

Mech 2191

Chapter 2191 Path to Greatness

[Design Evaluation: Blessed Squire BS-A-01]

Model name: Blessed Squire BS-A-01

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson, Gloriana Wodin

Weight Classification: Medium

Recommended Role: Knight Mech/Support Mech

Armor: B+

Carrying Capacity: D

Aesthetics: B

Endurance: A

Energy Efficiency: B

Flexibility: D+

Firepower: D-

Integrity: B

Mobility: C-

Spotting: D

X-Factor: A-

Cost efficiency: C

Project involvement: 90%

Original component composition: 7%

Overall evaluation: The Blessed Squire is a landbound knight mech designed to support assault forces. It features enough defense to withstand a fair amount of attacks and it possesses sufficient mobility to take part in offensive operations. The Blessed Squire excels more in its support function, as its ability to store, transfer and siphon electrical

energy adds a considerable degree of utility to the mech. Its glow is also remarkable for its six different expressions that provides various different methods of support.

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an adequate original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

He had almost forgotten about checking the System's notifications. He completed the design of the Blessed Squire some time ago, though the Hexers hadn't deployed it into battle up to this point.

The scores given to the Blessed Squire looked a bit worse than he thought, but that was due to its very specialized roles. A mech didn't necessarily have to be great at everything. It just had to fulfill its designated purpose as efficiently as possible.

"Hopefully, it will showcase its true value on the battlefield." He muttered.

[You have personally assembled a masterwork mech based on your own Blessed Squire design!]

[You have acquired Masterwork Mech Assembly III! Create more masterwork mechs to upgrade this Sub-Skill!]

[As you are not a major contributor to the formation of the masterwork mech, you are not entitled to receive additional rewards.]

He already expected this outcome. He knew that his mech affinity had increased after the creation of the Little Angel. Gloriana deserved the bulk of the credit, but since she wasn't hooked up to the Mech Designer System, she wasn't eligible to receive an extremely precious radiant lottery ticket.

That was a missed opportunity in hindsight. If Ves added her to the System as a guest user, she might have been able to receive a considerable reward!

"It's pointless to think about that right now. I don't have the Design Points to think about bringing her into the fold."

It would take a long time before he could accumulate 1,000,000 DP. Perhaps the recent changes might accelerate his progress, but Ves did not believe it was so simple.

His project involvement in the minor projects would definitely be substantially less than in any of the major projects.

While Ves had no way to determine how the System actually defined and measured project involvement, there wouldn't be any loopholes. He would probably only receive a fraction of the DP rewards for completing a minor mech design.

The System was very fair in that regard, though from another perspective the System always took advantage of any opportunity to act stingy.

Now that he earned 100,000 DP, he finally built up a modest buffer again.

He partially regretted his earlier decision to spend his DP in a profligate manner. The lack of critical resources that he could spend to bail himself out of a crisis had weighed heavier and heavier on him since he ventured into the Nyxian Gap.

He underestimated the threats residing in the periphery of the region!

Now that he spent weeks in this perilous region, Ves felt as if he gradually shifted into the mindset that he used to hold when he entered the frontier during the last Bright-Vesia War.

His paranoia acted up to a greater degree as he didn't feel very safe anymore no matter how quiet his surroundings seemed.

The thought of encountering strong, weird and outright alien adversaries both terrified him as well as excited him. He paradoxically felt more alive as the pressure mounted on him. The gradually-increasing spiritual interference field didn't help matters either!

It was times like these where he missed companionship. With Gloriana and Benny both remaining behind in civilized space, Ves did not have someone on his ship who he could share his more personal concerns.

What was worse was that Ves couldn't even vent his feelings to his cat. Calabast enthusiastically put Lucky through a crash course in infiltration, sabotage and assassination.

Any day now, Lucky would be going about his day wearing a pointed hood and jumping off of incredibly tall heights just to coincidentally land on a haystack even though he didn't need the cushioning because he could already fly.

He supposed he could expand his circle of conversation partners. It wasn't as if he was alone in the fleet. People like Nitaa, Major Verle, Ketis, Commander Melkor, the expert candidates and so on were all potential friends.

"Hmm. I think this might be a good idea to check up on Joshua. I haven't really talked to him after he advanced to expert candidate."

Out of every expert candidate in the Larkinson Clan, Joshua stood out from the others due to his chosen conviction.

He was the only one whose developing force of will centered around life!

Ves found it quite remarkable that the vibe that Joshua exuded closely matched his own attributes.

Both of them seem to obsess over life and mechs. The similarities were quite uncanny! It was as if Joshua was his first direct disciple as the products made by Ves had clearly played a huge role in the young mech pilot's development.

As a mech designer, Ves saw himself as a creator and facilitator of life.

What did that make Joshua? He might truly be the first mech pilot who truly embodied the meaning of Avatar of Myth.

Even though he still had a lot of work on his plate, Ves impulsively decided to pay a visit to Joshua. He boarded a shuttle that departed from the Scarlet Rose and soon reached the Redfeather.

He met with Commander Melkor first. When someone as important as the clan patriarch paid a visit, it was only proper to pay respects.

"Sir. Welcome to the Redfeather. Your visit isn't scheduled, so I apologize for not preparing a tour for you. What do you require?"

"Tell me about the state of the Avatars first."

Ves told him while he idly toured the mech hangar. An abundance of glows washed over him as Aurora Titans, Bright Warriors and a couple of other LMC mechs vied for his emotions.

It was a rather intense experience to someone as spiritually sensitive as Ves. Fortunately, it appeared that the rest of the Avatars and ship crew were accustomed to working in the presence of so many overlapping glows.

The pressure and influence of glows did not grow stronger in a linear fashion. Eventually, the overlap of so many glows began to flatten out into a plateau.

Melkor began to walk alongside him while reporting the overall state of the Avatars.

"The Avatars in the task force have all been growing at a rapid pace. The intensive training conducted in the previous months are all coming into fruition. When the stakes are real, the Avatars are far more serious about improving their skills and refining their methods. They are making months worth of progress in a matter of weeks."

"That sounds good." Ves nodded with a smile. "How goes the development of the elite squads?"

"Quite well, but that is because of their unique nature. First, the elite squads are all small. It would have been considerably more challenging if we decided to implement elite companies instead. Second, the leaders are all expert candidates. Joshua, Jannzi and Tusa are all universally respected by practically every other mech pilot in the clan. Even if they don't possess any notable command skills, their authority is rock solid."

Strength and skill determined the pecking order among mech pilots. A considerable gap existed between a normal mech pilot and an expert candidate.

"Tell me about Joshua and the Bright Companions specifically."

"While the Bright Companions are in a combat-ready state, they are still developing. Its current focus on adopting an assault orientation is mostly due to necessity. The Larkinson Clan lacks a unit that excels at breaking through obstacles or is geared towards challenging very strong opponents. Jannzi already covers some of our defensive needs while Tusa already excels at mobility. This leaves offense."

Ves briefly turned towards his visored cousin. "It sounds like there is an issue. What is Joshua's opinion?"

"According to him, he doesn't want to pigeon-hole himself into a narrow role. He is a fan of every LMC mech and not just the ones that are defined by their attack power."

That sounded like Joshua, Ves thought.

"I can see how that can be an issue. What is your response to this request?"

"While I normally don't want to reject a request from a potential expert pilot, the Avatars and the rest of the Larkinson Clan truly need his strength in this capacity. Their charge against the Rust Grinders was a good example. Joshua and his Bright Companions quickly managed to take out the ship-mounted cannoneer mechs with a single devastating attack run. They single-handedly broke the Rust Grinders, turning the remainder into easy pickings."

"Hmm. That was indeed a memorable sight."

"Joshua may not like it, but he understands our decisions and knows what is needed. He just hopes that he can move to a broader orientation once we have cultivated replacements. It's very likely that most of the current members of the Bright Companions will form the nucleus of our shock troops."

Commander Melkor already formed an extensive plan in this regard, so Ves saw no reason to intervene.

"Let's put the Bright Companions aside and focus on Joshua himself. How is he doing as a person."

A wry smile appeared on Melkor's face. "He has attained a height that few people have achieved. To become an expert candidate, and to break through while showing a notable degree of forced resonance, means that he is very likely to advance to expert pilot in the coming decade. Not a day goes by when he is not ecstatic. Ever since he achieved his higher state, he has enthusiastically poured himself into training. Even at this moment, we can probably find him in a simulator pod where he tries to fight back against overwhelming odds."

Though Melkor tried to convey himself as a professional commander, he wasn't able to hide the envy in his voice.

Melkor was jealous of Joshua. He was jealous of every expert candidate in the clan. Why shouldn't he? Almost every mech pilot in the galaxy dreamt of undergoing apotheosis in order to attain true glory!

Much like other unattainable dreams such as being able to join the MTA or being born in a prosperous first-rate state, too many mech pilots would never be able to fulfill these dreams.

The overwhelming majority had to live with the disappointment that they would never be able to surpass their mortality when it came to mech piloting.

When Ves studied Melkor with his spiritual senses, he found no changes in his cousin's mind.

He possessed no spiritual potential to speak of. And it didn't seem like one would ever form, at least naturally.

Though Ves truly felt tempted to try and find a way to bestow spiritual potential to Melkor and assist him into becoming an expert pilot, this was not a good idea.

First, he had to develop a safe and effective method, which was anything but easy!

Second, Ves and the Larkinson Clan would definitely attract too much suspicion if expert candidates and expert pilots emerged at a greater rate!

Last time, Ves barely managed to deflect Master Willix's suspicions in this area. Since an MTA Master Mech Designer felt the need to speak up about this topic, Ves knew that he didn't have much leeway anymore!

Therefore, for good or ill, Melkor would have to contend with living as a mortal for the rest of his life.

At least Melkor seemed okay with it. As the appointed leader of the Larkinson Clan's most illustrious mech force, he already had something to dedicate his life towards.

There were multiple paths to greatness.

Chapter 2192 Confused

Once Ves gained an up-to-date understanding of the Avatars of Myth, he dismissed his cousin.

While Commander Melkor returned to his duties, Ves headed to one of the training compartments where Joshua was immersed in a simulation.

Even though plenty of mech pilots rotated into space in order to guard the fleet and conduct patrols, nothing happened most of the time.

If mech pilots wanted to keep their skills sharp, they still needed to participate in an extensive amount of simulation training!

When Ves arrived at Joshua's pod, he did not immediately interrupt Joshua's current session. Instead, he observed the closed pod with his spiritual senses and immediately noticed the nascent force of will fluctuating inside.

Compared to the force of will of actual expert pilots, the one formed by Joshua was still too weak and immature.

While Joshua's force of will was already capable of increasing his presence and increasing some of his human limits, that was all he could manage.

He wasn't capable of projecting his force of will outwards like a domain. He also wasn't capable of spreading his force of will in his mechs in order to achieve true resonance.

The difference was like night and day!

Even so, Ves already became fascinated by the blueprint of Joshua's force of will in the future. The vibrancy of life and the instinctual understanding that came with it echoed his own to a remarkable degree.

Though Ves may have felt disturbed instead, he experienced no such discomfort.

As Ves vaguely reached out with his Spirituality, he even managed to form a very loose connection!

He widened his eyes. Joshua's mental defenses did not block him out at all! Ves encountered no sign of rejection as his presence grew in the young mech pilot's mind!

Ves already sensed that Joshua was aware of his arrival. This was the unique understanding that came with acquiring a life domain like theirs. Perhaps Joshua even inherited the ability to talk to cats and other animals!

As Ves studied the prototype force of will further, he attempted to gain an insight into the differences. He was already aware of the traits of his own life-attributed spiritual energy. He wanted to see what Joshua could do when he empowered his will.

Ves already recalled and rewatched the battle between the Purgatory Envoy and the Fortunate Devil numerous times. He especially poured over all of the telemetry and data related to Joshua's sudden promotion.

His forced resonance ability seemed very interesting! Ves could have never thought that Joshua was able to repair the broken components of a mech by sheer willpower alone.

As far as he knew, Ves could not achieve this effect. He wasn't too hung up over it. He could already communicate with all forms of life and perform various spiritual tricks to augment his mech designs. He was not dissatisfied with his current capabilities at all, though a part of him thought that being able to physically repair a mech by relying solely on spiritual energy was a very handy ability!

