but played a much more important role to the design of bestial mechs!

Once he got over the implications of his mission, he moved on to upgrading another Main Skill.

"Which one should I choose next?"

Three choices came to mind. Electrical Engineering, Mathematics and Propulsion all attracted him for different reasons.

As long as he could elevate his understanding of Electrical Engineering, a lot of problems related to his current mech design project would no longer trouble him as much!

"I would have to complete its Upgrade Mission first, and I don't know how long that will take!"

Mathematics helped him out in a lot of different fields. Aside from helping him program and configure more elaborate simulations, he would also be able to increase his understanding of highly complex theories related to high technology!

This was very relevant to the design of higher classes of mechs!

Finally, improving his Propulsion Skill would no longer hamper the mobility of his mech designs that much. His last couple of spaceborn mechs all featured abysmal mobility, which was not a good development!

Every Skill under his consideration was not only useful right away, but also laid the groundwork for the future.

His gaze finally landed on Electrical Engineering. In terms of immediate utility, this one brought the most practical benefits.

"System, can I skip the Upgrade Mission for my next Senior-level Skill? I really don't want to go through all of that trouble."

Surprisingly, the System responded to his half-serious query.

[User, diligence is an essential trait to a mech designer. Working hard is a virtue. In consideration of your current needs, the Mech Designer System is prepared to make an accommodation. As long as you agree to exchange 50,000 Design Points, you may directly pass over the Upgrade Mission.]

"WHAT?!"

Ves yelled so loudly that he startled both Nitaa and Lucky!

"Why didn't you tell me that before, you goddamn System!"

He had to resist the urge to bang the System comm against the metal crate he was sitting on. If he knew this earlier, he would have made some different choices!

Still, this offer came at a good time. While it was very wasteful to spend 50,000 DP to acquire a Skill, it all depended on how badly he needed it. As the previous Upgrade Mission had shown, the System wasn't going to let him off that easily!

"I can either spend months on designing a weird mech, or I can just skip all of that trouble for the handsome price of 50,000 DP."

Ves considered whether he should rather spend that 50,000 DP on a bunch of Sub-Skills instead. That was his original plan. Yet the more he thought about the integral ways his Hexer mech interacted with energy, the more this upgrade seemed essential.

"The better question to ask is whether my upcoming energy vampire knight mech is worth this much DP."

Even if he didn't achieve a revolutionary result, he was pretty confident that he would be able to earn 100,000 DP.

From that perspective, spending an extra 50,000 DP didn't sound like a big deal.

"Since I know that it will be useful, then let's grab it right away!"

[Electrical Engineering - Senior]: 150,000 DP (Skip Upgrade Mission)

Once he confirmed his choice, a huge amount of Design Points went down the drain. The System always demanded a price, and it would never pass up the opportunity to take advantage of him. Paying 50,000 DP to skip a mission that he could easily complete with time was probably a huge ripoff in its eyes!

Though Ves was aware of what he lost, he believed it was worth it. Sometimes, time was more valuable than all of the DP in his possession. It was just another currency to him. He could easily earn it back in the future.

"I'm just paying to win!"

Chapter 2093 Immediate Improvements

The experience of absorbing Senior-level Electrical Engineering was completely novel to Ves. Operating on strange instructions that definitely shouldn't have been part of its programming, his bioimplant processed the huge dump of data in a unique manner.

After initially storing it into its vast storage space, the Archimedes Rubal then proceeded to feed it to the rest of his mind in a very controlled manner.

No headache emerged. No pressure encumbered his thoughts. Ves only noticed a tiny burden. It wasn't until he actively began to go over the subject matter that he discovered a lot of brand-new knowledge that he didn't learn before!

Just like before, the integration of knowledge throughout his mind also proceeded faster.

The true value of partial digitization became apparent. His brain cells had effectively acquired some traits typical to computer processors. As long as they cooperated with the systems of his implant, he could effectively internalize a lot of knowledge at a greater rate.

The speed was astounding!

"It will probably take less than a week for me to truly be able to make use of all of this knowledge!"

This was amazing! Ves became impressed once again at the capabilities of advanced technology.

In fact, he even suspected that the System might have been designed to work in unison with cranial implants to begin with. The pain and unimaginable strain he experienced before was simply a consequence of not bringing the right tool!

A rueful smile appeared on his face. "Well, whatever the case, I can definitely use my greater understanding of Electrical Engineering to tune up my remaining mech design!"

He would have to delay the completion of the first iteration and wait a little longer before testing the first prototype. However, it would be well worth it. He had invested so much in his Hexer mech design already.

The weird knight mech with energy siphoning capabilities was more than just a support machine in his opinion. As long as Ves managed to hit all of his goals for this mech design, he could easily elevate it into a revolutionary new addition to the ranks of the Hex Army!

"The Fridaymen won't know what's coming!" He grinned.

His upcoming mech would have a profound effect on different people. It was to that effect that Ves had made a lot of additional preparations. He wanted to be sure he could make the mech as special as possible!

Once he got off his excitement, he glanced at his remaining points and noticed that he only had 50,000 DP left.

Ordinarily, Ves would have stopped by now. His reserves hadn't dipped this low in a low time. He also couldn't acquire any other Skills or Sub-Skills in an instant with his implant working at full tilt to convert all of the data related to Electrical Engineering into a usable form.

However, now that he had his implant, Ves suspected that this might not be a problem anymore. The idea sounded interesting enough to perform a small experiment.

Besides, Ves truly felt the need to expand his broad understanding of Electrical Engineering with more specific Sub-Skills. His Hexer mech design incorporated so many energy transmission systems that each needed to be handled in a distinctly different way.

Stuffing them all together in the frame of a cramped knight mech was almost impossible! The amount of mutual interference and other problems associated with squeezing so many high-energy parts together was stressing him out. Even Gloriana showed signs of frustration!

Part of that was his fault. His insistence on adding an energy siphoning system in order to extend the mech's effective operating time added a lot of complexity to the mech while burdening its internal real estate even further.

As long as Ves decided to remove this system, every other problem related to the mech design became a lot easier to deal with. It was so easy to just say the word and give it up in order to make the design more practical.

Though Gloriana hadn't mentioned it last time, the idea definitely lingered in her mind. If Ves didn't agree with bringing in a technical consultant to solve these thorny issues, she probably would have suggested simplifying their mech design next!

This was unacceptable to him! He had spent so much time dreaming up an ambitious vision. What started out as a simple commission for DIVA had slowly morphed into another passion project!

Ves knew he was being irrational again. Why should he spend so much effort and waste so much DP all of a sudden in order to improve a single mech design?

Yet now that he sunk so much emotional investment in this project, he couldn't stop at this point. He would do anything to fulfill the vision he settled upon! After expanding on his vision and concept several times, its scope had grown to a level that he could scarcely imagine.

Whatever he created at the end, he was sure the Hexadric Hegemony would take note! Not even the fact that one of its lead designers was male would hinder its recognition!

"Since I'm already this deep, I should go all the way!"

He browsed the Skill Tree for some useful Sub-Skills. He didn't linger at the cheaper ones but instead sought something more advanced and expensive.

[Dense Energy Transmissions I]: 20,000 DP

He first selected a Sub-Skill that added to his knowledge on energy transmission. It stood out from other types of knowledge on energy transmission by the heightened energy levels it dealt with. It was a Sub-Skill that was geared towards a narrow set of high-performance transmissions systems!

"This is just what I need!"

As expected, as soon as he acquired this Sub-Skill, he was able to instruct his implant to shuffle its order. He temporarily paused the integration of Senior-level Electrical Engineering to absorb the abundant amount of knowledge from his new Sub-Skill first!

After that, his implant quickly went back to Electrical Engineering again.

"That's handy."

Ves next browsed for another Sub-Skill that could improve his handling on his current mech design. He sought something that would provide him with immediate benefits.

[Heat-Resistant Materials I]: 20,000 DP

In the end, he went for something that enhanced his understanding of heat-resistant materials. This was an incredibly useful acquisition. Not only did it enhance his understanding of heat sinks, but it also provided him with a much more systematic understanding of the individual heat capacities of other components.

More importantly, now that he acquired this Sub-Skill, he knew how to improve their heat handling of every energy transmission system through some modest but effective solutions!

This was a great boon! Even a modest reduction in heat load would make a substantial difference on the battlefield!

Ves let out a deep breath. He had spent almost his entire DP reserves. He only retained less than 20,000 DP, which was not enough to purchase a life-saving gadget in the event of a crisis!

"I don't need to worry about that!"

In truth, he was making a gamble. He bet that he wouldn't need all of those points. That gave him the confidence of converting his inert Design Points into something that would be of immediate use!

"Speaking about immediate use, I can also do something about the internalizing of my latest Senior-level Skill."

It sounded strange to Ves that he acquired this huge upgrade without delay. He had been so used to working for these upgrades that he still couldn't believe the System actually cut him some slack!

Of course, in the perspective of the System, it gleefully absorbed a lot of Design Points that he could have used to redeem something wasteful in its perspective!

If Ves hadn't given up that extra DP, he could have acquired the second tier of one of his new Sub-Skills!

"Forget it." He shook his head. "They're pretty high class to begin with. The introductory tier of these Sub-Skills is already a lot for me to absorb!"

Before Ves left Compartment G-13, he continued to sit down and explore the manner in which his implant internalized the data dump.

After exploring a lot of internal diagnostics, he concluded that his implant was currently acting outside the bounds of its current programming!

"I knew it! There's no way my Archimedes Rubal can diffuse knowledge in such a sophisticated manner!"

A thread of fear ran through his mind. The only other explanation was that the System essentially hijacked his implant and inserted some temporary programming in order to establish such a smooth transfer!

However, this fear quickly subsided. The System always had access to his mind. Ves didn't believe he could hide anything from its powerful means.

Was it any surprise that it could directly bypass the various safeguards and protections of his implant?

"There's no point in dwelling on this matter any further."

He turned back to the operation of his implant and finally found a useful setting.

Right now, his Archimedes Rubal was transferring knowledge in a normal order.

That was not good enough. Ves needed knowledge that directly related to energy transmissions systems first! Everything else that wasn't as relevant to his current project could wait for later!

