

Mech 2411

Chapter 2411: Braver

The Larkinsons succeeded in bringing a warship online. They chose to spend their efforts on the Ailing Frey, as that happened to be the latest and most modern warship of the Allidus Alliance.

While it was too much to ask the incoming personnel to control the ship as well as the original crew, the Ailing Frey was not that difficult to bring online.

As long as the Black Cats hacked the ship systems and made sure to sweep them for traps and safeguards, the engineers and officers came face-to-face with friendly, user-friendly control systems.

This did not surprise Ves. A good maker always took his target audience into account. While the Allidus Alliance was certainly well-run, it couldn't ask too much of its own personnel! Most were pirates with mixed backgrounds. Expecting them to run a ship as complex as a CFA warship was way too unrealistic.

Therefore, the pirate shipwrights who designed and built the Ailing Frey not only made sure to keep the interfaces and control systems as self-explanatory as possible, they also made sure include dummy modes!

Though relying on simplified controls did not allow the Larkinson prize crew to make full use of the Ailing Frey's capabilities, it took a record couple of hours to get the powerful destroyer to move.

It only took a half hour after that for the temporary crew to figure out how to operate the main gun battery.

When her forward turret started swiveling, many of the Larkinsons in the vicinity grew nervous. Nearby Larkinson mechs on patrol went on high alert. As soon as the massive gun turret directed its aim at an existing Larkinson asset, they would definitely do everything possible to shut it down by force!

Fortunately, no weird programming took over the turret's systems. No traps triggered. The Black Cats already surmised that the Allidus pirates were too confident in their own strength to believe that their enemies would capture their own ships.

Ves was in the design lab of the Scarlet Rose when the captured Ailing Frey fired her main armament once again.

The turret slowly swiveled until its triple barrels were able to point their muzzles towards a certain direction in the distance.

A moment later, the three laser cannons simultaneously fired! Three bright red beams instantly soared across space, threading numerous nearby asteroids and striking a distant pirate carrier at once!

Ves clapped with glee. "Great accuracy!"

The ship hit by the lasers was just a small converted carrier. Her thin hull barely offered any resistance against the powerful lasers. The beams managed to transfer an enormous amount of heat inside, thereby causing untold internal damage.

Just a minute after getting hit, the pirate vessel was already flying out of control. A small number of escape pods and mechs desperately launched from the doomed ship as she finally crashed into an asteroid!

Many nearby pirates managed to observe the disastrous sight. Their ships and mechs quickly raced away from the battlefield. If the Larkinsons managed to get the Ailing Frey to hit one of their own at this distance, then remaining here was suicide!

"Hahaha! Look at them run! Serves those pirates right!" Rina Orion gloated.

The others in the design lab became impressed as well.

"So this is the power of a warship in our hands." Zanthar sighed with admiration.

Dukan French crossed his arms. "The Ailing Frey is pretty nice, but the real prize is the Gravada Knarlax."

"Can we step aboard those ships to study their systems, sir?" Estelle Lynwood asked. "I'm especially interested in taking a look at how they engineered their massive primary armament!"

"All in due time." Ves replied. "We haven't completely swept it clean of threats as of yet. Give our crews some time to gain more control over the systems."

The battle that the Larkinsons had just won had impacted the Braves remarkably. Though Ves hadn't spared any attention for his assistants, they acquitted themselves decently this time.

The Battle of Ulimo Citadel had caused them to enter into full-blown panic. This time, they made sure to control themselves and each other. Though they did not play any role during the fight, Ves was already proud of the progress they achieved. They were truly beginning to live up to their moniker as Braves.

"Teacher, we've gained a lot of new expert pilots, right?" Maikel asked.

"All of the candidates we used to have broke through." Ves confirmed. There was no reason for him to keep this secret. "In addition, we have also welcomed a batch of new expert candidates to the fold."

Maikel looked incredibly impressed. "Wow. I never heard of so many experts breaking through! This is a miracle! Did they all break through with the help of the work you have performed on your mechs?"

"There are many factors that affect a mech pilot's chances of advancing." Ves awkwardly coughed. "Certainly, although I would like to believe that piloting our living mechs has helped, there are too many variables in play to know for certain. I think the single most significant contributing factor is the fact we clashed against an overwhelmingly powerful opponent. Situations like these always squeeze out the potential in those who have the courage to face the enemy despite the odds."

Many mech designers in the design lab nodded in agreement. This was not an exotic theory in the mech community. The Larkinson Clan highly advocated for its truth as well.

It was just that not everyone had the stomach to develop themselves when they were weak and vulnerable. Too many mech pilots preferred to take it slow and steady and only begin to fight in glorious battles when they advanced to expert candidate.

This mentality was entirely wrong as far as Ves was concerned! True courage came from facing adversity rather than bullying the weak. Strong pilots such as Joshua and Tusa both polished their wills long before they became exceptional. It was the progress they made during this early period that largely formed the foundation of their future success.

However, Maikel, who was very interested in living mechs, was not entirely satisfied with this answer.

"Could our new expert pilots have reached this level if they were piloting something other than your mechs?"

"I don't know." Ves truthfully answered, though he interpreted his student's question very loosely. "We would have to perform a large-scale systematic investigation to make any solid conclusions. A small sample size of four mech pilots, five if you count Venerable Jannzi, is wholly insufficient to make any definite statements. We would need to perform a massive quantitative experiment involving at least several thousand mech pilots split into at least two different groups. One group would be piloting our best LMC mechs while the control group would be stuck with piloting the closest non-LMC equivalents."

"Aren't we doing that now? Our clan's mech troops are already split up like this. Maybe we can announce to the galaxy that our mechs are truly capable of helping mech pilots advance. We'll become famous!"

Bonk!

"Ouch! That hurts, teacher!"

Ves did not regret knocking Maikel on the head. "Don't be crazy! Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. What if you're wrong? What if some other factor such as the unique environment is the main cause? We'd be ruining our reputations if we're proven wrong!"

"We would also be painting a target on our backs if your guess happens to be true." Catherine Evenson-Larkinson added. As a former scion of a noble house, she was much more astute in these matters. "While it shouldn't be unusual if one or two expert pilots or expert candidates emerge from the Battle against the Abyss, gaining four of the former and nine of the latter is a bit too exaggerated, especially when you consider that we fielded less than a thousand mechs."