The simulator pod eventually slid open. Joshua had finally finished his session. He emerged from his pod wearing a tight piloting suit.

The expert candidate saluted. "Clan patriarch, it is an honor to be graced with your presence."

"You don't need to act so stiff in my presence. As like-minded people, we will be cooperating extensively in the future."

"Yes.. sir."

Despite their inherent kinship, Joshua looked up to Ves way too much to consider himself on the same level!

"Let's head somewhere more comfortable."

Joshua quickly freshened himself up and changed into his Avatar uniform before joining Ves at one of the Redfeather's private lounges.

When both of them sat down, Ves studied the younger mech pilot for a time.

"I'm very glad you have made it this far." Ves began. "I have kept my eye on you since Melkor took you in. Your high understanding and compatibility with my mechs is unsurpassed among my clansmen. Now that you have become an expert candidate,

you have set your course. You know who you are, what you are fighting for and what you want to become. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, sir, though I haven't thought everything through. Initially, I just wanted to enter your circle and pilot all of your mechs. Now that I have achieved this ambition, I'm not really sure what I am trying to achieve other than to protect you and the clan."

"All of that comes with time." Ves spoke from his own understanding of expert pilots and how they emerged in the original Larkinson Family. "While I'm not an expert pilot myself, I know that you need to develop an absolute conviction. The less doubts and uncertainties you have, the better. Expert pilots are always confident in who they are and what they do. Don't equate yourself to mortals who possess a complex mix of feelings and worries. Becoming a demigod is not just about acquiring extraordinary qualities. It is also about shedding some of your humanity."

This was an insight that he normally never shared with anyone. He gained it when he studied his interactions with many expert pilots such as Venerable Foster, Venerable Xie, Venerable Brutus and his uncle Ark.

What each of them had in common was not only their strong obsession and conviction towards an ideal, but also how they became increasingly more alienated from normal people.

Perhaps this was the hidden meaning to treading the path to godhood. With each step that mech pilots took, they increasingly dedicated themselves more to their chosen domains and convictions.

Even though Ves had never encountered an ace pilot or a god pilot in the flesh, he already inferred that they were even more single-minded than expert pilots!

Of course, all of this speculation rested on the assumption that there was only one trajectory for mech pilots.

Joshua remained silent and thoughtful for half a minute. The nuggets of insight that Ves provided may not sound profound at first, and it was difficult to know how relevant it was in the early stages.

It was fine if Joshua didn't immediately understand the value of this advice. When he completed his growth as an expert candidate and hit his first bottleneck, the young mech pilot would finally be reminded of what he heard and act accordingly.

That said, Ves might as well jump-start some of the processes.

"Earlier, you said that since you have completed your greatest ambition in your youth, you are lacking a bit of direction. Is that true?"

Joshua ruefully smiled. "There are so many changes taking place that I hardly know what to expect. One day, I'm piloting the Deliverer and constantly trying to deepen my friendship with the life that is inside the mech. Then you present me with the Quint, which is an entirely different beast. Some time ago, we lived on Cloudy Curtain, but then we had to move to Kesseling VIII, only for us to flee like rats to Cinach VI. Now, you have taken most of the fighting forces of the Larkinson Clan on a trip to the Nyxian Gap for some sort of reason. I don't understand much of what is happening."

The confusion in his voice made it clear that Joshua truly felt lost. It was as if he regarded himself as a passenger on a starship that flew towards random directions without any rhyme or reason.

It was different to Ves, but he was not only the highest-ranking member of the Larkinson Clan, but also its main decision maker!

In contrast, despite his power and prestige, Joshua was merely a special Avatar mech pilot. Once he advanced to expert pilot, his standing might shoot up to the point where he gained an actual say in the running of the clan, but he would still be confined to his own corner most of the time.

"I'm glad you shared your current condition with me." Ves said in an amiable tone. "This problem is easy to solve. First, let's consider the Larkinson Clan. What is it to you?"

"The Larkinson Clan.. is my new family. I am very glad to call myself a Larkinson. I like Jannzi as well. Ever since I advanced to expert candidate, I finally feel as if we are getting somewhere."

"Hmm. I'm glad you think of the clan in this way, but have you ever thought about what we are trying to accomplish in the future?"

"Uh.. not really."

Ves chuckled. "Well, I suppose I can fill you in a bit. Let's start with what has happened to us in the past. Back in Cloudy Curtain, why were we driven out by the Bright Republic?"

"Because of.. political stuff."

"Because we were weak. Because we were relying on protection from various domestic factions and the government that in the end proved to be weak as well. Now, what happened at Kesseling VIII?"

"The Friday Coalition attacked us and the three leading dynasties of the Ylvaine Protectorate turned against us as well."

"Do you recognize something familiar?"

"I get it, sir. It was because we were too weak."

"That's right. In the galaxy, power is the most effective guarantee of safety. The Larkinson Clan is our attempt at breaking our dependence on capricious and duplicitous groups that only seek to exploit us. Instead of putting our safety and freedom in the hands of another state, I have decided that our best course of action is to become our own state!"

Though Ves spoke of something grand, someone like Joshua couldn't quite fathom what all of that meant.

Ves sighed in disappointment when Joshua maintained a slightly blank stare.

"Let me put it in a simpler fashion, Joshua. The Larkinson Clan is your family, right? If that is the case, you want what is best for your family. People you know such as me, Jannzi and your fellow friends and colleagues in the clan all want to live their own lives and find their own paths to greatness. In the galaxy, it is not so easy to achieve all of this. The clan needs to accumulate both wealth and the power to protect ourselves."

Gradual realization emerged in Joshua's eyes, encouraging Ves to continue.

He placed his hand on his chest. "Now, as a very successful mech designer, it is my job to worry about gathering wealth. The products we develop and sell are very valuable, so much so that it turns us into a very juicy target to robbers. In fact, those states and groups I mentioned earlier are also greedy for my mech design abilities! The Coalition Reserve Corps almost succeeded in kidnapping me! Since that time, my value has only increased!"

"So that is why we need power as well!" Joshua's eyes lit up. "All sorts of people want to take you away or take control over the Larkinson Clan, and the only way to resist that is to become stronger, is that right?!"

"Exactly!"

A mutual understanding emerged between the mech designer and mech pilot. Since they happened to possess the same spiritual attributes which also seemed to facilitate communication, Ves felt as if he established an invisible bond with Joshua.

They communicated not only through words, but also through indescribable feelings!

Ves placed his palm on Joshua's chest. "As my future champion, it is up to you to grow stronger so that you can protect the Larkinson Clan against our biggest threat. There is a lot at stake. If you don't grow stronger, our clan might not be able to resist all of our adversaries. If we are defeated, then not only will lots of family members lose our lives, but our clan might also meet its end!"

"That's horrible!"

"It gets even worse. Without protection, I won't be able to do my job in the way I like anymore. If I don't get killed, I'll be taken into custody and design mechs that will never appear in public. This means that you won't ever be able to pilot my mechs. The public will never have the opportunity to pilot my latest products either!"

A small mental boom occurred in Joshua's mind. As someone who long obsessed over piloting as many LMC mechs as possible, the thought that he would never be able to pilot any more mechs designed Ves horrified him to his very core!

A strong pulse of willpower radiated from his mind. Joshua had suddenly formed a clearer idea of his purpose for fighting!

His eyes sharpened as he looked at Ves with a determined expression.

"I will never let anyone harm you or take you away while I'm around. I will do my utmost to defend the Larkinson Clan. Nothing can be allowed to stop you from designing your mechs!"

Hahaha! Ves inwardly laughed. It seemed like his Devil Tongue was quite effective! Accelerating Joshua's mental progression doubtlessly brought him a few steps closer to the day of his apotheosis!

Chapter 2193 Public Show

Though Ves occasionally paid attention to Joshua, he never really talked to the kid very often. A single one-on-one exchange therefore accomplished considerably more than he initially thought.

Joshua was like a boat that had gone lost in an endless ocean. Though the boat was clearly capable of traveling somewhere, it lacked a direction.

Now that Ves provided Joshua with a more concrete goal and destination to work towards, the expert candidate gained a strong motivation to grow stronger.

As Joshua's force of will evolved and grew a little more solid, Ves remained observant throughout the process.

This was not the first time he studied an expert candidate. He had a decent idea of what Joshua needed to do to catch up to the other expert candidates in the clan. As for taking his first true step to godhood, that was an opportunity that he needed to obtain by himself.

What Ves found curious was the potential cooperation and synergy he could achieve with a mech pilot who shared his domain.

Even now, whenever Ves reached out with his Spirituality, he always felt he could 'link up' with Joshua's force of will.

Naturally, he wasn't reckless enough to actually do so. Neural linking between two humans was exceedingly dangerous, and it shouldn't be too different if it happened over a spiritual link!

What Ves began to think about instead was trying to take advantage of this condition in a mech designed exclusively for Joshua.

If the expert candidate ever succeeded in taking the next step and advanced to expert pilot, then he needed a suitable expert mech to exercise the full range of his newly-acquired resonance abilities.

While Seniors and Masters were usually the ones to design expert mechs, Ves did not wish to pass off this responsibility to anyone else! There was no way he would rely on an external Senior to help him design an expert mech either.

No matter what, Ves had his own pride, and he believed that it shouldn't be impossible for him to design an expert mech at this stage!

Even if his work didn't measure up to the expert mechs designed by actual Seniors, he could always design a better expert mech next time!

Once Ves departed from the Redfeather and returned to the Scarlet Rose, he continued to speculate on the abilities he could bestow onto an expert mech.

Adding resonance abilities was a must. From what Joshua had briefly demonstrated back in the design duel, his domain allowed him to rejuvenate the parts of his mech.

On the surface, this made it seem as if he was made to pilot defensive mechs.

"It shouldn't be that simple." Ves shook his head.

Certainly, integrating resonating exotics that enabled a mech to repair itself should likely synergize extremely well with Joshua's resonance abilities. Ves did not dare to think how much damage such a zombie mech could repair in mid-battle!

However, aside from this application, it was rather difficult for Ves to imagine what else Joshua could do. One of the defining traits of a life domain was how both of them were able to communicate with other entities.

This meant that Joshua might be able to achieve a greater level of cooperation with design spirits than usual!

Ves could scarcely fathom what that meant for Joshua's future expert mech. Would he be able to meld with certain design spirits and be able to channel some of their distinctive powers?

That sounded incredibly wild, but Ves felt that it might not be as ludicrous as it sounded!

"Expert mechs are moving miracles. What they do defy common sense."

So far, Ves knew too little about the development of expert mechs.

If he really wanted to, he could ask Gloriana to explain what made expert mechs different. He was also pretty sure he could ask some favors from his allies and acquaintances.

So far, Ves did not feel inclined to pursue something that wouldn't be relevant for some time. He needed to focus his attention on his current projects.

When Ves resumed his work on his major projects, he continued to work together with Gloriana over the galactic net.

Even when they openly talked about controversial subjects such as proto-gods and the divine nature of mechs, Ves did not avoid them, but casually worked normally as if they were no big deal.

He knew that the Darkbreak module he was using probably gave Master Willix and anyone else in the MTA direct access to their transmissions.

There was no way to avoid these onlookers. If he refused to use the Darkbreak module and instead used a conventional quantum entanglement node, then the CFA and many other parties would listen in as well!

Ves felt pretty helpless at his inability to keep his remote conversations and collaborations with Gloriana private. He might as well accept this reality and use it as an opportunity to promote the illusion that he was a crank!

Therefore, instead of rejecting Gloriana's distinctive terminology, Ves embraced it. Design spirit became proto-god. Spiritual foundation became divine nature. Spiritual attributes became divine authorities.

Certainly, Ves believed that Master Willix must be probably learning quite a bit about his methods and approaches to mech design.

He was confident that it wasn't so easy to follow in his footsteps, though. Besides, if the MTA saw that both Ves and Gloriana sounded as if they were so delusional about their warped beliefs that they developed a consistent and systematic framework for creating gods, then that only strengthened his cover story!

One day, the pair discussed how to shape the Valkyrie Redeemer's personality.

"The Superior Mother, your mother, is a must." Gloriana stated with her hands placed on her hips.

