

Mech 2121

Chapter 2121 Charming Mech

The creation of a masterwork mech had always been a dream for mech designers.

Countless mech designers chased after the honor of fashioning one. Not only did it prove that the mech designer had an excellent touch for mechs, the experience of making the masterwork always resulted in many new insights.

As soon as Gloriana installed the Mother's Love, she quickly left the cockpit and floated above the mech, taking in every transformation with her eyes and implants.

Though the mech hardly changed in the eyes of laymen, to mech designers the first copy of the Blessed Squire model couldn't be more different!

There was a huge difference between a regular mech and a masterwork mech. The latter was something mundane and ordinary while the latter was exceptional and perfect in a way that normal means could never achieve!

Gloriana harvested a huge amount of insights, both from witnessing the transformation taking place before their eyes and the spontaneous innovations she developed during her days-long inspiring mood.

This was a sublimely fantastic moment for her, and Ves was genuinely happy that she managed to fulfill one her ambitions.

Since her design philosophy revolved around perfection, making a masterwork mech was one of the best ways to achieve his dream! Each masterwork mech she brought into existence put her one step closer towards attaining the ideal she dedicated her entire life to pursue.

The happiness that radiated from her was indescribable. Not even in their admittedly infrequently nightly sessions did she look as happy as she was at this very moment!

In addition, her design seed became active like crazy, so much so that the spiritual fragment that Ves deposited in her mind became affected as well!

Both the masterwork mech and Gloriana seemed to resonate with each other. The bond between creator and creation was sacred and holy, and the pervasive glow of the Superior Mother only reinforced this impression!

Ves was lucky to get some scraps at all. His involvement was not that much, but he did contribute sufficiently to the formation of the masterwork mech to absorb some benefits at well. He wasn't feeling that much worse than Gloriana!

As the transformation finished and the euphoria of the moment finally subsided, Gloriana slowly came off her transcendent high.

A brilliant smile plastered on her face as she floated next to the Blessed Squire mech she created with her own effort and placed her hand on its exterior.

"My precious baby.. you're so lovely.. I love you so much.."

Perhaps drunk on her amazing achievement, Gloriana kept cooing at her masterwork mech as she stroked its chest plating. She soon proceeded to rub her cheek against the Breyer alloy plate.

"Hihihi! You're so perfect. You're so lovely. You're all mine, my precious baby. Mommy brought you into this reality, and mommy will take care of you forever and ever..."

Ves froze and watched with astonishment as Gloriana's behavior became more and more unhinged.

She floated up to the head of the Blessed Squire and began to kiss and lick its surface!

Even though the mech was brand new and squeaky clean, that was not hygienic!

Ves wavered a bit. A part of him wanted to fly up and pull her out of her drunk mood. Another part of him wanted her to relish her achievement.

Though her perverted conduct towards her masterwork mech looked disturbing, she wasn't doing anything harmful, so Ves was inclined to let her have her moment. She would probably scream his head off if he interrupted her happy moment with her new 'baby'.

As he tried his best to ignore his girlfriend's senseless cooing and licking, Ves took a step back and began to take in his third masterwork mech.

Its thick shield and serviceable sword looked as if they were part of the same whole as the mech. The frame of the machine looked both masculine and innocent, which was a very strange contradiction.

Somehow though, the machine made it work. The Blessed Squire already revolved around these concepts, but the masterwork mech seemed to embody this duality a lot better than the original design!

Despite its heavy loadout and sturdy armor plating, the mech wasn't all that heavy compared to other knight mechs. Its strong legs and its balanced structure allowed it to move steadily on the battlefield.

Overall, the mech's appearance brought him a lot of confidence that it would serve its role as a defensive asset that could provide valuable protection to any squad it was attached to. Other friendlies would always be able to depend on it to provide cover!

However, that wasn't all. Two tentacle-like appendages snaked out of the sides of the torso. These flexible limbs were usually coiled against the frame. Yet these deceptively strong limbs played a key role in facilitating the secondary role of the mech.

Ves already knew that these tentacles could transfer a huge amount of energy in both directions.

The tentacles were able to channel the modest but decent amount of energy reserves stored in the frame of the mech to any friendly mech within reach.

However, their tips could also transform into razor-sharp spikes that could stab straight through the weak points of a hostile or fallen mech in order to harvest a lot of energy at a surprising pace!

The addition of these tentacles should have given the Blessed Squire a more menacing look, but they seemed as harmless as wet noodles on the masterwork mech.

All in all, Ves was very happy with how the entire machine turned out. As the first mech that bore the glow of the Superior Mother, he believed it would definitely make an impact on the Hexers!

Yet.. the only problem was that Gloriana had been drooling over her masterwork mech for over fifteen minutes without stopping.

"My beautiful baby boy.. would you like a name? Hmmm.. how about Little Angel. Oh, you like it? Hihih! Little Angel it is, then! Mommy loves your new name so much!💎💎💎"

While Gloriana persisted in her mad behavior, the sound of heels approached from behind.

"So I take it your attempt was a success." Calabast noted as she stared appreciatively at the Blessed Squire. "I don't look at mechs the way you mech designers do, but even I can tell there is something special about it. This mech.. even I feel tempted to keep it for myself. There is just something about it that makes it look so precious! I've seen the Quint up close multiple times, but this one is leagues better!"

Though Ves didn't know much about Calabast, he knew that she was not as taken in by mechs as other people. It was quite uncharacteristic of her to convey such appreciation.

He frowned and began to gaze back and forth between Gloriana and Calabast. While the creation of a masterwork mech was truly a special moment, the behavior exhibited by both triggered an alarm in his head!

This was not normal!

He suddenly thought back on the gem he decided to insert in the Blessed Squire mech.

[Mother's Love]

The love of a mother towards her offspring resides within this royal gem. Increases the allure of a mech by 100 percent to females.

When Lucky initially handed over this gem, Ves reacted very disdainfully towards its effect. A 100 percent boost sounded great at first, but not every attribute was valuable!

For example, if Ves received a boost promoting 100 percent faster beard growth, would he jump in joy? No! This was a completely irrelevant benefit and he was probably better off without this distraction.

Therefore, Ves always looked down on the gems with seemingly-useless enhancements. The Mother's Love, the Bastet's Whisper and the Whipping Boy all caused him to feel a lot of shame for owning them. Being able to get rid of one of them at this time lifted a considerable weight off his shoulders.

He overlooked one factor, though.

His opinion differed from other people's opinion!

It was only now that he realized the power of the Mother's Love gem.

Increasing the allure of a mech by a whopping 100 percent may not seem relevant in battle, but outside of it the effect was huge!

Someone like Gloriana who was the main person responsible for crafting the 'Little Angel' already possessed a lot of affection for the mech. This was the first time she entered into an inspired state of mind, and that would always leave an unforgettable place in her heart!

Suddenly doubling her already strong emotions practically turned her adoration into an outright obsession! Ves genuinely feared whether she would even leave the Little Angel's side!

Fortunately, there was at least one sane woman in this secure workshop. Calabast still looked composed despite the vastly increased appeal of the mech in her eyes.

"So. I think neither of us expected this day to end in this fashion." She said as her eyes kept roaming over the Little Angel as if it was a sweet boy. "Gloriana and you have outdone yourselves."

Ves ruefully smiled. "It's mostly Gloriana. She crafted the Little Angel as if the Superior Mother was literally supporting her from above."

He glanced back at the statue of the Superior Mother. Its presence had been decisive in pushing Gloriana to go beyond her limits!

Of course, Ves didn't actually believe the Superior Mother had blessed his girlfriend. She simply immersed herself in her superstitions and exceeded her capabilities through her own power.

In his honest opinion, the presence of the statue merely tricked Gloriana's state of mind. It was as if she had swallowed a medicine that actually didn't do anything to her body!

This was called the placebo effect.

Before, Ves always found Gloriana's insistence on sticking to her beliefs annoying. Ves had no respect for hexism and thought that all of it was nonsense that some delusional women had invented in order to justify putting women ahead of men.

Yet now, that same instance was one of the primary enablers of Gloriana's success. It didn't matter if her beliefs were built upon lies. As long as his girlfriend truly believed from the bottom of her heart that she was blessed by the Superior Mother, she was capable of outputting 120% or even more of her potential!

This caused Ves to feel very mixed about this situation. He was glad that the two of them created another masterwork mech, and so soon after their last one. They probably broke another record for Journeymen at their ages!

Once was a fluke, but twice was a pattern!

The odds of creating a third collaborative masterwork mech had increased as well, though the difference was probably small.

However, at the very least, he found a way to stimulate Gloriana. Instead of fighting her faith, Ves could obtain much better results by feeding into it! Though he was very reluctant to do so, the benefits were too attractive for him to ignore!

So what if Gloriana believed in nonsense? Increasing the odds of making another masterwork mech was very crucial in their early development! Ves would gladly tolerate a little more crazy from his girlfriend as long as both of them progressed faster!

Ves looked back at the giant statue once again. His mother's imperious gaze passed straight over his head, as befitting of a Supreme.

He did not regret creating the statue. Despite the accidents he encountered along the way, its existence played a pivotal role in the mech workshop!

Perhaps he should make it a habit. Ves already planned to repeat this act again. Even though Ves had not played a major role in this fabrication run, even he experienced the benefits of crafting a mech while under the influence of its design spirit!

Unfortunately, the successful creation of the Little Angel generated some very tough questions.

Calabast did not hold back in voicing one of them. "Let's discuss the ownership of this masterwork mech. This is a very valuable artifact, one that will definitely attract a lot of interest once it becomes known."

His face fell. She was right.

Chapter 2122 Relinquish

It took quite some time for Gloriana to regain a semblance of her composure. While she still exhibited a desire to pamper her 'Little Angel', Ves managed to drag her away from their new masterwork mech and push her into an office.

Ves, Gloriana and Calabast all sat down.

Gloriana still looked a bit vacant. She constantly turned her head in the direction of the Little Angel while she idly stroked Clixie's fur. Normally, she treated her pet more affectionately, but right now her furry companion hardly registered in her mind!

"Miaow? Miaow miaow!"

"Oh, I almost forgot about you, Clixie. Sorry!"

Lucky, who was perched on Ves' shoulder, looked sympathetic at his organic counterpart.

"Meow."

Ves reached up and stroked Lucky's back. "Gloriana will snap out of it.. eventually. This is your fault, you know."

His cat angrily raised his metal tail!

"Meow!"

If Lucky wanted to avoid blame, then he shouldn't be producing more pointless Hexer-inspired gems!

"Alright." Calabast spoke up. "Let us get this discussion out of the way. First, congratulations to the two of you for creating another masterwork mech. While I do not

recognize much what makes your latest success so compelling, I am quite aware of the repercussions of this result. Let's discuss the good ones first."

"The.. 'Little Angel'.. is much more significant than the Quint." Ves began. "The latter is a bridge mech, and we can't take full credit of its creation due to the involvement of outside help. The former is a legitimate second-class mech designed by two of us. Hardly anyone else contributed to its design."

Ves and Gloriana deserved full credit for designing the Blessed Squire!

Both of them were already responsible for making the Little Angel!

Even if they didn't say anything, any mech designer familiar with their work could tell that the pair had truly relied on themselves!

This made this achievement much more amazing. Though the novelty factor had subsided a bit, the significance of this success was much greater.

How many collaborations between Journeymen took place in the mech industry? Ves did not even dare to utter a number.

Out of all of those partnerships, which one resulted in not one, but two masterwork mechs? Very little!

With a second collaborative masterwork mech under their belt, a third one was not out of the question. Even if it took a few years or decades to produce another one, their titles as masterwork mech designers no longer came attached with an asterisk. Both of them proved they had become fully capable of reaching the masterwork threshold at their early ages!

Calabast concurred with his assessment. "According to my understanding of the mech industry, your fame will no longer be contained to this star sector. While there are many prominent Journeymen in the Yeina Star Cluster, the two of you will likely rank close to the top after your achievement is publicized."

The way she emphasized that last word triggered something in Ves. He looked at her carefully.

"You're implying that won't happen."

"At least not immediately." She spoke. "As happy as I am for your accomplishment, don't forget about your original purpose. DIVA commissioned you to design a male Hexer mech that carries one of your characteristic glows. You fulfilled this demand with the help of Hexer technology, Hexer components, Hexer design standard and Hexer criteria. According to the terms of this commission, the design and every mech derived from it is legally theirs."