"We're Larkinsons." Maikel retorted. "Our mech pilots are way better than others. Combined with the fact that many of them have been piloting our teacher's mechs, it shouldn't be a surprise we gained so many powerful additions."

"You fool! Just think about it. We have witnessed thirteen breakthroughs when we fielded less than half of a mech regiment's worth of mechs. That's a ratio of roughly 1 percent. While a single percent doesn't sound that much, the ratio is at least an order of magnitude smaller in any other outfit or military unit, and that is usually expressed across years, not the span of a single battle!"

Catherina had a good point. Ves worried a lot about the concerns she raised. If she could make this basic observation, so could others. He was already dreading his next conversation with Master Willix. Other authorities might also wish to investigate the circumstances of the so-called Battle against the Abyss.

Ves didn't know where that name came from. It certainly sounded dramatic enough to reflect the astonishing events, and it sounded a lot better than something generic such as 'Battle of Some Random Asteroids' or 'Subjugation of the Gravada Knarlax', among other suggestions.

He was already thinking about how to address these issues. The last thing he wanted was the MTA forcing him to take up residency at Halcyon Citadel. There was no way that he was willing to give up his freedom and autonomy!

"Ugh. This isn't going to be easy."

At least it was better than suffering a defeat. This was one of the better outcomes that he and his clan achieved.

Ves continued to check up on his Braves on an individual basis. He approached and talked to each of them in person for several reasons.

First, he wanted to verify how much they remembered from the previous battle. Those with stronger spiritual potential managed to remain conscious longer than the others.

Second, he wanted to check whether the Battle against the Abyss had left any serious scars in their psyche.

His quick inspection did indeed allow him to observe some worrying signs. Ves mentally noted down the names of those who showed signs of trauma and made sure to assign some counselors to them as soon as possible.

After witnessing how much battlefield trauma could warp someone like Carlos into a different person, Ves did not want his Braves to break before he could even earn a return on his investment in their development!

During these quick checkups, Ves encountered a very unexpected surprise.

As Catherine Evenson confidently sat down, Ves noted a change in her demeanor.

That wasn't strange in itself. Harrowing battles usually had that effect.

What was different about Catherine was that she appeared to be more confident and brave! This was the opposite of what he saw in others.

When Ves observed the former Sentinel noble with his spiritual vision, it took all he got not to jump in surprise.

To his utter amazement, Catherine had abruptly gained spiritual potential!

While it didn't look exceptional to him, the fact that she had become spiritually active at all was a very positive development.

If Catherine could do it, so could others!

Still, Ves grew confused. How did she manage to develop spiritual potential? Was it the same as mech pilots, where overwhelming pressure caused them to bring out their latent strength?

That didn't sound quite right.

"Catherine. What do you think of the previous battle?"

It is an amazing fight, and one that we will never forget." She said with a smile. "Aside from the trouble that I have mentioned, our clan will definitely gain a lot of prestige for

this. If we can haul the Gravada Knarlax and the other pirate warships to civilized space intact, then I suggest we hold a triumphant celebration. With props like these, our reputation will definitely rise to meteoric heights! This will grant us numerous advantages in the coming years."

"You're right, Catherine. I'll take your words into account. You don't need to worry too much about these issues. You're a mech designer. You have been making some good progress already. Keep it up and there might be a promotion in store."

"Truly?"

"I am a man of my word."

Pushing her into working harder would enable her to tap into her new potential more quickly.

Chapter 2412: Celebrity Endorsements

The Battle against the Abyss did not just ripple through the Nyxian Gap, but also beyond!

Of course, it took some time for those in the Komodo Star Sector to learn about the outcome of this long-awaited confrontation.

For more than a day, the Larkinsons in the Nyxian Gap hadn't transmitted any messages back to the clan members who remained in civilized space.

There were good reasons for that. First, they didn't want to transmit any sensitive information that Ves and the clan would rather keep under wraps. Second, even if they wanted to share the good news, they had no way to transmit their messages.

This was because their ships no longer possessed any quantum entanglement nodes!

A short time before the Battle against the Abyss commenced, Ves commanded all of the nodes to be destroyed.

The Black Cats made sure to remove every single communication device capable of communicating with the galaxy outside! Without any means to connect to the galactic net, Ves didn't have to worry about the Larkinson fleet leaking out sensitive information.

He did not even let off the Darkbreak module. His men had secretly removed the MTA communications device from the Scarlet Rose and hid it inside a random asteroid.

Right now, a detachment of Larkinson mechs were cautiously on their way to retrieve the precious device. Ves needed it back to talk to Master Willix on a frank basis. The clan also needed it for other communication.

In fact, the Gravada Knarlax and some of the other pirate ships that fell into their hands possessed quantum communication nodes as well.

According to Calabast, the pirates didn't build or buy them legitimately. Instead, they just stole from their prey.

None of these quantum communication nodes survived the battle. As soon as the dark gods appeared onto the battlefield, the pressure and interference they emanated caused the sensitive nodes to break.

"That is an unexpectedly good outcome." Calabast reported to Ves as the initial takeover of the Gravada Knarlax neared completion. "Quantum communication nodes are fairly sensitive to outside shock and influence. While there are reinforced nodes for sale that are better able to cope with adverse conditions, the pirates all sourced their nodes from privately-owned ships."

Third-class private sector starships rarely hosted reinforced nodes. They cost so much that they could easily eat through half of the budget of the ship in some cases. There was no way that any customer wanted to pay such a huge premium to obtain a simple ship! They would rather spend their money on other features such as faster propulsion or larger cargo holds.

Though Ves preferred not to talk to Master Willix again so soon, he knew he had to take the initiative to act proactively. If he simply did nothing, then the MTA would certainly begin to demand an explanation.

Due to the enormous power disparity between the Larkinson Clan and the Association, Ves would have no choice but to obey every instruction!

"I need to control the narrative."

This extended beyond just his relationship with the MTA. Though his clansmen were still in the process of tallying losses and comprehending the magnitude of what had taken place, the scope of casualties would soon become known to everyone.