"Miaow."

Clixie just happened to be projected as well. She looked confused as she failed to spot Lucky. Was he avoiding her or something?

Even though Ves felt annoyed that Gloriana kept equating the Superior Mother to his actual mother in a literal fashion, he let it slide. Trying to correct her would only make him appear more sane, which was exactly what he didn't want to do in front of the MTA.

"I was thinking of adopting a more youthful and aggressive expression of the Superior Mother." He told her. "The Valkyrie Redeemer is a marauder mech that is strong in both speed and offense. Those are traits that fit much better with maidens rather than matrons."

"That's not necessarily the case, Ves. Mothers can be very angry and very aggressive when roused."

"That's true, but that is something that fits more closely to the Blessed Squire, where the Superior Mother is watching over the male mech pilots. In the case of our current project, the female mech pilots of the Valkyrie Redeemer do not need to fight as if their mothers are leaning over their shoulders. They need to have the room to run wild and follow their impulses."

"Hmm.. maybe you are onto something. Is it even possible to express the Supreme in such a fashion? It sounds as if you are forcing your mother to do something she might not like."

"What woman doesn't dream of becoming younger?" Ves boldly grinned.

His fiancé chuckled. "You have a point. If you are confident you can make your mother younger, then by all means, go for it. I wonder what she was like when she was younger. What kind of life did she live to birth a wonderful lover like you? She must have led an exciting life!"

Ves coughed. "Enough about my mother. Let's continue with the design of the Valkyrie Redeemer."

It was not a good idea to talk about his mother's personal life over a compromised channel! If the MTA ever found out that Cynthia Larkinson wasn't as dead as the record stated, then he would definitely be in trouble!

Just as with the design of the Cat's Paw, the pair began to look at the weapon loadout first. The armaments of a mech often defined its overall fighting style.

They already decided to design a medium marauder mech. The mech had to be tougher than light mechs because it was expected to make direct assaults in smaller units.

Ves fully envisioned the Valkyrie Redeemer as a mech that flew over the periphery of a battlefield. Rather than join the pitched battles at the front, the mech should instead be looking for its own opportunities to finish off an isolated opponent or sabotage critical infrastructure.

"I'm not quite certain about the pulse submachine gun that we initially paired with this mech design." Gloriana frowned. "It's lightweight, consumes a modest amount of energy and doesn't take up a lot of capacity. It's just..."

"Individually, pulse submachine guns are rather weak." Ves finished for her. "I'm aware of that, but pairing a marauder mech with a full-sized rifle will basically turn it into a hero mech, which is quite difficult to pull off and pilot."

The inherent lack of range and accuracy at longer distances meant that the pulse submachine gun was only effective at closer ranges.

Normally, this sounded like a shortcoming, but it was actually a hidden boon in this case. Designing a mech to handle full-sized rifles while ensuring a high degree of accuracy and precision was very difficult.

Rather than waste much capacity in order to add a long-ranged solution to the Valkyrie Redeemer, Ves instead preferred to minimize his investment in this area and stick to a short-ranged weapon.

The pulse submachine gun undeniably imposed much less demands. The Valkyrie Redeemer only had to fly close enough to a target before peppering it with a large volley of pulsed particles.

"We need to keep the ranged option for the Valkyrie Redeemer modest because we have to dedicate a lot of capacity to strengthen its most powerful mode of attack.

The Valkyrie Redeemer also came equipped with a small shield and shortspear. This turned her into a discount version of a lancer mech as the mech was capable of charging any target on the ground!

Both Ves and Gloriana already possessed some experience with lancer mechs when they designed one of the Bright Warrior's configurations. They knew the most important aspect about facilitating charge attacks was to ensure the attacking mech survived the impact!

Gloriana did not express much concern. "You don't need to be concerned about finding the right materials and components that excel at absorbing shocks and impacts. The licenses provided by DIVA already cover this area. I even picked some of them out. They're all fantastic in what they do and they're already used in existing Hexer lancer mechs."

"I'll leave the decision up to you, then. Make sure to keep expenses in mind. Our budget can only accommodate some goodies."

Ves envisioned the Valkyrie Redeemer as a mythical valkyrie that offered redemption by delivering death. Right now, without the triggered ability that he intended to add to its spiritual makeup, the marauder mech did not quite live up to its potential.

Just like with some of his other mech designs, he felt as if the Valkyrie Redeemer missed something special. Ves felt the urge to add something more to the design, though he had no idea what he could fit in considering most of its capacity was already taken up by its existing weapon loadout.

"Hmmm. Let's get back to this topic later." Gloriana suggested. "Since we are working on several projects at the same time, we don't have to focus too much on a single issue. We can think over it slowly while we work on other projects."

The Valkyrie Redeemer would likely be the second commissioned mech design that the pair intended to deliver to DIVA.

As they both added more detail to its draft design, the vibrancy of the mech already became apparent! To Ves, it seemed as if the mech contradicted the phase of death, but Ves was in no mood to design a creepy, skeletal mech.

There was no way that female Hexer mech pilots would pilot something that looked so ugly and abhorrent!

Chapter 2194 Blinded

Task Force Predator almost made it all the way through Wreckage Paradise.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Larkinsons did not encounter many more pirates along the way. According to the intelligence the Black Cats gathered, some of the sites they visited should have been occupied by established pirate groups.

Most of the locations were devoid of enemies.

The Black Cats deserved no blame for this. The pirates had left plenty of evidence of their presence behind. No one wanted to come across the dreaded Larkinson Clan, which had already defeated over a dozen different pirate organizations who were just minding their business!

This was something that the pirates were fairly accustomed to doing. Life in the Nyxian Gap was anything but stable and the smarter ones knew when to run if an insurmountable opponent appeared.

Regardless, the Larkinson Clan increased in strength. After studying all of their prior battles and digesting all of their gains, the overall performance of all of the mech pilots rose by a substantial amount.

The battle-hardened Swordmaidens and Battle Criers only improved mildly, but the more numerous Avatars and Sentinels which contained a large number of rookies experienced more drastic gains.

Overall, the goal of using the pirates of Wreckage Paradise as a whetstone to sharpen the task force troops had been met! The rookies were no longer as green as before and earned the trust of the veterans.

With increased confidence, the Larkinsons entered into the inner periphery of the Nyxian Gap, which many people regarded as a true pirate haven.

The asteroids floating around became considerably more dense. The spatial warping effect had grown strong enough to cause many precision instruments to glitch at a slightly higher rate than before.

The spiritual interference field increased in strength as well, causing everyone's quality of sleep to degrade.

As the fleet slowed down its pace and adopted a more guarded posture, many clansmen found strength in each other. The dangers looming over their heads and the risks they faced caused many of them to be struck with anxiety.

Various people preferred various coping methods. Some wanted to get drunk and play Pirate Empires. Others poured themselves into training or self-study.

A significant portion of the clan preferred to spend their time differently.

In the past, this group of adopted Larkinsons possessed a much bigger say, but the mass recruitment in the Cinach System caused thousands of them to diminish in importance.

Regardless, the tight-knit group exhibited a remarkable degree of closeness and unity.

Of all of the developing factions within the Larkinson Clan, the Ylvainans clearly fell out of lockstep with the other clansmen.

Unlike the small but incredibly influential group of trueblood Larkinsons and other Brighters, the Ylvainans embraced religion instead of scorning it. The contrast was so

extreme that it was a miracle Ylvainans managed to remain in harmony with the rest of the clan.

This was especially so because the Ylvainans overwhelmingly came from the radical True Ylvaine Dynasty faction of the Ylvaine Protectorate!

The murky past of the True Believers caused Ves and many other clansmen to view the Ylvainans with suspicion.

However, as time went by and the Larkinsons recruited an even greater number of people in the Sentinel Kingdom, the concerns surrounding the Ylvainans slowly diminished.

The overwhelming majority of Ylvainans turned out to be polite, friendly and tolerant. They did not attempt to force their beliefs on everyone, though they did not refrain from speaking about them either.

Suspicious about the Ylvainans faded as the leaders of the clan busied themselves with integrating tens of thousands of foreigners at once. The excursion into the Nyxian Gap demanded a lot of attention as well.

With the Ylvainans laying low, they slowly gained acceptance from secularists members of the Larkinson Clan. What the Ylvainans shared in common with the rest of the clansmen mattered a lot more than their differences.

That said, the Ylvainans still maintained their own distinctive identity in the Larkinson Clan. James Ylvaine, the self-proclaimed Living Prophet, held absolute sway over the Ylvainan faction.

Right now, he was standing in the observation chamber of one of the light carriers of the Avatars.

Unlike the majority of the Larkinsons stationed on the ship, James wore the plain red-and-white uniform of a general clan member.

Even though he was capable of piloting a mech, James never applied to join the Avatars of Myth or Living Sentinels. Instead, he maintained no official position at all. In fact, he shouldn't even be allowed aboard the light carrier!

Still, it was a mistake to treat him as an ordinary clansman. No one knew what James had done to convince Commander Melkor to travel along the Avatars of Myth.

No matter what, he was a genuine, upstanding member of the clan. Every clansman possessed the ability to detect something amiss from their fellow Larkinsons if they harbored any seditious thoughts, but James never exhibited anything but respect and admiration for the clan he joined.

As James reminiscent what it took to get this far, the hatch to the observation chamber suddenly slid open.

Taon Melin, a strong Ylvainan mech pilot and the chosen of Zeal, approached with a strong stride.

He looked out at the dim view of asteroids floating and spinning in space. Remarkably, none of them collided into each other. Maynard Fields would have been a lot more dangerous if that was the case.

"Taon." James greeted with a compellingly smooth voice. "How goes your day?"

The former elite Kronon mech pilot shrugged. "Do you even need to ask?"

"You are doing quite well in the Deliverer, but that is to be expected. You are so willing to surrender yourself when you pilot this great machine that you are beginning to neglect your own strength. Faith may be important, but that does not mean you should look up to a higher power whenever you want to do something. Faith is meant to strengthen you. You are missing the point if you are weakening yourself instead."

Taon frowned. "I.. did not realize that. I will mull over your advice and do better."

"I know you will, my child. The error that you have made is not an unusual one in the flock. Remember that even if you are a believer, you are still a human. In our mortal shells, we are each born with humans wants and desires. Do not forsake them so readily in order to become a shell."

The mech pilot dutifully nodded. Even if he did not realize the full import of the advice given by James, he already intended to study them later.

"If you don't mind me asking, sir, why have you called me here?"

"I foresee great turbulence ahead of us." James declared with a focused expression as he looked out at the asteroids. "Ves Larkinson shall encounter one of his greatest fears in this hungry vortex, and he must choose who he truly is in order to survive the perils to come. The clan patriarch owes a great debt and must pay the price for his greed one way or another. Larkinsons shall die. It is only a question whether some of us or all of us shall meet our end in this haunted space."

Taon quietly listened as James apparently made another prophecy.

"This sounds very grave, Great Prophet. If I may ask, why do you not pass on your visions to the Avatar Commander or the Bright Martyr?"

James sighed and looked down at the deck. "You know how the Brighters are. They think they are so enlightened that they are blinded by their own light. The Bright Martyr

shines the brightest among the people of the clan. For good or ill, his light must dim, and the times to come shall accomplish that. We can only pray that his brightness will not go out entirely. As the guiding light of the Larkinson Clan, more lives are counting on him than he is aware of. These will be difficult times."

His ominous warning weighed heavily on Taon. The chosen never felt so uncertain as now. If even the Living Prophet showed great concern, then Taon knew that there were some very tough fights ahead.

"I will fight for the Bright Martyr and our fellow Ylvainans in the clan." The mech pilot vowed.

"I expect nothing less. The Bright Martyr needs your strength. He needs all of our strength. His strength as a visionary and unifier will play a great role in the times to come."

"Will you be taking the field as well, Great Prophet?"

"I shall lend what little strength I possess when necessary."

Taon showed great relief at that. His trust in James was incredibly high.

A moment of silence passed as James appeared to read the pattern of the floating asteroids. The hum of the light carrier faintly tickled their ears.

"My grasp on the future has strengthened." The Living Prophet broke the silence. "Yet I wish it were not so. My vision is becoming increasingly more clouded."