Though Ves hated it, she was right. He was not so stupid to think the Larkinson Clan could continue to own a piece of Hexer military hardware.

That did not sit well with his girlfriend, though. While she had been distracted throughout this meeting, it turned out that she still paid at least some attention!

"Unacceptable! The Little Angel is mine! He's my baby! I created him! DIVA has nothing to do with that!"

Both Ves and Calabast shared an exasperated glance.

"Gloriana, you know what DIVA will demand. In fact, if the Hex Army is involved, you will have even less rights to the Little Angel! I hate to pop your bubble, but when you work on behalf of the state, your product also belongs to the state."

This was a generally-accepted concept in the mech industry, and Gloriana should know better. It was just that her irrational affection towards the first masterwork mech she truly brought into existence was scrambling her common sense.

Though Calabast stated the truth, masterwork mechs were not treated in the same way as regular mechs!

"If I recall, DIVA's commission came with a fairly standard-looking contract, right?" Ves noted.

Calabast noted. "Model contracts exist for every type of client-mech designer relationship. DIVA has opted to make use of one of them, only modifying the terms that make it possible for a boy like you to be recognized as a lead designer."

Ves activated his comm and projected the confidential contract into view. "When I signed all of the paperwork, I specifically inspected the terms related to the production of any possible masterwork mechs."

He had already created two masterwork mechs. In the event of a third, he wanted to be ready to defend his rights.

Every commission that made use of a standard contract always incorporated clauses for nearly every possible outcome. Not even masterwork mechs were left of them! Though it was an ultra-rare occurrence for a masterwork mech to appear, it was better to set the terms beforehand rather than argue about them afterwards. A lot of ugly disputes between clients and mech designers had emerged when the latter fortuitously created a masterwork mech!

In most cases, a masterwork mech fell beyond the scope of any commission. The mech did not automatically become the client's possession, and the mech designer deserved to be rewarded for his extraordinary effort.

Sometimes, the agreements were worded in a way that allowed the mech designer to retain possession of the masterwork. The client may have ordered a specific mech, and the mech designer could easily whip up another copy and deliver that machine in the place of a masterwork.

As long as the mech designer fulfilled original commission, the masterwork mech didn't have to go!

Unfortunately, this was not the case. Calabast was right that the mech was stuffed with Hexer technology and other goodies. There was too little justification for Ves and Gloriana to maintain possession of the Little Angel unless they gained the right to retain possession of exclusive Hexer hardware.

However, that didn't mean they gained nothing.

"If we have to give up our mech, we're entitled to a lot of conversation." Ves stated.

Calabast nodded. "You can choose from various rewards, though I will have to confer with DIVA to present you with detailed options. I'll make sure you won't get short-changed. It is no exaggeration to say that the Little Angel has the potential to change everything."

"How about we keep my baby boy?!" Gloriana interrupted. "Is that a possible reward?"

"No." Calabast shook her head.

"Gloriana.." Ves turned towards his girlfriend and placed his hand over her own. He looked at her in the eyes. "I know what you are feeling right now. I felt this way as well with my Devil Tiger. I also became tempted by the urge to hoard my masterwork and keep it on display. However, is that truly the best for your Little Angel?"

She frowned. "What do you mean, Ves? He's my masterwork! What if he gets ruined?"

"The Blessed Squire isn't designed to be put on display. It's designed to fight." He stated. "As its creator, the Little Angel deserves to fulfill its intended purpose. We lucked out with the Quint because it's based on the Bright Warrior, which we designed for our own use. This isn't the case. We always intended the Blessed Squire to be used by others, and the Little Angel is no different."

Tears started to fall from Gloriana's cheeks. She actually started to cry, alarming Clixie and everyone else!

"Miaow miaow!"

"My baby.. I can't stand the thought of relinquishing my Little Angel..."

He leaned in to hug her shaking body. "It's okay, Gloriana. Everything will be alright. Don't forget about what the Superior Mother stands for. Raising a boy is all about making them grow up and be able to act responsibly. Only bad mothers want to keep their boys by their side forever. The act of nurturing has to reach an end. The Superior Mother, my mother, does not want you to waste the potential of the Little Angel!"

His garbled, improvised argument hit home. Though Gloriana's tears continued to leak from her eyes, the explicit mention of the Superior Mother caused her to rethink her views.

Only bad mothers kept their sons incapable and locked up in their protective cages.

If Gloriana wanted to show respect to the Superior Mother, she should adhere to the ideals that Ves had mentioned!

This was a bitter pill to stomach, not just for Gloriana, but many other mothers!

"I.. you're right.. I suppose.." She sniffed.

"Your Little Angel won't be thrown into the meat grinder, Gloriana." Calabast reassured. "While Ves is correct, your masterwork mech is much more useful outside of the battlefield. It's a game changer."

"What do you mean?"

"Consider your political problem. All of us here know your glows can benefit the side that uses them. There are two reasons why the Hegemony hasn't used any of your mechs. First, their designs are too weak. Second, you're a boy. Well, as soon as you finished the Blessed Squire design, the first problem doesn't apply anymore. Only the second problem remains. Originally, DIVA likely intends to introduce the Blessed Squire onto the battlefield sporadically. Before the mech is ready for widespread adoption, its value and utility has to be demonstrated in real battles."

"Otherwise, those biased Hexers will instantly dismiss our work because of the involvement of a male." Ves added.

"Yes. We're very fortunate that DIVA is more open-minded than the rest of Hexer society, but the agency alone can't field your mechs. I believe that my former superiors have already concluded that fielding your mechs en masse can break the current stalemate in the Komodo War. The longer it goes on, the greater the chance the Fridaymen will launch their own surprise."

Mentioning the political dimension caused Ves to make a very stark realization. "You can use the Little Angel to build up political support for our mech model!"

"Exactly!" Calabast grinned. "Due to its glow and its exceptional identity as a masterwork mech, it will likely attract a lot of attention as long as we exhibit it to prominent Hexers. As long as the mech can sway enough stubborn matriarchs to change their stance on letting mech designed by a boy to take part in the war, your Blessed Squires may truly become a staple on the battlefield! Of course, that is also contingent on the performance of the initial batches."

If the Blessed Squire performed worse than expected, then all of this was moot, but neither Ves nor Gloriana believed that would happen.

The scenario envisioned by Calabast took much of the sting away from the prospect of losing her baby. Gloriana no longer shed any tears, though she still appeared glum.

"I suppose I can accept that. Ves and I will be credited for its design, right?"

"Once DIVA is ready to roll out the Blessed Squires onto the battlefield, there is no more need for secrecy." Calabast confirmed. "In fact, it is to the Hegemony's advantage that your names are mentioned. The two of you have quite clearly become some of the top Journeymen of our star sector. Borrowing your fame will not only add a halo to the Blessed Squire, but also embolden the Hegemony."

"Even for a 'boy'?" Ves pointed at himself.

Calabast grinned. "You're not just an ordinary boy anymore to the Hegemony. As long as Hexers recognize the immense value of your glow, they will definitely embrace it! By then, they will employ any measure possible to circumvent established law and dogma. Nothing can stand in the way of their determination to win the Komodo War!"

Chapter 2123 An Interesting Offer

Ves and Gloriana emerged from the secret workshop with much less joy than they should. After all, the two of them succeeded in creating their second collaborative masterwork mech!

Yet the thought of giving it up was still painful, regardless of any high-sounding arguments that Ves put forth.

At least the Quint completely belonged to the Larkinson Clan. If he ever felt the desire to check up on it in order to make sure it was being treated right, he could always stop by the Avatars of Myth and inspect Joshua's assigned machine.

This wasn't possible for the masterwork mech that Gloriana impulsively named the Little Angel. Every Blessed Squire mech belonged to the Hexadric Hegemony. At most, Ves and Gloriana deserved remuneration proportionate to the worth of the exceptional mech.

Ves had already adjusted his mentality towards giving up his masterwork mechs. His Devil Tiger was still wandering in the depths of the Nyxian Gap. At least he could reassure himself that his father was piloting one of his best works.

However, Gloriana still required a lot of time to accept this inevitability. Though she wanted to spend every single moment with the Little Angel, Ves forced her to leave.

"You have stayed awake for four days straight." He told her while he grabbed her arm. "Your body will fail if you push yourself further. Go to bed. You can return to the Little Angel tomorrow. It isn't going anywhere for awhile."

"Miaow."

Clixie pawed at Gloriana's foot in concern.

"See? Even your pet is concerned about you! I know the Little Angel is very fascinating, but there is a time and place for everything."

"Okay, fine... I'll go."

When the pair of mech designers finally returned to their accommodations, the clansmen they passed all noticed their downcast emotions.

Ves looked stoic as if he was holding something in. Meanwhile, Gloriana's tear streaks were still visible.

This caused a lot of Larkinsons to conclude that they had failed to produce another masterwork!

It was no secret that the two always worked hard to replicate their previous success. The Quint not only raised their stature, but also brought a lot of pride to the Larkinson Clan!

Many other family organizations boasted mech designers, but few of them had reached as far as Journeyman.

Of this group, only Ves and Gloriana could boast of producing a masterwork mech! The Quint was living proof that they had the potential of producing greater mechs in the future.

Of course, the odds of making another one was very small. Every Larkinson knew that. So they did not think too much about the disappointment shown by the two. It was a given to feel crushed when met by another failure.

Though the conclusions made by the clansmen initially took Ves aback, he quickly decided to roll with the situation.

The Blessed Squire design and the Little Angel both had to remain hidden! Calabast already told him that DIVA could achieve the strongest effect if it revealed the design and the masterwork mech at a time and place of its choosing.

While Ves agreed with this statement, he had one more reason to mislead the public that their attempt had failed.

He wanted to avoid Master Willix!

Ves had become aware that the MTA would dispatch very capable experts whenever someone created a masterwork mech. It was the only way for the people responsible to receive their coveted masterwork certificates.

Though he admittedly desired to receive another masterwork certificate to his collection, he did not relish the thought of entertaining Master Willix in person! He liked it even less when she dissected his mech and design from inside out. There was just something about this rational mech designer that made him feel afraid that she would be able to crack his secrets any day.

If Ves was able to keep the surprise under wraps for a decent period of time, he could leave for the Nyxian Gap and let DIVA inform the MTA afterwards!

By then, even if the MTA wanted to interview the mech designers responsible for creating the masterwork, Moira Willix would only be able to reach Gloriana!

As for Ves, he would be long gone in the Nyxian Gap, which was an anomalous region of space that even the Big Two couldn't tame!

Ves wanted to break out a laugh. This plan sounded brilliant! All he had to do was to make sure that everyone in the know sold the illusion that the attempt had failed.

Not a lot of people were actually aware of the truth. Aside from Ves, Gloriana and Calabast, he only had to worry about the lips of their bodyguards.

Nitaa was loyal to him to a fault while the guards dispatched by the Glory Battalion were loyal Hexers who would never harm the interests of their state.

Though the MTA possessed very powerful spying capabilities, Calabast had already made sure that the workshop they had just used was as secure as possible. The odds that the MTA had been pointing some powerful scanner that was both capable enough to penetrate a lot of shielding but also stealthy enough to avoid tripping any sensors was very unlikely!

Ves did not believe the local branch on Cinach VI possessed such advanced capabilities. Their local mech evaluators couldn't even make heads or tails of the Doom Guard!

As they returned to their bedroom, Gloriana instantly went out like a light. The exhaustion of the last couple of days had finally caught up to her. Ves was feeling a bit tired as well.

The next day, Gloriana woke up and dressed herself as quickly as possible. She wanted to return to the Little Angel straight away in order to study its exquisite structure.

Though Ves felt tempted to join her, he had to take care of other matters.

Gloriana leaned in and happily kissed Ves on the lips. "Thank you for lending me that gem. I couldn't have made my Little Angel so perfect if not for your help. I was a bit too tired yesterday, but I'll be sure to reward you tonight!"

She winked at him before she hopped away, leaving Ves with a goofy grin!

"Ahem." He coughed. "I should meet with Calabast."

Some time later, he entered her office. While Ves sat on a chair and started to pet Lucky's head, Calabast switched off her terminal.

"Ves. It's to see you here early. I conferred with DIVA yesterday on a secure channel and managed to convey the good news to them. The reaction I've received is very positive."

"Are you sure?"