The setting he discovered allowed him to change the order and rearrange what he wanted to learn first. He immediately made use of it and spent an hour to sort through all of the dizzying topics the implant tried to cram into his mind!

"There's so much!" Ves groaned when he finally snapped out of his daze.

His session was done. He no longer possessed any meaningful DP to spend, so he readily stood up and gestured to Nitaa and Lucky.

"We're leaving."

As Ves returned to the design lab the next day, he looked a lot more confident.

His girlfriend already looked impatient. "I've waited patiently for you to come up with a solution. I don't know what you have in store, but if it's not sufficient, I'll force my own solution on this project!"

Ves smiled in an intriguing manner and raised his hand.

A number of design schematics projected into existence.

"What is this, Ves? Wait a minute..."

She instantly became absorbed by what she saw. She completely ignored her boyfriend's existence and began to examine all of the schematics.

Ves had hastily made use of his new knowledge to improve some of the troublesome areas about the internal makeup of their collaborative mech design.

Various problems that dogged the two for weeks had suddenly turned into non-issues after Ves applied a tiny portion of his newly-acquired knowledge!

Seeing Gloriana becoming so absorbed brought a smile on his face.

"This.." She looked up at him with wide eyes. "How did you obtain these improvements. They all bear your style, but that's impossible! You can't possibly be that good?"

Ves grinned and tapped the side of his head. "I just consulted a lot of books, that's all. I can study very hard if I want to! After receiving some sparks of insights, I instantly knew how to resolve these issues!"

"That's amazing!" Gloriana sounded incredibly impressed. "You're also lying."

"Thank you—, wait, what?"

"DO YOU THINK I'M STUPID?!" She pressed her finger against his chest! "We were in a deadlock for weeks! I referenced all kinds of books in order to solve these problems, but I still hadn't managed to deal with them. How can someone like you magically wave your hand and come up with much better solutions in a single day? It's impossible!"

Ves panicked a bit. "I-I-It's true! It's all me! I swear it! I was so afraid that you would insist on simplifying our current mech design that I worked harder than ever before to solve all of these issues!"

Gloriana narrowed her eyes in suspicion. She briefly turned around and picked up Clixie.

"Is he lying, Clixie?"

"Miaow!"

Though Gloriana didn't speak cat, she could still interpret Clixie's hiss!

"I thought so!" She nodded with certainty. "So spill, Ves. Who's the technical consultant that provided all of these solutions?"

"It's all me!"

"You're not that smart!"

Chapter 2094 Quality Jump

A mech designer did not suddenly improve all of a sudden. It was impossible.

Certainly, incidents of enlightenment frequently occurred where mech designers passed a crucial turning point in their understanding of a specific field.

Yet those cases were not only rare, but also took place after a long period of precipitation.

The sudden boost in understanding and application on energy transmission systems was anything but normal! Ves was a mech designer who specialized in a more esoteric field. Achieving successive breakthroughs in the field of Electrical Engineering and other related fields was too ludicrous!

Even if Ves possessed an implant, it was not as simple as downloading a huge amount of textbooks and academic journal articles!

Rote memorization without taking the time to understand and internalize what they actually taught was pointless.

This happened to be the unique strength of the System. It was capable of making Ves absorb a huge amount of knowledge as if he truly spent months and years of diligently studying a lot of books.

Even if the Big Two somehow managed to develop this amazing technology, it would certainly be reserved for themselves. There was no way a tiny figure like Ves could have access to such an astounding means!

Therefore, Gloriana couldn't believe that Ves had improved. According to her, he must have consulted some other mech designer!

"Who is it, Ves?!" She imperiously placed her hands on her hips. "Is it Professor Ventag? No, it shouldn't. The improvements don't carry his style."

"It was all me! I can prove it to you! I still have some ideas left to implement, so let me demonstrate."

He disliked it whenever Gloriana questioned his competence! Even though he didn't specialize in technical mech design like her, that did not mean he was a drooling idiot when it came to this important aspect.

Every mech was a machine! Ves still understood this truth, so he often reminded himself not to neglect this aspect. Playing with Spirituality may be a crucial part of his main specialization, but that did not mean that he should neglect the fundamentals of his profession. He was not his mother! He followed his own path!

As Ves sat down behind a terminal and began to refine the energy siphoning mechanism of the extra appendages of their Hexer mech, Gloriana curiously observed his work.

It didn't take long before she started to feel less confident about her assertion. Before her eyes, Ves seemed like a different mech designer from yesterday.

All of a sudden, he solved numerous problems while mitigating other issues to a much better degree than before!

Though the overall gain in efficiency was only as little as 5 percent, this was already a huge accomplishment. When their project had reached their stage, most of their design choices had been setting, which meant that there was very little leeway to squeeze more performance gains.

To achieve small but solid performance gains with just a short amount of work was nothing but mind blowing to Gloriana!

"This is impossible!"

She had worked years alongside Ves! She knew exactly what he was capable of! They had collaborated on so many mech designs that she could probably draft a reasonably accurate list of all of his skills and competences!

Now, she suddenly discovered that she severely misjudged his capabilities. Or did she?

The wheels in her mind spun at unheard speeds. However, the more she observed the solutions conjured up by Ves, the more she became enthralled by the elegant and sophisticated methods he employed.

A lot of problems were akin to trying to deliver a parcel from one city to another city.

Previously, they dabbled with relatively low tech solutions such as making someone bring the parcel to its intended destination by foot or by horse.

None of these solutions satisfied the pair. They were too slow and inefficient. Yet they couldn't come up with anything better.

Yesterday, Gloriana was pretty sure that they were both at this level.

Yet for some inexplicable reason, Ves had suddenly improved to the point where he was able to build a shuttle from scratch that could be used to deliver the parcel to its destination at a much greater speed than before!

Even if this analogy was a bit too exaggerated, it aptly described the shock she felt. This much difference in a span of a single day was simply too ludicrous!

Sadly, her imagination was only so big. She could never conceive of a notion that Ves made use of something as heaven-defying as the Mech Designer System.

That did not mean that Ves may have used other unorthodox means to gain enlightenment. It was just that Gloriana couldn't put much stock in all of those low-probability possibilities.

After a long time, she eventually came to a conclusion. This was not the first time that Ves pulled off something inexplicable behind her back. She quickly recalled how Ves abruptly showed off a Bright Warrior design that was considerably more refined and improved than before.

Though Gloriana studied her boyfriend's history extensively, there were still a considerable amount of holes in his background.

Just like Master Willix, she increasingly suspected that Ves enjoyed a secret relationship with a very competent mech designer!

If this 'Mr. S.' had struck again, then everything could be explained. Perhaps this presumed Master Mech Designer had given Ves a lot of relevant points yesterday! That would explain most of the improvements!

She looked increasingly more determined. This must be what had happened!

As Ves worked on the design, he had kept one eye on his girlfriend. He easily caught the changes in her expression.

He tried his best to hold back his grin.

From the start, he already knew it would be difficult to explain this sudden jump in competence. It wouldn't be long before he fully digested Senior-level Electrical Engineering.

Such a comprehensive jump was too difficult to hide from an observant mech designer like Gloriana!

He didn't want his sudden improvement. He didn't spend an enormous amount of DP to let his newly-upgraded Skill collect dust! He wanted to make immediate use of it to elevate the quality of his subsequent mech designs.

In addition, this wasn't the first time he improved so suddenly. Ves wanted to set a pattern where Gloriana wouldn't take much notice of his changes, because he definitely intended to spend his DP in the same manner again in the future!

This was why he decided to openly show off his improvements to Gloriana. It didn't matter if he declined to say anything. People like Gloriana tended to make their own conclusions. This was something that Ves had already exploited on other people.

As expected, Gloriana looked much more at ease with herself now that she constructed a plausible explanation in her mind. She no longer looked interested in pursuing the matter further, but became fully engrossed at all of the alterations that Ves had made to their mech design!

This was another good way to distract her. She always became enthralled by anything that brought a mech design closer to perfection.

As long as Ves triggered her obsession, she instantly switched to a one-track mind! Nothing else mattered to her whenever she saw an opportunity to increase her ability to design a better mech!

At the end of the day, the Hexer mech design had gained a comprehensive improvement. Ves hadn't even finished yet but its performance had already become a lot smoother!

Due to the nature of his changes, the upper limit of the male Hexer mech hadn't improved all that much.

What Ves actually did was to increase the design's internal resilience. He improved the rigor of the internal components and how they interacted with each other. Their ability to endure a large burden had improved and they became much less prone to malfunctions or rapid degradation due to all of the dense energy transmissions running through the mech.

The heat capacity of the mech had also been improved, though Ves didn't have enough time to push through all of the changes. However, he had shown off enough solutions to make it clear that there was still considerable room for improvement in this aspect!

"How didn't I think of that!" Gloriana gasped.

She uttered those words many times today. Though Ves only picked up two Sub-Skills and internalized just a portion of Senior-level Electrical Engineering, the new knowledge he had at his disposal was still something she hadn't studied herself!

One scary aspect about her was that she learned quickly.

The next day, as soon as Ves was about to resume his design session, Gloriana sat down at the terminal and began to demonstrate her own solution!

"What?!" Ves widened his eyes.

"I've been thinking a lot of what you have shown. I think I figured out the essence of your methods. As long as I understand the theory, I can apply the same solution to every other related problem!"

What Ves had shown off the day before was very complicated, but not that diverse. Many of the problems related to the mech design shared the same shortcomings.

As long as one of them developed a solution for one problem, they could easily apply the same formula to other related problems!

Though Ves was surprised at her learning efficiency, he soon accepted it. Now that she became capable of solving the same problems as him, they could both work on improving the mech design!

In fact, in many cases, it was Gloriana who came up with the formula and it was Ves that borrowed her work. It wasn't often that she was on the receiving side!

They proceeded to work on the mech design with gusto over the next week. The more time passed, the more Ves absorbed more knowledge on Electrical Engineering.

Much of the latter knowledge no longer held any relations to their current mech design, though, so Ves hadn't been able to come up with fantastic new solutions.

It was already enough. The sheer depth and breadth of Senior-level Electrical Engineering wasn't something that could fit inside a single textbook! Ves practically absorbed half a study room's worth of theories, formulas and other goodies!