The Nyxian Gap had a way of unnerving anyone who entered the abyss. James just happened to be affected more than most!

Though it seemed strange to hear James profess any weakness, Taon did not think less of him because of that. Even the greatest people possessed chinks in their armor.

"Can I do anything to help?"

James shook his head. "You cannot fight against the entire Nyxian Gap. No one can. Do not fret over my condition. My difficulties will pass if we manage to leave the abyss."

"Is there anything that I must take note of, sir?"

"Develop your strength. Keep up your prayers. Do not lose heart. While I cannot foresee what terror the Bright Martyr must confront, you must demonstrate to him what true faith can accomplish."

"I shall take your words to heart." Taon placed his palm on his chest and bowed. "Shall I keep training with the Deliverer or should I transfer to another machine? I have been offered the option to pilot a Bright Warrior."

"That is up to you. As I have said, do not pray for assistance when you are fully capable of resolving your issues by yourself. Pilot the mech that gives you strength."

"Thank you for the advice."

As the small discussion proceeded, James suddenly collapsed onto his knees.

"Great Prophet!"

Blood began pouring out of the Ylvainan leader's nose. James groaned as he endured a lot of strain.

"Do not be concerned." He spoke to Taon. "I shall recover."

"What happened, sir?"

"I am blinded." James spoke with a measurable amount of concern.

"How can that be? You are the Great Prophet! You have ascended!"

"I am hardly the only fish in the pond. There are ancient horrors from eons past that still make their mark this day."

"Then.."

"Prophecies are always tenuous and subject to change. According to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, the act of observing something inevitably alters that which is observed. I am afraid that I have directed my vision to somewhere I shouldn't have looked. This is but a small punishment for my transgression, though I fear the rest of this fleet might suffer as well."

"If you are blinded, how must we go on without your guidance?"

James smiled and patted Taon's shoulder. "This is why you must stand tall by yourself. Remember my earlier advice? I cannot watch over you in perpetuity, and it shouldn't be necessary. Have faith."

Taon Melin inexplicably grew peaceful. Though great threats might be on the horizon, he shouldn't be thinking too much.

As long as he soldiered on and held onto his faith, he would be ready to face any calamity that might beset the Larkinson Clan.

After several more minutes, James turned to leave the observation chamber.

"One more thing." He spoke. "Accelerate our outreach. I shall spread the words among our compatriots. It is in darkness when the light of faith shines the brightest."

"The Larkinson Clan is already basking in the light." Taon commented.

"That is true, but some may find it inadequate. All we must do is change one of the light fixtures with one of our own. Our faith shall shine over the entire clan in time."

"Let it be so."

Chapter 2195 The Queen Left Behind

The Larkinson Clan still maintained a very substantial presence in the Cinach System. Despite the departure of many of the combat forces of the clan, tens of thousands of Larkinsons still remained in orbit or on the surface of Cinach VI.

The trainees and second-line personnel of the Living Sentinels and other forces still retained sufficient strength to protect the remainder. The hundreds of Penitent Sisters and the Glory Battalion provided an even stronger deterrent against any possible malicious actors.

With so much protection, the workers of the LMC and the other general clansmen were able to develop and work in peace.

Sales of the Doom Guard may have stagnated, but with sales nearing 100,000 mechs per month, the virtual headquarters of the LMC became busier than ever. Just trying to organize the production, quality control, sales, financing, logistics and after-sales support of this scale could not be done without the diligent efforts of the business-minded members of the Larkinson Clan.

As the soon-to-be-married companion of the clan patriarch, Gloriana oversaw all of this activity.

Even if Ves never granted her any authority, even if she held no other position in the LMC than lead designer, her sway over the Larkinsons left behind was unsurpassed!

Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson may be officially in charge of running the day-to-day business of the LMC. The Larkinson Assembly may be responsible for setting the overall policies of the clan. The Larkinson Executive Council may have a say in how to implement the current directives.

Yet for someone who transcended the rules, Gloriana did not shy away from imposing her own will.

On one day, Gloriana languidly lay on a sofa while Gavin and Melody stood side by side.

"Gavin, there is good news." The Journeyman Mech Designer announced with a smile. "I have just conferred with Melody, who told me that our Wodin Dynasty has finally received dispensation to set up a branch office in Hegemony space. My mother has already arranged a suitable office facility for the LMC. Please work with Calsie to staff the branch office. Make sure to send several loyalty medallions as soon as possible. The Wodins are already screening potential new executives to staff the branch office."

Though Gavin was pleased that Gloriana bothered to call him by his actual name, he wasn't so sure about the development she announced.

"As far as I am aware of, neither Raymond nor the boss has signaled any intention of setting up a branch office in the Hegemony, Miss Wodin. It is well-known that the Hexadric Hegemony tightly controls its mech market. No mechs designed by males are allowed to go on sale."

A confident smirk appeared on the prominent Hexer's face. "My lover's splendor is growing at an unsurpassed rate. Trust me, dear Gavin. My fellow Hexers will adore my precious 'man' in due time."

"I can hear the quotation marks around that word, ma'am."

"I apologise. I am unaccustomed to this word." Gloriana waved away the issue. "Don't treat the office we are setting up in the Scimitar System as a regular branch. If possible we should look into elevating it into our sector headquarters."

"I am DEFINITELY sure that the boss does not approve of such!"

"This is why I'm telling this to you instead of my beloved. Let's face it. The Hexadric Hegemony will overrun the Friday Coalition and become the dominant state of the Komodo Star Sector. How can the LMC possibly set up its sector headquarters in the Sentinel Kingdom or some forgettable state? The Hegemony will not allow it! Rather than wait, we might as well act early and lay the groundwork of our presence in my home state."

Gavin looked pensive. "I can't argue with your logic, but you should really bring this up with the boss."

"I already told you. He will throw a fit and refuse out of bias. What then? If the LMC wants to continue doing business in the Komodo Star Sector, it cannot do so without the sanction of the Hegemony. Just set up the branch office first and inform your boss later."

"That is.. not.. proper."

Gloriana grew fierce. She shifted her relaxing pose and leaned in on Gavin. "I will decide what is proper around here. I do not like it when obstacles are in my way. I have many ways of pushing them aside. Do you comprehend?"

The intensity of her stare forced Gavin to back down. He gulped as he wilted under the pressure. "Understood!"

"Good!" Gloriana turned all sunny again. "Melody, please assist as well. This is important. By the way, have you received word yet from Brutus?"

"He has informed us that he is not ready to turn back as of yet." Her assistant replied. "At this moment, he is in a crucial stage in his attempts to rehabilitate Davia Stark."

Gloriana looked sour. "He promised to return in a month! Why is he spending so much time on a broken old woman?!"

"He says.. he can do more for you and the Larkinson Clan if he continues his current course."

"Urgh. Fine! What is the state of our next round of reinforcements?"

"A convoy will arrive tomorrow, with more to come in the coming weeks and months. The initial convoy not only carries the first batch of materials and props for the grand wedding, but is also accompanied by wedding planners, bridal stylists and other renowned specialists. We shall receive some much-needed reinforcements to our Wodin Battation. All of them consist of loyal soldiers from the Wodin Warriors, and your mother has tried her best to select those who meet your.. specific requirements."

"Good. Have you prepared a list of guests to invite to the grand wedding?"

"We have finalized the list, I advise against sending the invitation letters at this time. With the controversy surrounding you and your relationship with Mr. Larkinson, not many recipients will accept."

"Do it anyway. We can at least determine who among them is worth befriending. If there is anything I agree with Ves, it's that it is best to keep fair-weather friends at a distance."

"Miss Gloriana, if you do so, then the amount of guests that will attend your grand wedding will not reflect the prestige of the occasion." Melody frowned as she clutched her data pad tighter. "This will not only reflect badly on you and the Larkinson Clan, but the shame might also be used against the Wodin Dynasty."

Gloriana showed no concern at all. Instead, she leaned back against the sofa and began to curl her fingers into Clixie's fur.

"Miaow~"

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat comfortably dozed on a pillow.

"I am certain that those who decline the invitation at this time will rue their decision a few months later. They will drop to their knees and beg to attend our wedding. At that time, we can obtain some concessions from them, though I won't forgive all of them. I intend to fill the vacant seats with other guests."

She refused to tell Melody who she had in mind to take those places.

A day after this meeting, the convoy finally arrived. A modest but very intimidating fleet of Hexer vessels transitioned into the Cinach System.

The nearby trade ships quickly veered away as the combat carriers of the Glory Battalion closely hugged a number of distinctive Hexer cargo vessels.

Once the group of ships arrived in orbit of Cinach VI, the vessels joined the original formation of vessels of the Glory Battalion.

A large number of movements took place.

After transferring some cargo to the surface, various bots and construction vehicles emerged from the Hexer cargo ships. They soon began construction of a very large structure in space!

Meanwhile, the newly-arrived combat carriers soon descended from orbit and landed on the surface next to the rented base of the Larkinson Clan.

Hundreds of blue-and-gold uniformed Hexers emerged from the vessels and marched into the base in an imposing column.

The clansmen who worked at the base looked askance at the sudden emergence of so many Hexers. While the Glory Battalion was a familiar sight in the clan, they never saw so many of them at once!

The disciplined Glory Warriors ignored the befuddled stares of the gawking Larkinsons and headed straight to a mech workshop.

There, Gloriana greeted the Hexers that her mother had dispatched from home.

"Welcome to Cinach." She beamed with pride. "I know that many of you have signed on to a very different commitment than before. Know that this is an opportunity, not a punishment. Just because you have left the Hexadric Hegemony does not mean you are no longer able to contribute to the state. The oaths you are about to make will take primacy, but that does not mean you should forget your roots."

Her speech only took a few minutes before she gestured behind her. "Let us proceed further inside. A very special mech awaits in the rear."

With Gloriana at the head, the large column of Hexers marched to the end of the workshop, where a spare Bright Warrior stood in its hefty space knight configuration!

A Larkinson mech pilot already entered the cockpit and activated the mech, causing its glow to reach the entire crowd of Glory Warriors.

"Now, let us begin. Captain Serena Valeis, please step forth."

One of the mech captains standing at the head of the column approached the looming Bright Warrior. Despite its strong glow, Captain Valeis maintained her neutral expression.

"Please place your hand onto the mech and pledge an oath of loyalty to the Larkinson Clan."

The captain did as Gloriana instructed. She spoke a short but precisely-worded oath that had been handed to her beforehand.

The glow of the Bright Warrior briefly pulsed, and Captain Valeis frowned as she felt something trying to burrow into her mind.

Eventually, the glow subsided, leaving the Hexer mech officer confused.

Gloriana peered very closely at the first Hexer to attempt to join the Larkinson and failed to detect the distinctive sensation of facing a fellow Larkinson.

"Failed. Try again."

The captain did as ordered, but the Bright Warrior did not seem receptive.

As the second attempt failed, Gloriana began to look upset. It seemed that Ves had designed and instructed the ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan too well!

Even if the new arrivals had already undergone some ideological training in order to shave off the sharper edges of their Hexer mindsets, they still possessed a strong attachment to the Hexadric Hegemony and the Wodin Dynasty in particular.

In order for anyone to become a Larkinson, they not only had to place the interests of the clan above the interests of other states, but also exhibit at least some alignment to the core values and principles of the Larkinsons!

Apparently, Captain Valeis still had some ways to go before she could even think about gaining the Golden Cat's approval.

Still, Gloriana had prepared for this occasion. She picked up Clixie and stepped closer to the foot of the Bright Warrior before holding out her cat.

"Clixie, can you tell Goldie to do us a favor?"

"Miaow?"

"Just talk to the mech like you talk to the Larkinson Mandate. Goldie will listen."

Even though neither Gloriana nor Clixie could actually talk or see the Golden Cat, they still made the attempt.

"Miaow miaow miaow."

Clixie started to talk to Bright Warrior mech. This lasted for roughly a minute before the Bright Warrior's glow began to pulse in an aggressive fashion.

Gloriana grew uncertain as she pulled back her cat. "Try again, captain."

When Captain Valeis pledged her loyalty to the Larkinson Clan yet again, the result was the same as before.