The spymaster smiled. "DIVA fits in a different mold than you think. Unlike many other Hexers, the agency is fully capable of appreciating the competence of boys. My former superiors agree with my suggestion to make use of the Little Angel to introduce the utility of your work to the decision-makers of the Hegemony. DIVA has already notified me that a secure transport convoy is on the way to pick up the Little Angel."

"That's rather slow."

She shrugged. "While DIVA has stationed assets closer to the Sentinel Kingdom, they're not strong enough to defend something as valuable as the Little Angel. Don't underestimate the significance of its existence. In my opinion, the addition of your glows to the Hex Army is enough to tilt the balance of the Komodo War in the Hegemony's favor! The biggest hindrance we face is the rejection from our own side. Parading your masterwork mech is a powerful way to neutralize their core justification for rejecting mechs designed by boys."

"The stuffy matriarchs who decide which mechs to approve always believe that male mech designers like me are incompetent." Ves ruefully smiled. "I can see how the existence of a masterwork version of a Hexer mech design, a male one no less, can collapse their entire logic!"

The logic of those biased matriarchs and Hexers were flawed to begin with. Let alone Ves, many other male mech designers produce just as much masterworks as their female counterparts.

It was just that the Hexers always discounted the works of male mech designers for lame reasons. The fact that not a single male Hexer mech designer had been able to make a masterwork mech, as far as the public was aware of, had always supported the existing policies.

Though DIVA was not an organization that specifically advocated for increasing the rights of boys, right now it was to their benefit if they carved out a place for someone like Ves. There was no female alternative to a mech designer with his specialty!

Calabast noticed his look. "Don't read too much in this development. Female Hexers aren't about to improve their treatment of boys due to this change. Even with the help of the Little Angel, it will take a lot of lobbying and political maneuvering to carve out an exception for you. You're an outlier as far the Hexers are concerned, so it is not impossible to give you a pass on account of the substantial difference you can make to the war effort. The same does not necessarily apply to their domestic male mech designers. Even if they are given more liberties, they will hardly nudge the direction of the war."

"Mhmm."

He wasn't a part of the Hegemony. Even if he plotted to change the mindset of Hexers by exposing them to the Superior Mother, this was a long-term plan that took years to come into fruition. There was simply too much institutional opposition towards giving the males of their society more space and opportunities.

"In any case, I do have some good news for you." The Black Cat Commander continued. "DIVA has put a very generous valuation on your masterwork mech. "In general, the perceived value of a mech is multiplied by as little as 10 to as much as 100 or more. Some even go as high as 1000 times more. Since the Little Angels is based off a premium military second-class mech design, multiplying the value by 100 sounds fair."

"What is the estimated market price of the Blessed Squire?"

"200 million hex credits. This is what the analysts at DIVA have concluded after studying its design for several days. Do you have any objections?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "Considering the performance, proprietary tech, materials along with the added value of the Superior Mother's glow, that is a reasonable sum to pay for a single copy of the Blessed Squire."

This meant that the Little Angel, which was hardly distinguishable from a regular Blessed Squire at first glance, was worth 20 billion hex credits according to DIVA!

If it was before he released the Doom Guard, this sum would have been enough to make him wild. Nowadays, this windfall sounded extremely paltry!

His disappointment was apparent on his face.

"You think the multiplier is too low?"

"It's hard not to think so. If I submit the mech to the MTA, I could get a lot of merits in return."

He was already starting to contemplate whether he should leak the existence of the Little Angel to the MTA.

Someone as astute as Calabast immediately guessed what he was thinking. "I advise you not to spoil your relationship with DIVA. My former agency is one of your few supporters along with the Wodin Dynasty. I have already managed to negotiate a better deal with DIVA on your behalf. Its director is not going to demand the Little Angel from you without a hefty reward. What do you think about receiving a state-of-the-art second-class factory ship built according to your specifications?"

Ves immediately straightened his back. "Those ships cost way more than 20 billion hex credits! In fact, not even 200 billion is enough in some cases!"

Factory ships, especially the higher-classed ones, were enormous investments. They were not only capable of pumping out as many mechs as a manufacturing complex, but were also tough enough to withstand at least some attacks without falling apart.

That latter was very crucial and one of the main reasons that proper factory ships were so expensive!

In truth, Ves highly doubted that the Little Angel was enough to pay for a modern factory ship!

"It's not as straightforward as you think, Ves." Calabast stretched her arm. "As long as the Blessed Squire takes off in the Hegemony, DIVA wants to extend and renew its cooperation with you. As long as you fulfill additional commissions, the agency will pledge to deliver a brand-new factory ship to you within a year."

Ah. So the factory ship was part of a package deal. This was a lot more complicated than he thought. As excited as he was to obtain the most important ship of his grand expedition, this was not the time to make an impulsive decision!

Chapter 2124 Difficult Deal

A factory ship!

Obtaining a factory ship had long haunted his dreams.

He still recalled the times he spent on the Wolf Mother. Though the Flagrant Vandal version of a factory ship had been built step-by-step by grafting on additional compartments and ship parts, at her most recent incarnation she had become quite a formidable vessel!

Though unarmed and not that well-armored, the Wolf Mother had made a powerful impression in his mind due to her robust material processing and industrial capacity.

At their best, factory ships functioned as mobile manufacturing complexes! Paired with mining ships or mining mechs, it was very much possible for factory ships to pump out mechs and other heavy duty equipment at a respectable pace.

This was because factory ships spanned for at least several kilometers, classifying them decisively as capital ships!

Once a vessel reached the size of a capital ship, her internal volume and her tonnage reached a point where she could essentially be regarded as a miniature city!

Of course, the cost rapidly ballooned as a response. One of the biggest reasons that humans preferred to fly with several smaller vessels as opposed to a single big one was because the cost of procuring and operating the other shot up very rapidly.

A ship that was twice as large as a normal one could easily cost ten times more.

However, the adage that you got what you paid for also applied. As long as a huge ship was put to good use, she could provide incredible value in return.

This was why Ves always aimed to obtain a proper factory ship, especially one built towards his own specifications. He had no stomach for buying a second-hand vessel.

There was no place in the competitive Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy for weak, outdated ships!

As a mech designer, designing and producing mechs was his core activity. In a different region of space where there wasn't a lot of industrial capacity, being able to rely on himself to produce his mechs was an essential priority.

Relying completely on third-party manufacturers was not a wise decision. He needed to obtain the ability to produce mechs, and not just any mech. Higher quality designs required a lot more heavy duty production machines to produce on a cost and time-efficient basis. Smaller logistics ships or simple workshops would never allow him to produce advanced mechs at a profit.

Though he wanted to obtain a factory ship badly, it wasn't easy at all to obtain these vessels.

Most capital ships fell into the hands of states and state-owned entities. It was very rare for companies or smaller players to own them because capital ship production was quite constrained.

Only a small number of large, specialized shipyards produced these massive vessels. These large shipyards also happened to be owned by states or companies that fell under the sway of the government. Most of their output ended up in the military.

Therefore, ordering a capital ship as a private entity was anything but simple. Ves had to obtain the cooperation of the government of a second-class state, and that had always stopped him from exploring this option!

This was why he reacted with so much astonishment to Calabast's words. If DIVA valued his mechs so much that it was willing to trade a factory ship for it, then this was a very attractive offer!

The most important part about the offer was that DIVA truly tailored its offer to his needs. The agency did not attempt to pass off one of the Hegemony old cast-offs that had been built a century ago or so. Such vessels were not only more fragile, but also came in a fixed configuration.

For the most important vessel of his grand expedition, Ves did not wish to obtain any factory ship. He wanted one that was configured to his needs as much as possible! He had some very important demands for his dream factory ship and he did not wish to settle for less!

Fortunately, Calabast was aware of that, so she managed to negotiate a decent deal on his behalf. Even if she was a former DIVA agent, Ves could at least trust that she was on side.

"You should think carefully on what you want and how much you are willing to pay for it." Calabast cautioned him. "I can already tell you that DIVA has already fabricated a number of copies of the Blessed Squire in the method you recommended. The internal evaluation of the new mechs are still on-going, but I'm already hearing a lot of appreciation."

Ves smirked. It was hard not to get charmed by his mechs. Their glows were simply irresistible to those who came across them for the first time! The fact that the Superior Mother was highly compatible with the Hexers only made the Blessed Squire even more compelling.

"I would be glad to design more Hexer mechs." He spoke. "However, I don't like to design a mech according to the boundaries set by the Hexers. No offense, but I don't want to stick with designing male support mechs forever."

"You will have your chance to design female mechs, Ves. If you decide to accept DIVA's offer, then the Hegemony expects you to go all the way. Even if you're a male mech designer, any problem can be overcome as long as you can contribute materially to the Komodo War."

Both of them looked at each other and chuckled a bit. Dogma was important, but winning the war mattered more! The Hexers could always go back to their hardline ways after they beat the Friday Coalition.

"My time and energy is very limited, though. I know the value of my mechs."

"Even for you, an opportunity to obtain your own factory ship is hard to come by." Calabast retorted. "That said, the budget and the amount of advanced features you can obtain is dependent on your commitment. DIVA doesn't ask for any masterwork mechs. It just wants designs with glows, as many of them as possible. The more designs you promise, the better the factory ship that they will prepare for you. Each of the designs has to be able to go toe-to-toe with the mechs of the Friday Coalition."

"That's difficult to accomplish." Ves frowned. "Most mechs fielded by the militaries of both states are designed by Masters or teams of Masters. In terms of performance and sophistication, my mechs won't always be able to match the best. It would be best if I can enlist some help, but..."

Calabast immediately confirmed his guess. "No Hexer Master will ever want to collaborate with you. Even if it helps the Hex Army win more battles, their reputation will be ruined. These old and powerful women will never taint themselves by working alongside a boy!"

He didn't want to cooperate with other mech designers anyway. Ves liked to exert as much creative control over his mech designs as possible. Collaborating with Gloriana was fine because their focus lay in different areas.

However, as soon as a Senior or Master entered the picture, it was very hard for Ves to justify taking the lead! He did not wish to play second fiddle to a better and more qualified mech designer!

"So what are my options?" Ves asked.

"The minimum designs that DIVA demands from you are six Hexer mech designs. The terms are similar to the ones that applied before. The designs will belong to the Hegemony and you can expect to earn no licensing fees or royalties."

"That's a pretty severe demand! I'm potentially missing out on a lot of profit!"

Calabast grinned. "That's how DIVA intends to earn back the money it spent on commissioning your ship. Don't forget that factory ships are so big that their armor plating alone costs hundreds of billions of credits. After all, you don't want your expensive capital ship to get blasted apart by getting fired upon by a single band of pirates at long range, do you?"

The bigger the ship, the bigger the target. Such vessels were not only bigger targets, but also less agile ones at well, making them extremely susceptible to long-range bombardment!

Therefore, cladding them with thick hull plating was essential, but that was where the size of a capital ship became so troublesome. A huge internal volume required a lot more structural support, and an enormous exterior surface area demanded a lot more armor plating than a ship that was just slightly smaller.

The increase in material requirement was not a linear relationship. Instead, if expressed on a graph, the line would continue to angle higher and higher until it almost became vertical!

This was why the CFA's battleships only reached a length of 12 to 15 kilometers at best.

It was not as if one of the most powerful organizations in the galaxy could build larger vessels. The cost simply became too prohibitive!

Therefore, depending on the dimensions of the factory ship and the quality of materials used to toughen the vessel up, the cost of a premium factory could easily exceed 1 trillion of hex credits!

Even for a powerful intelligence agency such as DIVA, such a sum of money could not be pulled out on a whim!

Ves understood the economics behind this deal. "Ostensibly, this deal is about securing my commitment to design more Hexer mechs. However, there are more layers behind it. By obtaining all of the rights to my design, they can produce and sell it to the Hex Army at a profit, thereby earning all of the revenue from my work. Over time, they can recoup all of the cost of the factory ship and earn a profit."

In short, DIVA wanted to exploit his profit-making potential!

"You and I both know it's not that straightforward." Calabast leaned back and crossed her arms. "First, as I've already mentioned, access is very restricted. For you to be able to order a factory ship through government channels at this early stage in your career is very valuable. I'm sure you can solicit more opportunities in the future, but how much time has passed by then. Five years? Ten years? That's too long considering your rate

of progress. Getting your hands on a factory ship five years early is very helpful for your current plans."

This time premium was indeed of great value to Ves. Being able to travel through multiple star clusters while owning his own factory ship was a completely different concept than doing so without one! Being able to take along so much industrial capacity would relieve him from a lot of troublesome problems, especially if his fleet entered unwelcome space.

