

Mech 2151

Chapter 2151 The Couple

Explosive news had erupted from the Cinach System once again!

The Larkinson Clan attracted the attention of the MTA once again. Master Willix portal-jumped straight to Cinach in order to certify another masterwork mech!

The unusual frequency of this occurrence practically stunned the local mech community and surprised many other mech designers.

Once was a coincidence. Twice was a pattern!

The odds of creating a masterwork mech at Journeyman-level was already slim to none, and they only dropped even further for younger mech designers.

Even then, the mech community could barely accept that the now-famous collaborative partnership of Ves and Gloriana managed to luck out once by benefiting from external help.

Yet accomplishing the same astonishing feat again in just over half a year was no longer a coincidence.

The two mech designers credited for creating the masterwork mech had done it again, and this time the MTA's public records noted that they had done it by themselves!

That latter detail was pretty important. It proved that Ves and Gloriana were more than a bunch of leeches. They possessed the capital to stand up on their own and wear their masterwork mech designer titles with pride!

Sadly, both the mech design and the masterwork mech relating to this remarkable event remained secret. The Larkinson Clan did not leak a single breath and the MTA respected the secrecy agreement, so no outsiders managed to learn the juicy details.

Due to the magnitude of this sensational news, the second story about Ves Larkinson managing to vanquish an elite MTA mech designer almost went unnoticed.

If it happened in isolation, then it would have caught more attention, but people were too abuzz with discussing the latest masterwork mech to talk about some small duel.

Of course, those who were aware of the formidable strength of MTA mech designers and the horrible nature of Jovy Armalon reacted with shock.

It was rare for indigenous mech designers to beat MTA mech designers in a duel! The starting points of these two kinds of professionals were simply too far apart!

As for the third piece of news about Joshua Larkinson advancing to expert candidate, hardly anyone had any attention left to bother about it. Only the Larkinsons themselves exhibited a huge reaction.

The addition of another expert candidate resulted in a very significant increase in the clan's overall strength!

No matter what, the Larkinson Clan boiled yet again. An excitement spread in the air throughout the rented base as tens of thousands of clansmen felt proud of what their leaders had achieved.

The entire clan depended on the success of Ves and Gloriana!

Due to the two continuous high-profile accomplishments, the media began to bestow a unique name for their pairing.

The Miracle Couple!

Surprisingly, it was a Hexer publication that first coined this term. The Hexer journalist called the pairing this way because Ves and Gloriana seemingly generated a continuous string of miracles ever since they joined forces and worked together on design projects.

Practically every couple of months, the two remarkable young Journeymen generated another sensational piece of news. Calling them the Miracle Couple was not unjustified, especially when many industry insiders recognized that such a young duo of masterwork mech designers would only create further masterworks in the future.

Unfortunately, not everyone was happy with this piece of news.

When Gavin reported to Ves in person during breakfast, the latter almost spilled out his coffee.

"The hell?!" Ves banged his fist against the dining table. "The Miracle Couple?!"

He shifted his gaze towards Gloriana who burst out into a smile.

"I love it! Even the public acknowledges our capacity to create miracles." She gushed.

"Did you have anything to do with it? I told you not to do these kinds of stunts! I hate the word 'miracle'!"

She shook her head. "I'm not involved. Honestly."

"Really?"

"I would never lie to you, Ves! Can't you trust me, at least?"

He decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. "If you're not responsible, then who?"

"If you ask me, then the likeliest suspect is DIVA, followed by my own dynasty." Gloriana ventured.

As for the possibility that this charming name was just the invention of a single journalist, everyone in the dining room ruled it out. There was simply too much momentum behind the new term for it to have spread organically.

"It makes sense that either or both manipulated the media to adopt this new term." Gavin spoke. "DIVA is likely preparing to introduce your Blessed Squires onto the battlefield. A lot of questions about their designers will doubtlessly emerge, and if the Hexers find out that you are involved, a lot of backlash will erupt. It is in DIVA's best interests to enhance your prestige and paint you as a boy who is different from the norm. Grouping you together with Gloriana will doubtlessly blunt some of the criticism that will doubtlessly emerge from the conservative Hexer circles."

Gloriana nodded in agreement. She turned to her own assistant Melody, who looked uncertain.

"While I am not privy to your mother's every action, it is a habit of hers to exert control of the situation. You know as well as I do that your mother does not prefer to leave potential risks unattended. Due to your increasing importance within the dynasty, it has become more important than ever to elevate Mr. Larkinson's image within the Hegemony."

Regardless of which of the two was responsible, now that the Miracle Couple had been attached to their pairing, neither Ves nor Gloriana would be able to get rid of it anytime soon!

Ves looked glum while Gloriana gladly welcomed this new development. Anything that tied her closer together to her boyfriend was something to celebrate about!

"Is there anything else, Benny?"

"Yes. The Military Bureau wanted to inform you that while they have already put your latest windfall of funds to good use, it will take a couple of months to procure and ship all of the second-hand ships from the Hegemony. Many of the vessels they are eying are mothballed and decommissioned, and it takes an extensive amount of time to bring them back to readiness. A lot of skeleton crews have to be formed to perform this process and dispatch the combat carriers and such to the Sentinel Kingdom. Once they are here, our ship crews will need to spend an extensive amount of time to gain a decent degree of mastery over these advanced vessels."

"How long?"

"Six months at minimum, and that is only if you just want them to get prepped for travel, not combat."

In short, there was no point in waiting for his powerful new ships to arrive before he left for the Nyxian Gap.

"Then let's stick to the original plan." Ves decided. "Once my mission is over, we can wait for the delivery of the factory ship and take our entire upgraded fleet out of this star sector once and for all."

The adoption of the Hexer vessels couldn't be sped up. Though it was a pity, Ves already possessed ample confidence that his current Larkinson Clan was more than ready to venture into the Nyxian Gap. His planned task force far surpassed the strength of Peacekeeper outfits that regularly dipped into this dangerous region!

Aside from this news, Gavin passed on something else.

"Joshua Larkinson will recover in time to attend the upcoming celebration that is set to be held in three days. The MTA's doctors did an excellent job in hastening his recovery. Right now, he only needs to stay in bed for another day before he is ready to walk again."

"That's good news."

Three days. After encountering so many delays and unexpected incidents, Ves was finally ready to put the Cinach System behind him and embark on his long-awaited excursion. He had already grown antsy from staying too long in a single place.

It was a pity that Gloriana wouldn't be accompanying him. The new Darkbreak module that his engineers were in the process of installing on the Scarlet Rose should help in alleviating their temporary separation.

After breakfast, Ves and Gloriana both took their cats and headed to their design lab.

Along the way, every Larkinson greeted the two with respect. Even the clansmen themselves began to call them the Miracle Couple!

"Ugh." Ves snarled as he held Lucky in his grasp. "They're talking about us as if we are gods who create miracles on a daily basis. Don't they have better things to talk about?"

"Meow."

"Yeah, I guess not."

"Isn't it the truth?"

"NO!" Ves immediately replied to Gloriana. "Painting us as gods, especially in a literal sense, is dangerous! Self-sufficiency and hard work are vital to our clan. It's one thing to admire us. It's another thing to surrender to us. I don't want our clan to become too dependent on their 'gods'. There is no point in raising our clan if its members are incapable of solving their own problems and need to call for help all the time."

Whenever someone used the word god, Brighters like Ves always associated it with tyrannical faiths that tried their best to suppress and exploit their flock. At best, these religions were scams. At worst, they turned into vehicles of ignorance and oppression!

Therefore, Ves truly did not wish his clan to indulge too much in superstition.

If his clan turned into a bunch of babies who needed to pray to their gods for help all the time, how could Ves feel at ease with delegating important matters to the leaders of his clan?

The Larkinson Clan was supposed to serve him, not the other way around! Turning it into a spaceborn version of the Ylvaine Protectorate would only be counterproductive.

Of course, the fact that he himself depended on it as a shield to deflect MTA attention did not register in his mind!

Once the Miracle Couple reached the design lab, they let their cats scurry off elsewhere before stepping in front of a crowd of over sixty mech designers.

Though the welcoming tour meant to indoctrinate the newly-hired mech designers into the Larkinson Clan had only reached its halfway point, Ves was already satisfied with what he saw.

Every talented and competent mech designer that Ves and Gloriana recruited during the selection process had all acclimatized to their new lives.

The spiritual bonds they shared with the Larkinson Network had grown vigorous. Some of them even became twice or thrice as strong in the case of some notable talents such as Catherine Evenson-Larkinson and Moltar Ringer-Larkinson.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen." Ves greeted the young and eager mech designers. "I hope you have all learned what it takes to become a Larkinson. While you are already adopted into our clan, this is only the start."

Gloriana spoke up. "The reason why we have interrupted your training and called you here is to make an announcement. I'm sure you have heard already, but a portion of our combat forces will soon depart to perform an important mission for the MTA. Ves will head this new task force, while I shall remain here in order to hold down the fort."

Ves looked at the crowd in expectation. "The Nyxian Gap is dangerous, as you should all be aware of. Yet that is not enough to stop us! If you have memorized the motto of our clan, then you should be aware why we have decided to take this risk."

Someone raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"Sir, you have achieved so much success at Cinach. Why must you take part in a dangerous mission?"

Ves crossed his arms. "My recent achievements are the result of the lessons I've learned during my travels and various crises. I would have never been able to get this far if I just holed up in a lab all the time. I hope that all of you understand this lesson as well. We mech designers can't rely on our imagination alone to produce our best works. Only by venturing out and learning about the true state of the galaxy will you be able to understand the true nature of mechs!"

After answering a few other questions, Ves finally addressed the purpose of this assembly.

"The reason why I've called you here is simple. Since our task force will be venturing to Nyxian Gap very soon, I could use some design teams to assist my design efforts and provide aid to any ship or mech company. Due to the danger of this mission and the nature of our profession, I won't force any of you to take part. Now, who among you is willing to volunteer to take part in our mission?"

Total silence spread throughout the entire design lab.

Chapter 2152 Larkinson Merit Exchange

"Pathetic!" A female voice uttered from the crowd!

A beret-wearing woman followed by a floating greatsword stepped forward. Her straightened back and her strong physique made her very powerful among the gathered mech designers.

"Do you think your new boss subjected you all to the glow of the Doom Guard for no reason? Did you think that facing my blade is just a one-time encounter? You are horribly wrong if you think that your future will be spent in comfort and luxury! While I don't expect much from the softies among you who managed to get into the clan through your smarts, but why aren't any of you who are hired by Ves stepping up?!"

Under her admonishments, some of the mech designers felt ashamed of themselves.

Though Ves only expected a couple of the mech designers to step up, in the end around thirty of them put themselves forward!

All of the newly-hired mech designers selected by Ves were anything but average. All of them had shown considerable courage and determination during the unconventional selection process. Even though they all feared the dangers of the Nyxian Gap, compared to the previous tests, it didn't seem so scary!

Ves felt very gratified by the sheer amount of volunteers. Aside from the people he selected, the Ylvainans stepped forth as well! Oscar DiMartin and the other fanatics completely believed in him. They feared nothing as long as they accompanied the Bright Martyr!

"Okay. This is good." Ves finally nodded and smiled. Ketis did a great job at riling them all up. "There are ten design teams, but I only need half. Oscar, you should stay with Gloriana and continue to develop your individual mech designs. As for the rest of your team, you can assist my partner in other matters."

"Very well, sir." Oscar replied in a disappointed tone.

It wasn't necessary to bring so many mech designers. Ves already trusted the Ylvainans in the Design Department, so there was no need to challenge their limits further.

Instead, he wanted to bring along the people he selected in order to train their mentality and let them get used to facing different kinds of pressure.

While Ves did not expect them to become fully-fledged combat engineers or anything, they should at least be able to keep their heads and remain productive during crisis situations!

He of all people knew how difficult it was to demand courage under fire from a bunch of mech designers. Cowardice and rear-line duty seemed to be ingrained in the bones of most of them. Too many of them were nerds whose only exposure to violence was playing some popular virtual reality games in their youth.

Such entertainment hardly conveyed the true terror of the threat of death!