Applying such a tiny fraction of it onto their current mech design already made a substantial difference. Ves believed that the result they achieved was not that different from bringing in a Senior Mech Designer as a consultant!

At the end of this design session, Ves and Gloriana both became a lot more at ease with their mech. While its overall level of refinement still couldn't match the excellence of a highly-optimized Hexer mech design, it was slightly better than the work of most other Journeymen!

"I think our first iteration is ready for prototype testing." Ves confidently declared.

While Gloriana still wanted to spend some time on optimizing it further, she reluctantly agreed.

There was only so much that simulation testing could reveal. It was not a good thing to rely too much on mathematical models and approximations of reality to assume the mech would perform well in any given scenarios.

Assumptions had to be tested! That was the custom in the mech industry!

"Who will fabricate the prototype?" She asked.

That was a good question, and one that momentarily stumped Ves. He initially wanted to leave this task to his design teams, but he immediately pulled back this suggestion.

Their Hexer mech design was too sophisticated! Not only that, it incorporated a lot of restricted Hexer-developed technology and components that couldn't be spread!

Though the pair could easily do it themselves, if they did so, that would make the creation of their first production model a lot less special.

That was something that neither of them wanted.

"Maybe we could ask another mech designer's help." Ves suggested. "Don't forget that we are currently in Cinach VI. There are loads of mech companies on this planet, and several of them are led by Seniors."

"I'm aware of that." Gloriana stated. "While I'm sure that they are capable enough to fabricate a mech of this caliber, I am pretty certain they won't be allowed to do so. Let me look into this matter."

Chapter 2095 The Final Gathering

While Gloriana sought to find someone close at hand that could fabricate their prototype, Ves exited the design lab in order to take stock at what else had taken place.

He soon found out that the Larkinson Family was finally departing the Cinach System.

"They're leaving?!" Ves looked surprised.

"The Larkinson Family has already lingered in Cinach for several months." Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson noted. "You have to keep in mind that the old family is much less prosperous than our clan. The family's fleet is just a fraction of the size of ours and their recruitment efforts have been minimal at best. Now that the preparations of our other relatives are complete, they are ready to set off and find their own way."

"Where does the family plan to go?"

"I'm not sure." Raymond shrugged. "Ark hasn't confided in me. I believe he is likely going to wander around in order to accumulate enough money and resources to build up a decent fleet that is capable of traversing to other star sectors."

"The old family doesn't need to do that. While I haven't been generous towards it, I still let them keep a 1 percent share in the LMC! With how well the Doom Guard and my other mech models have been selling lately, Ark shouldn't have too many problems procuring the hardware the family needs!"

"The family doesn't want to live off your charity. They are Larkinsons. They want to earn their own keep as much as possible. It's a matter of pride to many of them, and Ark probably thinks that he needs to keep them all sharp. If they begin to take the wealth granted by their minority stake in the LMC for granted, then the old family would soon become a shadow of its former self!"

"I see. Ark knows the importance of maintaining the readiness of the fighting forces of the family. In his cruel galaxy, the family can't afford to grow weak!"

"Per angusta ad augusta." Raymond recited. "Your clan may have enshrined this motto, but this has been one of the core principles of the Larkinson Family for centuries. A hard worker like Ark definitely knows what is best for his charges. Now that the old family has lost the protection of a state, it has to depend completely on itself! None of the members of the family can afford to slide back during this time."

Ves scratched his head. "While I understand this argument, leaving a safe star system like Cinach will only increase their vulnerability."

"Ah, I'm sure the family has taken all of the risks into account. Don't forget that your uncle is a strong expert pilot. He is much more frightening than a Doom Guard in battle!"

That was true. Ves had no choice but to put down his worries and trust that Ark knew what he was doing. His impressive track record already proved that he was qualified to lead the family during these difficult times!

"Will there be a final farewell?"

"Of course. The date has already been set. Every trueblood Larkinson is invited." Raymond momentarily paused. "For various reasons, it is best to keep the adopted Larkinsons at a distance. There are many members of the old family who believe that bestowing our name on tens of thousands of unrelated people is a great betrayal to our heritage."

Though it would be a shame to keep so many deserving clansmen away, it wasn't as if they possessed a lot of affection towards the old family. Though this decision was technically discriminatory towards the clan, it was unlikely that anyone would kick up a fuss at this time.

Even now, the status of trueblood Larkinsons was still eminent!

"If there aren't any major issues, then I approve."

"Good. This is very likely the last time that we will physically be in each other's presence, so Ark wants to make it memorable. No stunts, no drama. We should let every relative say their goodbyes to each other in peace."

The separation between the family and the clan would become final at that time.

Before this day, a couple of Larkinsons still maintained the hope that the two groups of Larkinsons would be able to reconcile their differences.

Sadly, no such movement had occurred. The Larkinson Clan had already chosen a different development trajectory that was simply too radical for the Larkinson Family.

The day of the final gathering soon came to pass. The rag-tag fleet of the Larkinson Family looked a little less shabby after several months of upgrades and acquisitions.

The Gracious Indigo was no longer as lonely as the family managed to secure several more light carriers and other ships from who knew where.

Every trueblood Larkinson in the Cinach System temporarily put down all of their duties and gathered in a large hall aboard a space station. The entire section had already been booked by the clan. A lot of security showed up in and around the station in order to prevent anyone from disturbing this highly-sensitive gathering.

If someone managed to launch an attack on the space station, Almost the entire original lineage of Larkinsons risked going extinct!

Since the gathering was such a juicy target to the enemies of the Larkinsons, Ves didn't hesitate to employ every spaceborn Penitent Sister asset to form a security cordon around the space station!

A lot of routine business and traffic encountered hindrances that day. The mere presence of so many intimidating second-class mechs practically turned the entire space station into a floating ghost town!

Fortunately, the clan's prestige along with the generous amount of money they threw at the owners of the station solved every objection.

A rather awkward union took place in the hall. While the interior had been converted in the style of modern Brighter architecture, hardly any trueblood Larkinson felt at ease.

This moment was simply too heavy for all of their hearts.

Ves, followed by Lucky, slowly approached Benjamin Larkinson.

"Grandfather."

"Ves."

"Do you have confidence in the family's future?"

The old man smiled. "I wouldn't be a part of it if I wasn't. I believe in my son. Ark truly has what it takes to lead the family to a new future. Trust in him. He won't lead us astray."

"At least he won't be alone. You'll be there to advise him along with all of the other elders."

"That's not necessarily a good thing, Ves." Benjamin shook his head. "All of our knowledge is centered around our circumstances back home. When it comes to traversing through foreign states, I barely know more than Ark. In these cases, it is best to lead someone with a nimbler mind. That is why Ark is our new patriarch instead of someone from my generation."

They chatted a bit until Ark himself approached. The expert pilot possessed such a huge presence that everyone couldn't help but pause at his passing!

To Ves, his uncle Ark looked considerably more impressive. Had he fully adjusted to his new role as the guardian and leader of the Larkinson Clan?

Whatever the case, this was a welcome development to Ves. The more imposing Ark became, the more leverage he would hold when he negotiated with other parties!

The two closed in for a warm hug.

"So this is it." Ves said after they parted from their embrace. "You're finally setting off, is that right?"

The older Larkinson nodded. "This is a necessary move. The longer we stay in the Cinach System, the more we huddle under the shadow of your clan. As a fellow patriarch, I'm sure you are aware of the necessity of maintaining self-sufficiency."

"I know."

The two exchanged some words, but most of what they wanted to say to each other had already been uttered in their previous conversations.

One irksome issue was that Ark Larkinson kept his plans for the family to himself.

This bothered Ves a lot. Even though he didn't have much to do with the old family anymore, he still wanted it to thrive in its own way. It was rather strange that Ark didn't explain where he wanted to settle down and what kind of employment opportunities he was looking for. Even with the dividends the old family received from its minority stake in the LMC, it would still take a long time for the members of the family to build up a fleet that could cross over to other star sectors!

Ark offered a simple answer to all of these concerns.

"We know what we are doing. Let us overcome this challenge on our own. If we ever need your help, we'll call you right away, but until then, let us prove to ourselves that we can stand on our own two feet in the wider galaxy."

"Alright..." Ves reluctantly said.

Soon enough, Ves and Ark proceeded to the front of the hall where they addressed their blood relatives.

"Fellow Larkinsons." Ves began. "Our time of parting has come. In the preceding months, I hope that you have made the most of our time together. From this day onwards, it will no longer be possible to hug each other. While we can always stay in

contact with each other over the galactic net, make no mistake. Our physical separation will only widen our emotional separation."

Every Larkinson looked sad at that. They all knew that the family and the clan would only grow further apart over time.

"Do not be sad, my fellow Larkinsons." Ark spoke in a gentle tone. "As much as this parting makes the schism in our original family permanent, let us celebrate this occasion. We have accomplished much when we were together, and we will accomplish even more now that we are pursuing different trajectories. Even though you will never see hundreds of Larkinsons again, each of you will still be surrounded by relatives."

Ves smiled. "Splitting up doesn't make us weak. In fact, it's the opposite. Branching out in different directions will only strengthen our lineage! Before the schism, our family had always been vulnerable to getting wiped out at once. Now that we are travelling in different directions, we no longer have to be afraid of losing our entire name and heritage. Even if the clan is lost, the family will still be able to carry forth the banner of the Larkinsons! The same goes for the family!"

"New adventures await us both." Ark looked hopeful at the crowd of gathered Larkinsons. "The Larkinson Ancestor once traversed an unimaginable distance to start a new life in the Komodo Star Sector. Now, we follow in his honored footsteps. To traverse the stars is not a betrayal to our heritage. It is in our lifeblood! Though both of us have different ideas on what constitutes a proper home, both Ves and I will do our best lead you all to a great future!"

The Larkinsons all clapped! Every Larkinson felt the depth of energy and emotions behind the words of the patriarchs. Each of them couldn't help but feel touched in their hearts!

As soon as they wrapped up their speeches, the members of the Larkinson Family finally boarded their shuttles that would bring them to their ships.

Ves and every other member of the clan took their time to approach the relatives they were close to and bid their final goodbyes.