The figures didn't look good.

"How many dead, major?"

Major Verle recited the figures from his data pad. "Sir, during this battle alone, we have lost around 140 Avatar mech pilots, 80 Sentinel mech pilots, 30 Battle Crier mech pilots, 30 Vandal mech pilots, 2 Swordmaiden mech pilots and also 60 Penitent Sister mech pilots. Naturally, we lost a lot more of the other personnel when so many of our ships went down. With more than thirty ships lost so far and many more damaged, over 6,000 Larkinsons have died, along with plenty of Penitent Sisters as well. This is the first time

in our entire run that we suffered such serious losses from our ship crews and support personnel."

Before that, the only significant loss in that area was when an anomalous hazard caused the disappearance of the Nova Krokaw. Compared to that little incident, the deaths from this battle were much worse! Not even the preemptive evacuation measures helped reduce this figure all that much.

Ves rubbed his forehead. "It could have been worse. Still, with so many clansmen gone, the hole they've left in the clan is enormous. It will be difficult for our remaining men to get over so many deaths."

He grew concerned about whether he could hold onto his position. When he and the Larkinson Assembly formulated the governing rules of the clan, the position of clan patriarch did not come with absolute power.

This was necessary in order to reassure the rest of the clan that their highest leader remained accountable. While the barrier to remove the clan patriarch was high, it was not an impossible hurdle to overcome.

Right now, Ves felt it was very realistic for eighty percent of the Assembly members to vote for his removal! While he had helped the clan rise, ruinous battles like these also proved that he could easily lead it to ruin!

"What I'm worried about are the reactions from the Avatars and Sentinels, sir." Major Verle noted. "These two groups comprise the mainstay of our clan. Any dissatisfaction from them will have far-reaching effects. At the same time, gaining their support will offer you a lot of internal support. The influence of the soldiers in our clan is very substantial. Buying them over means you automatically gain the support of the majority."

The former Brighter possessed a good grasp on what it took to swing people's opinions. When he pointed out that Ves only needed to focus on swaying the Avatars and Sentinels, the problem didn't appear to be so unsurmountable anymore.

Still, Ves wasn't sure whether the two groups would be easy to persuade.

"The Avatars are my original loyalists." He surmised. "While my standing in their eyes has certainly taken a hit from this battle, I can still bank on my existing popularity. After all, out of all of our mech forces, I invested a lot of resources and attention in them. I also have a good relationship with some key personnel. As for the Sentinels..."

His face grew ugly. He called up the casualty figures of the Sentinel mech pilots.

When his task force initially crossed over into the Nyxian Gap, the Sentinels boasted a grand mech roster of 500 mech pilots.

While the Avatars brought 600 mech pilots, that was mostly because Ves did not give them a choice.

The Avatars were the elites of the Larkinson Clan. As the prime mech pilots who everyone in the clan should look up to in the future, they needed to be prepared to fight any battle under any circumstances so long as they wore their gold-and-white uniforms.

If any of them disagreed with these terms, then they were welcome to depart after they ended their tours.

In contrast to the high expectations placed upon the Avatars, the Sentinels had it relatively easy. This was the organization for soldiers and mech pilots who wanted to commit to defending the Larkinson Clan but still be able to maintain an optimal work-life balance.

In the old Larkinson Family, Ves met plenty of people like that. Not every Larkinson was cut out to be a full-throated soldier. In fact, many survivors of the Bright-Vesia Wars typically transitioned from full dedication to looking to start a family.

His father was no exception.

Therefore, subjecting the Sentinels to successive battles where they sustained heavy losses was not a good reflection of his leadership!

It did not matter that these 500 Sentinels consisted of volunteers. Each of them entrusted their lives to him. When they signed up to take part in this excursion, they looked forward to taking part in a great endeavor.

They did not expect to go through a gauntlet where those who showed any weakness were mercilessly culled!

Yet that was exactly what happened. Of the 500 Sentinels that initially took part, only around 120 mech pilots were left alive!

Of that figure, some were heavily injured and some had lost the ability to pilot mechs, thereby making the overall picture worse.

Ves continually furrowed his brows. If he was a Sentinel, he would probably feel pissed at the insanely greedy clan patriarch that constantly picked a fight against the pirates!

Even though the Sentinels were the weakest mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan, their influence reached far. They were the closest to the non-militant Larkinsons, and they valued family the most.

Fortunately, Major Verle was not without ideas. "The situation is not as hopeless as you think, sir. Directly gaining the support of the Sentinels is a bad idea. We are both good

speakers, but there is only so much of the ugly truth that words can cover up. Engaging the Sentinels directly when they have suffered such a huge loss is.. not wise."

"Then what do you suggest instead?"

"We approach a small but key group of mech pilots that the Sentinels universally respect."

"Pardon?"

"Our expert pilots, Ves!" Major Verle smiled. "The one trait that every mech pilot has in common is that they always admire and respect the few who have managed to become expert pilots. We have five of them in our fleet. Gaining the support of this small group of stakeholders is a much better way to influence the Sentinels than any direct appeal. It's no different from leveraging celebrity endorsements."

This was quite an astute plan! Ves lit up after he heard this. While expert pilots were different from normal people, he was still confident he could sway all of them to support him as long as he talked to them on an individual basis.

"I already have Venerable Joshua in the bag." He confidently stated. There was no doubt that his greatest fan would stick to him unless he literally started eating babies! "Commander Dise probably doesn't care about the losses suffered by the rest of the clan, but that in turn means her influence isn't great. Commander Orfan has a bit more sway, but I'm not sure of her stance."

"Venerable Orfan may have developed some misgivings, but I believe she is still on your side." Verle noted. "She is no stranger to losses. She just needs to believe that we haven't needlessly thrown the lives of our clansmen away. The deaths have to be meaningful for her to accept the outcome."

That didn't sound too tricky. Ves was already beginning to warm up his Devil Tongue.

"It's always refreshing to talk to an expert pilot. While they're annoyingly stubborn, they're very predictable as a response. I just need to know how they think and how they act to formulate my approach."

"I will send you the updated behavior profiles of our expert pilots later today."