This was why Ves specifically selected those who were able to resist it from the start. Yet even if he selected a bunch of brave mech designers, he knew he had to make sure to stimulate them further instead of letting them grow soft!

Of course, he did not expect them to take a lot of risks without any corresponding rewards. If his subordinate mech designers became aware that Ves just wanted to exploit them, they would grow very dissatisfied!

Seeing the grim and resigned expressions of the group of brave mech designers, Ves decided to throw his pets some carrots.

"Those who accompany our task force will be rewarded for their contribution. As long as you perform your duty diligently, you will each be rewarded with 50 Larkinson merits!"

A small gasp ran throughout the entire crowd!

Though Ves and Gloriana only spent a brief amount of time in setting up their merit system, the Larkinson Merit Exchange had already become an official institution.

Right now, the remuneration structure was still a little bit crude. A single merit corresponded to one year of low-level work. 10 merits equated to one year of medium-level work. The only people who were entitled to earn 100 merits or more consisted of mech commanders, assembly members and the other people at the upper hierarchy.

Ves already regarded the assistant mech designers as mid-level employees, so if they didn't do anything exceptional, they only stood to gain 10 merits a year.

Unlike merits which were non-transferable to other people, they also earned a regular salary. For now, the Larkinson Clan did not bother with minting its own coin, so everyone was being paid in hex credits for the time being. While their salaries were fairly high, the assistant mech designers all hungered for merits.

This was because some of the goods and services offered by the Larkinson Merit Exchange couldn't be obtained through money!

"We have recently expanded and clarified the items you can spend your Larkinson merits on." Gloriana announced. "With one merit, you can request a personalized tutoring session from myself or my partner, though not too often. For an entire hour, we will devote our full attention to critiquing your mech designs, addressing your difficulties and offer advice on your progression. I advise everyone to take advantage of this service at least once."

Some of the assistant mech designers recognized the value in asking for guidance. Many Apprentices weren't actually able to navigate their way to Journeyman-level! Each individual's circumstances were different and every design philosophy demanded a unique approach, so general advice and lessons weren't very useful in facilitating their progression.

Gloriana mentioned another benefit. "Aside from that, a single merit also allows you to borrow a single advanced textbook from the Larkinson Library. We have adjusted the pricing so that most textbooks that aren't suitable for Apprentices will cost more merits while those that are safe for you to learn will cost much less."

"The reason for that is because we want to allow you to save for other benefits that you can obtain in the Larkinson Merit Exchange." Ves mentioned. "After working together the Larkinson Biotech Institute, we are finally prepared to offer a range of augmentations that can all enhance your design prowess."

He waved his hand, causing the projectors to depict a list.

[50 Larkinson merits: third-class cranial implant

200 Larkinson merits: second-class cranial implant

25 Larkinson merits: third-class gene mod template

150 Larkinson merits: second-class gene mod template

10 Larkinson merits: entry-level gene boost priming agent]

Some of these items were quite expensive in terms of merits! At the very least, an assistant mech designer with only average performance had to work around 40 years in order to obtain a basic set of second-class augmentations!

To many ambitious mech designers, this lengthy span of time would eat up all of their golden years. By the time their intellect and cognitive functions reached a high standard, they were already too old to hold any promise!

The brave mech designers aligned to Ves did not appear very worried. They already suspected that this mission was only the first opportunity to earn a lot of merits.

It was the so-called erudite mech designers favored by Gloriana who appeared concerned! They feared that they wouldn't have as much opportunity to earn merits unless they volunteered for combat duty!

"Don't worry." Gloriana tried to reassure her own group of pets. "We have opened up additional channels to earn merits. Along with offering excellent solutions during serious design sessions, the top contributors to a design project will receive 10 or less merits depending on their performance."

"Leading a design team, tutoring your fellow colleagues in a field you are extensively familiar with, volunteering for shipboard duty, and other useful activities will also reward you with a lot of merits. You can easily earn ten times as many merits a year as the mech designer standing next to you as long as you are willing to engage rather than show up!" Ves added.

He deliberately structured the reward structure to encourage greater participation. He wanted to motivate as many of his subordinates as possible to throw their all into their work.

Those who thought they had won the jackpot by surviving through the selection process should not grow complacent too soon! While Ves was sure that there were some who couldn't be bothered to do more, with all of the carrots he dangled in front of their faces, the most ambitious among them would certainly do their best to earn more merits!

If any of them were smart enough, then they should aim to obtain a full set of second-class augmentations as soon as possible.

In the next couple of years, Ves believed that the differences between the fifty new hires as well as his older assistants would become very obvious!

Those who only did the bare minimum and earned 10 merits a year would be forced to look at the hardest workers with envy as they raked in 100 merits or more in the same amount of time!

That was good. Ves hoped that the constant comparisons and the growing differences in status would motivate at least some of those slackers to get off the couch and invest more time in their work.

Both Ves and Gloriana were pretty much workaholics, just like many other high-ranking mech designers. Those who managed to develop a mature design philosophy and form their design seeds were not only incredibly passionate about their ambitions, but possessed the drive to pursue them no matter how hard they needed to work.

The mech design profession was not for average people! Those who wanted to catch up to the likes of the Miracle Couple could forget about maintaining a healthy work-life balance!

This was a rather depressing truth, not only in the mech industry, but many other sectors as well.

The only consolation was that Ves did not set excessively long mandatory shifts. It was up to the mech designers themselves to decide how to spend their free time.

In case the most enthusiastic assistants worked themselves to death for some reason, at the very least Ves and the Larkinson Clan wouldn't be liable or at fault!

"Do you have any questions?"

A brief pause ensued. Ves found it amusing that the brave mech designers and the erudite mech designers had already formed into distinct camps.

He had no intentions of breaking them up. Fostering a little rivalry would do them all some good. Diving his assistant mech designers into camps, teams and by performance all served to split them all up and weaken their power as a collective.

Even though the sixty young men and women were all individually weak, they might grow into formidable mech designers in the future! A portion of them would doubtlessly advance to Journeyman as well, which meant that they would gain a massive amount of standing within the Larkinson Clan.

Therefore, Ves wanted to make sure that none of them gained the opportunity to stir any major trouble. Dividing them all and encouraging them to pit themselves against each other not only stimulated their drive to improve, but also kept them busy and distracted!

A woman who Ves recognized as the Sentinel noble raised her hand.

"Sir, what will be able to gain if we become Journeymen?" Catherine Evenson asked.

He found it rather ironic that the person who asked this question hadn't developed any spiritual potential up until now. Catherine's chances of advancing to Journeyman were nonexistent as long as that was the case.

"It is too much to expect any of you to become equal partners once you advance to this rank. Gloriana and I practically built the Larkinson Clan and grew the LMC to its current level of success by ourselves. There are many differences between Apprentices, and it's no different at the Journeyman-level."

That popped the bubble of those who dreamt of catching up to the Miracle Couple.

"Unless any new Journeyman in the clan is able to match or surpass our ability, they will still remain subordinate. However, they stand to earn substantially more merits and hex credits and are also entitled to a profit share to any mechs that they are principally responsible for designing. I will release a lot of high-priced goods and services onto the Larkinson Merit Exchange when that happens. Journeymen are valuable throughout human space, and we will make sure that any of you who reach this rank are rewarded for your contributions!"

Ves had already learned from other merit systems that fairness lay at the heart of their success!

The rules were clear to all. As long as the assistants earned the expected amount of merits for their contributions, the system would keep running despite its exploitative nature!

Chapter 2153 Not Of Age

Once Ves and Gloriana clarified some matters to their new assistants, the new recruits all left the design lab in order to resume their tour.

Ves directed some attention to his students. Maikel and Zanthar Larkinson had been listening quietly on the side while holding two feisty cats in their arms.

"Meow."

"Miaow."

"Are the two of you enjoying yourselves?" Ves asked.

"Oh, uhm, yes, sir." Maikel stammered.

Neither of the two youngsters knew if it was appropriate for them to play around with the cats.

"It's fine." Ves casually brushed aside the issue. "The Larkinson Clan is known as the Clan of the Golden Cat. Every clansman is allowed to bring their own cats to work as long as they are smart enough to avoid getting in the way."

"Really?"

"Yes. The Larkinson Assembly recently passed this rule."

As more and more people joined the clan, they became enamoured by the clan's association with cats. A trend had recently emerged where clansmen would go out into Cinach VI in order to buy or adopt a furry pet, which encompassed more than just felines!

The problem with this development was that the Larkinson Clan would be living on ships in future. This meant that their homes also functioned as workplaces to an extent.

Thinking of all of the cats, dogs, lizard, birds and more exotic varieties moving around the sometimes cramped corridors and compartments of a vessel gave everyone headaches!

Therefore, the Larkinson Assembly urgently debate this growing issue and came to a consensus.

The clansmen weren't forbidden from obtaining pets, but they were only allowed to adopt tame, intelligent and obedient pets.

They needed to be tame in order to minimize any risk of pets attacking fellow clansmen.

They needed to be intelligent in order to understand their limits and refrain from touching something sensitive.

They also needed to be obedient in order to make sure that they would not disturb people on duty.

This basically meant that no one was allowed to bring in any regular cats or animals. Only sentient genetic products such as the famous breeds of Felixia I were acceptable to the Larkinson Clan!

As for mechanical cats, those who possessed a fancy to them would have to subject them to an extremely thorough inspection. It was well-known that mechanical pets often functioned as a means of spying on their owners, and that was intolerable!

The security checks were so stringent that Ves did not expect many of the mechanical cats to pass. This was a deliberate suggestion on his part because not every mechanical critter was as unhackable as his gem cat.

The two young men already started to think about adopting their own cats now that these new rules have come into being.

Ves and Gloriana both served as stellar examples of success within the clan. The fact that both of them owned cats would doubtlessly spark a lot of copycat behavior!

What nobody knew was that Ves also had an ulterior motive for encouraging mass adoption of pets.

Though he hadn't really done his best to keep it a secret, hardly anyone was truly aware of his ability to talk to animals.

Spreading around cats and other pets onto every ship was basically the same as establishing spy networks in plain view!

Even if the cats were smart enough to become aware of their own existence, they hardly cared about complicated human affairs. Yet that did not mean they paid no attention to what the tall humans around them were up to on a daily basis!

This was why he strongly encouraged the assemblymen to pass such a generous policy. Hardly any spaceborn clan established a pet policy as loose and generous as that of the Larkinson Clan!

Anyway, Ves did not approach his students to encourage them to adopt their own pets.

"Do the two of you want to join us on our mission?"

"Uhm, is that okay?" Zanthar frowned in doubt. "We're not adults yet. I don't think the law permits us to join the mission."

Ves smirked. "I am the law. We aren't operating under the auspices of the Bright Republic anymore, so you should forget about how we do things back in our former home. Right now, there isn't any explicit rule that prohibits you from joining up. It's just that there is no reason for most of us to bring along a bunch of kids."

"What about us, sir?"

"You're different. From the moment you accepted my mentorship, you aren't an average clansman anymore. I'm not raising you to become another assistant mech designer. I want at least one of you to advance to Journeyman so that the trueblood lineage of our clan has at least one other dependable mech designer aside from myself. We original Larkinsons must continuously show our strength in order to maintain some of our hold in the upper hierarchy of the clan. You and our future expert pilots will be key in making sure the clan will stick our Larkinson values!"

With the enormous expansion of the clan in recent months, it was inevitable that most authority positions would eventually slip in the hands of adopted Larkinsons. The disparity in numbers between truebloods and adopted had simply grown too vast to prevent this trend.

If that was the case, Ves at least wanted his own group of Larkinsons to maintain at least some dominance.

"Our clan is set up as a meritocracy." Ves reminded the two Larkinson seeds. "Many opportunities exist for both the trueblood and the adopted. Officially, the two aren't even treated differently, so don't think you can rely on your bloodline to gain any unfair advantages. In the short and medium term, that might allow us to maintain our dominance, but in the long-term such arrangements will only distort our behavior and cause us to grow complacent. This is our clan doesn't provide truebloods like you with any inherent privileges!"