"I'm leaving, Ves." Melinda spoke.

Ves let out a heavy breath. "Sometimes, I didn't wish this day would come."

"You can't stop the inevitable. At least we get to part on our own terms."

Melinda reached out and ruffled his hair, completely ignoring the fact that Ves was a patriarch of a rising clan!

"I will miss you, Melinda. There are actually very few Larkinsons who I can truly be myself."

"It's okay, Ves." She smiled in a bittersweet manner. "I will always cherish the childhood memories I have of you. Both of us have grown up, though. As much as we wish to hold onto the past, we should look towards the future instead. Isn't that the point you were trying to make earlier?"

He nodded. "That's true, but.. that doesn't make this any less difficult."

Since Melinda didn't have much time before she had to enter her shuttle, she closed in and hugged him one last time.

"I'm very proud of you. You have become much greater than I could have ever thought. Your parents would feel proud if they could see you today!"

"You have become a great mech pilot as well. I'm sure you'll do a great job of protecting the family during your journey."

When Melinda withdrew, she spoke her final words to him in person.

"Goodbye, Ves."

"Goodbye, Melinda."

Melinda Larkinson along with many other members of the Larkinson Family left the hall, putting an end to the fateful gathering.

Chapter 2096 Stuck Shares

The departure of the Larkinson Family made Cinach VI much less warm to the trueblood Larkinsons who remained.

Many of them had taken advantage of the presence of the old family to meet with their relatives on the other side.

Now, it was no longer possible for a member of the old family to have a beer with a member of the clan. The physical separation marked a historic moment where such times would no longer happen.

With this momentous change, Ves no longer felt a pressing need to remain in the Cinach System. His urge to set off and embark on another journey grew stronger.

"We'll be leaving soon." Ves reminded Raymond and Gavin in his temporary office.

"Just like the Larkinson Family, we need to work towards our own future. Right now, that future lies in the Red Ocean."

"We need a huge amount of merits to reach the dwarf galaxy, boss. Where can we possibly get that much?"

"I'm working on that, Benny. I have been keeping my eye open for various opportunities. If there aren't any, then I'll simply make one. There are always ways to earn a lot of merits if you are daring enough."

Gavin coughed. "Not every mech designer possesses the same tolerance of risk as you, boss. In that regard, you are a huge outlier."

"I made it this far intact. Mostly."

"You have a lot of weird parts inserted inside your body!"

"They're pretty useful once I had them fixed!"

Raymond tapped the surface of the desk. "You're still thinking about diving into the Nyxian Gap, aren't you, Ves?"

"That will likely be my next destination."

Neither Raymond nor Gavin looked happy at this answer!

"I... don't think that is wise." Raymond cautiously said. "While we are all willing to step up when it's necessary, we Larkinsons haven't survived for so long by committing suicide at every possible turn."

Ves frowned. "The whole point of founding this clan is because I believe we can achieve greatness if we take some risks. The Nyxian Gap may look intimidating, but with the Penitent Sisters, we will hardly face any challenges! We just have to keep our eyes out for dangerous localized anomalies, but as far as I know, they tend to be more concentrated in the central regions."

"Even if that is true, there is no reason for you to bring us all along. Many members of the family aren't combatants. They have no place on the battlefield!"

Ah. Ves finally understood what Raymond was getting at. "You want to split up our fleet?"

"Leave the bulk of the Larkinson Clan here. If you want to go on another adventure, then bring only those who are ready to face the challenges of the Nyxian Gap. This way, your fleet is leaner, faster and much easier to protect. You don't want to enter this perilous region with a lot of baggage dragging your heels."

That made a lot of sense. Ves already became convinced. Though he preferred to keep his entire clan together, in this case it was too irresponsible to do so. Leaving a huge portion behind would instead free up his combat forces.

"Alright. We'll do that." He announced. "We can't bring all of our combat forces with us. We'll have to split them up as well. I'll likely leave behind a considerable amount of Sentinels and enough Penitent Sisters to form an effective deterrent. I'll contact Major Verle and tell him to form a plan."

He did not know his own mech forces well enough to make this determination. The size and scope of the Avatars, Sentinels and other mech forces had already exceeded his ability to command them in person.

It was far more appropriate to leave this matter to the professionals!

The conversation soon turned to business-related matters.

"How well is the Doom Guard faring these days?"

"We have reached every state in the star sector that is open to telling our new mech model." Gavin replied. "We have even seen some growing signs of smuggling. While the Friday Coalition doesn't want to see our mechs in its sphere of influence, the demand of some of the customers there is simply too great!"

"What about our sales figures?"

"Our analysts estimate that our sales will likely peak in a month or two. While we have a lot of buyers, they aren't ordering a lot of copies. This is different from the Desolate Soldier where it isn't unusual for outfits to order dozens of mechs at the same time."

That was the nature of a premium mech. The Desolate Soldier was a budget mech that still sold for a very affordable price. Bulk purchases were the rule rather than the exception.

In contrast, most outfits only wanted a single copy of the Doom Guard! More would be helpful, but not necessary.

Gavin soon proceeded to outline all of the revenue they made so far. The figure already looked incredibly astounding. This was more wealth than Ves ever possessed even in the heyday of the Desolate Soldier's success!

It was too bad that the clan's expenses had grown as well. Aside from the growing upkeep due to all of the expansion, the clan also spent massively on acquiring new hardware!

"The good news is that our financial position is no longer declining." Gavin grinned. "The release of the Doom Guard has single-handedly reversed our declining trend. Right now, we can probably sustain ourselves by as much as seven years if everything remains the same. This provides us with plenty of leeway."

Though it was nice to see that the Doom Guard generated so much money, it was far from the 1 trillion hex credits he needed to form an expedition-ready fleet.

Raymond added another notable development. "Another good news is that the Doom Guard's emergence has breathed new life into our older mech models. As you might expect, sales of mechs with glows that can mitigate or withstand the Doom Guard's glow have skyrocketed. The Aurora Titan model is the primary beneficiary!"

Though they had already discussed this before, Ves was glad that the defensive space knight's lack of mobility didn't hinder it from turning into a hot seller!

There was just one issue that Ves suddenly recalled. "Wait a moment. Didn't we split up the ownership of the Aurora Titan model with NORA Consolidated?"

Originally, Ves and Professor Ventag collaborated on the design. Even though Ves did most of the heavy lifting, the assistance of an authentic and highly-experienced Senior was still of great value!

For this reason, they made a deal where the LMC would only gain a fourth of the profits while NORA Consolidated received the remainder.

This was a fair deal, especially considering that the professor still lent the strength of his design philosophy to the original design.

"Ves.. NORA Consolidated no longer exists. It's been disbanded."

"What?!"

He shouldn't have missed such a huge piece of news!

"It's a consequence of the Battle of Bentheim and the aftermath." Raymond continued. "A lot of mech companies and institutions on Bentheim are gone. Nothing remains except for some intangible assets that have mostly lost a lot of value as well. A lot of Brighter mech companies have concentrated so much of their assets and business activities on Bentheim that they had nothing left after the Sand War has concluded."

"Then... what happened to the rights to the Aurora Titan?"

"The amount of administrative and financial messes that ensued after the fall of Bentheim was considerable, Ves. Fortunately, plenty of people in the LMC had been ready for this moment. As soon as the Bright Republic fell into confusion, a number of

our people solicited the help of some colluders to purchase the rights from the state on behalf of a shell company. After a lot of arcane transfers which I won't get into, the rights have eventually fallen into our company's hands."

"That.. sounds great." Ves smiled, but only briefly. "That reminds me, what about our shares?"

"They haven't moved." Raymond shook his head. "Trust me, we tried to get them back, but the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate are still clinging onto the shares in our company as if they are sources of endless wealth!"

"Those goddamn leeches!"

With all of the chaos and damage the two states had suffered, it became more important than ever for them to tap into sources of revenue. There was no way the two states would fail to recognize the growing earning potential of the LMC!

Even though Ves and the LMC had turned hostile against the two states, it wasn't possible to invalidate those shares! The MTA simply wouldn't permit such a brazen move!

Ves held both his palms against his face. This persistent hurdle had been haunting him for a while. The mere thought of enriching the states who stabbed in the back made him angry!

They didn't deserve a single hex credit from his business activities as far as he was concerned!

Yet the truth of the matter was that the LMC obediently transferred the dividends to the two states on time.

The Larkinson Family only owned 1 percent of outstanding shares.

The Bright Republic owned 7 percent while the Ylvaine Protectorate owned 9 percent.

This meant that the two states effectively received 16 times as much money as the Larkinson Family!

Just this fact was enough to make his blood boil!

"How can we get those shares back?!"

Raymond shook his head. "We don't have any leverage, Ves. There is no way we can persuade or intimidate the two states into giving away their cash cows. We can knock on the doors of the MTA in order to ask for arbitration, but history has shown that the mechers always uphold the sanctity of contracts."

"Can't we issue a lot of new stock to diminish the worth of the shares in their possession?"

"That was one of our first ideas, Ves. Suffice to say, the MTA doesn't look highly on share dilution. There are too many times in the past where mech designers tried to stiff their investors in this manner."

"Urgh."

"I feel the same way, Ves. Our Legal Department has actually been waging a small war against the two states. Their lawyers and government officials have made several attempts to appropriate our company and our assets with the help of crooked laws, but fortunately the MTA isn't willing to entertain their requests. As long as we don't enter the states in question, they can't do anything except hold on to the shares they already possess."

"Those traitors are going too far!" Ves banged his fist against his desk!

"There is a way to get those shares back." Gavin suddenly said.

"Oh? Do tell."

"What if the two states don't exist anymore? What if there is a way to apply pressure on them, say, threaten to sic a lot of Hexers on them if they don't allow us to buyback our shares?"

That.. sounded viable. Ves looked intrigued. "Only a deviant person would come up with such a suggestion. As expected of a Benny!"

Gavin grit his teeth. "It is simply a possibility, boss. We are far from this point."

"It's a possibility, at least!" Ves grinned as he started to churn his mind. "Yes, I can see it now. The Komodo War will be key! As long as the Hexers gain the upper hand, the Fridaymen won't be able to shield their client states. The Republic and the Protectorate would suddenly become easy pickings once they lose the protection of their patron!"