"Hmm." Gloriana thought for a moment. "I think I understand why we are not successful. The Golden Cat is supposed to embody the thoughts and beliefs of the Larkinson Clan. Right now, our presence isn't very welcome here. While I managed to get in on account of my relationship with Ves, the rest of you do not share his affection."

Now that she figured a possible cause for the rejection, she could work on resolving it! If the Larkinsons harbored a bad impression of Hexers, then Gloriana should just change that by winning their hearts and minds!

"It's a good thing Ves isn't here, hihi!"

Chapter 2196 Modification Kits

The Doom Guard had entered the market for just several months, but already the astonishing new striker mech model had shook up the mech market!

Within Hegemony-aligned space and a little bit beyond, the local and regional branches of the LMC worked together with hundreds of third-party manufacturers to deliver as many Doom Guards in the hands of customers as possible.

Sales had shot up in the first weeks and already reached an enviable height so far! Numerous other mech designers could only look on with envy as the LMC benefited from a massive amount of publicity as numerous news publications and mech publications gushed over the intimidating but incredibly novel Doom Guard.

Propelled by enthusiastic journalists and industry insiders, the market came to adopt the Doom Guard through a combination of factors.

First, despite its problematic handling issues, the mech already proved at the start that it was extremely effective at its designated role.

Second, it received the support of several authoritative figures within the mech community. Even the renowned Master Willix of the Mech Trade Association indirectly endorsed the new product!

Third, the early battles where it had been put to use had already resulted in dramatic swings in battle. Those who fielded the Doom Guard almost always achieved better results than before!

Fourth, the consistently stellar reputation of the LMC caused many customers to trust in its latest product.

Fifth, the rising fame and accomplishments of the Miracle Couple dazzled everyone in the local mech community!

All of these factors and more caused the Doom Guard to solidify its place in the mech market for the foreseeable time. If not for its premium price tag, it might have easily reached the sales of the Soldier product line at its prime!

In a war-stricken star system, forces from the Hinsien Protectorate and the Phantasm Republic struggled to take control of a piece of territory that used to belong to the Chuka Republic.

With the fall of the latter, the three third-rate states that surrounded their prey had gorged upon the carcass and annexed many star systems.

Yet that wasn't enough for some!

The states were very reluctant to declare war against each other, therefore preventing their mech militaries from engaging in hostilities.

Yet they didn't want to let go of any star system within reach! The upper ranks all knew that in this volatile time, this is their best opportunity to grab some extra stars. Once the borders solidified, it was much harder to grab more territory!

Due to these realities, a large proxy war erupted. The Traditional Tribe, the Hinsien Protectorate and the Phantasm Republic all hired and armed the local mercenary corps and sent them off the contested star systems to struggle for supremacy.

Proxy wars offered some of the most lucrative opportunities to enterprising mercenaries!

They also tended to turn into bloodbaths. This meant that only the most patriotic, greedy or overconfident mercenary corps participated in these proxy wars.

Though the skirmishes and conflicts taking place in this contested region had swayed back and forth without much result for a time, the introduction of a new mech model changed the equation.

Doom Guards started showing up by the dozens, then the hundreds, then the thousands!

With some of the early adopters fielding entire Doom Guards, the formation of striker mechs foiled many attempts to come to blows!

Many offensive maneuvers failed as the melee mechs that eagerly closed the distance all flew back at the last moment or fought under visible suppression.

The slow-moving striker mechs did not remain on the defensive either. Despite their low mobility, plenty of outfits started to experiment with employing them in offensive actions.

From slow-marching them towards the enemy to modifying the mechs in order to enhance their acceleration, a vast community of enthusiasts and professionals banded together to develop the best solution!

Just one month after the release of the Doom Guard, the first modification kits started to enter the market.

Designed by teams of various mech designers who licensed the Doom Guard design, these mod kits consisted of a large collection of parts and components as well as instructions on how to install them onto a base model.

In many cases, the mod kits for the Doom Guard mostly entailed replacing some of the stock parts of its flight system and adding some extra components meant to increase the mech's mobility!

Though the price of these mod kits ranged from 100,000 to 1,000,000 hex credits, many owners of the base models who were frustrated by the lack of mobility eagerly spent the money to address this shortcoming!

The aftermarket modifications were very simple to apply. No mech designers needed to supervise the procedure as the mech technicians merely had to follow the instructions to the letter.

Two results emerged after installing the kits.

First, the overhauled Doom Guards accelerated much faster in space, allowing them to keep up with most spaceborn mechs!

Second, their glows weakened a bit as the modified mechs differed drastically from the original design.

By now, the mech community had already learned that it was very difficult to preserve the strength of the glow of a mech when making alterations.

The owners of LMC mechs had gradually learned that only slow adjustments and customizations over a longer stretch of time allowed the glow to remain strong. The adjustment period aborted many attempts at introducing radical changes to prior LMC mech models.

In any case, it wasn't a big deal in the past. The Desolate Soldier and other LMC mechs already performed well enough in their original incarnations. The demand for mod kits wasn't particularly strong.

That was before the Doom Guard entered the scene. Months before the LMC was prepared to release a light skirmisher that was meant to address this need, the customers themselves had already come up with their own remedies!

With several different mod kits selling like hotcakes, the proxy war in the former Chuko Republic abruptly intensified!

Mercenary corps fighting for all three sides started to experiment with their modified Doom Guards.

Battles that pitted one group of Doom Guards against an enemy group of Doom Guards became increasingly more common!

The duels between the Doom Guards quickly became notable for how much they diverged from traditional clashes between mechs.

First, many mercenary corps desperately hired and trained mech pilots who exhibited strong mental fortitude. In order to pilot a Doom Guard, they had to be strong-willed enough to withstand its glow from point-blank range!

Fortunately, unlike the mech designers who applied to work under the Miracle Couple, it was not as difficult to headhunt fearless mech pilots.

As every mech pilot trained for combat since their teens, the best of them developed considerably solid minds!

Even so, no Doom Guard pilot could withstand the nauseous ripples and inexplicable terror forever, especially when several of the glows overlapped with each other!

As a result, battles between Doom Guards rarely ended up with one of them downing the other.

The mech pilots always broke before their mechs sustained critical damage!

As long as one side's Doom Guards all retreated from the field, the other side gained a substantial advantage for the remainder of the battle!

"Damn these Doom Guards! I hate the LMC for introducing them to the galaxy."

"Stop whining! If you want to beat these Doom Guards, then go train your courage some more. What the others have been doing is actually working, you know."

Even the mercenary corps who had no intention of relying on Doom Guards to win their battles were still compelled to purchase at least one copy, if only to train their mech pilots to withstand the harmful glow!

Through these developments, the Doom Guard model became more and more ubiquitous in the states that offered it for sale.

Even the people in Coalition-aligned space started to pay more attention to the Doom Guard and other LMC mechs!

Sadly, no matter how much the demand pent up, with the Friday Coalition officially sanctioning Ves Larkinson and anything related to him, no glows graced their territories.

It was also at this time when LMC mechs began to establish a serious presence in the Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal Star Sector.

Buoyed by all of the accomplishments of the Miracle Couple, the foreigners from other star sectors began to acquire a couple of LMC mechs to see what the fuss was about.

It was difficult to obtain the mechs. Importing the mechs from the Komodo Star Sector was prohibitively expensive. Only a handful of mech designers and mech companies licensed some LMC mechs, and even fewer bothered to produce them locally.

As the LMC was still a new and unknown brand in this foreign region of space, the initial sales had been pitiful.

Yet the first customers who bought the best-selling Desolate Soldier and Doom Guards quickly fell in love with them. When they employed the mechs for various new ends such as boosting the morale of their troops or depressing the courage of enemy mech pilots, the opponents who were unprepared to face these befuddling new mechs mostly suffered for their ignorance!

With the growing amount of drastic victories achieved with the help of these revolutionary new mech models, the demand for LMC mechs soon built up. Demand exceeded supply, which gave many a lot of heartache as they forked over excessive premiums in order to obtain their copies!

Even without the LMC maintaining a significant presence in these star sectors, the Vicious Mountainers and Majestic Tealers all began to grow fascinated at the products the Komodans cooked up. The frontier star sector presented a great surprise to many first-time buyers or victims of LMC mechs!

When Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and Calsie Doornbos-Larkinson met in the former's office, they discussed the rising trend of foreign sales.

"I think we can go ahead with setting up branches in both Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal. My office has already dispatched numerous loyalty medallions to both destinations."

Raymond looked concerned. "I am not happy with this development. It is difficult to exert control over what takes place in those star sectors."

"I think the loyalty medallions will play a surprising role in accelerating the establishment of the new sector headquarters. We need to move early and establish at least some presence in the foreign markets. If we continue to allow random mech companies to sell our products after licensing our designs, they may completely crowd the marketplace, leaving little room for the LMC."

She was right. Right now, the LMC maintained a high degree of control over the activities of its partners due to the contracts they enforced.

Every third-party manufacturer that had entered into a partnership with the LMC had to abide by standardized pricing, quality levels and other requirements. Aside from mandatory adjustments due to local laws and customs, the LMC mechs had to be sold as uniformly as possible!

Right now, this was not the case in Vicious Mountain and Majestic Teal. Several mech designers creatively interpreted the Desolate Soldier and Doom Guard design and developed warped variants that lost some of the essence of the base models.

The pricing was also excessive and all over the place, while the quality of the mechs sometimes left much to be desired.

It was a chaotic development that risked ruining the LMC's brand name even before the company formally expanded its operations in the foreign star sectors!

"Ves has great ambitions." Raymond told Calsie. "And regardless how much he claims to leave everything here behind when he departs for the Red Ocean, he is a sentimental individual. Knowing that his products are still sold and used in the Yeina Star Cluster will still make him happen in the end. Besides, the Larkinson Family isn't going anywhere."

Thinking about the Larkinson Family and its current search for a new home panged Raymond's heart. Though he wished to offer his support to Ark Larkinson, the old family possessed its own pride.

"We Larkinsons must make our mark in this star cluster. The clan and the family are still tied to each other. As long as we share the same name, we must always support each other."

Chapter 2197 Sand War Survivor

As the Komodo War and other conflicts began to engulf the star sector with increasing frequency, one exceptionally devastated region of space did not escape the fighting either!

The aftermath of the Sand War affected dozens of border states and trillions of lives. With the sandmen sweeping over almost every human settlement, there were precious few valuables left in the dusty ruins left after the sandman race's wake.

Still, a huge amount of profiteers and enterprising salvagers descended on the graves of the massacred border citizens like vultures!

At the Varantyr System, the capital of the former Vindmar Republic, a massacre ensued!

A chaotic horde of shabby mechs ran or flew from from an empty crater and fled the site as rapidly as possible!

Though the mechs all shared the same coating pattern, which signified that they belonged to a single force, no hint of cohesion or coordination was present in their panicked movements.

Their mech pilots had each been subjected to a terror that surpassed anything that a Doom Guard could accomplish!

At the very least, some mech pilots were still capable of resisting the infamous striker mech's fearsome glow.

It was a different story this time. The threat they faced was so overwhelmingly strong that even if they numbered over a hundred mechs, the mercenaries that had landed on the surface to dig out abandoned treasures had all been scared out of their wits!

Two mechs emerged from the huge crater. One of them was a fairly standard-looking rifleman mech bearing the markings of the Glory Battalion.

The other mech was the cause for causing the mercenaries to flee. The Star Dancer, floated majestically as it brought its much more powerful rifle to bear against the escaping mercenary mechs!

Capable of firing gauss rounds, positron beams and laser beams, this time Venerable Brutus decided to opt for the latter.

The vultures were too weak to merit more powerful attacks.

As the Hexer expert pilot focused his will and resonated with the custom-designed rifle, the weapon started to glow in a strange rainbow sheen!

When the resonance had reached its peak, the Star Dancer's weapon finally fired a diverging blast!

A huge splitting laser beam instantly shot out from the muzzle and struck dozens of fleeing mechs with perfect accuracy.

Each split beam just happened to target the point where the Star Dancer's sensors had already identified as critical weak points.

Even though the firepower of the Star Dancer's rifle had been dispersed over so many mechs, they possessed enough resonance-enhanced power to pierce straight through the back of the mercenary mechs without fail!