The Larkinsons had fought against too many Vesians in the past to realize the flaws of such an unfair system. Their current approach actually borrowed a lot of elements from the Mech Corps.

Despite the sporadic nepotism that took place in that large organization, as a whole the mech military of the Bright Republic had often been lauded for the opportunities it provided for the competent.

Due to the pressure exerted by the Vesia Kingdom in the past, any instances of gross incompetence or negligence often led to major military defeats!

Though the Larkinson Clan had long separated itself from the Bright Republic, many of the veterans in the original group still possessed much of the institutional knowledge they gained during their service.

Ves was well aware that the influence of all of these veterans caused the clan to develop a militaristic slant. He didn't think there was anything wrong with that since their fleet would definitely bump into a lot of threats in the Red Ocean.

The Larkinson Clan couldn't afford to grow soft!

He finished his discussion with the Larkinson seeds. They were so young and naive that they weren't even aware that Ves essentially forced them into taking part in the mission!

With his growing proficiency in social manipulation, it was literally child's play to make his two gullible students enthusiastic about entering a region filled with pirates and anomalous hazards!

"We won't disappoint you, teacher!" Maikel bopped his head in enthusiasm.

"We'll prove to you that we aren't cowards, sir!" Zanthar bravely thrust his skinny chest.

Hehehe. Ves would mold them into fine and brave mech designers yet. Perhaps he should put them through some combat training as well.

"Meow!"

"That's not important, Lucky."

With this matter taken care of, Ves met with Gloriana and entered a closed-off section of the workshop.

"Why did you bring me here, Ves? Wait, isn't that the Purgatory Envoy and the Fortunate Devil?!"

Both competition mechs were still in their original damaged conditions. Even so, their great bulk and the stories their battle-scars told gave them an aggressive air!

Due to its inactive state, the Purgatory Envoy's glow wasn't very noticeable. The Fortunate Devil also didn't exhibit any signs of spreading any bad luck to those nearby.

"I brought these mechs here for two reasons." Ves started. "First, did you observe my mech doing anything special yesterday?"

"Aside from helping Joshua advancing to expert candidate?"

"That was not in the scope of my design."

"Hmm.. I do recall your mech releasing a strange pulse."

"What if I tell you that the Superior Mother had nothing to do with that. It was Joshua who activated this ability, thereby causing his mech to shed some of the bad luck that had stuck its frame!"

"Really?!"

Since Gloriana possessed a basic understanding of his design philosophy, she understood how significant it was. Every other ability added to a mech so far wasn't really reliable or accessible.

For example, the Guided Aim ability associated with the Deliverer mechs was basically dependent on Ylvaine's spiritual fragment prodding the mech pilot to adjust his aim!

"I call them triggered abilities, and they speak for themselves. I'm still exploring the theory and mechanics behind it all, but I think I can apply this method to almost every future mech design!"

"That's fantastic news! You found yet another application of your design philosophy! You're finally starting to catch up to me!" Gloriana celebrated.

Ves briefly glowered at that. He knew that as much as he achieved some progress, his girlfriend advanced even more! Every single masterwork they fabricated provided an enormous amount of insights to a detail-oriented mech designer.

To someone striving for perfection, studying mechs like the Quint and the Little Angels provided her with a clear direction for the future. This not only accelerated her progression, but saved her a lot of fumbling in the dark!

If this pattern continued, then Gloriana would definitely advance to Senior before him! That would be a disaster of epic proportions!

He coughed. "Anyway, the more important mech is the Fortunate Devil. When I initially stumbled upon this wreck, I developed a very radical theory."

He told her about the potential to siphon the spiritual trace from the Fortunate Devil and use it as an ingredient to develop a design spirit that was capable of manipulating probabilities!

If the revelation of triggered abilities had made her happy, the news that Ves could potentially replicate Jovy Armalon's specialty sent her into an entirely different mood!

"That.. that's too powerful! I don't think it is that simple to replicate what Jovy can do, though." She responded.

A part of her was afraid if Ves could live up to his latest boast. If he could truly replicate anyone's design philosophy, then would he be able to make her redundant?

Her entire body shook at this thought!

"You're right. It's not that simple." Ves sighed. "Spiritual entities have interesting abilities, but they can't express most of them when they are enshrined as design spirits. For example, Qilanxo doesn't actually make our Aurora Titans tougher. She is only able to influence people's minds with her glow, and that applies to many of my other design spirits. Perhaps in the future they will be able to exert more power in the form of triggered abilities and the like, but my specialty has always centered around increasing the level of cooperation between the mech pilot and mech."

"Oh." She said.

Her relief was immeasurable!

"That said, even if I can't replicate Jovy's full abilities, I might be able to salvage something. It's just that a luck-oriented design spirit will mainly be able to make people feel lucky, that's all. The spiritual trace that is responsible for empowering the Fortunate Devil is very weak and very specific towards the mech."

If his previous ingredients could be likened to steaks, then the spiritual trace that Ves was able to observe from the wreck was as miniscule as a pinch of salt!

However, that did not take into account the methods he could employ to grow it. Perhaps it was difficult to grow it with conventional methods, but Ves remembered the instance where he created the Superior Mother.

The life-attributed energy that Ves derived from the serum appeared to be capable of fostering the growth of anything spiritual!

The question was whether it was worth it to waste the previous life-attributed energy on this specific endeavor. Would he really be able to do something useful with a luck-based design spirit without understanding anything about Jovy's design philosophy?

Chapter 2154 Attracting Investment

Much of the Larkinson Clan had gathered today!

After residing almost half a year in the Cinach System, Ves and a substantial proportion of the clan's combat forces were finally scheduled to leave.

Before that happened, the clan made sure to throw a huge celebration.

"Congratulations for reaching expert candidate!"

The lucky adopted Larkinson smiled for posterity as his dashing figure held the hand of his girlfriend.

The Two J's as they were starting to get called had become one of the hottest young couples of the Larkinson Clan.

Everyone knew that Joshua and Jannzi Larkinson possessed a bright future! They may very well soon be expert pilots that every warrior in the Larkinson would look up to! As long as one of them advanced, the clan would no longer be worse off than the Larkinson Family when it came to martial prowess.

From a political standpoint, Ves couldn't be happier for the pairing. As young expert candidates, they not only supported each other, but also represented the fusion between old and new Larkinsons.

Within the huge, festive hall that could house thousands of people, an enormous crowd of Larkinsons mingled with each other as they joyously toasted the latest Larkinson to have breached beyond human limits.

Each of the Larkinsons wore the same style of uniforms, their colors only differing by the branch they worked for. Yet no matter how they differed, each clansman wore the symbol of the Golden Cat on their backs, thereby presenting an incredibly strong united front!

In order to increase the harmony of the hall, Ves had added some of his personal touches to the interior. The clan emblem had been affixed to each large wall. Over a hundred life-like projections of the Golden Cat flew over everyone's heads and played with each other like real cats.

Kids giggled as the projected cats playfully wooshed through their bodies, depositing some of the clan's precious new Larkinson merits to their accounts!

The clan had also distributed a number of charming-looking Golden Cat statues in the hall. Sized like cows, these statues looked imposing enough to convey a lot of presence, but were still small enough to fit through a standard corridor.

Ves did not make them just to spice up the celebrations. The statues also served as totems for the clan's Ancestral Spirit. They not only provided Goldie with a strong channel to extend her influence, but also earned everyone's appreciation for their exquisite craftsmanship.

Even if Ves did not specialize in crafting statues, with three masterwork mechs under his belt, his ability to shape any object had increased remarkably. Though this boost mostly applied to mechs, in truth it also affected anything else that shared something in common!

In fact, he suspected that this might be one of the reasons why Star Designers eventually expanded their scope beyond mechs.

Their mech affinity may have reached such an insanely high level that any machine no longer seemed mysterious to them. Whether it was ships, space stations or even grander designs, all of them shared the same root as mechs.

Perhaps to Star Designers, mechs no longer seemed special to them, which was why they removed the word 'mech' from their title!

He shook his head. Thinking about Star Designers was way too premature. Right now, he wanted to enjoy the party he organized!

Even though more than twenty-thousand people had gathered in the huge venue rented by the clan, Ves did not worry about any attacks.

A large number of mechs from every combat branch of the clan were stationed just outside and in orbit. At fixed intervals, a portion of their mech pilots rotated so that everyone had an opportunity to take part in the celebration.

No Larkinson was left out!

Of course, the Penitent Sisters hovered around as well. Their formidable Hexer mechs patrolled and remained in silent vigil, causing every other outfit or organization on Cinach VI to steer clear of the site!

Standing on a raised platform reserved for the leaders and upper hierarchy of the clan, Ves and Gloriana both held hands as they wore more resplendent outfits.

Ves wore his standard uniform, but added a grand red cape that bore the clan emblem and some additional flourishes.

Gloriana meanwhile wore a brilliant blue dress that featured moving patterns of elegant-looking fish.

Their cats weren't too far away. Lucky and Clixie both kept the Larkinson Mandate company. The book hovered over a majestic-looking pedestal and spun lazily on its axis.

As the spirit that watched over the entire clan, Goldie was having the time of her life! Her presence suffused the hall, and the joyous emotions of the Larkinsons fed straight back, causing her to swell with power and affection!

"It's amazing to see how much we've grown in just a year." Melkor noted with admiration.

The Avatar Commander cut a dashing figure himself. With a new, slimmer second-class visor model and some rank insignia on his uniform, Melkor exuded a commanding demeanor that was no less than that of an elder!

"You know, I never asked why you wear something over your eyes all the time." Ves spoke up. "Is there something wrong with your vision? You can just stop by the Larkinson Biotech Institute if you need something fixed."

"It's none of your business, Ves."

Hardly any clansman dared to speak that way to him nowadays. His stature continually increased with each and every accomplishment he made. In addition, the rapid growth of the clan he founded also turned him into a revered figure akin to senior statesmen such as Senator Tovar!

Though Gloriana frowned a bit, Ves squeezed her hand. The Larkinson Clan had never insisted on excessive formality and strict hierarchies. Besides, it felt good to be around people who he didn't need to put on any airs.

The more power he gained, the more restricted he felt. It became increasingly more difficult for him to break the expectations set upon him. The transition happened too quickly for Ves to grow into his leadership role.

In that regard, Melkor was better off. While Ves had to bear the entire weight of the Larkinson Clan on his shoulders, his cousin only had to worry about the Avatars of Myth. It was no surprise that the Avatar Commander adjusted to his role much better.

After chatting with Melkor, Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson approached as well.

"My grandson will be taking part in your mission as well." He sighed.

Ves nodded. "There is no peace in the Nyxian Gap. Tusa will be able to find plenty of opportunities to test his limits."

"I'm aware that this is what he wants." Raymond spoke with concern. "That boy wants to be the first clansman to advance to expert pilot. Jannzi is giving him a lot of pressure."

"It is in his nature to be flighty. Racing ahead of others is part of his personality." Ves shrugged.

Though he had never paid a lot of attention to Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, that did not mean the expert candidate was weak!

Tusa was the most formidable light skirmisher specialist in the clan. What Ves valued most in him was that Tusa acted responsibly and often spared some time to tutor other light mech specialists. The Flagrant Vandals even employed him as a guest instructor to facilitate their transition to light mechs!

"The Doom Guard is still selling well. It is even being exported to other star sectors, though not by us." Raymond explained. "We have cautiously begun to set up

subsidiaries in Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal. However, not even the loyalty medallions we've sent will ensure we are able to exert sufficient control. We need the guarantee of the MTA in order to make our presence solid."

Ves frowned. That cost a lot of merits, and he wasn't sure whether it was worth it to spend that much. "Don't be in a hurry. If need be, just slow down. We are already earning plenty of money from our current star sector and many of our most pressing needs have already been met. I'll revisit this issue after I return from the Nyxian Gap. Depending on how many merits I've earned, I'll look into borrowing the power of the MTA to reinforce our control over our expanding network."

"That sounds good."

After Raymond came some other figures. This was a rare opportunity to catch up with Ves outside his design lab, and plenty of people wanted to command his attention in order to draw attention to their own priorities.