In other words, Ves possessed an even greater reason to help the Hexers win the war! As long as they achieved a decisive victory against the Fridaymen, Ves could probably borrow their influence and extort the two recalcitrant states into coughing up their shares!

"This isn't going to be easy, though." Ves quickly muttered.

The Komodo War easily involved millions of mechs and thousands of star systems. There was hardly any way for a single individual to make a difference.

Nonetheless, Ves already knew he had the potential to do so. His upcoming mech design was just his first step!

"How are our preparations for the 'special occasion' I planned?"

"House Evenson has been very cooperative. They have already helped us identify and secure enough willing participants. You won't be disappointed, boss!"

Chapter 2097 Chaos Remnant

The departure of the Larkinson Family made the Cinach System a lot less lively. A lot of trueblood clansmen already started to miss the presence of the relatives who left.

Still, as much as they missed the company of the people they grew up with, they had a new family now. The Larkinson Clan brought warmth and life from both old and new faces.

Though the integration of the adopted Larkinsons did not go perfectly, it was remarkable that people from every background managed to mesh together.

Brighters, Ylvainans, Reinaldians, Sentinels and more all interacted with each other on a daily basis without raising any tempers.

This was already an incredible achievement, especially considering that some people like the Ylvainans possessed very strange customs!

Certainly, the different groups were still far from integrating into a single, cohesive whole, but the current state was already optimistic considering the clan was less than a year old.

As Ves looked out the window of his office, he studied the bustling activity inside the rented base.

Mechs and people moved in every direction. Their glows blended with each other, impacting the people around them with varying moods.

Different uniforms in different colors mingled with each other. No matter if they were ordinary clansmen or elite Avatars, every Larkinson treated each other with a measure of trust.

The sight filled him with pride.

"Meow."

"Oh? You finally produced another gem for me. It's about time!"

"Meow!"

Lucky flicked a purple gem at Ves with his paws before phasing through his desk and scurrying away!

"I hope it's not a Hexer-themed gem again. Three is already too much!"

Ves picked up the new gem and studied its details.

[Minor Chaos Remnant]

An infinitesimally small remnant of chaos is captured within this gem. Increases the penetration of any sharp melee weapon wielded by a mech by 40 percent.

"Well, this is different."

This time, the description didn't reference any forgotten gods, ancient warriors or figures that sounded as if they emerged straight out of a fantasy drama.

In fact, the description sounded outright boring in relation to its strong effect!

"Forty percent!"

Sure, the Mother's Love gem offered a whopping 100 percent boost, but the variable it affected was a hundred times more useless!

Compared to such a useless gem that Lucky probably derived from getting pampered by Gloriana all the time, Ves vastly preferred anything that directly affected a mech's combat parameters!

As a keen mech designer, Ves understood the horror of this gem. Its boost remained potent even when Ves paired it with a mech wielding a weapon that was already sharp and powerful!

If paired with one of the melee configurations of the Quint, it would have given the masterwork Bright Warrior the power to harm any standard second-class mech!

If Ves happened to embed this gem in a melee-oriented second-class expert mech, then that machine would turn into a butcher of other second-class expert mechs!

"It's too wasteful to put this gem in any ordinary mech! I should reserve it for an expert mech!"

Expert mechs all featured some of the best armor of their class. Almost no expense was spared in their design and construction. Therefore, a lot of combat between expert

mechs devolved into a race of which machine could breach the armor of the other machine first!

"This gem is worth the wait!" Ves gleefully grinned as he lovingly put the gem in his Synthra Umbra pouch.

Though Lucky's rate of gem production had slowed down considerably, none of their effects were weak!

Ves only felt exasperated by the fact that their effects varied considerably. There was no telling whether he would get something useful like the Minor Chaos Fragment or obtain something completely frivolous like the Whipping Boy!

[Whipping Boy]

The fear of a boy towards women is encapsulated within this cursed gem. Increases the dread of a mech by 50 percent to males.

Thinking about this abominable gem instantly soured his mood. How in the hell could Lucky's digestion system possibly produce such a frivolous boost?

"If I put it on a Doom Guard, not a single man will want to get near it! It will have to be handled exclusively by women!"

If Ves had the option of turning his first copy of the Doom Guard into a Masterwork, he would have used this sadistic gem right then and there. It didn't matter if it was wasteful to embed his gem onto a relatively ordinary third-class mech. He just couldn't stand the thought of carrying this gem any further than necessary!

"I should design more dread-oriented mechs." He muttered darkly. "I'll continue designing them until I finally get within reach of creating another masterwork. I'll definitely be able to get rid of this insulting gem!"

The Minor Chaos Fragment was not the only goodie he received. After a long time, Calabast finally deigned to visit him. She appeared in his office by going through the front door this time.

Wearing her black-and-grey Black Cat uniform, she stood out immensely from the rest of the Larkinsons. Her womanly figure along with her seductive charm caused a lot of people to turn their heads!

When Ves looked at her, he didn't put much stock with what his eyes conveyed. He knew that a trained spy like her always presented a fake facade.

He instead studied her with his spiritual senses.

It was a pity that Calabast still revealed almost nothing. She was one of the many people who possessed no spiritual potential. That meant that Ves couldn't read her spiritual attributes nor derive anything solid from her mind.

Perhaps the only useful observation he could make with his spiritual system was the strength of her bond with the Golden Cat.

Surprisingly, it looked healthy. This meant that the Golden Cat fully approved of Calabast and found no signs of concern!

Ves began to wonder if the ancestral spirit developed a warped sense of judgement. He didn't forget that she readily accepted Vincent Ricklin into the clan!

"Good news, Ves." Calabast greeted as she sauntered over to his desk. "My agents have been scouring many of the regional black markets in the Cinach System and beyond. We have found numerous samples of the exotics you've demanded."

Instead of sitting down at the chair like a normal person, Calabast instead leaned her butt against the edge of the desk.

Ves didn't pay attention to her posture. Instead, he instantly honed in on her statement!

"What did you obtain?! Did you find any F-stones or B-stones?!"

She crossed her arms and looked sideways at Ves. "Sorry to disappoint you. That's the bad news. My field agents tried my best to seek out these rarer exotics, but they haven't found any traces of them in the areas they could access. It's possible that they are present in more exclusive circles, but we don't have access to them. You'll have to make do with the P-stones we've gathered."

"How much? And what's their size?"

"Strangely enough, their sizes are all roughly similar to what you have specified. They're around the shape of a human head, but their density, material composition and visual appearances vary considerably. We've secured thirty-five rocks that match the properties you've given."

"Thirty-five!"

That was double the amount of P-stones in his possession! Once he added the new P-stones to his vault, he would have 52 P-stones in total!

"This is indeed great news!" Ves joyously crowed. "These exotics are extremely vital to the development and application of my specialty. Don't stop looking for them. The more, the better!"

Calabast sighed and shook her head. "It will be difficult to secure more of them in a short time. Many of these so-called 'P-stones' have accumulated over many years as no one figured out anything special about them. Now that we have snatched them all up, it will take a long time before they are back in stock. As far as I'm aware of, the most if not all of the P-stones originated from the Nyxian Gap."

"I see."

Ves already knew the P-stones were relatively scarce. Calabast essentially told him that he shouldn't expect another windfall.

What truly disappointed him was the failure to obtain new B-stones and F-stones. The defensive and offensive spiritually-reactive exotics were very powerful in their own way. Both of them were necessary to deal with powerful spiritual entities such as Nyxie or Cassandra Breyer!

"If you want, I can instruct my agents to focus more on securing those other two exotics. It might be possible to obtain them if I help agents obtain greater access to the black markets we've visited."

"What will it cost?" Ves asked.

"Access costs money. We will have to bribe a lot of people. 1 billion hex credits."

He winced at that price. While Ves and the Larkinson Clan weren't short on money these days, a billion hex credits was already a fortune in the Hegemony!

"Our clan already provides the Black Cats with a generous budget! I don't believe you need to spend this much money to do what you say. The Sentinel Kingdom is just a third-rate state. It's impossible for the price of access to be this much!"

"We've been expanding rapidly just like the other organizations under the clan's umbrella." Calabast tapped her nail against the surface of the desk. "The budget specified for the Black Cats was based around the assumption that the LMC continued to stagnate. That doesn't apply anymore. Since your Doom Guard and some of your other mech models are selling well these days, why not share some of your newfound wealth? After all, you wouldn't neglect your strategic partner, wouldn't you?"

She spoke those final words in a teasing manner.

Ves did not look amused.

"Fine. You will get your money by the end of the day. Just don't waste it all. I expect to obtain at least one sample of each exotic!"

"I can't promise you anything, but we will do our best." She promised.

They soon moved on to another discussion.

"Are there any threats on the horizon?" Ves asked.

"Not particularly." She answered. "Every faction in the Sentinel Kingdom knows better than to mess with you. There is no escape from death if any of them harm the interests of the Hegemony. They all know that, so they won't do anything stupid to you. There is hardly benefit of doing so anyway. This state is too far away from the Friday Coalition to curry favor with them. It doesn't make any sense."

Though people frequently behaved illogically, Ves didn't think that any of the local factions that could threaten him would commit suicide in this fashion.

"What if we split up the fleet? I'm sure you know of my intentions of venturing into the Nyxian Gap."

"It'll be okay. If you are that worried about it, I can bolster my own arrangements." Her face turned grave. "However, I'm very concerned about your plan to venture into the Gap. I don't have to tell you how risky that can be. Even the MTA has lost ships and mechs inside this region!"

Ves waved away her concerns. "That has only happened in the central regions. As long as we don't travel too deep, we can manage the risks. Did you collect enough intelligence on the Gap?"

She nodded. "I'll transmit all of the information we've obtained that we managed to verify. We have managed to piece together a rather comprehensive map that defines most of the anomalous hotspots and navigational hazards in the periphery. We also managed to form a map of the fixed locations of the more pirate organizations, though don't assume they are 100 percent accurate. Pirates tend to move around a lot and bases get razed every day due to all of the fighting that takes place."

"I understand. This is already incredibly helpful."

One of the reasons why he lingered so long in Cinach was because he wanted to take the time to gather intelligence!