Venerable Brutus did not pause to admire his handiwork. Instead, he shifted the aim of his weapon 45 degrees to the side and soon repeated the same resonance attack!

With each pull of the trigger, twenty or more distancing mercenary mechs fell instantly!

Soon enough, none of the fleeing mercenaries remained intact. Each of them received crippling damage as they found no cover that could shield them against the wrath of an expert pilot.

A short pause ensued as the rifle cooked down from its exertion.

"Brutus.." A strained voice sounded over the communication channel between the two Hexer mechs. "When I requested you to repel the scavengers, I did not mean you should shoot down their mechs. There has been enough bloodshed in the Varantyr System. I do not wish the grave of my fellow citizens to be stained in red."

"Davia, you can't be soft when you deal with scum. Their motives are clear and dishonorable. Instead of respecting the slain victims of the sandman invasion, they thought to dig through the remnants of your people in order to steal what little heritage the Vindmar Republic has retained."

"...Did you kill any of the mech pilots?"

"Do not be concerned about the lives of those hyenas. If you must know, I have slain the male mech pilots and spared the female ones."

"Is that even possible?"

"You underestimate the sensors of a ranged expert mech. My mech is designed with this functionality in mind. The low-quality mechs of these scavengers offer no hindrance at these ranges."

Though Davia still felt disturbed, she dropped the topic. It was not as if Brutus was strictly wrong. She indeed found it difficult to stomach seeing the capital planet of the Vindmar Republic being treated like a giant treasure trove!

The two mechs lingered on the surface of Varantyr II for a time. The Star Dancer quietly accompanied and guarded over the shaky-moving rifleman mech as they flew over the coordinates of several notable locations of the former bustling planet.

The places that Davia Stark visited in her younger years only existed in records and memories after the Sand War.

The museum that displayed some of the relics that belonged to the founders of Vindmar was no more. The sandmen race, which did not possess any discernible appreciation for culture and history, ravaged the site of the famed cultural institution like it did with any other 'useless' structure!

Only sand and devastation remained. It was as if an unfathomable god wiped the planet clean of life.

Not even the native wildlife remained alive, as the sandmen even scorned nature!

The pair of mechs left the site of the museum and instead flew towards an elevated hill where the capital city's proud spaceport once stood.

Several different outfits had already descended upon the site in order to dig through any of the valuable cargo that the sandmen had neglected to erase.

Word of the Hexer mechs had already spread. As soon as some of their scouts noticed the approaching Star Dancer, the scavenging activities stopped immediately as the mechs and other vehicles instantly evacuated the site!

When the Star Dancer lifted its rifle regardless, the other Hexer mech physically stood in its firing line.

"Leave them be, Brutus. I told you that I do not want to inflict further suffering, especially against fellow humans."

"These rats are barely human. They will just come back after we leave."

A sigh sounded over the communication channel.

"Then let them. I may hold a lot of sentiment for the remains here, but even you cannot protect the Vindmar Republic's remaining legacy forever. At least they will be of some use to the people who are still alive."

Though Brutus agreed with her sentiment, he decided to abide by her requests. She was a woman, after all.

The pair of Hexer mechs visited some other notable sites, only to encounter one pile of sand after another.

The more they encountered this sight, the greater the weight on Davia's heart.

Through the telemetry transmitted by the mech she barely managed to pilot, Brutus grew concerned about her condition.

"You are growing more and more unstable. If this continues, we will be throwing away all of the progress you have made in the last few weeks."

"This is what I need, Brutus. I have been plagued by my concerns for too long. Let me see what is left of the places I once held dear. I cannot say goodbye to my friends and comrades, but I can at least pay tribute to my home state."

The journey eventually ended when Davia grew too tired to continue. As a recovering mech pilot, she could not withstand the strain of piloting a mech too long. An added difficulty was that second-class mechs were much more challenging to control!

When the Serendipity caught up to the two mechs and allowed them to dock, the two mech pilots emerged from the cockpits and changed their clothes.

Davia soon sat down in the lounge compartment holding a cup of warm tea.

The vapor wafting from her drink passed over her face as she slowly processed the sights she had seen.

Venerable Brutus sat calmly on the opposite side. "I'm not sure if we should proceed. It took this long to get you in a state to allow you to pilot a mech."

"I owe it to my fellow citizens to see what has become of the heart of the Vindmar Republic." The woman replied.

"Has it helped?"

She nodded. "The sights were dismaying, but at least I am not beholden to my imagination. I will always remember the devastation that I have seen. I need to remember the outcome of an alien invasion."

For a time, they fell silent as Davia calmly sipped her tea. The taste was bitter and lacked any sweetness. It echoed her current sentiments.

"Where do you wish to go next? Are you ready to return or do you need more closure?"

She didn't answer immediately.

"Davia?"

"I... I have seen the grave of my home state." She stated. "I thought it would settle the storm in my heart, but.. I am not as settled as I thought. I have witnessed the devastation wrought by the sandmen upon humanity, but I have not yet observed the destruction that humanity inflicted on the aliens."

Her answer caused Brutus to become pensive. "If you wish to witness humanity's final counterattacks, you can access the footage of the razing of the sandman's capital planet."

"I have watched and rewatched it more than a hundred times. I still feel empty. I need to see the planet for myself."

"There is nothing left of that 'planet' except for loose sand."

"It doesn't matter. Seeing what remains of that abomination shall have to do. Nothing will fill the void in my soul than visiting the grave of the sandman empire."

"I am obliged to return to my sister's side."

"Give me a ship, then. Take one over from the scavengers in this system. If not, I will seek passage elsewhere."

"There is no need for that, Davia." Brutus shook his head and smiled. "Let us venture forth into the deep frontier, then. The sandmen swept aside all of the pirates and other threats, so we will encounter very few threats along the way."

This time it was Davia's turn to frown. "My request is selfish. I do not wish to impose on you. As a uniformed soldier, you have a duty to fulfill."

"While you are correct, Gloriana already enjoys sufficient protection. Where she resides at the moment is far out of the reach of the Fridaymen. With the Glory Battalion and the

Penitent Sisters on site, not even assassins can breach her protection. At this time, you are in greater need. Gloriana will understand."

"I thought a male Hexer such as you would never disobey your female superiors."

"You are correct, but my overriding mission is to protect Gloriana, safeguard the continuation of the Wodin Dynasty and do my duty to the Hexadric Hegemony. My decision does not conflict with my goals."

With those words, the Serendipity left the Komodo Star Sector and entered the Faris Star Region.

If anyone entered this frontier region just a couple of years earlier, then they would be beset unless they came with a massive fleet.

Yet now, a single frigate that was smaller than any carrier traversed peacefully through former pirate havens.

Before the sandmen scoured the border states, they conveniently swept the local pirates as well. The savvier and more resourceful pirates had long fled into civilized space and blended in with the local refugees.

Many other sons and daughters of the frontier were not able to move in time. Though Brutus couldn't care less about the scum that inhabited the frontier, Davia mourned for every human that had fallen victim to the sandmen.

"The sandmen have taken too many lives before they went down. The Big Two should have wiped them out before they turned into a threat."

Davia harbored plenty of grievances against the Big Two. Any survivor of the border states that had been wiped out by the sandmen shared her sentiment.

Their feelings didn't matter. No matter how many billions or trillions of humans resented the Big Two, the CFA and MTA merrily ignored the bleatings of the so-called space peasants.

They were too weak. Those who had fallen due to the negligence of their supposed protectors no longer had any voice to complain. Those who were fortunate enough to survive such as Davia lost their relatives, their friends, their homes and much of what they worked for just because the Big Two were too big to care for the little folk!

Maybe the Larkinson Clan was right. Maybe the clan patriarch, as detestable as he may be, was on the right track.

She clenched her fists.

The weak lacked a voice. They needed someone powerful enough to speak on their behalf.

Chapter 2198 Ves the Tutor

Over the course of supervising the steady progress of the four minor mech design projects, Ves slowly became more familiar with the assistants he hired.

The brave mech designers who passed the stringent final selection process through grit and courage already began to distinguish themselves from the assistants left behind at Cinach.

Due to all of the recent drilling they endured and the fact that they were part of a combat fleet, the Braves as they began to call themselves already began to develop their own identity.

Through the instruction and direction provided by Ves whenever the teams reported on their progress, he gradually imparted some of his design preferences in their minds.

Overall, Ves wanted the Braves to prioritize simplicity, practicality, cost efficiency, ruggedness, and timeliness.

He wanted to mold them into mech designers who did not act like sensitive princesses who couldn't stand the sight of an ugly stain on the floor.

Though Ves cared a lot about quality and performance, he valued practicality a lot more. Some situations simply didn't allow for thoroughness. His many experiences during the Bright-Vesia War had forced him to resort to quick and dirty methods many times in order to survive.

Rather than letting the Braves learn this lesson when the situation grew perilous, Ves might as well push them in this direction beforehand so that they would become better prepared.

Normally, Ves did not wish to influence the development of other mech designers to such a degree.

If possible, he wanted to give mech designers the room to find their own design styles and develop their own approach towards mech design.

This was what he had patiently done with Ketis. Even though she still inherited many of his traits and outlooks, at the very least she had a choice in the matter.

"I can't adopt this approach again."

He possessed much less emotional investment in his regular assistant mech designers. No matter how much they botched their own development, Ves would hardly shed a tear for their misfortune.

Assistants such as Moltar Ringer, Rina Orion, Estelle Lynwood and Catherine Evenson exhibited a lot of promise.

However, he did not need all of them to stand out and advance into promising Journeymen. Only one would do. The rest just needed to do their jobs of assisting his work earnestly while molding their design approach closer to his own. Even if their future did not allow them to ascend to higher heights, as long as they remained useful cogs in the machine, everything was fine!

That said, Ves did not wish to become a ruthless taskmaster who only knew how to whip his slaves. As a mech designer, he possessed the responsibility of guiding and mentoring others in his profession.

Since he led the Braves, he became responsible for them as well. While Ves was unwilling to invest a vast amount of time, resources and attention on their development, he did not believe his assistants needed any coddling.

After establishing a working merit system, the assistants could choose to contribute to the LMC and the Larkinson Clan through several methods. By earning a lot of merits and exchanging them for some potent rewards, the ambitious among the group of assistants would be able to climb their way up through their own efforts!

The industriousness of the assistants had surprised Ves a lot. None of the assistants were average people. Whether they were Braves or Erudites, they both worked diligently and tried their best to stand out and receive the favor of their superiors.

It was unavoidable that Ves and Gloriana both picked their favorites after several weeks of progress.

In general, the Braves consisted of colorful characters who came from a wide variety of backgrounds.

For example, Moltar Ringer used to be a Reinaldan before he joined the Larkinson Clan. Due to the state's murky legal practices and the state's recent devastation during the Sand War, Moltar ended up deep in debt.

Everything changed once he joined the Larkinson Clan. As a member of a tight-knit organization that had become as wealthy as some of the Hexadric Hegemony's minor dynasties, the little debt that Moltar owed to Reinaldan money lenders no longer became a problem!

As a result, the Reinaldan began to view the Larkinson Clan and Ves in particular as his savior. The man's incredible passion and drive infused a lot of energy in the Fifth Design Team, which he led with enthusiasm.

Out of all of the Braves under his supervision, Ves identified himself most with Moltar.

Both of them came from modest, lowborn backgrounds. Both of them had to work hard to crawl their way upwards. Both of them were emotional. Both of them earned some lucky breaks that allowed them to shoot up and bloom in greater splendor.

Most of all, both Ves and Moltar possessed the same trait that allowed them to thrive under pressure.

Combined with the fact that Moltar possessed spiritual potential, Ves already developed high expectations towards the team leader.

It just so happened that the fellow spent one of his rare and precious merits for an individual tutoring session with Ves!

No one else had requested this service as of yet, so Ves wanted to make sure he provided plenty of value in the form of helpful guidance and useful advice.

When Moltar entered one of the offices next to the design lab, he sat down at the chair in front of the desk.

Ves already sat on the opposite side. In order to prepare for this session, he briefly studied Moltar's record. He not only became up to date with the Reinaldan's past, but also the work he performed on the Sanctuary Project.

"Welcome to your first tutoring session." He greeted the team leader. "First of all, let me say that I will endeavor to use my knowledge, experience and insights to provide guidance to you. This means that everything I say is colored by my own personal biases. Do you understand the implications of this warning?"