Ves tired a bit from handling these issues. He felt as if his own clansmen were lobbying him as if he was a politician.

Soon enough, another couple stepped forward. Ves immediately scowled. "What are you two doing here?"

"Hey, Ves!" Raella grinned as she stood next to Vincent. "Thanks for all of the work you've done. Now that our clan is swimming in money, it's a lot easier to get a hold of the funding required to set up the Larkinson Championship Series. I hope to begin the next duels in just half a year, with team battles coming six months later!"

That sounded remarkably quick! Even though Ves wasn't very familiar with competitive circuits, he could easily imagine all of the infrastructure that needed to be set up in order to hold a safe and expensive competition.

"How did you manage to fund your venture so quickly? I don't recall the Assembly expanding your budget."

"We plan to keep costs fairly low at the start by restricting the duels to third-class mechs for now, so we don't actually need an excessive amount of hex credits. The handout from the clan only makes up 20 percent of our funding. We managed to obtain the rest through attracting investment. It's all Vincent's idea."

The man in question patted his broad chest. "There's a lot of interest in the LCS throughout the clan. When I saw how eager Avatars wanted to prove that they were the best or how domineering the Swordmaidens wanted to vanquish over everyone else, I recognized an opportunity. What if we can channel the rivalries within the clan in the arena?"

"You don't mean..."

"It's exactly what you think, Ves." Raella grinned. "I managed to convince several bigshots within the clan to invest in the LCS. In exchange, they not only get shares in our organization, but are also allowed to field a team!"

"Who did you manage to convince so far?"

"A couple." Raella raised her fingers in succession. "First, there's Commander Dise of the Swordmaidens. She plans to pick a group of her most competitive mech pilots to form the Amazons. Then there's Melkor, who has already set up the Golden Avatars. Commander Orfan enthusiastically pitched in as well. I heard the Flagrant Vandals have already formed a team organization called the 100 Scoundrels. I'm still in negotiation with the Battle Criers and the Living Sentinels, but I expect them to put forth their own teams very soon."

"Don't forget about me!" Vincent grinned. "Team Solo Vincent will steamroll all of the competition once the first season starts!"

Though Ves was not particularly enthused by Raella and Vincent, he had to admit that they were certainly enterprising. Their success in attracting investment was a testament to their business acumen!

"Why tell us all of this? I'm not involved in this venture."

"We still have a few team slots left. Since you and your girlfriend are so loaded with money, would any of you like to become a partner as well? It will be fun! We can fight for pride and glory!"

"No." Ves resolutely shook his head. "I'm not interested."

Gloriana on the hand looked intrigued. "I don't know Ves. It sounds like a great way to have some fun."

"So you're willing to invest in us?!" Realla looked excited.

"Only if I'm allowed to field Hexers in my team."

The condition caused the rest to look astonished. Vincent and Realla frowned a bit. They looked to each other before nodding.

"We can do that. Some additional challenges will certainly stoke up the competition. Since all of the mech pilots in our clan will promote to a higher class sooner or later, the differences won't be great. Have you figured out a team name already?"

"Yes. My team shall be known as Cloud 6!"

Chapter 2155 Task Force Predator

Ves looked at his girlfriend with a weird expression. "Why are you taking part in this venture?"

"It's fun!" She said. "We have competitions like this in the Wodin Dynasty as well. It's really engaging to root for your own team and group. I miss that about home. Besides, too many of your clansman don't really like us Hexers all that much."

"What a surprise. How could that be?" Ves dramatically coughed.

His girlfriend hit his arm and hissed. "I'm being serious! I know my fellow Hexers aren't exactly well-liked, but we aren't that bad! I don't want your entire clan to keep misunderstanding us. Setting up Cloud 6 and taking part in the LCS will show that we are people instead of monsters."

Good luck with that. Ves did not think that most people's opinion of Hexer culture would change because of this. There was so much wrong with Hexers that a couple of PR stunts would never be able to rehabilitate their image!

Still, his girlfriend was determined to go through with her plan. She was convinced it would work!

"Great!" Realla exclaimed after obtaining Gloriana's verbal commitment. "I'll get in touch with you or your people in order to hash out the finer details."

Once Raella and Vincent got what they wanted, they walked out of sight.

More people arrived to petition the clan patriarch, causing Ves to put this incident out of his mind.

Throughout the talks, Ves understood that the Larkinson Clan had grown to a point where a lot of interest groups had emerged.

For example, Ronsel Larkinson wanted to revive the Larkinson Basic Mech Academy.

"So far, we have already organized a complete curriculum for our mech cadets." The elder Larkinson and former expert candidate spoke. "It's just that many of our veterans and mech instructors are beginning to diverge on how to raise our future generation of warriors. The adoption of so many new clansmen who come from different states that are accustomed to different mech doctrines has led to a lot of disputes. If we don't do anything, we risk splintering our teaching resources."

That didn't sound too bad to Ves. However, he knew that it was not yet time for the Larkinson Clan to set up multiple mech academies. There weren't enough cadets to make this move worthwhile."

"So what is your plan?"

"I'd like your permission to revive the Larkinson Basic Mech Academy. Even though it is a pity that we were forced to abandon the original academy at Cloudy Curtain, our teachers have learned a lot. This time, we plan to be more ambitious. As long as you are willing to invest a couple of billion hex credits in the reestablishment of our mech academy, I can promise you that we will produce graduates who can immediately begin with piloting second-class mechs!"

"Seriously?!" Ves could not remain calm at this moment!

Ronsel Larkinson looked proud. "Our mech instructors aren't that bad, and we plan to hire plenty of external help who have experience with piloting second-class mechs. We have already formed an extensive plan to make this happen within the next couple of years. The main restraining factor is funding. Raising second-class mech pilots isn't as difficult as you think, but that is only in case there is ample funding available."

"He's right." Gloriana added. "The Hexadric Hegemony could have trained twice or thrice as many mech pilots than it did. Right now, most of our mech academies don't bother with potentates whose aptitudes are lower than C-grade. It just isn't viable to train so many low-quality mech pilots."

"I see."

In the end, Ves promised to throw a couple of billion hex credits in Ronsel's direction.

The elder's first attempt at setting up an academy had already impressed Ves a lot. With all of that experience under his belt, their second attempt would definitely be better!

Once Ronsel departed, only a couple of people arrived to make their case. Each time, Ves listened patiently, but he did not always consent to their ideas.

"How much money have I given away already?" Ves wearily asked.

"Over 19 billion hex credits." Gloriana supplied. "That's a hefty sum, but easily manageable these days. If the clan's coffers aren't enough, then you can shift some of the MTA credits you've won from the design duel."

That was a lot of money. A few months ago, Ves would never dare to spend so much on concerns that weren't high in priority. Matters such as reforming the Larkinson Basic Mech Academy could have waited. It was only now that the clan had gained a lot of money that their organizers smelled blood.

Ves felt as if he had been butchered by a pack of hungry wolves!

It made him realize that this would never stop. The amount of clansmen asking for money would only increase.

"Many of these matters were held up in the Larkinson Assembly. The organizers figured that they could have obtained faster results if they approached the clan patriarch in person." Gloriana told him. "Next time, if you don't want to pass any proposals, then just pass it back to the Assembly."

"I guess you're right."

The two no longer faced any petitioners, allowing them to enjoy the festivities without any further interruptions.

Witnessing the vitality and harmony of the clan he set up and supported up to this point brought him a huge measure of pride.

Even though only less than five percent of the people in the enormous hall had any Larkinson blood running through their veins, the differences didn't matter.

Former citizens of the Ylvaine Protectorate like James got along well with former citizens of the Sentinel Kingdom.

No matter which state they used to belong to, after spending at least a month in the clan, most of the adopted had already forgotten about their former allegiances!

It was hard not to fall in love with the Larkinson Clan. With its friendly culture that treated every Larkinson with respect, those who joined the clan later did not face that much discrimination.

The Larkinson Network played a key role in reducing a lot of friction. Differences between Ylvainans, Brighters, Sentinels and other groups still existed and continued to lead to heated arguments to this day.

Yet no matter how much they differed, the different groups of Larkinsons always emphasized what they shared in common!

Ves appreciated the harmony so much that he commenced his speech ahead of schedule.

As soon as the music faded and the sound projectors carried his voice, the entire crowd of Larkinsons fell silent.

"My fellows Larkinsons." He began. "Aside from celebrating Mr. Joshua Larkinson's ascension to expert candidate, I would like to make two more announcements today."

He waved his hand, causing projections of a formidable-looking fleet to emerge above everyone's head.

"Starting from tomorrow, Task Force Predator will officially depart to the Nyxian Gap! With a mech roster that consists of roughly 600 Avatars, 500 Sentinels, 160 Battle Criers, 140 Vandals, 40 Swordmaidens and 400 Penitent Sisters, we will be able to smash aside any local opposition! Hardly any pirate organization can withstand our collective might!"

He was right. Even without the Penitent Sisters, his task force was already strong enough to defeat military mech regiments. With the second-class mechs of the exiled Hexers added on top of that, then Ves had a very good chance of defeating entire mech regiments!

Due to the lack of population and incredible degree of dispersion of local powers, hardly any pirate organization in the Gap could muster up that much strength.

Even if the bigger pirate alliances possessed enough mechs, they were often assigned to guard a lot of different bases or spread around in different fleets.

Pirates were very sensitive towards profit and losses. They never held back when pouncing the weak, but always avoided strong opponents like plague.

There was no profit in attacking the latter!

"While I cannot tell you how long Task Force Predator will stay in the Nyxian Gap, don't expect us back in half a year."

This was a considerable length of time to many Larkinsons. Those who were slated to take part in the mission and those who remained in place both looked concerned.

"There is no reason to feel discouraged." Ves gently admonished his clansmen. "Believe in our clan. Our strength is not weak and with our best leaders in charge, we will not succumb to danger! Challenges like these shall never hinder our Larkinson Clan! Instead, I believe we can overcome them all and become stronger as a result. When our task force returns, we will each complete our transformation as warriors!"

Ves raised his fist in the air. "For the clan!"

The others followed suit!

"For the clan!"

"For the clan!"

"For the clan!"

Once the cheers died down, Ves turned to Gloriana. He briefly took the time to enjoy her lovely scent.

"I have one other announcement to make. This one is personal."

In the view of the entire clan, Ves held his girlfriend's slim and supple hands and drew close. Her breath hitched as she looked in his eyes.

"Gloriana. Though we have only known each other for two years, we have already experienced a lifetime of success and setbacks."

"Oh, Ves..."

He caressed the back of her hand. "To be honest, when I first met you, I was ambivalent about you. I still am. Yet over these years, you have proven you are more than Hexer. You have shown a willingness to adapt to the circumstances and adjust your behavior. I know how difficult it is to break from the mold set by your mother, your dynasty and your society."

"I am doing it all for you, Ves." Gloriana smiled with emotion. "I certainly haven't made life easy for you."

"There are difficulties in any relationship. Ours is just a bit more complicated than most. Yet just like the clan, they aren't enough to hinder us from appreciating what we share in common. We both love mechs. We both love each other. Our differences don't detract from that. Instead, some of our differences just happen to complement each other. The synergies we have been able to achieve in and outside of the design lab has propelled us to the forefront of the mech community. I could have never grown our clan to this extent without your unwavering support!"

"Your clan is also my clan, Ves. We're in this together. Now, and always."

"I know, but that is not enough for me. There is one more step I want to take in order to make you mine."

Under the view of the entire Larkinson Clan, Ves gradually lowered himself so that one of his knees touched the podium.

Everyone held their breath. Even Lucky, Clixie and Goldie didn't dare to utter any meows.

Ves calmly reached into his pocket and retrieved a small box. He raised it up to Gloriana and opened it, revealing an elegant golden ring set with an alluring transparent gem.

Ves had fabricated the ring the day before. He affixed one of Lucky's old lesser gems onto it. While the effect of the gem was negligible, its visual appearance was incredibly alluring.

Gloriana immediately became enchanted by the luster of the gem and the craftsmanship of the ring.