Heading into the Nyxian Gap blind was not only stupid, but also unnecessary!

Ves couldn't help but recall the time when the Flagrant Swordmaiden fleet crossed over into frontier space. Major Verle and the rest of the Vandals wouldn't have known what to do if not for the alliance they struck with Lydia's Swordmaidens!

"Oh. That reminds me of your other request." Calabast smiled. "The men I've assigned to investigate the Nyxian Gap have also been looking out for the tiger mech you mentioned."

Ves immediately sat straight! "Did you find the Devil Tiger?!"

This was his first masterwork mech! It was also the mech his ghostly mother stole from him! Ves worried constantly about the risks involved in piloting this mech.

He explicitly designed it for pirates, so he weakened a lot of safety precautions that were meant to protect the mech pilot.

The thought of his own father piloting one of his twisted experiments made him sick!

Chapter 2098 Continuous Shock

Ves didn't hide his reactions at the mention of the Devil Tiger. He couldn't. How could he remain calm when this mech was tied to both of his parents?

There was no way Ves could disregard any news that could tell him more about his missing father and his inscrutable mother!

What were they up to? Was his father piloting the dangerous mech in person? What kind of battles had he fought while he was trying to do his best to avoid getting caught by the Five Scrolls Compact?

Calabast watched him very carefully. She confirmed a number of theories, disproved some others and formed some additional conclusions.

All of this happened in the span of a few seconds!

"Ves.." She opened her mouth. "Don't tell me.. the Devil Tiger that is striking fear in the hearts of pirates.."

"It's mine." He confirmed. "I designed and built the Devil Tiger."

Fortunately, the office had already been jammed and secured. Uttering something explosive as this in public would instantly land Ves in hot water!

Backed by Hexers or not, the Sentinel Kingdom would universally condemn him if he had made any dealings with Nyxian scum!

Calabast looked incredibly serious all of a sudden. "I should have known! Even if the Devil Tiger in the rumors doesn't possess any glows, I couldn't get rid of the hunch that you had a hand in its creation! Ever since it emerged, this mech has exacerbated the chaos that has been brewing in this region."

"What did you say?" Ves reacted in shock yet again.

Was it a coincidence she used the word 'chaos'?

"Let me start from the beginning." She said. "There are several unusual aspects about the mech and the faction it belongs to. From what information I've gathered, the Oblivion Hand existed for quite some time as a notable but relatively unremarkable band of dark mercenaries. That was until the emergence of their new leader. Someone who goes by the name of the Dark Cleaver has triggered a mutiny against Commander Arnold Dafoe, the prior leader of the Oblivion Hand."

The Dark Cleaver? The Oblivion Hand? Ves couldn't imagine his relatively upright father mixing in a cesspool where these lurid names were common!

"Who is the Dark Cleaver?"

"No one knows." Calabast shrugged. "There are countless rumors surrounding his abrupt rise, but the Nyxian Gap isn't exactly a place where keeping accurate records is common. At least in civilized space you can always find reliable traces in the records of various government institutions. That's not the case here. The stories vary so wildly that I don't dare to mention any of you lest you develop an incorrect bias."

She had been looking at him very intently when she talked about the Dark Cleaver. With her powerful deductive abilities, she constantly became more certain about her guess.

"The Dark Cleaver.. is your father, isn't he?"

"...I don't know. I need to hear more."

Ves knew there was no way he could hide his thoughts on the matter from Calabast. She knew too much!

"If Ryncol is your father.. it would explain much." She slowly said as she parsed her thoughts. "There are too many uncertainties, though. As far as I'm aware of, ever since the Dark Cleaver took control of the Oblivion Hand, the dark mercenary corps has grown explosively."

"How?"

"Conquest." Calabast replied. "Ever since the Oblivion Hand had a change in leadership, it no longer performed illicit missions on behalf of clients who don't want to besmirch its reputation. Instead, the Hand has turned its entire attention to attacking certain pirate factions."

"That.. isn't very unusual." Ves spoke. "Everyone in the Nyxian Gap fights against each other. True peace doesn't exist in a place like that. It's much easier to rob the people next to you than to travel all the way to the Sentinel Kingdom in order to raid some trade convoy."

"This is different." She shook her head. "The Oblivion Hand isn't just engaging in opportunistic robbery. It has been ending entire pirate organizations that have existed for decades, if not centuries! The Hand has razed over a dozen fortified pirate bases, which has disrupted all of the existing patterns that have taken shape in the surrounding regions!"

Ves couldn't help but drop his jaw at that news! How could his father ever accomplish such a feat? Was the Oblivion Hand that strong when he took it over? That was impossible!

Back in the Bright Republic, Ryncol Larkinson was the younger and much less talented brother of Ark Larkinson.

Ves knew very well that as much as he loved and respected his father, he had never performed better than the average Larkinson mech pilot. He didn't possess that much ability for command either.

It was way too much to equate his father as this notorious Nyxian pirate killer!

Yet Ves couldn't ignore the fact that the Dark Cleaver piloted the Devil Tiger. His mother stole the masterwork mech herself. She recognized its exceptional value. She would never drop this treasure in the hands of a random Nyxian!

"Have you obtained any battle footage of the Oblivion Hand?"

She shook her head. "Footage is always hard to obtain. The Sentinel Kingdom always cracks down whenever someone tries to spread anything that takes place in the Nyxian Gap. From what I can gather, the Oblivion Hand fight so viciously that they rarely leave anything behind."

Was this truly the organization that his father led? How could he have grown so ruthless?!

"Why is the Oblivion Hand so aggressive? Has anyone figured out its goals?"

"I'm not sure. From the information I've gathered up until now, I believe the Dark Cleaver wants to expand his organization."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It has become clear that the Oblivion Hand is clearly targeting pirate organizations with lots of assets." Calabast spoke with admiration. "Not only that, but after every battle, the Hand grows stronger. Despite the casualties, the dark mercenary corps is able to field more mechs and ships. It doesn't have any problems attracting new recruits either. Everyone loves a winner, the Nyxians most of all. What is remarkable about the

Oblivion Hand is that it has never lost a battle ever since the Dark Cleaver became its new commander."

"Are you sure?!"

It was impossible to win everytime. Too many factors affected the outcome of a battle. Unless someone controlled every variable, setbacks and losses would happen sooner or later.

"No one knows how the Dark Cleaver does it. Commander Dafoe used to be a regular leader who won slightly more often than he lost. The new commander is becoming increasingly more known for achieving guaranteed victories. He has never lost, even against pirate organizations that should have been strong enough to crush the Oblivion Hand in a straight battle! It is not uncommon to hear that the Hand has managed to achieve lop-sided victories when outnumbered by at least 3-to-1!"

"What the hell?! Are those rumors even credible!?"

"I reacted the same when I first heard about them." Calabast ruefully smiled. "However, no matter who you talk to, they all vouch for the Oblivion Hand's string of victories. The leadership vacuum that emerges after the Oblivion Hand has toppled another pirate power is proof of the Hand's accomplishments. These huge fluctuations can't be faked."

Ves never stopped looking shocked. He received so much explosive news that he never had the opportunity to regain his composure. To think that his father was behind all of these acts was simply too difficult for him to accept!

However, once Ves thought the matter true, he realized he missed one crucial factor.

His mother.

If his mother was fighting alongside his father, then these ludicrous tales became a lot more plausible!

With her intangibility and her potent spiritual abilities whose depths Ves couldn't even fathom, Cynthia Larkinson could perform all kinds of mischief against her targets!

She could sneak into a pirate ship or a fortified base without encountering any hindrance. Once inside, his mother could take advantage of her intangible and invisible form to spy on the enemy commanders, assassinate them in their sleep or steal their command codes.

She could also mess with the enemy hardware. She could easily phase through all kinds of solid barriers in order to damage all kinds of critical components.

She could disable the FTL drive of a starship in order to prevent her escape.

She could tamper with the power reactors of every mech inside a carrier vessel.

She could destroy the life support systems so that the occupants of a ship or base would slowly suffocate as they ran out of air to breathe.

With so many possibilities, it was no wonder that the organization led by her husband managed to raise such a storm!

Perhaps the only concern was the fact that his mother probably had to conserve her energy. Why else did she siphon his spiritual energy each time they met? Her current form of existence must be defective somehow!

If not for this constraint, his mother would have probably turned the entire Nyxian Gap upside-down by now. Considering her extraordinary origins, this wasn't an exaggeration in his opinion!

Though Calabast thoroughly captured the rapid changes in his expression, she refrained from probing him any further.

There were some matters he simply couldn't reveal. Calabast probably understood that, so she appropriately maintained her distance.

It had become very clear to her that the reason why Ves had become so remarkable was undeniably related to his parents!

"Tell me about the Devil Tiger."

She looked uncertain. "It's a remarkable mech. It has become just as renowned as its mech pilot. What is strange about the mech is that its initial appearance wasn't all that remarkable. It initially became known as a powerful but fairly manageable tiger mech."

"And then?"

"Well, just like the Oblivion Hand, each time it showed up again, it became a little stronger. A lot of Nyxians have guessed that the Dark Cleaver must have secured the services of a very capable mech designer. The Nyxians have already surmised that one of the reasons why the Oblivion Hand is so aggressive is because the Dark Cleaver is eager to upgrade his mech through plunder!"

That made a lot of sense. Due to the ASMAS system that Ves incorporated in the Devil Tiger, it had become a self-evolving mech!

People just had to feed any exotic or other powerful material to the mech. The pure ASMAS, which consisted of very high-quality nanomachines, slowly processed these materials into substitute ASMAS.

Most of the structure of the Devil Tiger consisted of this derivative substance.

The quality of the substitute ASMAS was directly proportional to the quality of the materials being fed to the mech!

It had been several years since Ves made the Devil Tiger. If the Oblivion Hand had been fighting as often as Calabast claimed, then his father would have definitely fed all kinds of goodies to the Devil Tiger!

"What is the current state of the Devil Tiger? How strong has it grown?" He asked in an eager tone.

"From what I have heard, it has become an expert mech!"

"What?!" Ves reacted with shock for the umpteenth time today!