"Secondly, DIVA will almost solely supply your mechs to the Hex Army." She continued. "Do you know how difficult it is to be able to offer mechs to one of the Hegemony's most powerful and most demanding services? Not just any mech designer or company can meet all of the requirements to sell mechs to this picky client. DIVA will have to do a lot of lobbying and influence a lot of powerful Hexers in order to get your mechs through the door. All of this will cost political capital that DIVA could have spent on other priorities."

With all of these concerns, it became clear to Ves that DIVA didn't demand the right to profit from his mech designs because of greed. It had to invest deep in order to fulfill its commitment and make full use of his mech designs.

"I understand." Ves reluctantly sighed. "If I can't obtain a share of the profits, then I at least want my ship to be as good as possible."

He understood that this was the only way. His bargaining position was decent but not exceptional. DIVA held the upper hand due to the sole reason that Ves couldn't approach any other party in the Hegemony to sell his mechs to the Hex Army.

Therefore, it was undeniable that DIVA held the upper hand. At the very least, on an economic level, DIVA would likely earn back more hex credits it made in selling his mechs than it spent on the factory ship.

The only consolation was that it would probably take a few years to recoup its monetary costs. That was too much time as far as Ves was concerned. He didn't mind passing over those profits as long as he obtained a factory ship much earlier than he expected.

Calabast understood his position well. She tried to console him. "This is a win-win arrangement. DIVA won't skimp on the factory ship at all. If you commit to design six Hexer mechs, then the budget for the factory ship will be 800 billion hex credits. If you commit to designing 8 mechs, then the budget will be 1.2 trillion hex credits! The more, the better."

That was a lot of money! With such a budget, obtaining a moderately valuable second-class factory ship was well within reach!

She added another sweetener. "The factory ship will be built according to the standard of the Hex Army. This meant that it will incorporate state-of-the-art military components that made use of exclusive Hexer-developed technology. Such a ship is completely different from a capital ship built to civilian standards! You can't buy this access with money!"

That made this deal even more attractive to Ves! At a certain point, the private sector was no longer able to meet his demands. Only by gaining the cooperation of government entities would he be able to obtain a high-spec ship!

"I need to discuss this with Gloriana. This decision is way too big for me to decide alone."

Chapter 2125 Fair Deal

Ves left Calabast's office with a pensive expression. He clutched Lucky to his chest as he slowly stepped out and smelled the oil and metal from all of the mechs on the move.

A squad of mech pilots jogged right past him as a number of heavy-duty lifter bots transported some depleted energy cells to the nearest power generator. A lone silver-coated Desolate Soldier marched around a corner while a number of teenage Larkinsons sat next to a dormant Aurora Titan in order to enjoy its soothing, protective area.

"Meow."

"Yeah. I don't relish getting scammed, but Calabast is right. This deal can't be weighed on its financial merits alone."

When Ves marched across the base, greeting a lot of friendly clansmen along the way, he finally reached the secure workshop, where the Little Angel still resided.

Security had loosened up after fabricating the masterwork mech. However, a squad of mechs from the Glory Battalion as well as several other mech companies still loomed close.

As soon as he entered, he immediately experienced the overlapping glows emanating from both the statue and the Little Angel.

The effect was so strong and cloying that Ves felt a bit uncomfortable. Where there was nothing fundamentally annoying about his supportive glows, he did not wish to spend his time under the influence of this particular design spirit.

Ves may have imparted a more boy-friendly ideology to the Superior Mother, but she was still very much a Hexer! True equality and respect towards boys and men was still in short supply!

"Ugh." He grunted.

When he approached the Little Angel, he already saw Gloriana buzzing around its frame like a busy bee. She no longer scanned or did anything special with the mech. She simply rubbed her hand on the smooth metal texture of the masterwork mech's armor plating.

"What a beautiful mech you are.. you are so perfect.. mommy doesn't want to let you go, but you deserve to go out into the galaxy and fulfill your purpose. No matter what, mommy will never forget about you.."

For a moment, Ves felt the urge to turn around and leave, but he really needed to talk.

"Gloriana! Could you come with me for a moment?"

"Mhh?"

"It's important! Just get down here!"

It took a bit of cajoling before she finally agreed to leave the Little Angel's side. In order to hold a private discussion, Ves led her to a familiar office before closing and locking the door.

He then proceeded to explain DIVA's offer.

This finally caused Gloriana to turn her thoughts away from the Little Angel.

"I don't see why you would refuse." She spoke. "Lending our strength to the Hexadric Hegemony is a noble endeavor. If the Filthy Fridaymen win the Komodo War, our people will lose everything! Our culture and our way of life will disappear!"

Ordinarily, that should have been a cause for celebration to Ves. Unfortunately, not only was he on the Hegemony's side, his mother's life and wellbeing also depended on its success!

"We can't ignore the profits we forgo if we sign on to this deal." Ves emphasized.

"You obsess too much about money! Even if DIVA stands to make a hefty profit, the deal still sounds fair. Don't forget that DIVA not only has to open up its own sales channels, but also do its best to build up a market for your mechs. There is no stomach for mechs designed by boys at the start, and persuading all of those conservative, rigid-minded matriarchs to allow your mechs to be fielded by the Hex Army is not a given."

"Yes but..." Ves hesitated. "If we designed a second-class mech for another superior state, then as long as it's successful, we could earn enough money to build up a factory ship by ourselves!"

"You're still in the Komodo Star Sector, Ves. Entering the market of another second-rate state in another star sector is easier said than done. The competition of the more open mech markets is extremely competitive, and there are often a lot of other complications as well."

To Gloriana, designing mechs for the Hegemony was partially a patriotic calling. She was much less inclined to quibble over the potential profits they signed away.

Though Ves understood her perspective and had his own reasons to help out the Hegemony, he still couldn't get over the fact that he would be getting the worse end of the deal. His bargaining power shouldn't be this weak, especially if DIVA thought highly of his mech designs!

Then again, Calabast already mentioned that DIVA was willing to provide a lot of benefits. Not only would he be able to obtain the factory ship fairly quickly, she would also come packed with advanced Hexer technology normally reserved for the Hex Army!

The material cost of all of those exclusive Hexer components and ship parts may not be ludicrously high, but their performance was always better! The difference between a military-grade factory ship and a civilian-grade factory ship was considerable!

Gloriana made an argument. "Besides, what DIVA is doing is treating us like a design studio. We are merely responsible for providing our client with the promised design. Our involvement ends there. The client will take the designs and do all of the heavy lifting with regards to producing, marketing and selling the mechs. It is not unusual for design studios to accept a fixed, upfront fee for their designs."

She was right. The business model of a design studio started and ended with the mech design. All of the other cumbersome issues with regards to utilizing the mech design became someone else's responsibility.

In this way, a design studio and all of the mech designers working for it only had to focus on their core profession, which was developing a lot of mech designs!

Everything else was irrelevant to their job. It took hundreds, thousands or tens of thousands of workers to perform the other activities. Expensive office buildings and manufacturing complexes had to be built. An extensive supply chain needed to be formed in order to make sure the production facilities ran smoothly and the mechs ended up in the hands of the end users as smoothly as possible.

Ves initially didn't think about design studios because the Living Mech Company pursued a different business model. Much like many ambitious mech designers, Ves wanted to exert at least some control over the marketing and production of his mechs.

In theory, less middlemen resulted in more profit to the LMC! His company's earnings would have been even better if it didn't rely on so many third-party manufacturers to make its products.

This was one of the many reasons why Ves would benefit from owning his own factory ship.

"You have a point." He told her. "Design studios earn less profit from their own designs, but in exchange they assume much less risk and responsibility. Passing over the latter to DIVA means that it is fair to forgo other profits."

It was difficult to put a solid hex credit figure on all of the other compensation that DIVA promised in return.

However, one look at Gloriana already made it clear that she didn't want to take no for answer!

Designing mechs for the Hex Army was one of her cherished dreams when she was younger. She wanted to accept any offer that allowed her to design mechs for the Hexers fighting on the frontlines, even if she had to work for free!

Ves did not wish to deprive her of this rare and valuable opportunity.

Since their departure from the Komodo Star Sector loomed closer, it would be best if Gloriana gained some closure before she bid farewell to her former home. Contributing to the success of the Hexadric Hegemony was a great way for her to pay off her emotional debt to the state she pledged allegiance to. Otherwise, this debt would haunt her all the way to the Red Ocean!

As for him, the deal also aligned with his own intentions of making life difficult for the Fridaymen, which was considerably more important in his eyes.

He rarely had the opportunity to take revenge on those who attacked him or screwed him over, which made this window of opportunity all the more important!

He needed to teach the Friday Coalition a very nasty lesson in order to deter anyone else who plotted something similar in the future.

If a state thought they could nab him and force him to work on its behalf, he could threaten them back by designing mechs that were literally designed to tear it down!

Both of them soon agreed to take DIVA's offer.

"How many mechs are you willing to design?" He asked. "Personally, as much as I want to help the Hexers out, I don't think I can stomach designing too many Hexer mechs. Six sounds fine, but I don't want our factory ship to be too weak. According to Calabast,

DIVA will add 400 billion hex credits to our budget if we design two additional Hexer mechs."

"Eight sounds fine." Gloriana smiled. "It's not close enough to cover every single mech type used by the Hex Army, but it offers us enough room to spread the Superior Mother in every battlefield situation."

He nodded.

For this series of commissions, he only intended to make use of the Superior Mother. She was already versatile enough to adapt to many different mech types and Ves wanted to spread her influence as much as possible.

As long as a unit of Hexers contained a single mech with a glow, that was already sufficient to boost the entire unit's comprehensive combat effectiveness.

His glows worked as a force multiplier and rarely as a source of direct strength. Instances where Ves had been able to add predictive power to the Deliverer was rare. It was enough to make the Superior Mother lift the spirits of every Hexer while depressing the morale of enemy Fridaymen within the range of her glow!

After an extensive discussion with Gloriana, Ves returned to Calabast but did not immediately give his assent.

She approved of his decision. "We both know that you've already made your choice, but that doesn't mean we have to make it easy for DIVA. The agency works on behalf of the entire Hegemony, so its means are anything but modest. Since DIVA's willingness to use mechs will only improve once the utility of the Blessed Squire becomes clear, your leverage will improve. Take some time to extract more concessions."

With that, they decided to stall for time and quibble over the terms.

In the next few days, with Calabast's advice, Ves demanded several concessions. Even though he suspected that DIVA probably guessed what he was up to, they still needed to go through the motions.

Though DIVA refused to increase the budget for the factory ship, the negotiators did relent on some smaller issues.

First, Ves had gotten a promise that he would be able to maintain possession on any future masterwork mechs that he and Gloriana produced.

He was not about to forgo the opportunity to earn a lot of MTA merits again!

Second, DIVA would make sure the large shipyard responsible for building the factory ship would complete her within 8 standard months.

This was very fast. The ship-building company would definitely have to exert all of its capacity to finish a capital ship within such a short amount of time.

Normally, it took years to construct a 2-kilometer capital ship!

Third, if the Hexer government ever interrupted the deal, Ves would still get his factory ship even if he was no longer allowed to design any additional Hexer mechs!

This concession was a bit more difficult to secure, but DIVA eventually relented. Ves did not want to get screwed a third of the way in if the Hexers ever decided that his mechs posed too much of a threat to their man-hating sensibilities!

It was up to DIVA and other friendly stakeholders to do their utmost to make his mechs acceptable for use. Ves did not want to pay the price if the spies failed to accomplish this basic necessity!

Fourth, the Hexers should lend sufficient trainers in order to teach the Larkinsons how to cooperate in every aspect of the vessel.

This was a detail that Ves did not miss out on. He could already tell that the factory ship would be so advanced and contain so many high-tech systems that third-raters would never be able to get a handle on her at the start!

Therefore, Ves wanted DIVA to send over knowledgeable and experienced spacers in order to teach the Larkinson crewmen how to man the factory ship.

The trainers, which could potentially amount to a hundred, only needed to stay with the Larkinson Clan for a couple of years at most. During this time, they could also operate the essential systems of the factory ship themselves, thereby preventing many possible disasters!

"It's very clever of you to think of that." Calabast complimented. "The free specialists will be invaluable at the start."

Chapter 2126 Made to Order

Once they came to an accord, Ves and DIVA did not waste much time. It didn't take much time to sign the contracts.