In truth, Ves had wasted more than 15 batches of Breyer alloy and other expensive exotics in order to produce a high-quality engagement ring.

Though the ring in the box did not reach masterwork quality, it came fairly close!

The sight of Ves kneeling in front of him and presenting a ring to her made Gloriana emotional. Tears of happiness leaked from her eyes as she raised her hands to cover her mouth.

Ves finally asked the fateful question.

"Gloriana... will you marry me?"

A few seconds passed as his girlfriend blinked.

"Yes! I will!"

She practically burst into tears as the occasion overwhelmed her mood! Joy exploded from her body as the rest of the clan finally reacted to the successful marriage proposal!

Chapter 2156 Long Awaited

After two years, Ves finally mustered up the courage to propose to Gloriana.

A lot of Larkinsons thought it was too soon. Ves didn't think so, and neither did his girlfriend.

As far as Gloriana was concerned, she was already to tie the knot the day after she met him at Centerpoint! The moment she laid her sights on her was the moment that she was never going to let him go no matter what obstacles stood in her way. Even his prior affiliation with the Friday Coalition fell victim to her conviction.

Therefore, from her perspective, Ves was actually two years too late!

Ves was well aware of Gloriana's inclinations. It took two years for him to finally reconcile himself with spending the rest of his life with the woman who derailed his life but also became someone worthy of his trust.

Perhaps he should have waited more. Perhaps he should have spent an additional year to see whether Gloriana truly fit in his life

He didn't want to wait anymore.

For one, Ves felt he had truly gotten Gloriana's measure. He had thought deeply of their relationship and found that it was acceptable even if she was a Hexer who believed in hexism.

The trust they shared towards each other and the synergies they achieved in their work remained strong despite their occasional fights.

Their love exceeded the obstacles that could break apart their relationship. Once Ves made this realization, there was nothing holding him back from taking the next step.

Therefore, the only question that Ves had to struggle with was the timing of his marriage proposal.

Ves planned to leave the Komodo Star Sector within the year. So long as they left their home star system, everyone in the Larkinson Fleet would truly be making a break with all of their prior attachments to home.

While Ves couldn't care less about the people he planned to leave behind, Gloriana was different. She still held a lot of affection towards the Wodin Dynasty.

It was a must to hold their wedding in this star sector. He wanted to give Gloriana an opportunity to invite her relatives to attend the wedding.

She deserved at least this much! Gloriana would probably be sad if none of her relatives could make it to their wedding!

Gloriana probably understood that as well. She appreciated him even more.

She also appreciated the ring he made.

"What an amazing ring."

His girlfriend felt incredibly touched and she didn't comment on the tiny flaws of the engagement ring.

He had infused it with his entire love and devotion towards her. He meant every word he said when he presented the pretty ring during the celebration.

Though many people in the clan still harbored a lot of misgivings about Ves marrying a Hexer, most of them were confident they weren't about to start worshipping women.

Ves had already made clear that his clan would form its own sovereign identity! Neither the Bright Republic, the Hexadric Hegemony or any state would hold dominion over the Larkinsons. The clan had already grown strong to stand on its own in the galaxy!

When Gloriana joyfully slipped the ring onto her finger, Ves rose to his feet and held her waist.

"I love you, Ves."

"I love you too, Gloriana."

Under the cheers of every Larkinson, they kissed each other passionately!

It served as the perfect ending to the celebration.

After a very enthusiastic and energetic night, the couple woke up and calmly prepared for the day.

Happiness continued to bubble inside Gloriana as she continually admired the engagement ring that Ves had made for her. She also closed her eyes in order to feel the glow that Ves imparted to it. The spiritual foundation of the ring centered almost completely about his love towards her. He even experimented with his new ability to create spiritual constructs by accentuating the aspects about her that he liked the most!

"It's as if you are constantly by my side." She giggled. "I truly do love what you've made. As for this gem..."

"It's not what you think. Not exactly." He quickly replied.

Even so, Gloriana still appreciated it! There was just something about its luster that seemed alive. She could spend hours staring at her new ring!

While Ves was happy with his fiancé's reaction towards his handicraft, an even heavier weight pressed on his heart.

When it was time for them to hold their wedding, he needed to present even better rings.

He still carried the plain wedding bands gifted by his mother in one of his pockets. He had been trying to infuse them with his presence through constant proximity. All the while, he continued to puzzle over how he wanted to shape their final appearances.

If possible, he wanted to turn them into masterworks! That would be the ultimate gift to Gloriana and himself!

To any other mech designer, the difficulty of accomplishing this was immense. Even Ves did not have much hope because Lucky's gems only elevated the quality of mechs, not other objects.

Therefore, if Ves wanted to turn the wedding bands into masterworks, he needed to find a chance and employ unconventional methods to achieve this objective before the wedding ceremony!

Maybe he could fix something up during his expedition to the Nyxian Gap.

Task Force Predator was scheduled to depart at the end of the day. This gave Ves and Gloriana plenty of time together.

The rented base exhibited a huge amount of activity as mechs and supplies were being loaded onto ships that subsequently departed into orbit.

The clan had already prepared for this expedition, so not a lot of war materiel needed to be moved. It was mainly the mech pilots and other people that had to reach orbit.

After so much time spent on solid ground, the members of Task Force Predator would soon be spending several months in the most inhospitable region of space of the star sector.

This was no pleasure cruise.

Due to the abundance of danger lurking within the endless fields of asteroids, the entire fleet would operate in the same manner as Ves had once experienced when the Flagrant Swordmaidens traveled all the way to the deep frontier.

No one was allowed to relax. Everyone already enjoyed a six-month vacation of sorts. Starting from today, many Larkinsons were expected to prove they had what it took to be a part of the clan.

Ves was determined to weed out any cowards within the ranks of Task Force Predator!

It was better if they popped out early on when they were just venturing into a known danger zone than later when the clan entered the Red Ocean!

"Don't worry, Gloriana." He told her. "The periphery of the Nyxian Gap isn't nearly as dangerous as you think. Just consider this excursion to be a practice run for what is ahead of us in a decade."

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "I know, but I'm concerned you'll go deeper for whatever reason. I know you, Ves. As soon as you smell a bone, you always get obsessed and lose control."

"I'm not that bad!" He defended himself. "I know my responsibilities! I can't possibly disregard the bigger picture and ruin my entire schedule just because I yearn to explore the heart of the Nyxian Gap."

She looked up at him with suspicious eyes.

"Trust me! I'm engaged to you now. We have already set the date for our wedding. There is no way that I will miss the most significant moment of my life!"

Gloriana softened up after hearing that. "You better remember than when I'm not there to warm your bed anymore."

"I will miss the opportunity to discharge my energy. I only have Lucky to keep me company at night, and he is far too cold and hard to hug to sleep."

"Meow!"

Lucky took offense to that!

Ves ignored his cat's protests. He just wanted to spend one final afternoon with his lover before he went off to earn a lot of merits.

"Have you already accepted a mission?" She asked.

"Not yet."

"Shouldn't you have taken care of that by now?"

"I'm not in a hurry. Many of the lucrative missions that I'm eying are open missions that are open to anyone. No one seems to have fulfilled them for a time, so the Rim Guardians just let any associate try their luck at them in the hopes that one of them can actually succeed."

There were other missions that demanded Ves to make a prior commitment. Most of them were supposed to be completed in a group or contained too many conditions.

Ves did not wish to make any reckless promises and commitments. Part of what allowed successful pirates to survive in the Nyxian Gap was that they were highly adaptable. The truly clever pirate commander never proceeded with a plan the moment something seemed wrong. As long as his purpose or his route were leaked, there was a considerable chance that Task Force Predator might fall victim to an ambush!

This was one of the valuable advice provided by Calabast.

"Ves."

"Yes, honey?"

"We should talk about starting some new mech design projects. Now that we have hired a considerable cohort of mech designers, we can probably triple the amount of projects we can work on concurrently."

"I'm aware. It's just that I have been trying to come up with some good ideas for a while now. One of the reasons why I'm so eager to depart for the Nyxian Gap is to gain a lot of inspiration from my travels. I won't be able to figure out anything good if I remain stuck in Cinach all the time."

"Silly Ves." She softly giggled at him. She reached out and poked her finger against his forehead. "We aren't the only mech designers in the Design Department. We've added 50 mech designers, many of which possess different backgrounds. Why not make use of them for once and task them with coming up with their own proposals?"

Ves raised his eyebrows. "This.. this is a very interesting idea. I think.. it can actually work!"

Certainly, none of their assistant mech designers were as bright as Ves and Gloriana. They were all different and filled with unique ideas. Even if 48 out of the 50 suggestions were too awful to be taken seriously, as long as the remaining two sounded decent, it was still worth it in the end!

"We can obtain a good glimpse of our new assistants." Gloriana added. "We already know that many of them have what it takes to be useful, but we don't want all of them to remain this way, do we?"

Ves nodded. "There are a number of promising people who I'll be keeping an eye on. I feel quite good about their chances to advance to Journeyman."

As long as just one of them advanced to Journeyman, Ves and Gloriana would be able to incorporate another powerful specialty in their mech designs!

Right now, just the two of them weren't enough. There was plenty room for additional design philosophies in their collaborative works!

Just as Ves began to imagine what it would be like to design a swordsman mech with Ketis advancing to Journeyman, his girlfriend presented her own idea.

"We promised to design 8 mechs for DIVA. We should start with designing at least two for now. I already have a suggestion in mind."

"Do tell."

She activated her comm and projected some sketches. They depicted a variety of male and female Hexer mech designs.

Ves had come up with most of their mech design projects so far. While he wasn't used to Gloriana taking the initiative this time, he welcomed it anyway.

His girlfriend was incredibly passionate about Hexer mech designs, and she possessed a much deeper understanding how the Hex Army worked than him. Already she impressed him with a familiar-looking mech concept.

"A.. valkyrie?"

Chapter 2157 Solok Reyva

Task Force Predator departed the Cinach System with incredible momentum. Numerous light carriers, combat carriers and some swift logistics ships moved in unison towards one of the nearest Lagrange points.

Once there, the fleet practically transitioned into FTL in unison. With over 40 carriers of different shapes and sizes making up the bulk of its composition, it didn't take much of a guess that the Larkinson Clan was about to go off on an expedition to the Nyxian Gap!

A lot of observers in the system immediately sent messages to other parties. As one of the most prominent Journeymen in the star sector, Ves already knew that his movements would be tracked.

There was no way to stop it as long as he and his fleet remained in civilized space. If he wanted to shake off pursuers, his task force would have to enter within the realm of the Nyxian Gap.

That would take a while. Until then, Ves could spend his time on numerous matters.

The first issue he addressed was setting some solid goals for his excursion.

Once his implant connected to the Rim Exchange, his consciousness entered Granada Prime, a virtual city set aside for associates originating from the nearby star sectors.

A butler-like android with a curly moustache immediately greeted his arrival.

[Welcome back to the Rim Exchange, Apollo Radiant.]

Having entered the virtual portal of the Rim Exchange a few times before, Ves had grown used to Gamma-Gamma-Hogan's presence. His personal attendant actually provided him with numerous useful functions.

"Have I received any mail?"

[You have received 351 messages. Of these messages, 351 of them have failed to go past the filters that you have configured. The total amount of messages that await your perusal is 0.]

That was to be expected. During his previous visits, he couldn't resist spending some time to tweak and update his Apollo Radiant avatar. Its ornate, clockwork-like bronze shell became even more exquisite. His raised mech affinity elevated its quality further, allowing him to stand out from other low-level associates!

There were hardly any stupid people in the Rim Exchange. The Rim Guardian Fraternity specifically approached the best and most promising professionals in the galactic rim to take part in the Rim Exchange.

Combined with the fact that Granada Prime was filled with associates from the Komodo Star Sector, it did not take long for some of them to equate the Apollo Radiant avatar to the male half of the Miracle Couple!

Ves had no intentions of hiding the connection. His avatar advertised his current design ability, and conveyed his distinctive design style. On top of that, it also carried one of his characteristic glows. As the only mech designer able to incorporate them in mechs, the evidence was rather conclusive!