"The Oblivion Hand has spread the news itself. Their leader, the Dark Cleaver, has become an expert pilot! This alone has caused a lot of Nyxian pirates and mercenaries to join his banner. Expert pilots are very rare in the Nyxian Gap, and every single one of them are prominent leaders in the pirate community!"

This was too much for Ves to absorb. His father, an expert pilot? Impossible! His father served in the mech corps for such a long time without any signs of breaking through.

His father even fought in some of the same bloody battles as his brother Ark, but nothing happened in the end!

Yet after recalling that expert pilots all emerged due to empowering their willpower with spirituality, Ves suddenly froze.

In his previous experiments, Ves managed to turn William Urbesh into an expert candidate.

This proved that it was possible to artificially advance a mech pilot to a higher stage!

If Ves could do so, then what stopped his mother from attempting the same?

Perhaps to her, turning someone into an expert pilot was just a matter of investing enough spiritual energy! That might have explained why she had been so eager to siphon his spiritual energy last time!

A sense of confusion radiated from his mind.

He already felt he couldn't recognize his mother anymore. Would his father be the same? Did this enigmatic Dark Cleaver even bore any relation to the father who raised him back in Cloudy Curtain?

Chapter 2099 Affection

It took a long time until Calabast left for Ves to regain his composure.

He couldn't help it. He had a very hard time associating the tales that Calabast spun with his father!

There was no way his father was that good of a mech pilot and leader. If the father in his memories ended up in the Nyxian Gap, he would have kept his head down!

Certainly, a highly-trained and experienced mech pilot who was also a Larkinson would easily be able to show his worth. Yet that was not enough to make any waves.

Ves always imagined that his father was constantly on the run. Perhaps he might have been able to lead a small organization due to his overall level of competence, but he never expected his father to make it this far in such a short time!

Even with his mother helping him every step of the way, his father still must have braved a lot of danger to get this far. After all, the pirate organizations he fought against were all local overlords who repelled many challengers over the years. None of them were weak!

He sighed and looked at Lucky who was lounging on his lap.

"Can you imagine my father and mother terrorizing the Nyxian Gap?"

"Meow."

"I don't know either. According to Calabast, the pirate organizations the Oblivion Hand has hit are only moderately strong. So far, the Dark Cleaver hasn't hit the biggest overlords yet. Hopefully, he won't overestimate himself. If he's only out to plunder men, mechs and resources, then he should stick to targeting the weaker players."

The problem was that Ves failed to ascertain his father's intentions!

Though he readily acknowledged that the Devil Tiger and the Oblivion Hand had benefited enormously from all of the plunder, the local pirate factions were definitely unwilling to lose their foundations!

Ves worried considerably about the backlash coming from the pirate community. It was always possible that the pirates put down their infighting and overwhelmed the Oblivion Hand with so many mechs and ships that a single intangible saboteur couldn't possibly render them ineffective!

"My parents are playing with fire. Aren't they afraid of getting burned?"

The fact that the Oblivion Hand fought so brazenly and developed a very high profile meant that his parents might be feeling desperate for some reason.

Considering that the Five Scrolls Compact was constantly hunting them somehow, this was not an outlandish suspicion! His parents must have truly felt the need to strengthen themselves very quickly.

This made Ves feel very helpless. The Ves from before was not the Ves today. Even though he hadn't grown strong enough to resist the Five Scrolls Compact, he had definitely become capable enough to provide his parents with a lot of material assistance!

He began to develop the risky notion of heading into the Nyxian Gap in order to seek out his parents.

There had to be a way to provide them with some relief! His Devil Tiger, despite its double-edged nature, seemed to cooperate quite well with his father.

As the sole designer of the tiger mech, Ves knew that there were limits to its self-evolution capabilities.

The mech did not solely consist of pure ASMAS and substitute ASMAS. A considerable chunk of its structure and core components consisted of solid components.

Ordinarily, it would be quite difficult to upgrade them. At this time, the Devil Tiger should still be making use of those original components, but when Ves heard that the mech had displayed the ability to achieve resonance, he grew a bit uncertain.

Did the Oblivion Hand secure the services of some exiled Senior? There was no way the Devil Tiger could turn into a working expert mech by relying on its self-evolution capabilities alone! It took serious technical expertise to instill a mech with resonating abilities.

Back when he designed the Devil Tiger and programmed its pure ASMAS, Ves had no clue how to design an expert mech. In fact, as of this moment, he still didn't know!

All of this meant that the Oblivion Hand must have hired or made a deal with a mech designer who knew a thing or two about designing expert mechs.

Sure, there was the possibility that this mystery mech designer was a Master instead, but Ves didn't believe such figures would stoop to assisting Nyxian scum.

Whatever the case, regardless of how well the Oblivion Hand took care of the Devil Tiger, Ves could definitely strengthen it in a lot of ways!

He could also aid his father in other matters, such as providing new mech designs to delivering essential supplies.

The more he thought about it, the more the urge grew stronger. Even if his mother had stated that he should stay as far away as possible, Ves really didn't want to leave the Komodo Star Sector with the impression that he abandoned his parents to their fates!

"I'm not that weak anymore!"

Though Ves understood that it was very dangerous and irresponsible to dive straight into the Nyxian Gap in order to seek out the Oblivion Hand, he didn't care.

"It's one thing if I'm still weak and helpless. It's another thing if I have grown capable enough to lend them a hand!"

Ves understood the immense challenges of such a dangerous course of action. The Oblivion Hand was both powerful and elusive. Its fleet mainly sustained itself through continuous plunder, and never rested in the same location for long.

This not only allowed his father to avoid the retribution of vengeful pirates, but also their mysterious pursuers!

With so much threats baying for its blood, the Oblivion Hand should never be in a position where Ves could track down its fleet!

"Damnit." Ves leaned his head against his hand.

"Meow."

Lucky climbed up to his desk and patted him with his paw.

"Yeah. I know it's a bad idea. It's not only dangerous, but also impossible."

Still, as much as his logic told him to drop this idiotic idea, his heart still couldn't get rid of it. The desire to meet with his father at least once before he left this part of the galaxy had grown into an ardent wish!

He shook his head. If he was alone, then he would have tried to reach his parents no matter the cost.

Unfortunately, he wasn't alone anymore. As a mech designer, he became increasingly reliant on others to facilitate his activities.

The LMC and his mech forces all existed to empower him. The more he advanced, the more he needed money. The greater his value, the more he needed protection.

Though his growing clan had become incredibly helpful to him, its existence also constrained him. Unlike before, he couldn't go on a reckless jaunt by himself!

This was especially so because the Larkinson Clan consisted of his own family. It was one thing to abandon or betray some random lackeys. It was another thing to lead his own blood relatives to ruin!

"Responsibility. What a heavy burden." He sighed.

It was too difficult for him to make a choice between his parents and his clan. To be honest, he didn't want to make that choice.

Perhaps the only consolation was the thought that his parents weren't inept. As his father and presumably his mother had already proven, they had managed to thrive in the Nyxian Gap.

Even if Ves never managed to reach them, they should still be fine.

"Do you think my father and mother need any help?"

Lucky looked away from Ves. "Meow."

"I can help, you know!"

"Meow meow."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence."

Though Ves had grown stronger, he was still far from the point where he could intervene in the struggle that beset his parents. This made him feel profoundly helpless and depressed.

He had a lot to go. Becoming a Senior was not enough. Perhaps becoming a Master still wasn't sufficient!

Ves did not forget about his original goal. With the System, he wanted to surpass his limits and reach the pinnacle of mech design! Only at that height would he be able to solve the root of the trouble that his parents had incurred!

Yet.. how long would that take? A century? Two centuries? Becoming a Master was already arduous enough. To go beyond... only the legendary Polymath advanced to Star Designer at record speed.

"I shouldn't dream so much. Becoming a Master is already a huge hurdle."

As much as the Mech Designer System provided him with an unimaginable amount of advantages, Ves still needed to rely on himself to advance his design philosophy.

A few hours went by. Ves calmly sorted out his thoughts and threw away any fanciful notions from his mind. No matter how confident he was in his abilities, reality was too difficult to overcome.

Any notions of seeking out his parents in order to gain answers or provide them with valuable assistance were nothing but dangerous delusions.

Many times, Ves liked to listen to his heart rather than his mind.

However, this time was different. With so many responsibilities weighing him down, he couldn't afford to ruin his entire clan in order to pursue his selfish goals.

"This must be what my parents are thinking as well." He muttered. "My mother specifically told me that she doesn't want me to get dragged into her mess."

She wanted to protect him and allow him to live his own life. It sounded a bit strange that his mother acted so.. uncharacteristically motherly at him, but Ves believed in her sincerity.

This was how a parent was supposed to act. This was how responsible people were supposed to act.

Ves eventually decided to clear his mind by leaving his office. He had been lingering around enough in this empty and isolated room.

As he stepped out into the base, he received a lot of greetings. As the clan patriarch, he earned the acknowledgement of every clansman, whether they were trueblood or adopted.

He wandered around aimlessly for a while. Though his appearance was enough to startle the clansmen in the vicinity, it wasn't enough to raise a commotion.

He soon encountered a familiar face.

Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was standing in front of a crowd of teenage Larkinsons. Ves even recognized the young teenage form of Lanie Larkinson among the kids!

"...think very carefully before you decide to specialize in light mechs. Although piloting them is my greatest joy, they are not for everyone. Far from it. You either love them or hate them. There is no middle ground. Each time to enter the cockpit and deploy into battle, you are dancing with death. Unlike ranged mechs, light mechs have to get up close to the enemy. Unlike medium mechs, light mechs can't take a lot of hits!"

"Light mechs are fast, though, right, teacher?"

Tusa laughed in a good-naturedly manner. "Incredibly so! If you love speed, you'll love light mechs! While it's too soon for you mech cadets to decide upon your specializations, you can already determine for yourself whether they suit your talent and inclination."

"How do we do that?" Another mech cadet asked.

"Just spin up your simulators and try out some virtual light mechs. Don't just pilot them aimlessly. See whether you can accomplish anything without dying. While it is easy to get caught up by them when you're playing a game like Iron Spirit, don't think that reality is as generous! Each time your mech is downed on an actual battlefield, you risk dying. If you think that is bad enough, then let me tell you that this risk is considerably greater when you pilot a light mech!"