"That leaves us with Venerable Tusa and Venerable Jannzi. Both of them aren't exactly my fans."

"Are you confident that you can get them to back you up for the decisions you've made up to this point?" Verle asked.

"Uhhh... no? I've already talked to Venerable Jannzi about a similar topic before. She's very difficult to budge. As for Tusa, I don't know what he thinks, but I haven't exactly treated him well."

"Well, the effect we want to accomplish won't be as good if you can only receive the endorsement of three expert pilots rather than five. You truly need all five of them to give the Sentinels the impression that every new pillar of the Larkinson Clan is fully in favor of your leadership. It will be very difficult for the dissenters to continue to voice their doubts on you. It would be like hitting on the faces of the expert pilots."

This sounded like a relatively clever scheme.

"Let's do this, then." Ves said. "We'll have to move quickly before the negative sentiment spreads."

Getting all five expert pilots to support him was difficult, but Ves believed he could find a way!

Chapter 2413: Unforgettable Tour

Just like before, Ves brought his students and Braves on an eye-opening tour.

Hardly any human in the galaxy enjoyed the unique privilege of stepping aboard an actual warship!

The myths and legends surrounding this incredibly destructive class of warships caused the younger mech designers to feel apprehensive about getting close.

Yet hidden behind the glint of their eyes, Ves noticed their intense curiosity and excitement.

As mech designers, their job was to make weapons of war. While they favored mechs the most, they eagerly looked forward to studying an actual warship from within!

"Alright. We're here. Put your helmets up and remember the safety rules."

As soon as their large shuttle descended in one of the hangar bays of the Gravada Knarlax, they emerged from their vehicle in hazard suits and other protective gear.

The hangar bay used to be organized pretty well. The Allidus Alliance may not have been so diligent in organizing its other vessels, but it did not dare to neglect its pride and flagship.

If not for the collapsed sections and all of the vehicles and equipment crashed into the bulkheads, the clan could have made use of this place as an extra place to store the numerous wrecks floating in space!

"Wow. Does the rest of the intact portions of the ship look as bad?"

Ves shook his head. "Not quite. This hangar bay is fairly close to the damaged starboard section of the ship. Further ahead, the compartments aren't in as much disarray. Loose objects and unsecured equipment may have been flung against bulkheads or other obstacles, but there aren't too many of those. The ship is designed to take a lot of punishment. In fact, if not for certain abnormal circumstances, the Gravada Knarlax could have fought on even in this awful state."

It took a lot of sacrifices for his task force to even inflict this much damage.

The Penitent Sisters lost most of their combat carriers to the Gravada Knarlax's main cannons just to allow two more vessels to crash into the starboard side of the heavy cruiser.

Even then, the ship still held on with the help of the Hallowed Abyss Temple!

The warship's bow section suffered a lot of damage when Joshua charged into it. Flush with power from his perfect breakthrough, he managed to summon a powerful energy projection of the Larkinson Clan's ancestral spirit. This was the first time that the Golden Cat directly fought in a battle!

Many Larkinsons still remembered this glorious moment. This was before the dark gods emerged and exerted their soul-pressing auras. Ves had no intentions of hiding it because he wanted to boost the reputation of one of his strongest supporters.

"Let's take a look inside."

Ves and his mech designers proceeded to cross the messy hangar bay. They moved through the passageways and entered some random compartments. The Gravada Knarlax packed a lot of functions. Some of the more important ship components took up multiple decks. Witnessing the sheer scale of some of those systems left an unforgettable impression in their minds!

Of course, the most exciting stop of their tour was when they visited the aft turret system. This behemoth of a turret could fire enormous rounds that were capable of piercing through dozens of mechs or punching a hole in most of the ships of the Larkinson Clan!

The sheer amount of decks occupied by the turret mechanisms reflected the enormous capacity it took to host such a powerful weapon.

"Look at all of the space the pirates had to reserve for this weapon system!" Moltar Ringer remarked. "The turret that is exposed on the hull is just the tip of the iceberg."

Rina nodded and grunted. "Turrets that big don't rotate by themselves. The ammunition feeding system also has to be big enough to make it safe to insert another round in the main cannons."

"Just look at the size of them!" Zanthar stepped towards a secure stack of ballistic shells that looked ready to be fed into the cannons. "They're almost as big as a light mech!"

What was interesting about the Gravada Knarlax was that the ship actually possessed multiple types of rounds. Ves along with many of his assistants closely inspected these huge projectiles.

"They're all simple, but big."

"That's enough to turn this ship into the terror of the Nyxian Gap."

There was something very inspiring about studying the armament of a huge warship. This was a completely new experience for all of the Braves.

While Ves once had the pleasure of residing in a crashed CFA battleship, he never really got to access any of her formidable armaments from the inside.

There was something brutally inspiring about pirate engineering. Simple and uncomplicated, the pirates harkened back to an early age when they built their warships.

"How barbaric." Catherine Evenson shook her head in disapproval. "We no longer live under the tyranny of warships. These blasted pirates should all be wiped out for trying to bring back the Age of Conquest."

She still shared a lot of sentiment for her former state. The Sentinel Kingdom often bore the brunt of Nyxian pirate attacks. Taking down the main fleet of the Allidus Alliance and capturing a large portion of their warships definitely weakened them as a whole!

In a way, the Larkinson Clan performed a huge favor to the surrounding states. Ves narrowed his eyes a bit at that. He resolved to make sure that the Sentinel Kingdom and any other beneficiary would pay sufficient compensation. With the astronomical amount of fame, honor and prestige the Larkinson Clan was about to gain from this overwhelming victory, it would be hard for those bystanders to remain idle!

The tour continued for many hours. They crossed many areas which not only bore the aftermath of the crippling attacks inflicted on the ship, but also became the sites where many remaining pirates held their last stands.

Hardly any cleaning took place in the days before. The Larkinson infantrymen may have tried to put some effort into capturing the pirates alive, but if they fought too hard, there was no other alternative than eliminating them on the spot.

Though the follow-up parties had hauled the bodies away, the blood and broken pieces of tissue and gear still scarred the compartments. The Braves may have been spared from the awful smell by virtue of their vacuum-sealed suits, but the lingering presence of death still affected their mood.