Ves felt ambivalent as he returned to Gloriana, who was still spending all of her time with the Little Angel. Soon, DIVA would be taking the masterwork mech away, and it was very unlikely that she would meet her finest work to date ever again!

Therefore, even if her current behavior seemed unhealthy, Ves allowed her to indulge in her current fancy.

"Gloriana! The deal is set. Eight designs for a factory ship. Hopefully, as long as everything goes well, we'll be able to receive our new ship within a year."

"That sounds great!" Gloriana cheerfully responded. "I always wanted a factory ship, and I always wanted to design mechs for the Hex Army. Now I get to do both!"

It was hard not to get caught up in her jubilation. Ves cared less about the potential profits he signed away. Making her happy was a joy in itself.

"Well, in order for the shipyard that DIVA has approached to build our ship, it needs a ship design."

"Oh? Ah, you're right! Not any factory ship will do. We need to pick the right class and select the best configuration for our needs. This is going to be fun!"

"Hahaha, I thought so. If you don't mind, I've invited some other clansmen in order to take part in the initial session. We don't specialize in designing ships, so it is wise to borrow the wisdom of those who command them for a living."

It took some time for the meeting to start.

In a secure conference, Ves, Gloriana, Calabast, Fleet Commander Ophelia Kronon, Major Verle and most notably Commodore Abigail Evern all sat down at a round table.

A projector already started to display various factory ship classes in the center. The imposing mass and size of these vessels instantly dwarfed anything the Larkinson Fleet owned up to this moment!

Before the session commenced, everyone turned to Commodore Evern.

The prominent ♂ symbol tattoos on her face instantly marked her as a Penitent Sister! Even Gloriana looked askance at the presence of the exiled Hexer!

"Ves.. why did you invite Commodore Evern?"

"She's our highest-ranking naval officer." He shrugged. "Look, I have my doubts as well, but when I approached her, she promised to remain cordial."

He only approached the commodore on a whim. The Larkinson Clan may have Ophelia Kronon-Larkinson, but she mainly dealt with second-class ships. She did not possess enough depth in second-class ships!

"I know what you think of me." Abigail defensively huffed. "I only agreed to offer my expertise in exchange for favor. It's in my best interest to play along."

Both Gloriana and Calabast turned to Ves. "What did you promise?"

Ves shrugged. "When I approached the Penitent Sisters, I found out that the ones who participated in the ceremony want to return the statue. Those who don't fall under the 666 Sisters have heard a lot and want to try and worship the statue as well."

"Oh. That.. sounds okay, I think."

He was pleasantly surprised when the Penitent Sisters made this request. If even these extremists became swayed by the Superior Mother, then that meant there was a lot of hope that the rest of the Hegemony might embrace the ancestral spirit!

Of course, the reason why the Penitent Sisters clamored so much to see the statue was because of the show he performed. If he didn't impress them so much, they would have been much more reluctant to approach him with this request!

Even so, he didn't make it easy. Now that he possessed leverage over the recalcitrant Hexers, he wanted to make sure he could use it to keep them under control! He heavily restricted access to the Penitent Sisters and only opened up a small window to access and worship the statue of the Superior Mother.

Ves promised to widen this window as long as the Penitent Sisters behaved well!

With this carrot, he hoped to tame the Sisters and make them less of a problem. Though he did not have much hope of converting them to his side, at the very least he wanted them to be an asset rather than a liability.

Once everyone accepted Abigail's participation, the session finally began when Ves took control of the projector.

"Every factory ship is unique. They're large, stupendously so, and can fit a lot of different stuff. Because they're so big and expensive compared to mechs, the client has a lot of choice on what can go in. It's similar to ordering a custom mech, though our choices are limited by the restrictions of the ship class."

Ship classes were like mech models in that they already provided a fairly complete framework.

Different from mech models, ship classes offered a lot of room for customization. They initially started off in a barebones form, which also happened to be the cheapest option.

It was easy to upgrade or modify the layout of the ship at the initial phase. As long as his demands didn't break the framework and as long as his budget was sufficient enough, he could add all kinds of items on his wish list!

Everyone else knew this as well, so they quickly began to look over the available ship classes.

They could choose from over a hundred different factory ship classes. Some of them looked similar, but others looked radically different!

Most of them were long and narrow and shaped like a cigar or fish. They rarely came in other forms, though Ves did encounter some very vertical ships.

It was a bit difficult to make a choice right away, and it took too much time to go over every single ship class.

This was why Calabast proposed a selection method. "Perhaps it is best to set our criteria first and see which ship class fits our needs the best."

Everyone agreed. The first choice was to consider the overall shape of the factory ship.

Ophelia immediately offered her judgement. "Most human vessels are long and narrow for a reason, sir. In combat situations, strategic ships like these are either flying towards or away from the enemy. You don't want to give the enemy a larger target to hit. Keeping the front and rear silhouettes as small as possible will make it harder for enemies to take down the ship. That said, a ship that is too long and narrow is an easy target when attacked from the flanks. There are other tradeoffs as well, such as the increased stress and demand from the FTL drive."

Everyone concurred with her assessment. None of them had any intentions to buck the trend, especially Ves! He could already predict that his factory ship would definitely experience these situations several times in the future!

"The next choice is to determine a ranking order of strengths, sir." Ophelia continued. "Every ship class scores differently in every area. Some are amazingly resilient against damage. Some are very low-maintenance and cheaper to operate. Some are structurally solid and built to last for centuries. You can't have everything without breaking our budget, so we need to set our priorities."

As mech designers, Ves and Gloriana already knew that there was only so much they could demand from their factory ship.

Ves already had some very strong thoughts about the criteria he valued the most.

"This factory ship will serve as the core and quite possibly the flagship of our grand expedition. Since I intend to take us to the Red Ocean, the ship has to be able to endure the rigors and challenges of operating in underdeveloped, unstable and potentially hostile space."

This put everyone else in a serious mood.

"So you want a heavily-armored factory ship?" Gloriana asked.

"Not necessarily." He shook his head. "In my time travelling through the frontier, I learned that it is more important to retain mobility than to pile up as much armor as possible. I don't want our factory ship to turn into a barely mobile bathtub. It's a lot easier to upgrade the armor plating and structural supports of our ship than to improve her mobility, at least by ourselves."

This caught the Penitent Sister officer's attention. "You intend to upgrade the factory ship frequently?"

Ves nodded. "The Larkinson Clan will only grow wealthier from now. Ten years or twenty years from now, we might be able to get our hands on exotics and materials that are considerably superior to the ones used in the construction of our ship. We will also be able to obtain or produce much better ship parts that can enhance the performance of our ship. I want to be able to upgrade our ship on the fly so that she can best serve our needs in the Red Ocean."

"Hmmm..." Abigail paused for a moment. "Some ship classes are designed with upgradeability in mind, while others are more fixed. The former is that it is easier to keep them up to date, but don't discount the latter. They are not only more affordable, but also more solid and integrated."

Essentially, Ves could obtain a considerably higher-performing ship if he selected a class that was all fixed from inside out. While it was still possible to tear out old or damaged parts and fit them with replacements, it was very troublesome and costly to do so! Many jobs even required the services of a dedicated shipyard!

This choice was best if Ves only intended to make use of the factory ship for a couple of decades before getting rid of her. He could either sell her or scrap her and use the recycled materials to build a better ship.

Ves preferred the other approach. As long as it was viable to keep using the same ship, then why shouldn't he?

This option also fit better with his design philosophy. He treated mechs with respect, so he should at least extend at least some of that courtesy towards ships.

As a mech designer, Ves also felt eager to tinker with his ship. He wanted to make it his by customizing and altering anything he didn't like. He already did so several times with the Scarlet Rose and he expected no different with his new factory ship!

"Let's prioritize modularity and upgradeability." He spoke to everyone. "Don't forget that large swathes of the Red Ocean are either underdeveloped or not developed at all. It will be much more difficult to procure quality ships there. Demand will definitely exceed supply."

Modular ship classes were more expensive and less efficient, but Ves believed that this was a worthy price to pay.

No one offered any strong objections, so the selection process quickly moved on. Everyone pitched in on what the factory ship should excel at, though not everyone agreed with each other.

Ves knew what he wanted. If he had to describe as simple as possible, then he sought to obtain a factory ship that was good at survival.

She had to be tough enough to endure moderate attacks. She had to be mobile enough to flee from powerful enough. She had to offer enough room for mechs to defend her from attackers. Above all else, she had to offer plenty of room for customization.

Once Abigail knew what he wanted, she scrolled through the list and settled on a suggestion.

"The Estrella Klavier-class of factory ships is fairly new and fits your preference the best." She explained. "If you compare her to other factory ships, then you can see that she is fairly lean but still defensible. She isn't built like a tank, but her sub-light propulsion is decent and she can accommodate two capital-grade FTL drives, and offers room for a third."

Some capital ships came with additional FTL drives. They weren't meant to be activated at the same time. Instead, the spares offered the ship an additional escape option if one of them malfunctioned or got knocked out.

The FTL drives could also be activated in succession!

This allowed a ship to enter a star system with the help of one FTL drive, then leave shortly afterwards by engaging the other FTL drive!

Ships with multiple FTL drives did not need to wait for them to finish cycling. They could be operated one at a time, allowing the inactive drive to cycle while the ship was already on her way to her next destination!

Theoretically, ships could continue to chain their FTL drive activations along this pattern and only spend a couple of minutes in the material dimensions at most!

Of course, the stress on the ship and the drives made it very unwise to keep it up. The operation also required very skilled engineers who knew exactly how to push the FTL drives.

Regardless if Ves prioritized redundancy or speed, having multiple FTL drives was essential in his opinion!

"Two FTL drives sound good." He smiled. "We can obtain a third one later."

As everyone studied the Estrella Klavier-class further, it became clear why it might be a good choice.

Compared to many of the other ship classes offered by the Hexers, the Estrella Klavier-class contained a lot of holes!

The schematics only contained the parts and structure that was necessary to operate a basic factory ship.

The client could then fill up the holes in the schematics with their own optional modules?

For example, if he wanted to fill up a compartment with a third FTL drive, Ves could choose to do so. If he would rather augment the power supply of the factory ship, then he could instead fill the same compartment with a power reactor!

The Estrella Klavier-class offered a lot of other choices like this. This appealed strongly to his inclinations as a mech designer!

"This is a great choice!" Gloriana declared. "We can fit everything we want inside this ship!"

Their choice was made. Even if there were tougher, faster and higher capacity alternatives available, the Estrella Klavier-class promised unmatched versatility!

Ves looked intrigued as he began to imagine how he could fill these spaces up. While it wasn't possible for him to design a factory ship and instill her with a glow, what if he could impart at least some spirituality through a different method?

Chapter 2127 Ostentatious Addition

With the sheer amount of choices available, Ves and the rest had to think very carefully on how to configure their personal Estrella Klavier-class vessel.

Capital ships generally weren't built to land on planets. It took too much effort to prevent the starship from crashing and it took even more effort to lift the vessel into orbit.

While it wasn't impossible by any stretch of the imagination, it was mostly a waste of space to add such a capability to such a heavy ship.

If Ves wanted to bring something down, it was much more efficient to rely on smaller ships.

For this reason, the Estrella Klavier-class factory ship did not feature any wings or other extraneous elements. Perhaps the only annoying part about the shape of her hull was that she was shaped like a somewhat stubby hexagonal-sided rod.

If viewed from the front or back, the factory ship was shaped exactly like a hexagon!

To be fair, the Estrella Klavier-class was hardly the only one who incorporated this arbitrary design choice. Many other long and narrow Hexer ships adopted the same shape.

Changing the shape was out of the question. Almost everything about the interior had been built around her specific dimensions. Ves would have to redesign the entire ship class from scratch if he wanted to adopt a more rounded shape!

"From a defensive angle, a Estrella Klavier-class starship is excellent when enemies approach from the front or rear. However, as soon as she shows her entire broadside to an enemy formation, she'll take an awful pounding due to all of the hull plating that is facing them at a perpendicular angle." Ophelia Kronon noted with a frown.

"The same principle applies to mechs." Gloriana nodded in understanding. "Though it's not always possible, its best to always incorporate oblique angles in a design."

A projectile hitting a 1 meter plate of armor at a straight angle only had to pierce through 1 meter of solid alloy.

A projectile hitting the same plate at a 60 degree angle effectively has to chew through 2 meters of solid alloy!