Some of the cadets gasped!

"Therefore, those who pilot the cheapest, smallest and most fragile mechs on the battlefield are some of the bravest mech pilots. Each of them must rely solely on the mobility of their mechs to avoid getting hit. Every single hit not only poses a fatal danger to your mech, but also to your life! After all, the cockpits of light mechs are just as fragile as the rest of their frames!"

Tusa continued to regale the realities of piloting light mechs to the class of enthralled mech cadets.

Ves found it rather weird that an honored expert candidate would spend his valuable time on tutoring a bunch of brats.

Yet the sight also made him feel a lot of warmth. No matter what, the Larkinsons cared for each other. Letting the older generation instruct the younger generation was one of their time-honored customs.

Tusa had long noticed his presence. "Ah, Ves. You should know a thing or two about light mechs, right? Could you tell these cadets about light mechs from the perspective of a mech designer?"

"Why certainly." Ves smiled affectionately.

Chapter 2100 Flying Solo

When Gloriana promised to tackle the problem on how to test the prototype, Ves expected a lot of difficulty.

However, it didn't take a long time before she approached him with a smile.

"The first prototypes are being fabricated and are about to be tested very soon!" She chirped. "Everything will be taken care of. A Senior will personally preside over the fabrication of all of the machines. They'll be sent to a renowned testing ground very soon which will quickly and thoroughly explore every limit of our Hexer knight mech!"

Ves looked surprised. "I thought your search would take longer."

His girlfriend grinned. "I didn't bother contacting any companies on Cinach. We've been arranging these sorts of tests by ourselves for such a long time that we never thought about contacting more capable services. It's fine to test our third-class mechs in this fashion, but hardly any testing ground in a lesser state is capable of defining the upper limits of a second-class mech."

"Wait a minute.." Ves widened his eyes in realization. "You contacted Hexers?!"

"Of course! Why not? A Hexer mech design ought to be tested in the Hegemony! Since our mech design consists entirely of proprietary parts and specifications from the Hex Army, there is no other choice. I already contacted my mother about it. She has already taken care of everything. Our Wodin Dynasty employs our own mech designers, you know. We have access to all the facilities that we ever need!"

This... made a lot of sense. A faction as large as the Wodin Dynasty always employed a lot of mech designers. Even if it hadn't managed to secure the cooperation of a Master, it was definitely possible for them to partner with a bunch of Seniors.

Still, Ves felt very uncomfortable about this arrangement.

First, the testing would take place many light-years from his current position. The extreme separation made him feel as if a portion of his work was completely out of his hands.

Second, the person who arranged it all was Gloriana's mother! What would Madame Constance think of his unfinished prototype? Though its design was 96 or 97 percent finished, she might develop an undeserved bias despite its unfinished state!

What was more, the mech currently did not house any glows. Ves doubted whether Madame Constance witnessed any glows in person. The weaker spiritual foundation of his Hexer mech might lead her to believe that his glows were weak!

"Don't worry, Ves. I know what you're concerned about." She cuddled up to his side and leaned into his arm. "My mother has been watching us closely. She knows our prototypes are only previews of what is to come. She'll definitely obtain some copies of our finished design when it's ready. We'll definitely be able to impress her at that time!"

That did not reassure him a lot.

"How soon can we expect the results."

"Three days."

"What?! That fast?!"

Ves was used to waiting for a week to obtain all of the testing data.

Gloriana rubbed her face against the fabric of his uniform. "It's easy enough if you fabricate a dozen copies of our mech and test them at the same time. Mother is pulling all the stops. The sooner we get our reality-tested data, the sooner we complete our mech. The sooner we complete our mech, the faster we can tackle other priorities."

A testing ground based in the Hegemony was not a simple obstacle course. In order to provide the most accurate data on a mech's real performance, it featured many high-tech facilities that could emulate all kinds of battlefield conditions.

On top of that, the sensors they used were much more extensive and much more accurate. Gloriana already told him to get ready to receive a huge influx of data.

While the prototype testing was being taken care of in the distant Scimitar System, Ves and Gloriana decided to take stock of their future.

"Are you still thinking about venturing into the Nyxian Gap?"

"I am." He replied with a determined expression. "We need the merits, Gloriana, and accepting a high-risk mission from the Rim Guardians is the best way to obtain them. I have already prepared extensively for this trip. Our clan is ready to undertake this challenge."

She tilted her head and looked up to him. "It's not just about that, isn't it? No sane mech designer would ever think that entering the Nyxian Gap is a good idea. You're different. You have a hunger inside you that drives you towards peril."

"Even though I'm a mech designer, I'm also a Larkinson. The experiences I've been through have shaped my design style for the better. If I hadn't learned all of those lessons and gained so much inspiration, I would have never become a partner who is worthy to work alongside you! I know it's risky, but I'm confident in my strength."

His confidence came from his preparation. Unlike many of the other 'adventures' he had been through, this time he was in charge of everything. He didn't have to follow the arrangements of Lord Jeremiah Kane, the Mech Corps or Lady Miralix Laterna.

One of the main reasons he worked so hard to cultivate his own mech forces was to gain complete control over his own protection!

All of the years he spent cultivating the Avatars and Sentinels finally paid off. He could call upon hundreds, if not thousands of mechs!

On top of that, Ves also had the Penitent Sisters at his disposal. The hundreds of second-class mechs he intended to bring along would be his sharpest knife as well as his biggest shield against any powerful threat he might stumble upon in the Nyxian Gap.

This was not the Groening Mission. This was not the Glowing Planet Campaign. This was not the Aeon Corona Mission.

Not only did he possess sufficient strength, he also obtained an extensive amount of intelligence.

The value of Calabast and the Black Cats finally became apparent. No longer would he be going in blind and encounter crises that emerged out of the blue. With so much information at his disposal, a large portion of the Nyxian Gap was no longer a mystery to him! He was aware of every hazard and every notable pirate organization that operated in the periphery of the region.

Of course, Calabast had already warned him that she wouldn't be able to tell him about the deeper regions of the Nyxian Gap. The hazards in those zones along with the increasingly more intense space warping meant that even the Big Two lost entire fleets inside the abyss!

Many of the most lucrative missions were situated in these deeper regions. For now, Ves didn't consider traveling this deep. Not only were the risks too high, but it took many months and years to enter and exit these core regions.

"Have you decided to come with me, or do you prefer to stay behind in Cinach and hold the fort while I'm gone?" He asked.

Gloriana frowned. This was a very difficult question for her. As much as she wanted to accompany Ves, she knew she wouldn't be as useful as him in a crisis situation.

Unlike Ves who had been forged in the flames of war and the unknown, Gloriana fit much closer to the mold of a 'classic' mech designer. She was most comfortable when she was safely working in a design lab on a highly-secure ship or planet.

Ves took a deep breath and took in her flowery scent. The intoxicating perfume she used only reinforced the impression that she didn't belong on the forefront of a risky expedition! People who ventured straight into danger did not bother with this kind of vanity!

"Just stay here." He suggested when Gloriana didn't answer his last question. "You don't have to feel guilty or anything. I'll just be going on a trip for a few months. Personally, I feel much more reassured if you remain behind and keep everything stable

on my behalf. I'm particularly concerned about the disposition of the Penitent Sisters. They're kind of unruly and they won't listen to the other members of our clan. Only a prominent Hexer like you can keep them in line."

She sighed. "You're right. I agree with everything you said. It's just that I feel a bit guilty for staying behind. I will miss you very much."

"It's for the best. Your presence in the Nyxian Gap won't add much to our strength."

"Are you calling me useless?"

"No! It's just.. I can probably solve every challenge by myself. I'm not heading into the Nyxian Gap to design a mech for the market. Whatever work that requires my services will likely involve a lot of improvisation and rushing. In these situations, working quick and dirty is the norm, and there is simply no room for thoroughness and precision."

She scrunched her face. "That sounds awful!"

"Even if a mech design is bad, as long as it manages to solve the problem, it's enough."

Gloriana looked very uncomfortable with this approach. Though her mind understood the necessity of working in this fashion, the rest of her felt repelled at the thought of rushing any of her work!

"I understand." She said. "I'll settle for staying behind, then. I can catch up to some of my other work while you're away."

"That's a good idea. We can even embark on some solo design projects. While I don't like Master Willix, I think she is right when she said that we shouldn't take our collaboration for granted. As fully-fledged mech designers, we should still be able to design a good mech by relying on ourselves!"

"Mmhmm. I suppose I can pick up my old occupation and design some custom mechs. Who in the clan requires my services?"

"Too many." Ves helplessly replied. "I recently spoke to Tusa. As an expert candidate, he deserves to pilot the best light skirmisher that fits his strengths. Jannzi already has the Shield of Samar, but Tusa has been piloting the same commercial mech as before. Even though it's a powerful machine, it is still a mass market model."

"I see. Designing a mech for an expert candidate sounds nice. Depending on how much he improved, I might even design a second-class for him! He should be powerful enough to handle one! It will be expensive, though."

"That's fine. I have a lot of Breyer alloy in stock."

"I'm not sure if Breyer alloy is the best option for Tusa. He's a light skirmisher specialist, right? I think I will go with importing lighter alloys. I'm more worried about the glow. Unless I adapt one of your existing mech designs, I can't add a glow to any of my custom mechs."

That was a considerable problem, especially when Gloriana had already become accustomed to their presence!

"Mechs don't need glows to perform well." He told her. "As much as I would like to help you by contributing to your design at the start, it won't entirely be your work anymore. You should try your best to figure something out on your own. If you can manage to imitate some of my techniques, then that's great! If not, then no harm is done. Tusa will still be able to perform well without a glow. If it truly bothers you a lot, then I can always develop a variant of your work."

"Ah. That will work. Let's work from his premise."

Ves smiled. "The same goes for me. If I ever design a mech that isn't relevant to the mission, then I expect you to go over it and perfect it. This way, we can gain a good understanding of our individual strengths."

After several years of designing mechs together, the thought of going solo sounded rather novel. As proud young Journeymen, they shouldn't be too afraid that they would botch their own designs!

"By the way, what's this I hear about some huge ceremony?"

"It's a surprise."