Fortunately, this was not the first time that his assistant mech designers confronted such ugly sights. They had experienced so many ups and downs throughout the campaign that they were starting to become desensitized.

This was exactly what Ves sought.

His two proteges had it worse than the others. They were still young and impressionable, so the impact of this tour was greater on them. The sights they had seen today would be seared in their minds for the rest of their lives!

"I knew it would be bad, but I didn't know it was so much worse." Maikel queasily said. He almost looked ready to vomit! "Human body parts aren't supposed to look like that!"

The ugliest sight by far was observing the aftermath of a heavy pipe weighing hundreds of kilograms slamming into a pair of legs.

Ves didn't like to stare at it either. He was a lover of aesthetics and did not enjoy this eye torture.

Still, he felt it was important for his mech designers to witness the consequences of battle.

"Everyone thinks that human society has reached a high standard of civilization." He spoke. "Many humans have the privilege to be born in a decent home in a decent planet and state. As long as they don't go astray, they grow up and become someone normal. Yet that is only the surface of how our society works. Underneath this civilized layer is a more brutal society that is based solely on might. Stronger organizations and states get to dominate weaker organizations and states. If the latter thinks that society will protect them against abuse or exploitation, then they will easily fold once they meet someone that doesn't care about the rules!"

His words made a very deep impression on the Braves. Ves grasped the situation well and couldn't help but take advantage of the situation to imprint some views onto them. He wanted to groom each of his Braves into his loyal and like-minded subordinates.

After half a day of touring, Ves eventually parted ways with the group. The Gravada Knarlax had a lot more to offer. He didn't have time to experience the full breadth of a ship with an internal volume that was so large that she could fit an entire city inside her dimensions!

"She's truly massive." Ves sighed as he walked alongside Calabast. "Sure, the Starlight Megalodon is positively enormous, but we were guests back then. Now, we own this prize."

"For now." Calabast answered.

She still wore her high-quality Hexer-built infiltrator suit. The heavy-duty suit offered both stealth and protection, though Ves doubted she actually made use of it these days. Just like him, she had transitioned to letting the grunts do all of the heavy lifting.

"Let me enjoy this illusion for a little longer. It would be great to parade our captured warships during my upcoming wedding. I'm sure it will make an unforgettable impression on our guests!"

"You'll have to make some arrangements with the MTA to pull off such a stunt, and I don't think they will think highly to your request. The MTA has worked hard to make people revolted at the sight of warships."

"I'll figure something out." Ves muttered.

"You're going to have to figure a lot of things out. The Battle against the Abyss won't be easy to explain to the authorities."

"Don't I know it. I don't want to become a 'long-term' guest of the local branch of the MTA."

Calabast didn't want to see this outcome either. How would she ever be able to exploit him when the MTA already had him in the palm of its hands?

The two talked a little about how they should approach the inevitable inquiry. They didn't go too much into the details because they weren't speaking in a secure location. Even with this limitation, Calabast provided him with plenty of useful advice.

"The MTA is known for its long-term perspective. The officials in charge pay much more attention to the future rather than the present. The key to gaining their support is to present an argument that encourages the Association to miss out in the short term in the hopes of gaining a much bigger prize in the long-term."

This was the reason behind most of the MTA's decisions. Its public history was rife with lots of decisions that seemed illogical at the time but made a lot of sense a century or so later. From regulating the mech market to encouraging the mass-education of mech designers, many of its policies went on to spark a golden age for mechs.

When Ves thought about his problems in this context, he came up with several new approaches on how to handle his upcoming discussion with Master Willix.

"We're here."

He interrupted his thoughts when he realized that they had arrived to a very special destination.

Hidden within the bowels of the Gravada Knarlax was a huge hall that hosted a shrine.

It was larger and more elaborate than the one built at Ulimo Citadel. Made out of the same unknown obsidian stone, the Larkinsons had already tried to damage it. The stone resisted all manner of attacks.

Ves had packed up the previous shrine in a ship somewhere and he intended to bring back this one as well. There was no way he would let off all of this stone!

"I'll have to bring Lucky to split up this shrine." He muttered. "It's way too big to cart off as a whole."

The material the shrine was made of was just an extra to him. He withheld most of the excitement until he finally entered the shrine.

Amidst all of the blood, remains and ruined ritual markings, a large amount of broken metal pieces were strewn throughout the floor!

A brilliant smile appeared on his face. "So much Unending alloy!"

Chapter 2414: Requirements of Great Works

The main hall of the dark shrine inside the Gravada Knarlax looked like someone launched a terrorist attack in the middle of a demonic ritual.

While Ves had seen a lot of shocking sights, he still felt awfully disturbed at the scale of the ritual circle.

The floor didn't offer enough space! This forced the Nyxian cultists to extend the ritual circle onto the walls and ceilings. All of this blood made it so that the entire space looked like the insides of a bloody stomach!

It was a good thing the blood had dried out by now. The Watchers who presided over this immense ritual had already died in order to summon the main bodies of their dark gods

No matter how strange the ritual circle made him feel, it did not distract him for long. He couldn't keep his eyes off all of the Unending alloy pieces that were laying on the ground. To Ves, they were simply begging to be picked up!

"All of this metal will definitely go into my strategic materials reserve!"

The strategic materials reserve was his new inventory dedicated to exotics and other valuable materials. Ves only intended to draw out the materials stored inside the reserve when he needed to make exceptional products such as expert mechs.

Ves took in all of the broken pieces of Unending alloy and estimated how many mechs he could make from all of it. "I can make at least four mechs out of this material!"

And that was if he used it on a mech that incorporated Unending alloy liberally. If he held himself back and made greater use of substitute materials, he could easily stretch it out to double the amount of mechs.

He already decided to make extensive use of this bounty in the expert mechs of his first batch of expert pilots!

With expert mechs that were structurally made out of Unending alloy, his expert pilots would gain a decisive advantage against other expert mechs. Ves seriously doubted that many second-class expert mechs incorporated so much first-class material.

Seeing that Ves had gone mad at the sight of so much precious materials, Calabast quietly shook her head.