Of course, this was a gross simplification of what actually occurred in battle. Different weapon types interacted with armor in different ways. It was also extremely rare that a defender was able to present the best possible sloping armor towards an enemy, especially the attacks came from multiple angles!

While the downside of having six flat sides was big, featuring a more rounded cigar-like hull shape also had its downsides.

Commodore Abigail Evern shrugged. "The hexagon is a sacred geometric shape. It is superior to the circle. It represents order and the six phases of existence at its best!"

Ves directed an exasperated glance towards Gloriana and Calabast. Both of them looked apologetic.

"That is a legitimate argument in the Hegemony." Calabast carefully confirmed his suspicions.

They had no choice but to live with this shape. While the Hexers offered factory ship classes in other shapes and sizes, none of them suited his needs!

What he wanted was freedom of choice. If he was going to entrust his life, career, future and clan on this decision, then he wanted a ship that reflected his approach and his strengths!

He wanted a factory ship that could survive danger because he often liked to take risks.

He wanted a factory ship that could run away quickly because he sometimes attracted formidable enemies.

He wanted a factory ship that offered a lot of upgradeability because he was confident he could obtain better technology and materials in the future.

He wanted a factory ship that offered a lot of modular choices and unreserved space so he could stuff them with everything he needed to facilitate his goals.

Above all, he wanted a factory ship that gave him enough room to express his greatest strength, his design philosophy!

With that last desire in mind, Ves immediately began to add his touch to the ship design. He took control of the projection and called up a design interface. He began to modify the bow of the vessel and almost completely changed its V-shaped face into a much more complex cosmetic appearance.

It soon became clear what Ves wanted to add to the bow of the factory.

"Is that.. the Golden Cat's head?!"

Ves finished his sketch in rapid time. Though the shape still needed a lot more refinement, it was enough to give everyone in the conference room an idea on the distinctive shape of the bow!

The addition of the Golden Cat's head completely changed the impression of the factory ship! Whereas before she looked like the quintessential Hexer starship, now she acquired a very strong association to the Larkinson Clan!

"While this ostentatious addition looks impressive, I'm not sure the shipyard will agree to incorporate this addition." Calabast warned.

"It adds a lot of extra material to the bow. It will eat into our budget!"

"Every Larkinson Clan vessel must have style!" Ves declared. "Cost is no concern!"

"I like it!" Gloriana chirped as she ruffled Clixie's fur. "This will turn our factory ship into an iconic symbol of the Larkinson Clan. As soon as our name spreads, the distinct appearance of the Golden Cat will definitely make an impression wherever we go! Is this how you're going to add your glow to the factory ship?"

Ves grinned. "Correct! As I've stated earlier, I can't imbue a glow onto a ship that I did not design myself. However, as objects such as the new loyalty medallions and the statue of the Superior Mother have already showed, I can still add my glow to any other material object! Who says I can't instill my glow into the component of a machine rather than the entire whole!"

For a moment, Gloriana and the rest looked stunned!

This was a very simple but very profound statement!

Before, his glows had always been associated with entire mechs.

The only way to gain the Desolate Soldier's duty-inspiring glow was to obtain an intact, working copy of the mech.

The only way to benefit from the Doom Guard's fear-inducing glow was to purchase an expensive copy of the spaceborn striker mech.

There was no instance where only a portion of the mech could induce the glow!

Many customers who thought they were clever attempted to disassemble a Desolate Soldier and tried to install some of the parts onto another mech.

Obviously, that didn't work. The less something resembled the design of an LMC mech, the weaker its glow. At some point, the differences grew so great that the spiritual connection broke entirely!

Therefore, no one ever thought about the possibility that Ves could add his glows to other mechs or vehicles by instilling it in just a smaller component!

"If you wanted to.." Gloriana speculated. "Couldn't you design some sort of.. I don't know.. a piloting chair.. that contains one of your proto-gods?"

The implication of this possibility was massive. Any mech technician could just remove the piloting chair from a random mech and install the one designed by Ves in order to bestow the mech with a glow!

The size of the object was irrelevant, mostly! As long as the creation was complex and sophisticated enough for Ves to instill at least some spiritual foundation, then it became a viable container of one of his glows!

"I can make it even smaller." Ves innocently shrugged. "The loyalty medallions are perhaps the smallest objects I've made that contain my glows."

"Their range is rather short and their effect is weak." Gloriana stated.

"That's correct. My specialty works best on mechs. If not, then at least something that resembles mechs. That's one of the reasons why I made sure the statue of the Superior Mother is as large as a mech."

He had added his glows to objects smaller than a mech. However, he hadn't done so on objects that were significantly larger.

Right now, the prow or forecastle of the Estrella Klavier-class ship had turned into a large cat head, one which Ves intended to design and build by himself!

Would its glow become more intense? Would the range of its glow reach the entire length of the factory ship? Ves didn't know the answers to these questions, and that excited him! He couldn't wait to test it out in a massive experiment!

However, not everyone was confident it was a good idea.

"A lot of materials are needed to construct this prow." Commodore Abigail Evern warned. "Factory ships like these are incredibly expensive because their exterior has to withstand a lot of attacks from second-class mechs. "You can probably build half a mech regiment with all of the alloys spent on this addition!"

Ves waved away her concern. "The cost is not a problem, and I already have a source of materials in mind."

Since recently, he decided to stockpile the Breyer alloy he steadily obtained from Cassandra Breyer. His main motivation for doing so was to strengthen the armor and structure of his future factory ship!

Because starships and especially capital ships were so big, the alloys used to prop them up and clad them with armor were actually inferior to the alloys utilized in mechs.

This was because the cost was way too prohibitive if ship armor used so many high-quality materials and exotics!

Instead of relying on quality, ship builders instead resort to quantity to strengthen the hull of a ship!

Even if the grade and quality of alloys was inferior, as long as the plate of armor was several meters thick, it offered far more effective protection without breaking the bank!

This vastly reduced the production cost of the ship. It also made it far easier and more affordable to repair or replace the armor plating once it sustained damage.

Therefore, using something as sturdy as Breyer alloy which was ordinarily fashioned in much thinner armor plating would make the bow of his future factory ship exceptionally resilient!

If Ves instilled the thick, decorative prow component with Goldie's glow, then his factory ship would truly become unique! Ves couldn't think of a better way to enhance the stature of the Larkinson Clan while at the same time demonstrating the formidable nature of his specialty!

However, empowering the prow with spirituality was different from designing a ship with spirituality.

"Don't expect too much from the glow of this giant cat head." Ves cautioned everyone. "One of the reasons why my mechs are so effective is because the glow not only influences the moods of people in the vicinity, but also makes the mech alive. The mech pilot is able to bond and operate the mech on a deeper level, and that is another source of strength that is often overlooked in recent times."

This was the original X-Factor that Ves pursued. Nowadays, he focused a lot more on expressing the power of his design spirits, but that didn't mean he lost sight of trying to align the mindsets of the mech, mech pilot and mech designer as much as possible!

What his remark actually conveyed was that the glow of the prow would only act on the ship like a source of emotional warmth. It would not be able to integrate with the entire ship and add mysterious effects to the vessel.

However, since that wasn't possible anyway, no one minded this deficiency. It was already good enough to add the glow that was strongly associated to the Larkinson Clan throughout several sections of the ship.

"So that is why you want so much unreserved space in the ship class!" Gloriana gasped in realization. "The prow isn't enough! You want to add more... more..."

"Totem." Ves generously supplied.

"You want to add more totems to our ship! Are you trying to transform it into a vessel of the Golden Cat by spreading her domain along the entire length of our factory ship?"

Ves chuckled. "I don't think it works that way. Even so, it will still be very useful to make sure to add enough totems to cover the ship. Even if the glow makes outsiders uncomfortable, I don't care. As long as it instills more kinship and loyalty in the crew of the factory ship, then that is worth the cost!"

The Golden Cat was his most important weapon and tool in shaping the Larkinson Clan! With her powerful, Larkinson-themed glow, Ves believed his most important ship of his fleet would be much better protected against malcontents and traitors!

In addition, Goldie's glow was also very useful in furthering the indoctrination of both outsiders and Larkinson clansmen.

If Ves could add totems to every ship of his expeditionary fleet, then how would others react when the entire Larkinson Clan arrived all at once?

Chapter 2128 Scrappy Ship

Once Ves adjusted his mindset, he became a lot more engaged in the configuration of the Estrella Klavier-class.

Though he was tempted to treat it as something analogous to mech design, in truth he was more like a client who made a list of demands and expected them to be implemented.

The only difference was that he was something of an engineer himself, so he was able to sketch and design detailed features onto the ship diagram.

However, just because he made his choice didn't mean it would go through. Just like mechs, ships consisted of many interconnected parts and systems. A single, careless addition could easily mess with other systems, causing them to become skewed, which in turn cascaded into other disturbances!

Something as massive as adding a large Breyer alloy forecastle shaped in the form of a golden cat head significantly altered the flight characteristics of the factory ship.

Ves didn't worry too much, though. The rest of the factory ship was already pretty massive, so it wasn't as if a bigger prow sent the ship completely off-balance. He figured the ship designers would just perform a lot of simulations and tweak a lot of systems in order to account for the altered mass distribution.

After finishing with the prow, he turned his attention to the other sections of his upcoming factory ship. As the most important ship of the fleet, she played a pivotal role in allowing him to conduct business and work with mechs regardless of where he traveled and what kind of circumstances he faced.

The factory ship would also very likely serve as his main base of operations in the Larkinson Fleet!

As a mech designer, there was no place that was more appropriate for him to station himself than the ship that featured the best mech production capacity. Any other choice

such as a fleet carrier, ark ship or any other kind of vessel simply didn't sound compelling enough.

As for the Barracuda and the Scarlet Rose, neither vessel matched his stature as the patriarch of an up-and-coming clan and a Journeyman with a bright future.

He had already outgrown the corvette and the mobile supply frigate. In terms of space alone, neither of them came close to fitting all of the features he demanded.

Therefore, he saw the wide, unreserved spaces of the Estrella Klavier-class as a blessing. Just as he did in the past when he designed his variants, he wanted to take this generic Hexer factory ship and transform her into a flagship that reflected his philosophy!

"Let's make this ship alive!"

Even if Ves was not a ship designer, even if it wasn't possible to fully exert his specialty on a massive starship, he still wanted to give it a try!

"Let's turn her into our perfect factory ship!" Gloriana concurred as she began to add her own additions to the ship diagram!

She didn't want to be left out. The factory ship would likely serve as her own base of operations as well, so the ship had to offer enough accommodations to make her comfortable for decades!

Compared to the hands-on approach adopted by Ves and Gloriana, the other advisers merely voiced their suggestions. Neither Calabast, Ophelia or Abigail possessed a technical background, but they were still competent professionals in their own right.

"You need to beef up the communications center of the ship." Calabast suggested. "It would be best to add some more redundancies as well. You should also move the quantum communication nodes to a separate compartment in order to isolate them better. I always disagreed with the decision to place them next to other communications systems in order to save space."

Abigail made a useful suggestion as well. "If defense is a priority but don't want to reduce the mobility of the factory ship any further, then you might consider adding large-area shield generators. They're very power hungry and very expensive and aren't as tough as actual armor, but they take up much less mass and volume than adding an extra layer of armor."

When Ves looked up the shield generators, he immediately shook his head. "They're too expensive! I'll have to chew through a considerable portion of my budget in order to slot them into the factory ship!"

The cost of an individual directional shield generator was still within an acceptable range. The problem was that Ves had to purchase them into a batch in order to cover the huge surface area of the exterior of the ship!

Even Gloriana agreed. "There is too much for us to spend on first. Let's add the shields to our list of future upgrades. Since they're fairly compact and relatively standalone, we can easily install them in place once we acquire them. We should instead focus on establishing the right foundation."

Certain modules and systems required the factory ship to undergo an extensive overhaul that could only take place at a shipyard. This was not one of them. Shield generators were just big blocks of metal and machinery that could be disassembled and assembled by a team of trained engineers and technicians.

Considering the LMC's earning potential, Ves could afford to wait and accumulate enough cash to purchase considerably more powerful shield generators than he could afford at this time.

He nodded. "You're right, Gloriana. We shouldn't consider the factory ship to be a finished product once she falls into our hands. She's an ongoing project that will potentially stay this way for centuries. What we should prioritize during this design session is to choose between all of the essential modules and systems that are very hard to add to the factory ship after she is built."