The assistant diligently nodded. "I do not mind. Any guidance is better than no guidance. I have long been on my own since I graduated. I had to fumble my way to Apprentice and I still struggled to keep my former mech company afloat."

"Very well. Since you consent to receiving my personal guidance, let us start this session. Let us start with your design philosophy. According to your record, you are aiming to specialize in signal disruption, correct?"

"Right." He nodded. "Back in the Reinald Republic, I tried to focus on designing and selling mechs that would allow me to gain a footing in the mech market. I noticed that there are a lot of.. irregular outfits who needed a cheap and potentially disposable means of interfering with enemy communication signals. While there are plenty of good

mech models that can achieve this job, they are too fancy and expensive for the audience I'm talking about. As for the cheaper ones, they're products developed by beginner mech designers who just want to earn some quick Reinaldan marks."

"So you decided to take the bold step and specialize in signal disruption in order to occupy this niche?"

"Yes..." Moltar briefly looked away.

Signal disruption did not sound like a glamorous specialization. In his record, it was classified as a Class II offensive design philosophy, but strictly speaking it leaned more towards utility.

Mech designers were humans as well. If they possessed the right opportunities, they were much likelier to pursue flashier and more impressive design philosophies!

This was why the design philosophies of most third-class mech designers weren't as sophisticated as those developed by their second-class counterparts.

In this regard, Moltar was more unfortunate than most and had to specialize in something that allowed him to survive in the mech industry rather than match his actual inclinations.

However, for him to become good enough to join the Larkinson Clan, he made an earnest effort in progressing his design philosophy!

"Are you passionate about signal disruption?"

"Not at the start." Moltar admitted. "Over the years, I found it increasingly more interesting. There are many different communication methods in use by humanity. There are ways to weaken them, block them and even hijack them! Though I can't accomplish anything fancy, I am already happy if my mechs are used to stymie the plans of the opponents of my customers."

The assistant truly sounded sincere. When Ves observed Moltar through his spiritual senses, he could pick up the former Reinaldan's faint spiritual activity.

That was a good sign. If Moltar held no passion towards his chosen specialty, then he didn't have a future in it. Ves would have encouraged the man to adopt a different design philosophy in that case.

"Tell me about your ambition." Ves asked. "Every mech designer seeks to fulfill an impossible dream. What is the mech you are aiming to design if you are ever able to reach the rank of Master?"

Moltar hesitated for a moment, but since he was talking to a fellow mech designer, he quickly got over this hurdle.

"I.. I envision designing a mech that can impose total solitude across an entire star system. I want to design and build a mech that imposes its entire dominion across light-hours! From one end of a star system to the other end, I want every asteroid, every moon, every planet and all of the space in between to become cut off from each other! Not a single hostile will be able to transmit any signal to their comrades!"

What a great ambition! The power required to accomplish this must be insane, and so was the exact implementation. The difficulty increased tremendously when the opponents of Moltar's dream mech became more powerful.

Trying to disrupt every communication method, from conventional electromagnetic waves to quantum entanglement, was very difficult to accomplish, especially since the mech had to block every possible method at the same time.

At his current level, Moltar did not need to aim so high. It was sufficient if he could design mechs that could block every conventional means of communication between ordinary third-class mechs.

"Well, you certainly aren't short of ambition. I think this is a worthy goal to pursue." Ves commented. "Right now, where do you think you stand?"

"I have performed a lot of research in my chosen field. Since I joined the clan, I borrowed several interesting books from the Larkinson Library. Reading the textbooks from Clarion University has opened my eyes to many more communication methods. I still have a long way to go before I can develop means to interfere with all of them. In fact, it might take too long."

As Moltar explained his situation further, Ves gained a sense that the man was splintering too much.

Ves abruptly raised his palm. "Stop for a moment and think back on what you said."

"Do you think I'm spreading myself too thin?"

"If you are cognizant enough to become aware of this shortcoming, why do you persist?"

"That's because my specialization requires me to provide a means to disrupt every signal transmission method."

Ves chuckled. "Moltar, no offense, but the amount of communication methods that both humans and aliens have invented is far larger than you think. If you develop specific

signal disruption methods for each and everyone of them, you will need several centuries to accomplish your goal!"

"I will learn faster once I earn enough merits and augment myself." Moltar confidently said.

"While it is true that a good cranial implant and an intelligence-focused gene mod template can boost your raw learning ability, you still won't be able to see the forest from the trees."

"What do you mean?" Moltar frowned.

"I'm telling you that if you are truly dedicated towards signal disruption, that you should focus on developing more global, inventive and unique methods to accomplish your goal. Rather than learn or develop one specific method for radio communications, tightbeam laser communications and etcetera, why not come up with a way to block all forms of electromagnetic signal transmission?"

Moltar frowned and reflexively shook his head. "While there are means to do so, the more you try to stretch a solution, the less effective it becomes."

"Says who?" Ves shot back. "Just because it hasn't been done effectively before does not mean you can upend this paradigm. If you just focus on a limited number of broader implementations and focus on combining them even further, you might not be able to spread as much as you planned, but at the very least you can go deeper than anyone else. This is not only a more practical development path, but it will push you into spending your time on research and development."

The profound insight in those words struck Moltar like lightning! His eyes widened in realization!

"This is how true mech designers progress." Ves stated. "If you keep studying other people's work, how can you ever accomplish anything meaningful? Every Journeyman has arrived at this rank by developing their own original research. If you ever want to amount to something, then stop following other people's footsteps and start blazing your own trail!"

Chapter 2199 Disqualified Hexer

The problem that Moltar suffered from was a rather simple problem for Ves to address.

If Moltar enjoyed the guidance of a proper mentor, then he wouldn't have developed a fixation for researching an endless amount of minor, existing solutions.

In the beginning, mech designers still had much more to learn in order to become more proficient at their craft.

Yet learning existing knowledge was not helpful in itself. It only set up a mech designer to become an excellent imitator and assistant.

To become a Master who succeeded in introducing something groundbreaking and innovative to the mech market, a mech designer needed to do more than passively absorbing other people's work.

Transitioning from absorbing knowledge to generating it was a difficult step for many to take. Some mech designers simply weren't suited to venture into the unknown and do the heavy work of pioneering a new research direction.

Right now, Ves could only say for sure that Moltar had been spending a lot of time as a learner. This did not indicate whether he would make for a good innovator. It was up to the young assistant mech designer himself to develop the necessary skills, habits and mindsets required of a good researcher.

Ves passed on a couple more tips and nuggets of advice. He constructed a set of instructions that would allow the fellow to smoothly take his first steps in performing his original research. Moltar grew more and more thoughtful as he finally realized his precarious direction.

"Thank you, patriarch." Moltar bowed sincerely. "I already feel I have already earned back the merit that I have spent."

"You're welcome, Mr. Ringer."

There was plenty of time left in their session, so they began to discuss other matters. Ves took a closer look at Moltar's old mech designs and provided his honest opinion as well as all of the points that the man should address in order to improve the quality of his output.

They also discussed Moltar's potential future role in the Larkinson Clan.

"While no one can ever say if an Apprentice is capable of becoming a Journeyman, let's consider what will happen if you ever manage to promote. What do you envision yourself doing?"

Moltar paused as he thought over his answer. "If I manage to invent something good that I can rely upon to push forward, I think I want to design mechs and publish that can disrupt signals right away. I am very envious of you and your partner for being able to meet the needs of millions of customers with your products. I can't imagine the amount of satisfaction you feel for being such a big influence to many people's lives."

That was for sure. Every mech designer was an artist and producer at heart. They rarely designed and created something purely for their own enjoyment. Only by receiving the

validation of many other people would mech designers feel as if they accomplished something meaningful in their lives!

"The LMC offers any Journeyman the opportunity to propose and lead their own projects. Journeymen can be trusted to develop products that will not shame the LMC and the clan. While you still have a long way to go, know that there is a bright future ahead of you if you work hard enough."

The tutoring session soon came to end. Moltar had become filled with new thoughts and needed a lot of time to process what Ves conveyed to him. No matter what, the assistant benefited hugely from what he learned!

That said, as Moltar turned his back and exited the office in contentment, it remained to be seen whether he amounted to anything.

The benefit of hiring many mech designers was that Ves did not need to get hung up on the individual failure and success of his people. He just had to provide them with opportunities and see if any of them bloomed. It didn't matter who among the assistants eventually advanced to Journeyman.

"Well, that's not entirely right. I really want Ketis to become a Journeyman. She is my first true student."

He took pride in her development. Even if her specialty was very narrow and specialized, he approved her decision to pursue an extreme. He looked forward to seeing what she was capable of once she formed her design seed.

Throughout the day, Ves not only busied himself with design work, but also studied some reports.

It just so happened that Ranya Wodin filed a new status report. Ves decided to enter the isolated biolab recently added to the Scarlet Rose.

"Ranya." He greeted. "How are you doing?"

"I have made an interesting discovery!" She replied as she gestured towards a scanner. "When I studied the 'exhausted' sample of serum that you provided me some time ago, I spent a long time studying the dead components."

The sample she referred to was the tiny drop of life-prolonging treatment serum which Ves had robbed of its life-attributed spiritual energy.

He subsequently used it up during the ceremony that birthed the Superior Mother. The drop of liquid stopped glowing as much and it didn't swirl anymore either.

Ves thought it had turned into a husk after losing the lively energy that provided them with mysterious qualities. He did not hesitate long before passing it over to Ranya, who enthusiastically studied it in order to identify and find a way to replicate its ingredients.

"What progress have you made, exactly?"

"Well, I managed to identify the general traits of many of the plant components used to synthesize this serum. I am not able to match them to any exoplants in my database, but that is because they are too high-end. However, many exoplants have 'relatives' that are akin to different variants of a mech. After a lot of observation and analysis, I have managed to identify numerous lower-quality exoplants."

"What does this mean, exactly?" Ves frowned.

"It means that I will possibly be able to fulfill one of the goals you've set! As long as I research these specific plant species further, I may be able to develop a formula for a more modest serum! While I don't dare to claim that I can prolong someone's life by a century, a few decades or so is very much within reach!"

Now Ves became interested. This was actually something that a very small number of biotech companies outside of the Big Two had already accomplished. However, they always charged ridiculously high prices to stave off death by just a couple of decades!

The only reason those companies were able to get away with charging so much was because the extra life could be obtained by spending money instead of merits.

"How economical would it be to develop this homebrew formula? Do you think it is viable enough to offer this solution to every clansman?"

Ranya's enthusiasm faded a little. "That is still a work in progress. The lower-quality exoplants may not be as inaccessible as their high-grade cousins, but they are still very pricy! Not only that, they originated from many unique alien environments and each of them can only grow under very different conditions. If you can get this far, then synthesizing the correct formula is also a huge challenge. From my studies, I have heard stories about how the synthesis of life-prolonging treatment serum has a ridiculously high failure rate. The higher the grade, the smaller the yield! Although I can't confirm this, I have also heard that the lower grades of serum are essentially partial failures. They don't quite make the cut and can only rejuvenate the lives of those who haven't undergone this treatment!"

Those were some bold claims! Instinctively, Ves felt that her logic was sound, but he did not dare to take her speculation too seriously. He was not a biotech researcher and was not well-versed in biology. Ranya herself was only the equivalent of a Novice or Apprentice in her profession, so she was hardly an authority when it came to something as sophisticated as life-prolonging treatment serums.

Despite the challenges that Ranya had to overcome, Ves still viewed her current work with lots of promise.

While it might be unlikely for her to succeed in a short amount of time, Ves was willing to wait. It would be great if she developed a way to extend the lives of his clansmen without spending too much money.

As long as every clansman was able to live ten or twenty years longer, they would continue to contribute to the clan by the same amount of time!

This would allow Ves to squeeze much more work out of every member of the clan! The importance of this couldn't be overstated!

After Ranya and Ves finished their discussion, they moved on to other topics.

"How is the Larkinson Biotech Institute?"

"I left most of the administrative work to a bunch of vice directors that I have appointed." Ranya casually said. "Don't worry. Even if I'm not there to address every single issue, the Institute is still developing on track."