"Boys and their toys."

Ves did not care about what others thought. Nobody in the clan except him understood the full value of Unending alloy. While he still needed to inspect the custom mechs he had built for his expert pilots, he already knew that the Unending gear he crafted for them had performed admirably.

What impressed him the most about the new equipment was that the expert pilots were able to take advantage of the spiritually-reactive properties of the material. This had massive implications for the future and only stoked his greed for Unending alloy even further!

"Those blasted Watchers don't deserve to make use of this material!"

As far as he was concerned, the Hallowed Abyss Temple solely existed to donate precious quantities of Unending alloy to him. If not for the growing discontent in his clan and the need to distance himself from his parents, he would have loved to plunder more Unending alloy for a few years.

He lovingly approached a couple of the bigger chunks. Each of them were no larger than a cow, and most were actually smaller.

Despite their irregular shapes and sizes, Ves scanned each of them with his Vulcaneye and confirmed they were all uniform in their physical makeup. Whoever made these

statues did not cut any corners. He silently thanked whatever alien was in charge of their production.

The Larkinson personnel who entered the shrine had already scanned the broken pieces. By piecing them together in a virtual program, they ended up with a simulation of three statues that all bore a disturbing resemblance to the dark gods.

Seeing the complete forms of the Unending One, the Blinding One and the Inexorable One brought up a lot of awful memories to Ves. Suppressing them took quite a lot of effort, but the realization that he had made it through in the end was enough for him to find some peace in his mind.

"Heh. All of these powerful dark gods have become history now. Serves you right for targeting the Larkinson Clan!"

After he had his fill of inspecting the Unending alloy, he commanded his men to carefully collect each and every piece and bring them away.

While the Larkinsons already intended to bring the Gravada Knarlax with them, none of his people were sure they would be able to do so. Although her propulsion systems were still reasonably intact, the damage sustained by the heavy cruiser severely affected her structural integrity.

His men needed to perform a lot of repairs on the move in order to have any hopes of bringing the huge warship back to civilized space!

"We're lucky the Allidus Alliance hasn't skimped on FTL drives."

This was the most pleasant surprise of all. While the Allidus Alliance never showed any indications of wanting to bring their warships out of the Nyxian Gap, they were obviously thinking about it. The Gravada Knarlax actually boasted two large FTL drives that were seemingly tailored to the heavy cruiser.

The destroyers and frigates that accompanied the flagship also boasted FTL drives of their own. All of them were well-maintained and in good condition.

Of course, that did not mean that Ves and the Larkinsons were willing to trust them. One of the upsides to losing a lot of ships was that the Larkinson Clan were currently coping with an excess of evacuated ship crews. Many of them would soon move into the captured pirate ships to crew them and to inspect every critical system.

Even if Ves intended to sell or scrap most of them shortly after his task force returned to civilized space, they still needed to make sure the ship would even make it all the way there. Pirates always liked to bury various boobytraps and other nasty surprises in their own vessels.

Ves and Calabast visited some other important sections of the ship.

They stopped by the vast server rooms and data banks. The Black Cats were already having a great time extracting all of the useful data.

They visited several vaults. All of them contained valuable materials and other trinkets. Ves did not care so much for the latter, but the former would definitely go into his strategic materials reserve.

To his pleasant surprise, Ves found a large stash of B-stone in one of the vaults. When Ves scanned the entire collection, his eyes almost popped out of his sockets!

"There's enough B-stone here to build a shuttle out of it!" He celebrated. "I don't even know what to do with all of this material yet. This is definitely the second-best loot after all of that Unending alloy!"

As a mech designer and a maker of products, he benefited immensely from obtaining rare and valuable materials. He stood to make a lot of progress in his development as long as he made good use of their properties!

"It will be like the Devil Tiger, but grander." His eyes glinted with glee.

The gains he harvested from designing and making the Devil Tiger were incredible. Ever since then, his subsequent mechs never quite reached its level.

With materials as remarkable as Unending alloy and B-stone, Ves could once again produce miracles with them. Whether it was Unending weapons or his fantastic Unending Regalia, each product he could make with these exceptional materials would certainly be good enough to turn into heirlooms!

He was so preoccupied with thinking about how to put all of these valuable materials to good use that he hardly paid attention to the rest of the stops that Calabast brought him to. Not even Lord Hivex's stateroom with all of its trophies and trinkets impressed him much.

"The Gravada Knarlax is interesting, don't get me wrong, but I would rather appreciate my own work." He said as he was ready to depart the warship. "Besides, there is no way the Big Two will allow us to keep hold of any of the warships. Just strip of as many valuables as we can get away with before we inevitably have to hand the prohibited vessels over to the authorities."

"Understood. We won't waste this opportunity."

Calabast still had to remain behind in order to supervise some of the ongoing salvage and recovery operations aboard the ship. Ves returned to the Scarlet Rose alone.

Upon arrival, he returned to his own space and proceeded to work on his approach towards the MTA. A reckoning was about to come, and Ves needed to employ all of his wits in order to avoid an undesirable outcome.

Several hours later, he received an incredibly important notification. His men had retrieved the Darkbreak module and had just returned it to its old spot inside the Scarlet Rose.

He sighed. "I've been keeping the MTA waiting for too long."

The news about the pirate armada's shocking defeat had already spread throughout the Nyxian Gap. Even if the participants of the Battle against the Abyss weren't able to transmit any news yet, distant onlookers observed just enough to realize the Allidus Alliance was about to become history.

While the powerful pirate organization still retained a lot of assets in its territory, the loss of its flagship and several powerful escorts meant that Allidus no longer possessed enough power to defend its expansive territory!

The subsequent pirate movements would definitely lend credence to the rumors that Lord Hivex and his punitive fleet had met their end! Ves knew that not only the MTA, but also Gloriana and many other people wanted to get in touch with the victors.

When Ves reached the isolated chamber where the Darkbreak module had just been put back into place, he felt tempted to call Gloriana first.

The MTA wouldn't mind, right? They were eavesdropping on every conversation that took place in its private network anyway so it was not as if Ves snubbed them from his conversation.