Previously, Ves deliberately flaunted his avatar on the streets of Grenada Prime in order to attract attention and solicit offers.

It was too bad that most associates sought to leech from him or take advantage of him. This was why Ves did not react with surprise when Hogan filtered out all of the 351 messages his Apollo Radiant avatar received.

"Hogan, please convert to my second avatar."

Within the snap of a second, his artful appearance as Apollo Radiant disappeared. In its place was a humanoid avatar that looked anything but elegant.

Consisting of rusted steel and other garbage materials, Junkyard Joe was the antithesis of his former Rim Avatar. It looked like a shambling mess and every movement caused something inside to rattle or squeak. Its construction was so poor that it was already at risk of falling apart!

If that wasn't enough, a ratty, oil-stained piece of canvas covered the avatar's form, making it seem as if he was some kind of beggar in some neglected space station!

No one should be able to associate Junkyard Joe with Apollo Radiant. The differences were night and day. Even the worst Novices would have been able to cobble up something better!

The ugly lips of his avatar bent into a crooked smile. "I won't be disturbed this time."

There were no limits to how many Rim Avatars an associate could make. The way the Rim Exchange was set up, it was easy to maintain anonymity. Ves did not wish for other associates to learn which missions he wanted to pursue.

"Stay here Hogan and continue to monitor my messages. Please continue to monitor any announcements relating to high-priority missions."

[Very well, sir.]

When Junkyard Joe stepped into the public areas, the avatar hardly attracted any attention. Those that did study its construction only became repulsed by what they saw.

Ves had practically taken every lesson he learned from Gloriana and performed the exact opposite! His mech was crooked, unbalanced, asymmetrical and filled with so many flaws that it would have constituted as torture to his fiancé!

What he found amusing was that he was hardly the only associate who played this game.

Multiple associates designed ugly and misleading avatars to obscure their identities and avoid attracting attention. Other people already knew that there was no point in approaching these kinds of people.

Ves even received some accolades from fellow connoisseurs!

"I love your creativity, Junkyard Joe." A crab-shaped avatar made out of rotting wood raised its malfunctioning claw. "You're in my top 10 list!"

"Thanks."

A human-sized cleaning bot stumbled upon his path next. "Wow, you look like you crawled straight out of a pirate dump. Can you teach me how you're able to keep your avatar working at such horrible quality?"

"Get lost!"

Okay, maybe Ves had overdone it a little. Fortunately, he didn't encounter too many interruptions before he reached the Merit Hall.

Hundreds of associates, some of them accompanied by their android attendants, looked up at the huge projected bulletin boards. Numerous missions issued by the Rim Guardians blinked on it. Ves immediately approached the section of the hall that allowed him to view the missions related to the Nyxian Gap.

A very small number of avatars lingered in this section. Among the elites who managed to earn the acknowledgement of the Rim Guardians, hardly any of them possessed the stomach to venture in a region filled with danger and death!

"That's all the better for me." Junkyard Joe smirked.

The Merit Hall operated according to supply and demand. Easy missions and those that attracted a lot of associates offered little reward. The ones that were difficult, risky or cumbersome had to offer a lot more merits in order to solicit interest.

While there weren't that many missions that took place in the Nyxian Gap, almost all of them offered rewards that were well above average!

The ones that took place in the periphery already provided two to four times as much merits as an equivalent mission in civilized space.

Meanwhile, the missions that required the associate to travel a little deeper could easily earn an associate ten times as much merits as normal!

His Junkyard Joe avatar raised a rusty finger and rubbed its rough, rust-stained chin. "Many of the same missions are still on the list."

A lot of listings consisted of deep, latent missions. They essentially demanded the associate to take a huge risk in order to travel deeper into the Nyxian Gap. Since hardly anyone was crazy enough to accept them, these missions had been languishing on the list for years, sometimes even decades!

The longer a mission remained unfulfilled, the greater the rewards. As long as the Rim Guardians refused to delist the mission, the amount of merits and other benefits they yielded continued to balloon!

None of the missions were easy, though. Ves spotted nothing that sounded easy.

Right now, Ves just wanted to check if anything changed. He memorized every outstanding mission, but accepted none of them. It didn't matter if he did because they were open missions, which meant that anyone could fulfill them at any time.

Some consisted of bounties. Others consisted of retrieval missions. A fair number even directed the associate to travel straight to a hazard zone and scout the life-threatening circumstances!

Ves just took note of them all, especially the ones that he might encounter along his planned route. He adopted an opportunistic mindset towards these open missions. If he could fulfill them along the way, he didn't mind doing so, but the odds of that happening was rather slim.

"I need to set a solid goal for myself."

He browsed the list until he found the mission that he had been eying for a time.

[Rescue Mission

29 years ago, Solok Reyva, a talented Journeyman and a member of the Rim Guardian Fraternity, ventured into the Nyxian Gap with a small but powerful fleet. Ten months into the journey, the MTA has lost contact with the entire fleet.

Solok Reyva was presumed lost.

Several years later, small batches of high-quality mechs began to circulate among the Nyxian pirates. Rumors have emerged that the Krella Alliance, a minor but elusive pirate group in the Nyxian Gap, has captured a very capable mech designer and coerced him into working on commissions issued by various pirate clients.

The Rim Guardians have reason to suspect that the Krella Alliance has captured Solok Reyva and are exploiting him to this day. The design characteristics of the commissioned pirate mechs bear at least some resemblance to Solok Reyva's prior work at the MTA.

The Krella Alliance is a fleet-based pirate group that is often on the move. It is well-connected in the deeper portions of the periphery of the Nyxian Gap and is always able to evade pursuit.

Track down the Krella Alliance and retrieve the mech designer that is responsible for designing the commissioned pirate mechs. If the identity of the mech designer is Solok Reyva, then he must be brought back to MTA custody alive and as healthy as possible.

Due to prior failed rescue attempts, the Krella Alliance is on guard. Its fleet has become much more difficult to track, and the mechs its captive mech designers have designed no longer bear the design characteristics associated with Solok Reyva.

Reward: 2,500,000 MTA merits

Bonus: 2,500,000 MTA merits and 1 level associate status promotion if the rescued mech designer is Solok Reyva and alive]

This was the big one. Considering the composition and capabilities of his task force, Ves believed he had a decent shot at fulfilling this particular mission.

Rescuing Solok Reyva not only awarded him with a huge amount of MTA merits, but also elevated his associate status by an additional level!

The latter was pretty rare! It took a lot of effort to promote his associate status. While Ves had already gained one level due to receiving a masterwork certificate, that was just a one-time deal.

Each level after 1 granted him a 5 percent bonus in every good and service offered by the Rim Guardians. If Ves was able to rescue Solok Reyva, then he'd be able to gain a 10 percent discount in total!

Compared to his old situation, Ves effectively had to pay 5 million merits less for a second-class fleet beyonder ticket.

Therefore, while the rescue mission only awarded him with 5 million merits on the surface, he effectively gained double if he obtained the additional discount!

Putting him one-tenth closer to fulfilling his great ambition was well worth it in his eyes!

"Six months. I'll spend six months at most."

If Ves failed to track Solok down, then he was ready to cut his losses at that point.

One thing was for sure. It wasn't going to be easy for Ves to close in on Solok and the Krella Alliance.

The pirates covered their tracks so that Ves effectively had to trace them by following the breadcrumbs in the form of the commissioned mechs they sold.

Ves would have to access and inspect these mechs in person in order to ascertain whether they were Solok's handiwork. This was incredibly arduous and required a mech designer of high skill in order to make this determination.

The reason why it wasn't possible to determine whether any mech was designed by Solok was because he was actually a rational mech designer!

The man was able to emulate multiple specialties!

Chapter 2158 Nyxian Gap Geography

Solok Reyva's record did not reveal too many details. Much of it was classified and not accessible to a low-leveled external associate such as Ves. What little he had to go on only described the basics.

Almost thirty years ago, Solok Reyva was a Journeyman similar to Jovy Armalon. He was born into the MTA, where his parents worked for a long time.

The talented Solok did not opt to become a passionate mech designer. Like many of those who were brought up within the MTA, he chose the harder route and focused on designing mechs with his mind rather than his heart.

His design philosophy wasn't actually very impressive as a result. Officially, Solok specialized in burst-mobility propulsion systems. This was a rather plain Class IV design philosophy that allowed his mechs to exhibit extreme bursts of speed when needed.

Compared to a highly abstruse design philosophy like that of Jovy, Solok chose a much easier path to Master.

Regardless, as a rational mech designer, it really didn't matter if Solok could hardly contribute anything valuable to the MTA with his specialty.

The principal use of rational mech designers was to imitate and combine multiple different design philosophies developed by others!

This made tracking down Solok and the Krella Alliance that much harder. The latter had profited much from the former. Not only had the Krella Alliance grown its main fleet, it also established numerous other fleets!

What complicated the search even further was that every fleet hosted numerous mech designers. Whether willingly or not, they designed and produced various mechs on behalf of the Krella Alliance.

Within the vast and expansive pirate ecosystem of the Nyxian Gap, the Krella Alliance was one of the few reliable providers to medium and high-quality mechs!

While his did not sound very remarkable if the Krella Alliance operated in civilized space, in a region as difficult as the Nyxian Gap, most pirates could hardly find any mech supplier that sold something better than junk!

According to the intelligence provided by the Rim Guardians, most Krella Alliance fleets hid in the inner periphery of the Gap. The inner periphery was where most of the more established pirate groups resided.

Unlike the outer periphery, a lot less Peacekeeper outfits tended to venture into the inner periphery. The chance of encountering hazard zones was bigger, though it wasn't as bad as the core regions.

In general, the inner periphery was far enough from the Sentinel Kingdom to evade the authorities. It was also just beyond the core regions, where the spatial warping had reached such an intense level that most quantum entanglement nodes stopped working correctly.

In certain areas in the core regions, even his new Darkbreak module might not be able to maintain a connection to the galactic net!

Ves heavily suspected that the Oblivion Hand and his parents made their home in the core regions. This was why he never managed to get in touch with them through the backdoor he implemented in the Devil Tiger.

Even though the inner periphery sounded considerably safer than the core region, in truth nothing was absolute!

The CFA and MTA longer dispatched any of their main forces into the Nyxian Gap when a large proportion of their forces simply disappeared.

While the bulk of these disappearances took place in the core regions, it wasn't impossible for some of them to fall off the radar in both the inner and outer periphery!

The Big Two stopped sending big warfleets into the Nyxian Gap after that. Most of the time, the MTA relied on external help to investigate this perilous region.

Even if their local helpers encountered mishaps, the MTA didn't care! Such losses no longer hurt them. The only problem was that associates like Ves were not as capable and very reluctant to take on risks.

The MTA had no choice but to ramp up their merit rewards in order to encourage others to complete its missions.

Right now, Ves was one of the many fish that one of the MTA's daughter organizations had managed to lure.

The prospect of getting 10,000,000 MTA merits closer to his goal was simply too irresistible to him! Unlike many other missions, Ves was somewhat confident he could rescue Solok Reyva from the clutches of the Krella Alliance.

The key was to make use of all of his strengths. Aside from being confident that he could trace Solok's work, Ves also leaned on Calabast to facilitate the hunt!

The spymaster of the Larkinson Clan accompanied the task force in person. Instead of traveling on the Swordmaiden carrier, Calabast opted to take up residence in the Scarlet Rose.

That made it easier for Ves to visit her office in order to discuss their next moves.

When Ves entered her office compartment with Lucky, Calabast already awaited his arrival.

She draped black-clad body over the length of a couch that she specifically brought aboard the mobile supply frigate.

"Hello, Ves. Would you like to join me?" She asked in a teasing tone.

"No thanks." Ves scowled and opted to sit on the chair in front of her desk instead. "In case you don't know, I'm engaged."

"Hahaha, Gloriana won't mind what she doesn't know."

"Can you please stop joking around? I am in no mood to play this game."

Calabast shrugged and straightened her sinuously-curved body. The tightness of her uniform only accentuated her womanly charm.

"Fine. I suppose you are here to hear about Mr. Reyva's whereabouts?"