The Estrella Klavier-class might be a bit more generous in terms of upgradeability, but not everything about her design was modular. There were plenty of interlocking, interconnecting systems that had to be built right from the very start.

The same applied to mechs to a lesser degree. Surface battle damage was easy to repair, but once something deep inside broke, the mech technicians had to perform a lot of steps to disassemble the damaged machine.

As Ves and Gloriana each began to fill up the empty spaces of the factory, they focused on strengthening her survival ability.

To Ves, the basic configuration of the factory ship already provided him with plenty of performance. She offered sufficient production capacity and cargo capacity to fulfill her main role.

Though Ves could opt to make more room for production lines or turn more empty compartments into cargo bays, he declined to do so. Such a choice would doubtlessly make the factory ship more productive and more cost-efficient, but that would also come at the expense of other parameters!

What Ves instead wanted to build was a moving fortress. Of course, it was unrealistic to turn the factory ship into a frontline combat vessel. He just wanted the ship to be able to

defend herself regardless whether she was stationed in the middle of a fleet or caught by herself!

Therefore, Ves reserved enough compartments along the length of the hull to make room for future shield generators. He made sure to place the shield generators in a compartment with access to dense power connections.

Though these shield generators were surprisingly compact, they guzzled enough energy to power a sub-capital ship! It would be very strenuous for the factory ship to power every shield generator at the same time, that was for sure!

"This ship is very demanding on energy even without the shield generators." Ves remarked. With his new Senior-level Electrical Engineering Skill, he clearly foresaw a lot of problems in the future. "We should make sure to beef up the power supply and enhance the energy distribution systems."

The material processing machines and the industrial production lines all demanded a lot of energy to run. The power reactors of the factory ship were only powerful enough to feed these production facilities and sustain the normal operations of the ship. They were not enough if the Larkinson Clan planned to add shield generators in the future!

The cost of the power reactors alone consumed a substantial portion of the budget, but Ves figured it was worth it. If he only promised to deliver six Hexer mech designs to DIVA, then he wouldn't have chosen to add these extra power generators.

The increased power generation was not all good. Aside from producing a lot more heat, which required him to bolster the heat management system of the ship, it also cost a lot to keep them running.

Overall, the factory ship that took shape would not be cheap to run! The maintenance costs continued to rise with each module and system he added to the vessel. Perhaps other clients might start to feel hesitant at this point, but Ves had no concerns.

As a mech designer, making money was as easy as pumping out another commercial mech design! He had absolutely no concern that the Larkinson Clan of today would be able to cover the costs of running the huge factory ship.

"You wanted to upgrade the mobility of the factory ship as well, right?" Gloriana confirmed. "We should replace the standard sublight propulsion system with a more powerful one then. This is hardly the best we Hexers have to offer."

The sublight propulsion system consisted of the main thrusters, auxiliary thrusters, engines and every other part responsible for moving the ship forward.

The current iteration of the factory ship was quite sluggish and hardly fast in any sense of the word. More expensive propulsion systems offered more power but less efficiency.

If the factory ship was supposed to be used for peaceful purposes only, then this was a good choice.

However, Ves intended to take this ship straight into frontier space, where his Larkinson Fleet could encounter insurmountable danger at any time!

In these kinds of crisis situations, saving money by running an efficient propulsion system was the last thing on his mind!

Therefore, Ves quickly ripped out the original propulsion system and added a beefier one. According to the estimates given by the ship design program, the acceleration of the factory ship had received a modest bump.

The upgrade turned a sluggish tub in space into a slightly faster sluggish tub in space.

There was no way to gain any further mobility without switching to another class of factory ships! Capital ships were so massive that it was a pipedream to think they could ever match the acceleration of a swift corvette!

He was already happy with what he managed to gain. Increasing the acceleration of the factory ship by just a third or something meant that the huge vessel would waste less time in realspace.

From a money saving standpoint, upgrading the propulsion system was a horrendously wasteful decision.

From a time saving standpoint, beefing up the engines was very much worth the investment!

Of course, the more powerful engines not only consumed substantially more fuel, but also used up a higher grade, making it a bit more troublesome to refuel in space.

Fortunately, the higher grade of ship fuel was also substantially more energy dense, which meant that Ves did not have to expand the sizable fuel tanks of the factory ship any further.

Ves hummed as he thought of the additional logistical burden. "Perhaps we should add a specialized refinery ship to our fleet that can refine these high-grade fuels."

This was something to consider for later. For now, the fuel tanks should already be able to keep the factory ship moving for years. In addition, the supply of high-grade fuels was relatively ubiquitous and abundant in civilized space.

Empty space continued to dwindle as the overall performance profile of the factory ship became more defined.

With almost every choice dedicated to enhancing the factory ship's defense and mobility, she had become quite a scrappy factory ship!

"We can't forget about offense either!" Ves recalled.

There wasn't much room left in the outer compartments after Ves and Gloriana added a lot of modules and systems to the factory ship. Fortunately, the Estrella Klavier-class already came with a bunch of exterior bunkers!

Chapter 2129 A Shot At Redemption

Inspired by the bunkers he had seen in use by the forces of the House Kaine and the Flagrant Vandals, Ves wanted his factory ship to possess sufficient teeth to repel a pirate assault on her own if necessary!

He turned to Abigail Evern. "What is the Hexer doctrine concerning the use of bunkers on starships?"

The Penitent Sister gestured at a grouping of bunkers on the hull of the Estrella Klavier-class.

"Hexer ships usually concentrate six bunkers in a hexagon pattern on their broadsides. The bunkers are designed to accommodate specialized heavy mechs armed with powerful artillery cannons. The heavy mechs themselves are grouped into teams and are usually linked in some way. Their mech pilots constantly train together and practice together in order to be able to saturate a zone of space with partially-overlapping fields of fire."

The hexagon-shaped bunkers were grouped into a hexagon-shaped pattern, thereby making the association to the Hexadric Hegemony very clear.

Obviously, Ves was not a fan of this bunker placement.

He began to alter the arrangement of one of the bunker clusters. He completely broke up the hexagon pattern and trashed the hexagon-shaped designs of every bunker. Instead, he sketched in a different cluster of bunkers. He added some extra mass on top of them in order to tie them together.

The result was a cluster of five bunkers arranged in the form of cat claws!

Abigail Evern looked upset at this change. Removing the hexagon-shaped bunker cluster was still a very odd sight to her sensibilities! This was how Hexers protected their large ships for centuries. To see them replaced with a different arrangement almost caused her to speak against the change.

Unfortunately, she held no power here. If not for expertise on advanced, second-class ships, Ves wouldn't have invited her to this session!

As for Gloriana, despite being a Hexer herself, she was used to Ves rejecting her people's ways. Even though the factory ship would become her home as well, she was already happy enough with the other accommodations towards Hexers. Letting Ves personalize a few aspects of the factory ship to make it less Hexer did not affect her fundamental DNA!

Still, to Ves, the exterior of the capital ship reminded him a lot less of Hexers, and that was what mattered the most. As long as he paired the exterior changes with some interior changes, the factory ship would come much closer to representing the Larkinson Clan!

He couldn't go too far in transforming mechs into gun turrets. The MTA and CFA imposed a lot of rules and the design program literally blocked him from adding conveniences such as directly linking the heavy mech's heat management system to the heat management system of the factory and such.

"The Big Two really doesn't want starships to be heavily armed." Ves scowled.

He understood the rationale. From an outside perspective, it was a good way to limit the damage that humans inflicted on each other.

However, now that he was about to acquire a large and vulnerable ship on his own, the various rules that restricted him from allowing the factory ship to defend herself against attackers really began to annoy him! The Big Two even imposed limits on the maximum size and caliber of the cannons wielded by the heavy mechs!

There was nothing from stopping him from adding more bunkers to the ship per se. The rules only limited him from scaling up the mechs and weapons past a certain point. It didn't matter if he built a hundred bunkers along the length of the hull.

The only reason why he refrained from doing so was the fact that the factory ship couldn't accommodate too much mechs.

By default, she came with enough space to accommodate two mech companies of heavy mechs. This was already a considerable amount of mechs for a starship to carry, but compared to other capital ships, the figure was rather anemic.

It couldn't be helped. The production facilities and the cargo bays for the materials and end products took up a lot of space as well.

If Ves really wanted to, he could sacrifice some other functionary in order to add room for up to two additional mech companies.

However, he didn't think it was worth it. He would rather dedicate this role to another vessel, preferably a large fleet carrier, and focus purely on strengthening the self-defense aspects of his factory ship.

Therefore, Ves ended up with eighty bunkers clustered in groupings of five.

From a visual angle, the broadsides of the factory ship now featured sixteen giant golden cat paws!

Each of their claws were capable of scratching approaching any approaching enemy formation!

As Gloriana busied herself with rearranging the living space for the crew and occupants of the factory ship, she briefly glanced at his handiwork.

"That's a very pretty-looking change. We don't have the heavy mechs to fit in the bunkers, though."

Ves did not look concerned. "We'll just design our own, then. This grouping of five claws is already giving me some ideas. Perhaps I can combine five different glows that activate at specific times depending on the battle situation!"

Several ideas already tempted him to design the mechs in question!

If some enemy mechs were taking potshots at the factory ship from extreme range, he could employ Ylvaine's glow in order to increase the accuracy of his heavy artillery mechs.

If a large formation of light mechs were about to reach the hull, he could employ the same kind of spiritual counterbalancing he used in the Doom Guard design to prevent them from landing onto the hull!

Just two of these suggestions already sounded viable to him. Ves quickly archived these ideas in his implant and promised to revisit them later.

Eventually, the initial configuration session had come to an end. All of the free and unreserved space had been allocated.

While Ves had been preoccupied with transforming the arrangements of bunkers on the hull of the factory ship, Gloriana focused instead on the living conditions.

She upgraded and expanding the living quarters of the crew but especially for herself and Ves!

She filled up some of the empty compartments into schools, entertainment centers, gardens, swimming pools and other recreational areas.

Though it sounded a lot, the internal volume of the factory ship was already huge to begin with. Gloriana made sure to make efficient use of space so the various facilities didn't take up too much space.

Aside from that, she also made sure to add spaces for various chapels and areas of worship! At the very least, she insisted on retaining the fairly large hall of worship devoted to hexism!

Perhaps the only major alteration she made was to replace the large altar that represented the six phases of existence with the statue of the Superior Mother.

"You can do what you want to the rest of the ship, Ves, but this space is mine!" She insisted!

Ves let her have her way.

With that, the basic configuration of the Larkinson Clan's upcoming factory ship had been set. This was not the end, but just the start. Ves already knew he would have to submit the proposed ship design to the Hexer shipyard and let them refine it while crunching the numbers before sending back an altered proposal for him to review.

The factory ship was a huge, 1.2 trillion hex credit endeavor. Everyone involved had to make absolutely sure that the final design reflected the client's desires before they started to build her within a year!

When the meeting ended, Ves picked up Lucky and was just about to go elsewhere. However, Calabast and Abigail Evern both called him to stay.

"What's this all about?" Ves asked in suspicion. He turned to Abigail. "Is it about the Penitent Sisters?"

The former DIVA agent nodded. "I've been talking to Abigail before this meeting commenced. She and some of her fellow Penitent Sisters aren't satisfied with the limited access to the statue of the Superior Mother. Now that you have revealed that you can make smaller 'totems' and attach glows to them, perhaps it would be a good idea to make smaller replicas of the statue and spread them to the Penitent Sisters."

Ves frowned. This was not part of his plan. "The Superior Mother is my creation. Experiencing her glow is a privilege, not a right."

"As a commanding officer, I'm not unaware of what you have in mind when you set the quota." Commodore Abigail Evern spoke. "Considering our conduct and our history, it is not a surprise for you to adopt such a measure in order to steer our behavior."

He frowned even further. Even though religious Hexers were insanely stupid about their beliefs, they weren't incompetent!

A Penitent Sister like Abigail may be a fanatic, but she was also a highly-competent naval officer! Otherwise, she wouldn't have been promoted to her rank in the first place.

Since the commodore saw through his scheme, Ves did not deny it any further.

"If you understand my perspective, you shouldn't object to it." He told her. "So far, the only reason why you Penitent Sisters abide by your oaths is because of your self-imposed rules. The fact of the matter is that the power of your fleet is still capable of wiping out my own fleet. That much combat power in the hands of exiled Hexers looking for redemption is making me very uncomfortable. Since the Superior Mother appeals so much to you, then why shouldn't I use it as a carrot for your good behavior?"