Unfortunately, he did not have the choice. Apparently, the Darkbreak module was already active by the time he entered the compartment. As soon as he took a few steps closer, the physical projection of Master Willix immediately came into view.

She wore a stylish white lab coat, which meant that she had immediately interrupted her work in order to meet with Ves. Impatience radiated from her entire form.

"Hello, Master Willix. Are you here to congratulate us for our grand victory?"

She tapped her heels against the deck. "You have made a great contribution to society. You deserve all of the credit for removing a cancerous growth from this region. That said, you didn't need to remove the Darkbreak module from your ship before you entered into battle against the pirates. The MTA could have provided you with some helpful advice and technical support if kept it within reach."

Ves tried hard not to wince. "We will do better next time. I don't think we'll be confronting pirates again anytime soon, though. We thrashed the Allidus Alliance so hard and showed so much strength that I doubt anyone wants to tussle with us. Despite our losses, we have made immense gains."

"Please report on the battle you fought from the beginning. Do note that your words will be logged and included in our archives."

The interrogation had already begun. Ves expected some other MTA Masters or dignitaries to show up, but they never did. Perhaps they thought that he would be more candid if he spoke to a familiar and friendly face like Master Willix.

Keep dreaming.

He proudly presented a vague and hyperbolic story of the battle. He also transmitted a pile of doctored logs and reports that the Black Cats had prepared beforehand.

By all accounts, the first half of the battle was mostly true, yet the second half began to border on fiction.

Master Willix quickly began to frown as she went over the footage that was practically filled with noise. Reading the reports hardly provided her with any clarity. All of the references to gods and heroes quickly strained her tolerance.

"ENOUGH, Mr. Larkinson. What in humanity happened after Mr. Joshua Larkinson broke through and attacked the Gravada Knarlax?!"

Chapter 2415: Insistent Invitation

Ves had to exercise his Devil Tongue to the limit in the next half hour!

Under Master Willix's direct questioning, he could not gloss over the details he most wanted to skim over. He continually had to find creative angles to direct attention away from sensitive matters throughout the session.

"The pirates summoned these supremely powerful dark gods..."

"Our newly-advanced expert pilots fought against these terrible alien gods and acquitted themselves well for demi-gods. It's unfortunate that they weren't able to hold out against the Nyxian gods after they exhausted their initial breakthrough release..."

"Our multiple expert candidates managed to distract one of the enemy gods, the one the pirates call the Inexorable One. They stood even less of a chance against this Avian God than Venerable Tusa, since they only attained a bit of divinity. Their mechs aren't as good and their releases didn't have as much power..."

As for explaining what happened afterwards, Ves talked as if nothing about it had anything to do with him and his clan.

"The Nyxian Gap is not a completely dark place!" He falsely enthused. "In our darkest hour, we gained the assistance of a friendly god! I don't know who she is or why she decided to lend a hand against us, but it was clear that she is opposed to the dark gods. The divine confrontation that subsequently took place shook the surrounding space and knocked everyone unconscious for some reason."

"Including you?" Master Willix pointedly asked.

Ves nodded. "Yes. Do you know how powerful those dark gods are? Mortals can't withstand their majesty! While I was a bit better off than most, I eventually missed out on what the friendly god proceeded to do. All I know is that when I woke up shortly afterwards, every god was gone. We won, apparently, and I was not about to let the surviving but snoozing pirates off! I woke some of my people, who proceeded to wake our other clansmen and swept the Gravada Knarlax and other pirate assets before the scum even had a chance to mount a proper resistance!"

"I.. see." Master Willix drawled. "How did you conclude that your side has won the battle?"

While she retained her composure, it was clear that she did not enjoy the fact that he and the rest of his people conveniently lost consciousness at some point!

"Oh, that's simple. When I woke up, none of the gods were present. If the dark gods managed to beat the friendly god, then they would have proceeded to crush us while we were still knocked out. That didn't happen, so I guess the friendly god succeeded."

"This 'friendly god' had to face three of her kind. How do you think she won?"

"Beats me." Ves ignorantly shrugged. "I guess she's stronger. I think I did feel that she possessed remarkably more strength than any of the dark gods alone. She also looks human, so she probably employed strategy rather than brute force to overcome her enemies. It's a shame she left before I woke. I would have wanted to show my gratitude to her for saving us. Maybe she isn't interested in regular humans."

A pregnant pause ensued after he spun this tale. While his words sounded outrageous, he made sure to don a mask that truly believed that the battle proceeded in this fashion.

Master Willix frowned while remaining silent. Ves guessed that she was going over the data that he transmitted in her implant. She could also be corresponding with other MTA officials who were paying attention in the background.

"I am sorry, Mr. Larkinson, but I find it difficult to believe that 'gods' have interceded on behalf of both sides. Do you have any solid proof of this account?"

"We already sent our sensor data and logs to you. Our expert mechs and expert candidates clearly fought against the gods for a time."

"The amount of noise in the footage and sensor data is remarkable. The sensors of your ships are very deficient. It is rather astounding how even the surviving vessels of the Penitent Sisters are hardly able to resolve more details."

"The Gravada Knarlax focused all of her heavy firepower onto our second-class ships. They correctly concluded that the Penitent Sisters pose the greatest threat. I guess it was hard to leave them alone when it became clear that we converted them all into suicide vessels. We lost all of the combat carriers that carried the best sensor systems without being able to retrieve all of the data they collected."

"What about the other Penitent Sister ships?"

Ves helplessly smiled. "They're merely logistics ships, and rather low-specced ones at that. The Hexers who exiled the Penitent Sisters didn't want them to get any of the good stuff."

"Your Scarlet Rose is a considerably more modern Fridayman vessel, though. I know for a fact that her sensor and scanning systems are quite capable for her class."

"She's just a frigate. What can you expect from a ship this small? When those gods appeared onto the battlefield, my ship was already having trouble keeping track of them in battle. Almost everyone fainted except our expert pilots who managed to keep their wits, but they exhausted themselves quickly after expending their strength against these powerful existences."

"We would like to interview them." Master Willix stated.

"That.. is going to be a problem. They are still recovering from their breakthrough and subsequent battle."