He nodded. "Have you narrowed down the area where we are likely to encounter the right Krella Alliance fleet?"

"Not exactly, but I have my suspicions." Calabast waved her hand, causing a projection of a map of the Nyxian Gap to come into view.

The map had already been segregated into different regions and zones. She first highlighted a sizable zone in the inner periphery.

"After my Black Cats have collected a lot of intelligence and performed an extensive analysis, we have good reason to believe that the main fleet of the Krella Alliance is likely situated in a zone commonly referred to as the Maynard Fields."

Another projection popped up that displayed various archival footage of the zone in question.

"Maynard Fields is one of the inner periphery zones with some of the highest concentration of asteroids. Navigating through this area will test every helmsman and navigator. One wrong move can easily cause a ship to collide against an asteroid."

The concentration of asteroids was at least twice or thrice that of a regular zone in the periphery!

This was bad news, because any fleet traversing through this field would have to slow down in order to minimize any chance of bumping into them. The higher concentration of asteroids also made it easier to set up ambushes.

"Why would anyone even hang out in this dense field of asteroids?" Ves frowned.

"Maynard Fields is not rich in medium-grade or high-grade exotics. What is actually notable is that a fair number of asteroids contain notable deposits of Kavenit. While it takes some effort to find a Kavenit asteroid, once someone does, it's very easy to extract large quantities of this low-grade exotic."

Ah. Kavenit. That was a familiar material to Ves. It was a fairly prevalent exotic in the Yeina Star Cluster. Its wide applicability as an armor strengthener turned it into one of the most common ingredients used to toughen up cheap mechs.

Back in the frontier, Ves learned that the pirates there minted the Kavenit into coins, bars or slates in order to form a commonly-accepted hard currency.

Apparently, the Nyxian pirates adopted the same tradition.

"The pirate groups that are able to establish a presence in Maynard Fields are all able to mine a substantial amount of currency. The groups subsequently spend all of the wealth they mined to trade for other goods and services. It's quite a lucrative trade and the pirates that have managed to establish a foundation in Maynard are not weak."

"I see." Ves idly stroked Lucky's back. "So what is the main fleet of the Krella Alliance doing here?"

Calabast shrugged again. "I'm not certain yet. Perhaps the Krella Alliance requires a large amount of funds in order to fund an expansion. Maybe the group is searching for more recruits. There are a decent number of pirate bases and strongholds in Maynard that serve as hubs for pirate outfits. All kinds of misfits and criminals seek their fortune at these dens of iniquity."

The pirate organizations that were able to mine Kavenit on a large scale were not short on money. Hence, their publicly-accessible bases were home to a lot of markets and trading platforms.

With so much traffic and activity, ambushes must be very common here. The dense asteroid concentration provided considerable advantages to ambushers. Those that wish to travel through Maynard Fields unscathed had to remain alert throughout the entire journey!

Such conditions did not sound ideal to Ves. Despite the considerable strength of Task Force Predator, the difficult space terrain hindered its ability to bring all of its strength to bear.

The numerous asteroids not only got in the way of dispatching reinforcements, but also provided a lot of hard cover against ranged fire!

This effectively meant that most battles in Maynard consisted of short to medium-range brawls. Rifleman mechs and other ranged mechs were only able to fire at a limited distance.

"What about anomalies and hazard zones?" Ves asked.

"At least that isn't so bad. Kavenit is a relatively stable and unenergetic exotic. They hardly throw up any strange phenomena. The concentration of medium to high-grade exotics is too low in Maynard Fields to generate many space hazards. While that doesn't mean that an anomaly might emerge in certain localized areas, as a whole the zone has never presented a significant risk to its travelers. This is one of the other reasons why many pirate outfits prefer to linger in Maynard."

"Alright. That sounds good. I would rather fight against pirates than bump into inexplicable phenomena in space. How will we reach this zone?"

Calabast swiped her finger, causing a dotted route to traverse across the map. It began from the outer periphery and cut straight into Maynard.

"The direct route is best I believe. If time is an issue, then I advise the fleet to pass through an outer periphery zone called Wreckage Paradise."

"What a.. descriptive name. I take it that there's a lot of space junk floating in this region?"

Calabast nodded. "Wreckage Paradise has a relatively low concentration of asteroids. Most of them are filled with nothing but rock or mundane materials. What makes them notable is that a small amount of them actually hide modest deposits of medium-grade exotics. These are materials that can be sold for a high price in civilized space. This attracts a lot of Peacekeeper outfits. They usually cross into Wreckage Paradise with a mining ship or two to prospect and mine the valuable materials."

"And I suppose that attracts a lot of pirates, right?"

"Yup. The pirate gangs that prowl Wreckage Paradise tend to be rather weak. They aren't strong enough to enter the inner periphery, so they have to make do in the outermost zones of Nyxian Gap where they often clash with Peacekeepers."

That must be why the zone became known as Wreckage Paradise. Too much wreckage from mechs and ships floated in the area. Most of them were rather cheap to begin with, so salvagers hardly earned enough profit to compensate for the considerable risks of operating in a pirate-infested zone.

As Ves read up on Wreckage Paradise, he found himself agreeing with Calabast's choice. The bottom feeder pirates posed no threat to his forces, and the concentration of asteroids was so low that it would not slow down his fleet too much.

"Very well. I'll pass your recommendations to the fleet. If nothing else comes up, we'll adopt this route."

It would take around several weeks to a month to travel through Wreckage Paradise. After that, Ves planned to spend a couple of months in Maynard Fields.

Even if he failed to track down Solok Reyva, he could still pursue some other missions!

Chapter 2159 Intensive Drills

Normally, the Scarlet Rose wasn't very boisterous. The mobile supply frigate that Ves had managed to hijack from the Coalition Reserve Corps wasn't very big. She was only able to carry four mechs at most and her mech workshop's output was fairly modest.

Nonetheless, she was the best ship in his possession. Ves did not feel entirely safe to travel aboard the third-class ships of his clan. He didn't possess any stomach to travel aboard one of the ten formidable combat carriers in the hands of the Penitent Sisters either.

Only the Scarlet Rose provided him with a space that he could completely call his own. After an extensive overhaul and refit, much of her interior had been changed to suit his needs.

Now, after a long time, the Scarlet Rose hosted more people than just Ves and the Battle Criers that made up her crew.

A group of 26 assistant mech designers had gathered in the design lab. The presence of so many people made the compartment a lot livelier, though also a bit cramped.

Ketis stood proudly at the front of the group. The other mech designers fearfully kept their distance from her and her incredibly sharp greatsword.

The new Larkinsons had witnessed her chopping off too many body parts to count! Even though she hadn't actually killed anyone, the nonchalance she showed during the selection process proved that she was an experienced butcher!

The sight amused Ves a lot. It also disappointed him a bit. Much of his cohort of mech designers should have been uncommonly brave or firm. Despite that, the mere sight of a single female mech designer with a sword caused all of them to relive their past trauma!

"Alright." Ves eventually clapped. "Good morning everyone. I hope that all of you are satisfied with your new accommodations. While you all deserve to sleep in separate cabins, we don't have enough room aboard this ship. I hope you can endure these necessities."

All of his assistant mech designers were notable and accomplished talents. None of them signed up for an adventure like this, but sadly Ves was not an average employer!

As newly-adopted Larkinsons, they had no choice but to put up with the circumstances.

"Ketis, how have these fellows shaped up during the welcome tour?"

"They're doing a fine job, Ves." She casually replied. "I think all of them will make for fine Larkinsons."

"What about their battle readiness?"

Her smile disappeared. "Frankly, horrible. During the welcome tour, we hardly enjoyed any opportunities to drill. In the event of an alarm, the fools are liable to run into each other rather than reach their assigned posts!"

"I see. Let's address this first. Ketis, I want you to coordinate with the captain of the ship to hold intensive, randomized drills in the next couple of weeks. No matter if it happens in the early morning or in the evening, I want everyone on this ship to become familiar with what needs to be done in the event of a disaster!"

"Got it, Ves!"

This was a necessity aboard any ship. Back when he worked for the Flagrant Vandals, he took part in sporadic drills that initiated at random times. The reason why the Vandals hadn't conducted their drills more frequently was because most of their crews already knew what to do in the event of every conceivable emergency. They only needed to drill enough times to remain sharp.

That wasn't the case right now. The Battle Criers who crewed the ship might know how to react to various emergencies, but the new assistant mech designers probably didn't know the way to the nearest escape pods!

Shortly after that, the assistant mech designers went through hell. None of them had any opportunity to showcase their design prowess to Ves. They simply spent too much time on memorizing the various steps they needed to take in the event of an enemy attack or an explosion in the engineering bay.

If they weren't resting or studying, then they were often preoccupied with drills!

Ves did not allow his new assistants to do nothing except trying their best to stand out of the way. He wanted them to be proactive in assisting the crew in repairing critical damage or assisting in mitigating various disasters.

From putting out fires to replacing broken power cables, not every repair job required the services of a ship engineer.

All of the activity reminded Ves of the past. He too frequently lent a hand in the case of various emergencies. Though most of his new assistants didn't see the necessity in holding so many drills, Ves was sure that they would thank him later.

Increasing their stress levels, interrupting their sleep and forcing them to work on complicated equipment for hours at a time was the fastest way to raise them up to standard!

With less than a week of travel before the task force reached the outer periphery of the Nyxian Gap, disaster might strike at any moment.

Of course, as the man responsible for sparking all of these drills, Ves skipped out on them. He relaxed in his stateroom or quietly fiddled with his sketches at the design lab while his poor assistants were being worked to the bone.

In truth, Ves didn't just torture them in order to raise their battle readiness. He also wanted to increase their stress tolerance. Having lived through several battles, Ves knew that the intense pressure and uncertainty could break anyone who hadn't gone through combat training.

Though the drills weren't adequate substitutes to actual combat training, they at least sufficed.

During these stressful days, the assistants often vented their frustrations to each other.

"I already regret becoming a Larkinson!"

"I haven't slept more than three hours at a time!"

"Devil Tongue, indeed! I thought his moniker only reflected his speech, but it turns out he's a devil in other ways as well!"

Ves only derived further amusement when hearing these complaints. He wasn't worried that any of them would snap. The Battle Criers actually monitored every assistant very closely and built up an extensive profile of their ability to endure difficulties.

Perhaps the only other person who was allowed to skip some of the drills was Ketis. As someone who spent more than half of her life on a pirate ship, she was already an old hand at drills. She only needed to familiarize herself with the unique layout and ship components of the Scarlet Rose before she was ready to address most emergencies.

When Ves called her to the design lab, she sat down in front of her mentor.

"Meow!"

Lucky floated up to her lap, causing her to soften up. "Hehe! I miss you too, Lucky."

Ves smiled at the sight. "The two of us haven't talked alone for a while. How are you doing, Ketis?"

She shrugged. "I'm fine. I'm getting used to becoming a Larkinson. It still feels strange to me that my life has changed so much. I'm glad you're taking care of the Swordmaidens. They all love their new swords."

"Do you have any complaints or issues you want to address?"

"Yeah." She stopped playing with Lucky, causing him to look puzzled. "I don't know why you think I'm leadership material. Why are you putting me in charge of so many brats? They're so soft that the frontier would have eaten them all up in an instant! I really tire of babysitting them all the time. You once promised me you would give me enough time for me to design my own mechs and work towards my possible breakthrough to Journeyman. Well, in the last weeks, I haven't spent more than an hour a day on my designs!"

"Ah, that's my fault." Ves looked apologetic. "I needed someone to take charge of the new hires. You know how mech designers like us are. It's best for mech designers to lead other mech designers. I'm too busy to corral them all the time. You're the only one available that I can trust."

"I'm not your errand girl, Ves." She scowled and crossed her arms. "By now, the new hires don't need as much guidance anymore. I suggest you promote some of their ranks to team leaders and let them manage the rest in my stead. They're not delinquents, after all."

Ves looked interested. "You have a point. If they're responsible enough to manage themselves, then I am willing to give it a try. You know them better than I. Select 5 team leaders among the batch to lead our new design teams."