The commodore squirmed on her feet. Much of her usual self-righteousness and arrogance had disappeared. What was left was a middle-aged Hexer who looked conflicted.

"Mr. Larkinson.." She began. "666 Penitent Sisters were part of the ritual where.. where you summoned the Superior Mother. Though none of us are sure what took place that day, the effect it had on us is.. indescribable. Our faith and our convocation have all been shaken by the descent of the Superior Mother. Afterwards, we have started to question and rethink many of our old beliefs. This process is still ongoing, and it would help if we have more access to the Superior Mother. Juliet Stamos already attempted to fabricate a copy of the statue, but hers simply doesn't convey the majesty of your lightning-struck creation."

Ves couldn't help but smirk when he heard that. "Of course not. Only I can channel the Superior Mother!"

It amused him quite a bit that he supposedly enjoyed the blessing of a Hexer goddess while the ultra-religious Penitent Sisters were damned!

Calabast noticed his change and coughed. "Ves, be serious. This isn't the time for you to gloat. As much as the Penitent Sisters deserve to be punished, they also deserve a shot at redemption. True redemption. If we can deradicalize these Hexers, we can nip one of your fears in the bud and transform the Penitent Sisters into a dependable ally."

She had a good point. Another factor was that he designed the Superior Mother to convert conservative, man-hating Hexers in the first place. Letting his mother work her wiles on these former cultists was a good way to test whether she had what it took to transform the entire Hegemony!

"I'm open to the suggestion." He eventually said. "It won't take much effort for me to fabricate some human-sized totems, but they won't be able to channel the Superior Mother as well as my full-sized statue."

He didn't want to make the totems too big because he deliberately wanted to weaken their glows. Spreading out too many strong totems would only devalue his main relic!

Calabast looked thoughtful. "I'm sure we can come to an arrangement to ensure the good behavior of the Penitent Sisters. If you put me in charge of the totems, I'll link them to a new reward and punishment that will encourage the Sisters to remain on their best behavior."

"That sounds fine."

Hopefully, the Penitent Sisters would mellow out as a result of these measures. Perhaps he should also remind them that the likeness of the Superior Mother happened to resemble his mother!

Chapter 2130 Jovy Armalon

After submitting the initial proposal for the new Estrella Klavier-class factory ship, the shipyard sent back their revision for Ves to review.

The Hexers initially misunderstood the addition of the large and prominent cat-shaped prow. Ves had to clarify that he intended to build it himself.

A lot of other issues had emerged, forcing Ves and Gloriana to either accept the suggestions from the ship designers or come up with their own solutions.

This back-and-forth took place over several days. With no mech design project on the horizon, Ves and Gloriana directly conferred with the ship designers in order to refine the final factory ship design.

Even though their professions were different, they still shared much in common. This allowed them to exchange ideas very quickly as they already established a mutual understanding.

When they finalized the configuration of the Estrella Klavier-class, the choices had been locked in. At this point, the shipyard immediately began constructing the ship, and any changes to the design would disrupt all of the ongoing planning and activity.

"Well, that's it, I guess." He told Gloriana as he sat alongside her on their bed.

A flowery scent emanated from her body. Ves closed his eyes and enjoyed her lovely smell.

She smiled and giggled at him. "Oh, Ves. Isn't yesterday enough?"

"You know me. I'm always filled with energy."

"I suppose I can indulge you once again."

Ves reached towards his girlfriend and bent her body over the bed.

Ever since they created the Little Angel, Gloriana had entered a fantastic mood. Ves discovered to his joy that she was very open to allowing him to 'discharge his energy' at night!

There was no telling when she would close her port to him again. Ves made sure to take advantage of her receptive state while he still could!

Fortunately, Gloriana had already dismissed the guards from their bedroom that night.

The only ones who were left inside were their cats. Lucky and Clixie huddled together on a desk as they watched their human owners become more intimate with each other.

"Miaow?"

"Meow."

"Miaow miaow."

"Meow!"

The next morning, they woke up content and prepared to go to work. Gloriana wanted to study the Little Angel as much as possible before DIVA finally took it away. Their transportation convoy was already only several days away from arriving at Cinach.

Meanwhile, Ves wanted to ready a portion of the Larkinson Fleet to depart. Though he hadn't selected a mission as of yet, he already had his eye on a couple of them in the Rim Exchange during his earlier visits.

The only troublesome aspect about their current plan was that both Ves and Gloriana wouldn't be seeing each other for a couple of months.

This meant that they wouldn't be able to make a lot of progress on designing the eight mechs they promised to DIVA in exchange for their factory ship!

"It's fine." He told her. "This excursion will only take a few months to half a year. I need this, not just for the merits, but also forge my combat personnel into a cohesive, battle-tested group."

"I know, Ves. It's just that we only have three years to fulfill our promise. I'm thinking of accompanying you. Forget about starting any solo projects. The Komodo War is too important! It's better to hand in our mech designs early rather than later!"

He reacted with alarm! "Gloriana! Entering the Nyxian Gap is not a picnic! We will definitely encounter a lot of threats. Your Glory Battalion will go crazy if you intend to go through this reckless plan!"

"Then how will we be able make any progress?" She questioned.

"I'll remain in contact for at least a couple of months. The outer regions of the Nyxian Gaps aren't as warped as the core regions. It will still be possible to maintain contact with each other through the galactic net. It's only when my ship goes deeper or enters a special zone where the connection becomes garbled."

In the end, they had to make do with this outcome. Gloriana did not have many reasons to expose herself to so many risks, unlike Ves.

If he didn't satisfy his exploration cravings, he would always feel restless. He was simply wired differently from Gloriana.

To him, the Nyxian Gap wasn't an endless abyss that hid unimaginable terrors.

To him, the Nyxian Gap was a region filled with secrets and sources of inspiration!

As a creative-minded mech designer, Ves fed off his novel experiences and encounters. The more exciting his adventure, the greater his gains!

Almost all of his mech designs to date reflected his actual experiences. He designed mechs like the Doom Guard to address shortcomings that he personally suffered from. If he never encountered so many pirate attacks, he would have never come up with the idea of designing a striker mech that was expressly designed to deter massed attackers!

As his girlfriend, Gloriana already knew about this part of him. Though she feared for his life, she was also confident he would prevail.

Her unreserved support for him had always been one of her better parts. Trust in each other was the foundation of their relationship, and both of them felt they could let down their guard in each other's presence.

"Are you also trying to find.. your parents?" She carefully asked.

He shook his head. "They're in hiding for a reason. If I can track them down, then something has gone very wrong. I'm pretty certain that they are residing a lot deeper in the Nyxian Gap than I plan to travel."

"Oh. Well, at least your mother is with us in the form of the Superior Mother, hihi!"

His smile was distinctly less enthusiastic than hers. "Yes.. you're right."

Just as they were about to set off, his comm released a distinct tone.

His eyes widened. He had programmed various alarms in his comm. He had tied them to various triggers that watched out for various events.

Right now, he immediately recognized the specific tone. It was one of the ones he wanted to hear the least!

"What's wrong, Ves?" His girlfriend asked with concern.

"My greatest fear. Master Willix."

Her mood immediately lifted. "Are you sure?!"

"The Ubiquitous Force has just portal-jumped into this star system! The news is already spreading in the local news!"

"That's great!" She celebrated. "I would love to show off our Little Angel to her! I've made so many improvements. Hopefully, she'll be impressed!"

He was anything but happy. Even as Gavin reached his side and delivered an official notification from the MTA, his face had already turned glum.

A part of him hoped that a different MTA Master visited this time. Surely Master Willix had to attend to her own projects, right? There was no way she could take so unanticipated breaks from her duty!

Sadly, the notification he received had been signed personally by Master Willix. His heart dropped like a rock when he read it. It specified Ves and Gloriana by name, so they were both required to attend to her once she arrived!

His hand suddenly reached for his suit pocket. His Synthra Umbra pouches containing his gems and, more crucially, the high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum might get sniffed out if he came too close to a Master Mech Designer!

"I need to make some preparations!" Ves flung the data pad back at Gavin, who didn't possess the reflexes to catch the projectile. "Benny, make sure to call up the Avatars and form a greeting party."

In the next hour, he began to move various items to the Scarlet Rose's vault. Though Ves was reasonably sure that the Ubiquitous Force wouldn't bother to scan his base and everything he possessed, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Lucky's gems, the serum, the Ancient Sarcophagus and so on had all been transferred to the ship before Ves ordered her to scram!

"Take a vacation and don't come back until the Ubiquitous Force has left!"

With the mobile supply frigate departing from the surface of Cinach VI with remarkable haste, Ves wrung his hands as Lucky floated alongside his head.

"Meow."

"There shouldn't have been any leaks on my side! My virtual security experts along with Calabast should have constantly upgraded our security suites and other measures! With Goldie, none of our Larkinsons should have spilled the beans either!"

"Meow meow."

"Yeah, I suppose that someone could have acted carelessly. I don't believe that has happened, though! The much more likely outcome is that the leak originated from DIVA!"

If he was in the MTA's shoes, he would definitely keep tabs on the Hegemony's spy agencies! Everything that the spooks found out, the MTA would know as well. This was a good way to ensure that a state wouldn't be breaking any taboos. If there was any government institution that had the highest chance of breaking the Big Two's most important laws, it was always the spies!

Even as he grumbled at DIVA, he made sure to freshen himself up and prepare for his umpteenth meeting with an eminent Master from the MTA. He told Lucky to take Clixie on a vacation and entrusted the Larkinson Mandate to Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson.

Only then did he stride towards the landing zone where the Ubiquitous Force was about to descend.

A company of Avatar mechs stood straight in two columns on two sides. The gleaming gold-coated Bright Warriors loomed tall over everyone. Their third eyes glowed bright white, signifying that every Larkinson mech pilot inside had established a firm bond with their own mechs!

The sight along with the soothing warmth of the Golden Cat's glow lifted his spirits and firmed up his confidence.

No matter what, Master Willix hadn't done anything detrimental to him in her previous visits. As long as he remained on guard and kept his lies straight, the MTA shouldn't have any reason to nab him and drag him back to Centerpoint!

The Ubiquitous Force cut through the atmosphere as if gravity and aerodynamics were merely toys to be ignored on a whim. The armed frigate practically dropped down to ground level as if she was about to crash against the ground, yet the moment she was

about to make impact, she abruptly stalled her descent and landed on the surface as light as a feather!

Both Ves and Gloriana knew how impressive it was for a starship, even a modestly-sized frigate, to accomplish such a feat! To be able to negate so much momentum in such a short time was something only high technology was capable of! This single warship was probably powerful enough to wipe out every single mech in the Cinach System!

When the frigate's side hatch slid open, a number of figures floated through. Master Willix and a couple of dozen mechers wearing similar uniforms lowered themselves until they hovered right above the ground.

"Mr. Larkinson. Miss Wodin. We meet again." The great Master greeted the pair with a polite smile.

"It is an honor to receive you again, Master Willix!" Gloriana enthusiastically stated and bowed.

Ves couldn't remain silent. "We are very grateful for our work to be recognized again."

There was something different about Master Willix this time, or to be more exact, with one of the people accompanying her. A younger figure floating behind the Master's shoulder stared at Ves and Gloriana with an intense expression.

Willix noticed the stares. She gestured at the young man. "Ah, let me introduce you to one of our young talents. Jovy Armalon is one of our most notable Journeymen at Halcyon Citadel. Though you are likely not familiar with his work, he has long been clamoring to meet you two in person."

A competitive glint sparkled in his eyes as Jovy floated forward and offered his hand. "Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Larkinson."

Though Ves felt pressured by this unfamiliar Journeyman, he had faced more formidable opponents. He easily kept his cool and simply shook the other Journeyman's hand as if he was a normal person.

"Welcome to the Larkinson Clan." He spoke.

Jovy then proceeded to turn to Gloriana and shook her hand as well. "You are very fortunate to have found a partner like Mr. Larkinson."

"I know." She smiled in restrained fashion. Obviously, she was a lot more happy about it than she showed right now! "Our synergy has constantly produced marvelous results. The mech that I'm about to show you is just one of the many fantastic products borne out of our collaboration!"

"I have nothing but respect for your work." The mecher Journeyman replied in a cordial fashion. "Even at Halcyon Citadel, many of my colleagues have expressed envy at your accomplishments!"