As the director of the Institute, she was supposed to act much more conscientious. However, she was more of a pure researcher type than someone who enjoyed bossing people around. She was similar to Ves in that regard. It didn't surprise him at all that she chose to delegate many of her responsibilities to others.

As someone who relied heavily on delegation himself, Ves couldn't very well criticize Ranya for doing the same.

"How much progress have you made on your other projects?"

She frowned. "Not much, to be honest. I have too many projects vying for my time."

"That is what the Larkinson Biotech Institute is for. Haven't you hired other biotech researchers to assist you in your research?"

"We mostly focused on expanding our Gene Department and Implant Department. You wanted us to quickly develop the capabilities of providing second-class augmentations to the members of our clan. We've accomplished your target, but at the cost of neglecting our other responsibilities."

That was true. Ves couldn't fault her too much considering that he set these priorities. "Now that those departments are up and running, I hope you don't neglect the research role of the Institute any further. Understood?"

"Yes, sir. I'll instruct the vice directors to recruit more researchers and specialists."

Once they discussed work-related matters, the conversation strayed in a more personal direction.

"You've been in the clan for a few months now. How do you feel about your new life so far? As a Hexer, it must be very challenging to adjust to a radically different culture."

Dr. Ranya looked a little askance at Ves. She did not wish to reveal her inner thoughts at all, but she still had to say something.

"The clan is.. interesting. I would have thought that mixing so many people from different backgrounds would inevitably lead to chaos, but the combination of your strong presence along with this strange sense of kinship that I share with other clansmen has been remarkably effective in making everyone fit in. Even I'm surprised how easily I have come to like certain aspects about the clan. I feel proud whenever I call myself a Larkinson. I never thought that I would reach this point so soon."

Ves smiled inwardly. If even a Hexer like Ranya mellowed out after she joined the Larkinson Clan, then that meant the Larkinson Network was doing its job!

He had always speculated that the Larkinson Network and its relation to the Golden Cat would have this effect. Witnessing such an effective result made him glad that this experiment succeeded!

"Do you ever wish you could return to the Hegemony and become a proper Wodin?"

"No." Ranya answered without hesitation. "Though I initially looked down on you Larkinsons and your values, I have come to like what you stand for. To be honest, I don't even know I can still call myself a Hexer. I have spent too much time with nice, competent and capable men that I really can't accept Hexer orthodoxy anymore."

Ves was pleasantly surprised by what he heard!

Chapter 2200 Guard Kitty

Dr. Ranya Wodin-Larkinson's transformation from a typical Hexer into a more tolerant and open-minded Larkinson occurred remarkably quickly!

As someone who dealt with Gloriana on a near-daily basis, Ves knew that Hexers spent a lifetime learning that women were superior and boys had to be brought to heel.

Spending ten, twenty, thirty or even more years in the Hegemony where this orthodoxy affected every aspect of society meant that Hexers were notoriously stubborn about their beliefs!

He thought that other Hexers would be just as obstinate and convinced in their warped values and beliefs as his fiancé!

Perhaps it was a mistake to think that Gloriana was a representative example of a Hexer. As a Journeyman, much of her attitude, behavior, values and other personality traits had been essentially set the moment she formed her design seed.

It was the same for Ves. He could never forget about the time he advanced to Journeyman and witnessed the sight of his loose spiritual energy collapsing into a concentrated ball. It not only absorbed everything related to his design philosophy and approach to mech design, but also a bunch of random thoughts, emotions and feelings that he possessed at the time!

This phenomenon probably explained why Gloriana would always remain as she was for the most part. Only through the passage of time was it possible for design seeds and whatever had been stuffed inside to undergo a gradual evolution.

Expecting any changes to happen quickly among those who formed their design seeds was impossible!

Since Ranya was not a mech designer and did not form anything like a design seed, she became much more susceptible to the Larkinson Network's subtle influence.

The clansmen connected to the Larkinson Network may be able to influence the Golden Cat's development, but the opposite was true as well!

Ves hadn't been worried that the addition of Gloriana and Ranya into the clan would turn Goldie into a female supremacist or something.

The two Hexers were so outnumbered by the other groups of Larkinsons that their opinions didn't matter!

What Ves, the trueblood Larkinsons and the other groups thought possessed much more weight to the Golden Cat.

In that sense, it would have been more surprising if Ranya was just as contemptuous towards the male gender as she was at the start.

To be honest, as Ves interacted more with Ranya, he became more and more frightened at the effectiveness of the Larkinson Network's indoctrination effect.

Countless other people in the Komodo Star Sector had tried to change the minds of Hexers so they wouldn't be so virulently offensive, but such measures rarely succeeded!

Outside of extreme measures such as brainwashing, many Hexers had all been raised from the ground up to take the orthodoxy they learned as an absolute, universal truth!

Technically, adding Ranya Wodin technically meant that she had been subject to brainwashing as well. Even if Ves couched it in a less alarming term such as

indoctrination or enlightenment, it still did not hide the fact that Ranya experienced a lot of changes that she ordinarily wouldn't have made on her own accord!

This was a very dubious ethical development, and someone with an actual conscience might feel guilty for subjecting so many clansmen to this treatment.

Not Ves.

Though he understood the problematic issues, the gains vastly outweighed the costs in his eyes!

Besides, it was not as if the Larkinson Network was solely responsible for transforming Ranya so quickly.

Previously, she resided in the Hexadric Hegemony, where dissent and different opinions practically didn't exist. The powerful state had done a very good job at shaping the entire environment and all of the Hexers living within the mold of its culture.

Under such circumstances, there was too much fertile ground for Hexer orthodoxy and no room at all for other opinions!

Ranya grew up and developed herself in a way that made fit in the Hegemony.

Yet ever since she was suddenly plucked from her familiar home state and jumped into the pond of the Larkinson Clan, she lived in an entirely different environment.

Usually, it wasn't so straightforward for a foreigner like her to integrate with the clan who abided by very different values.

Over the course of many years, someone who wasn't actively trying to integrate with the Larkinsons would enter into at least two different trajectories.

The most typical trajectory was that Ranya would still cling to her roots as a Hexer and a Wodin. All of the pride and affection that she held towards her background and origin had already seeped into her bones. Ves could easily imagine that she would have remained stubborn about her own identity!

The second trajectory entailed a gradual surrender. If Ranya wasn't as conceited about her Hexer identity as Ves thought, then she may slowly begin to accept the Larkinson mindset over time. This was a very gradual development and could easily stall for many reasons.

What actually happened was that the Larkinson Network hastened her integration into the Larkinson Clan to a much greater degree! With the instinctive affection that she sensed from other Larkinsons, it was very difficult for her to treat male Larkinson with contempt!

The effect of spending a short amount of time in the Larkinson Clan and bonding with the Golden Cat was much stronger than spending entire decades in the Hexadric Hegemony!

This combination embodied the concept of institutional isomorphism to a much greater degree!

Institutions and the people that interact with them ultimately influenced nonconformists into becoming conformists through exerting external pressure.

In other words, the environment changed the person.

Yet with the addition of the Larkinson Network, Ranya and every other adopted Larkinson suddenly became exposed to an influence that bypassed every obstacle and connected straight to their minds!

The active bond that every Larkinson shared with the Golden Cat in effect exerted change from within!

If Ranya joined the Larkinson Network but returned to the Hexadric Hegemony, then it was difficult to say if she would change at all. After all, no matter what thoughts she harbored in her mind, she still had to act like a Hexer to fit into the environment!

"It's the combination that matters."

The dramatically effective results frightened Ves a bit. His worries were only tempered by the fact that once someone became sufficiently Larkinson, they still retained their individuality.

Otherwise, the Ylvainans would have become secularists and Vincent wouldn't obsess so much about his manhood.

All of this reminded Ves that he hadn't really checked up on the Golden Cat for a time.

"Hmm. Maybe I should do that."

Ves returned to his stateroom and took the Larkinson Mandate from Nitaa. The ancestral heirloom felt warm to his touch, and the Golden Cat actively looked up to Ves.

Nyaaa.

His mouth cracked into a smile. "You are such a precious darling."

Though Goldie stood for the entire Larkinson Clan as a whole, she was also still an adolescent kitty.

That said, she developed quite quickly. Not only did she receive regular lessons from Qilanxo, she also formed bonds with more and more clansmen, each of which had their own story to share.

Ves wasn't sure how much she had grown as a spiritual entity, but he could still sense the youthful spirit within her. She was filled with vitality and spirit.

"Are you content?"

Nyaa!

"What do you think about the clan?"

Nyaa nyaa nyaaa.

"We have grown explosively since the beginning." Ves agreed. "We won't be stopping anytime soon. Once we acquire our factory ship, we need to bring in a lot of trained personnel. We'll be expanding even further over the years as we'll be acquiring more capital ships. All of those huge specialized ships can't be staffed by our existing manpower alone. We will have to open recruitment to skilled second-class workers."

Though Ves had no stomach for hiring Fridaymen and Hexers, once the Larkinson Clan traveled to another star sector, he had no more concerns about opening the door to second-class applicants.

Ves had no doubt that those recruits would come when asked! The reputation of the Miracle Couple was sufficiently dazzling enough to prop up the insufficient foundation of the clan. In fact, his reputation had always served as a pillar to his clan from the start, and this would hold for a very long time!

"What do you think about our recruits? Are there any issues with integrating the different groups of people into our fold? I hope you haven't been corrupted too much by foreign beliefs. Just because we are tolerant doesn't mean we should compromise on our core beliefs so easily."

Nyaa nyaa nyaaa!

The Golden Cat briefly left the confines of the book and floated over to his shoulder in order to rub her cheek against his own in an affectionate manner.

"Oh?" He chuckled. "Gloriana attempted to sneak in some Hexers into the clan? I hope you remember your instructions."

Nyaaaaa!

Ves knew what Gloriana was like and he had an inkling she would attempt to add more Hexers into the Larkinson Clan.

It wasn't so easy to do that, though. First, Ves personally brought Goldie to life, and he invested a large part of his spiritual energy and intentions in the form of empowered images into her spiritual makeup.

This not only meant that she possessed a very high degree of loyalty and affection towards him, but she also valued his views the most!

Since Ves did not possess the most flattering opinion of Hexers, Goldie should also have inherited some of his objections towards Hexer culture!

Second, he designed Goldie to observe the overall sentiments of the clansman she shared a bond with and to slowly make them her own, within reason.

Though he never conducted any formal surveys, he knew that the vast majority of Larkinsons did not regard Hexers with fondness!

The male Larkinsons were very proud of themselves and would never subject themselves to the insane discrimination that Hexers practiced on a daily basis.

Unless males were spoonfed with Hexer orthodoxy from birth such as Venerable Brutus, it was incredibly unlikely for those who grew up in a more normal society to suddenly agree that their own gender needed to be beaten down in the dirt. Only deviants embraced this treatment!

As for the female Larkinsons, even though it appeared that Hexer ideology put their own gender ahead, they rejected it just as vehemently!

Aside from believing that every gender deserved equal treatment, women weren't isolated. Their male friends and family didn't deserve to be denigrated. More than that, they hoped that their sons and grandsons wouldn't be subjected to any humiliation either.

Goldie should know all of that and be aware of the peril of bringing any Hexers in the fold. Unless Ves personally inducted them into the clan or if they sincerely renounced their Hexer beliefs, there was no way in hell that Gloriana's scheme would succeed!

After a younger and more naive Golden Cat inducted a degenerate like Vincent Ricklin into the clan, Ves had taken the time to lecture her and provide her with specific instructions.

One of them just happened to be related to Hexers!

At the time, Ves only wanted to guard against contingencies.

He did not actually expect that his thorough preparation paid off. He raised his hand and caressed the Golden Cat.

"You've grown both smarter and stronger. Good job. The clan will need your strength in the coming days. How well can you cooperate with the mech pilots in battle? Are you able to empower the people piloting the Bright Warriors in anyway?"

Nyaaa....

Ves sighed. "Don't feel ashamed. This is new to me as well. I'm sure we'll figure something out when I work on the Chiron Project. We'll all be depending on you to help our next generation. You won't have to do everything alone. I'll do my best to coordinate with you from the design side. We're in this together, Goldie."

Nyaaaaaa!