"How do you want to distribute the assistants among the teams?"

There were several ways to structure a design team. Ves was used to working with teams ranging from 4 to 6 people. This was a rather small but flexible size.

Ves thought for a moment. "Just spread out their specialties so that every team is as well-rounded as possible. I don't want to concentrate on specialties in different design teams."

"Are you sure? I heard you wanted to design a lot of mechs at once. From what I know, forming specialized teams and assigning them to projects on a necessity basis is a good way to achieve the best results."

Such homogenized design teams did indeed produce a lot of higher quality results. However, Ves did not believe it was compatible with his mech design.

"I design mechs by feeling." He replied. "I don't want every design team to contribute to specific sections of a mech design in isolation. Only by working on a project from beginning to end will every participant be able to instill their thought and emotion into the mech design."

If Ves followed the model suggested by Ketis and concentrated the same category of specialties in specific design teams, then his subordinates would just see the mech designs as discrete parts.

How can a collection of discrete body parts be alive?

Ketis eventually understood. "I see. I will take care of it, I guess."

"Good. After that, you can delegate most of the responsibilities that you're currently performing to the new team leaders."

"What if they screw up?"

"Then just demote them and put someone else in charge. Don't forget that leading a design team earns an assistant an additional 10 merits a year. This practically doubles their base merit earnings. There is no way those ambitious brats will forgo this opportunity."

The best way to motivate people was to dangle carrots in front of their faces. Ves was not afraid that his team leaders would mess up. Gaining this advantage early essentially set them up for success.

"Tell me about the people you have in mind. Are there any notable mech designers in the batch that I should pay more attention to than normal?"

Ketis paused for a moment. "There are plenty of interesting figures. I suppose the weirdest one is Rina Orion-Larkinson. She used to be a refugee from the Coman Federation. She's stuffed with augmentations, though most of them are fairly low-quality implants. She wants to replace as many of her current implants with second-class versions."

Ah. The Coman Federation used to border the Bright Republic before the sandmen fleets rolled in. Now, practically all of their settled planets were covered by sand!

The Comans were practically cyborgs and possessed some weird beliefs when it came to self-augmentation.

"What makes her interesting?"

"She's very ambitious. She's also very bossy. She frequently clashes with Catherine Evenson-Larkinson. Both of them are jockeying to become the leaders of their batch

after me, though the other assistants don't particularly like either of them. Everyone sees each other as competitors."

"I see."

While Ves wanted to foster a bit of rivalry among his design teams, too much of it would only tear them apart.

"Let's group them into their design teams as soon as possible." He decided. "We can work on increasing their camaraderie within the teams as well. We'll tone down the drills once we enter Wreckage Paradise."

As much as he wanted to bang them into shape even further, Ves needed to put them to work! He already started a design project and would soon be forming even more. He urgently needed his assistants to earn their keep!

Chapter 2160 Sword Will

Lucky hopped onto a table and sat on his haunches. He looked curiously at Ves and Ketis obsessing over the projection of a mech design.

"...This is a very sober mech design. Even though it's devoid of any gimmicks or extra features, its foundation is quite solid!"

The mech that Ketis had designed in her spare time truly earned his appreciation. Though it was just an Apprentice-level premium landbound swordsman mech design, it not only showcased a Journeyman-level understanding of Mechanics, Physics and Metallurgy, the machine was also focused on making the most out of its incredibly sharp greatsword!

The care, love and attention that his first student had poured over this nameless mech design truly touched him. Similar to Ves, Ketis treated her mechs as precious, living containers of her values and principles.

Though she didn't adopt his perspective that mechs were alive, Ves had definitely influenced her own beliefs to a significant extent, sometimes unintentionally!

This was something that Ves hadn't entirely anticipated. Imitation was one of the best ways to improve, and Ketis enjoyed plenty of opportunities to study and observe his work.

She subsequently imitated many of his methods and maintained a lot of focus while she developed this swordsman mech. This had indirectly caused her nascent design philosophy to affect the mech at a significantly greater degree than other Apprentices were capable of. The sharpness of the blade of her mech design already surpassed the limits of its materials and production method!

Ketis smiled with pride. "To be honest, I followed your lessons and learned from your own mechs. You always emphasize the basics. I did my best to focus purely on the core functions of my mech, making sure that its most important specs are all good before focusing on imbuing my sword will into my design."

"Sword will?" Ves puzzled.

"My superpower!" She clarified. "Sword will is... kind of the goal that many of our Swordmaidens are pursuing. When Commander Lydia still led us, she told us stories on how to transcend mundane swordsmanship. Those who wield the sword as a tool are warriors. Those who have become the sword are true swordswomen!"

Ves raised his eyebrow. He may have seen this phrase a few times when he looked up swordsman mechs, but he never paid that much attention to it. However, now that Ketis mentioned it, perhaps there was actual substance behind this concept.

However, when Ves contextualized what Ketis mentioned with his own theories on design philosophies and force of will, it suddenly clicked.

"You mean there is an obsession with swords. An obsession that has grown so strong that it is capable of affecting reality!"

"Yup!" She grinned. "I always thought that Commander Lydia's lessons on sword will only applied to mech pilots. When you showed that mech designers like us can gain superpowers as well, I knew that I could develop a sword will as well! I put my full effort into developing it! It's thanks to you that I can slice a metal bar with a butter knife!"

Though her story sounded silly, Ves truly admired her persistence. Even if she harbored mistaken assumptions, she only needed to believe that it was possible for her to pour her entire heart and soul in developing her own 'sword will'!

Right now, Ketis basically equated her design philosophy to the concept of sword will that Commander Lydia used to inspire her Swordmaidens. This insured that Ketis would always remain highly motivated and highly passionate about her work!

Seeing that Ves did not have to worry about Ketis slacking off, he smiled and waved his hand.

"Your swordsman mech design is very good for a mech designer at your level. I would have absolutely liked to publish it a few years ago. As it is..."

"It's okay. I know it's not up to your standard. I don't want to impose on you and the LMC. I'll catch up with you someday and design a mech that is worthy enough to sell under your brand!"

Ketis did not mind that she wouldn't be able to sell her mech to the market. As a daughter of the frontier, she did not possess the same reverence towards the mech market than someone who was born in civilized space.

Whereas mech designers like Ves treated the mech market as the ultimate arbitrator of success, to Ketis it was merely a means to earn money. She cared a lot more about designing mechs for the Swordmaidens than achieving commercial success!

"About this sword will, I suppose Commander Dise has formed one as well?"

"Yes! Her sword will is different from mine. We regularly compare ourselves against each other through spars." She replied and sighed. "She's easily able to defeat me in every practice session, whether we compete on strength or technique. I really admire her sword will. Hers is.. changing every day. I think she is close to finding her own way."

"That sounds good. I hope we can welcome a new expert pilot within the Larkinson Clan when she succeeds."

Ves had very high hopes for this expedition. He had brought along every expert candidate in his clan. The Nyxian Gap would provide them with plenty of opportunities to challenge themselves and overcome their limits.

While it was possible for expert candidates to achieve their breakthroughs outside of the battlefield, in practice it was rare for them to do so. True life-and-death combat still remained the most effective method to achieve a breakthrough.

This was why states that engaged in war more frequently often boasted a greater quantity of expert pilots. The quality of their expert pilots were also better because each of them had advanced to their current height through a mountain of mech wrecks!

This was something that the Larkinson Family already understood. It was one of the reason why most Larkinson mech pilots were eager to do their duty and defend the Bright Republic against Vesian aggression.

Perhaps without a belligerent neighbor like the Vesia Kingdom, the Larkinsons would have never developed into a renowned military family!

Ves had long been frustrated by the lack of progress of his available expert candidates. Even though Jannzi Larkinson, Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson and Commander Dise had grown very strong, none of them managed to overcome their bottlenecks.

Rather than waiting for all of them to mill down the obstacles in their way, Ves would rather subject them to pressure so they could punch through their barriers with a single, direct leap!

The only issue that Ves was concerned about was whether he could manage the risks. He needed to surround them with sufficient danger to stimulate their potential, but also had to make sure his enemies didn't actually end the lives of his precious expert candidates.

The loss of even one of them would inflict a huge blow to the confidence of his Larkinson Clan!

The session between Ves and Ketis continued.

As Lucky crawled onto the female mech designer's lap, Ketis showcased some of her other mech designs.

Her most recent work was a light mech that fought akin to a fencer mech. It possessed high mobility and a rapier whose point was so sharp that it could even pierce through the chest plating of a mech as long as her mech applied sufficient force.

The only problem was that it was very challenging to do so. The base strength of the light swordsman mech was so weak that it had to build up a lot of momentum to punch through solid armor.

"This is a mech that requires excellent battle instincts and a high degree of skill in agile swordsmanship." Ketis explained. "Even among my surviving sisters, only a few of them are able to exert the full potential of this mech."

They moved on to a heftier mech design. The machine not only boasted a considerable amount of armor, but also wielded a sword in each hand!

"A duel-wielding swordsman mech?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "So far, you have shown a heavy preference to single swords in your mech designs. Why two all of a sudden?"

"This is my attempt at designing a defensive mech." She revealed and pointed at the thick armor plating covering most of its vitals. "While I can technically design a knight mech, I wanted to develop an alternative that can fulfill a similar role. Due to all of the mass slowing down its movement, I wasn't confident its defense was good enough. Adding a second sword not only allows this mech to defend against attacks from multiple angles, but also make it trickier for a single opponent to overcome its guard."

"That only applies to melee mechs."

"That's why I made the blades strong and thick. If they are able to cover themselves with the flat of the blades, it should be sufficient to defend against some ranged attacks."

Ves shook his head. "It's not good enough. You would be better off pairing the mech with a single broad blade instead, or better yet, an actual shield. Swords are held by

their ends. This means that physical projectiles will exert a lot of force close to the center of the blade. There is a considerable risk that the grip on the sword won't be able to hold."

From the glum look of Ketis, she knew it as well. The duel-wielding swordsman mech only offered the same degree of defense as a Doom Guard. While its mobility and offense was higher than a knight mech, it was a fairly awful mech to field against ranged attackers.

"It's a failed experiment."

"Not necessarily." Ves gently placed his hand on her shoulder. "The mech still has a niche, just like striker mechs. It's not a knight mech and doesn't have to fulfill the same role as one. As long as it is fielded alongside other mech types that can cover up its shortcomings, this mech can serve as the cornerstone of a defensive bulwark or the battering ram of any offensive assault."

Even if her vision or mech concept possessed a lot of holes, Ves still praised her work for their various strengths. He himself was a mech designer who liked to pursue extremes, so all of her work was very much to his liking.

Certainly, he could have dissected and magnified the flaws of each of her original mech designs, but there was hardly any benefit to such a course of action. Ketis already appeared aware of the main flaws of her mech designs, so there was no need for Ves to open her wounds.

It was hard for her to hide her shame, though. While her mech designs were good enough to match his Blackbeak and Crystal Lord designs, they were far from reaching the level of the Desolate Soldier and his later works!

Ves raised his hand and plopped it onto her poofy beret.

"Don't compare yourself to me." He gently advised her. "You're much younger than me. Your circumstances are different and you pursue a different path from mine. Compared to many of your peers, you have already reached further ahead. With every mech you've designed, I have noticed that you have become much more proficient in incorporating your specialty. You're progressing by leaps and bounds, and most of it has to do with the purity of your design philosophy. As long as you maintain this trajectory, you will definitely reach the level where you are qualified to outfit the Swordmaidens."

Her depression evaporated as she looked at him with hope. "Really?"

"I have always been grateful to the Swordmaidens. I always had the intention to design a mech for them, but I did not want to do so without your help. As an Apprentice, your design philosophy won't have much of an effect. I'm waiting for you to advance to

Journeyman. Once you do, you can either choose to design a mech for the Swordmaidens by yourself, or collaborate with me and Gloriana to design the most impressive swordsman mechs for your sisters!"

The flame burning within her heart suddenly grew hotter! Reaching Journeyman became an even greater priority for her now that Ves made such a generous promise.

"I'll take you up on your offer, Ves! My sisters deserve the best!"