This happened to be the truth. Ves did not have to lie about this. While it was possible for expert pilots to recover quickly after they had broken through, each of them overdrafted their strength in order to resist the dark gods.

"Please bring them before us as soon as they are fit to talk. In fact, we would like to invite all of you to speak with us more extensively about this battle. Gods or not, this is an extraordinary achievement and one of the few instances where a native mech force has overcome a stronger fleet that is centered around actual warships. We are already dispatching a fleet of ships to receive your forces outside of the border of the Nyxian Gap. We are happy to escort you and your expert pilots straight to Centerpoint."

That was exactly what Ves didn't want to hear! He seriously doubted that the MTA would ever want to let him go after confirming that the Larkinson Clan truly welcomed so many expert pilots and expert candidates in its ranks.

Ves modestly shook his head and spread his hands. "I am afraid that I have to decline your generous invitation. I have a wedding to catch. In addition, our clan doubtlessly wishes to celebrate our grand victory. People will raise a lot of questions if I am absent. I am sure the public is eager to witness this historic and defining moment for our star sector."

While the MTA did not have to pay attention to the public, Ves hoped that their expectations would be able to play at least some role. After all, the upcoming wedding of the Miracle Couple was already gearing up to become a high-profile spectacle involving guests from other star sectors!

Master Willix didn't give up that easily, though.

"We can hold a much grander wedding for the two of you in Centerpoint. With our support, we can turn your wedding into the most perfect possible occasion. You can also celebrate your clan's considerable contribution to society at the same time. Our Association is willing to organize and fund the events."

"That's not entirely appropriate, ma'am." Ves coughed. "My fiancé is a Hexer, and I'm already on the side of the Hegemony. Hosting and organizing our marriage will definitely break some neutrality rules, I'm sure. What will the Friday Coalition think? Those poor Fridaymen will all have the impression that the MTA wants them to lose so that the Komodo Star Sector turns into a bastion of female supremacy as soon as possible. In fact, not just the Fridaymen, but also many other people from other star sectors will begin to think that the MTA is not beneath playing favorites."

This was not something that the MTA could easily patch up! One of the biggest reasons why most human states in the galaxy put up with the Big Two was because all of the petty kingdoms and republics were still able to run their societies in their own way if they kept within their boundaries.

If the MTA did anything that broke its image of neutrality, a lot of people would begin to think they were better off living under the heel of the Big Two!

"Perhaps you may have a point, but we would still like to bring you and some of your men to our headquarters. We can wait until you have your little wedding and victory celebration to transfer you to Centerpoint. We can then properly verify your accomplishments and award you with the merits that you are entitled to. The proof and testimony that you have provided to us so far is not.. sufficient."

Ves inwardly grumbled. The MTA really wanted to 'debrief' him and his men in their stronghold! Master Willix even implied that she would hold back the astounding amount of merits he was supposed to obtain.

No one was allowed to touch his merits!

Seeing that Master Willix was so insistent on this course of actions, Ves decided to adopt a firmer tone. Since persuasion alone didn't work, he felt he needed to employ more tangible means to stop the Association from carting him off to Centerpoint.

He relaxed his shoulders and pressed his fingers against each other. His slight change in demeanor was fairly obvious.

"I have places to go and merits to earn. I am hungry to explore the greater galaxy. I am sure that Centerpoint is a cozy place for professionals like you, but I'm the kind of mech designer who will go crazy if I stay in a single place for too long. I could have never accomplished so much so quickly if I didn't travel and explore so much. So please, if you want to investigate us, you are free to step aboard our ships and question our men while we are on our way back to the Cinach System."

"There are several important people here at Halcyon Citadel who wish to meet with you, Mr. Larkinson. It is not possible for them to leave their posts at this time. These are very powerful and influential people, so it is not wise to snub them. Just get over here already and satisfy our curiosity. We can learn so much from studying the circumstances that led to the advancement of so many expert pilots and expert candidates."

She finally revealed the actual reason why the MTA really wanted to get their hands on Ves and his expert pilots. If he was in her place, he would probably issue the same demand!

That made it difficult for him to parry this request. One of the main goals of the MTA was to find ways to increase the rate of advancement of mech pilots.

The more expert pilots, the better! A larger pool of expert pilots produced more ace pilots, which in turn produced more god pilots, which the MTA was desperately short of! Halcyon Citadel was probably slobbering over the opportunity to present revolutionary research that actually increased the chances of mech pilots advancing to the next rank!

Though Ves wanted to retort that the MTA would never be able to accomplish this without his help, he knew the local MTA officials wouldn't believe him. He needed to give them a reason to back off and let him go on his way.

He directed a pointed stare at Master Willix.

"I would like to suggest a proposal to you, ma'am."

"Oh?" She curiously raised her eyebrow. "I suppose your proposal is not a trivial request."

"Not at all! I would never waste your precious time. I believe you will be very interested to hear what I am about to suggest."

"Well, let's hear it, then, Mr. Larkinson. I am all ears."

Chapter 2416: A Bold Proposal

Ves thought a lot about this conversation. It didn't take a genius to see that the MTA deeply wanted to know the secrets behind the Larkinson Clan's success. After the Battle against the Abyss, the clan suddenly gained four new expert pilots and nine new expert candidates.

In fact, there should have been even more expert candidates if some of them didn't die straight away!

Such a result was so extreme that even an idiot could tell there was something fishy about how all of these powerful mech pilots came into power!

Therefore, Ves could already tell the MTA would come calling.

It was difficult to find a way to resist their insistent advances.

While the MTA did not technically rule humanity as a whole, their power, influence and reach pretty much turned the Association into a de-facto hegemon.

When the MTA wanted something, few were able to say no.

Ves and his closest advisors discussed and analyzed how to keep himself and the Larkinson Clan free from the MTA's clutches.

The MTA did not expose its hierarchy and internal workings to the outside galaxy. It was rather difficult for outsiders to get a sense of how much say certain officials possessed within the organization.

Fortunately, there were plenty of clues. Both Calabast and Major Verle possessed deep insights into how organizations worked. The two already came to a consensus on what angle Ves should take to extricate himself from his current predicament.

Similar to the issue of his continued leadership in the clan, Ves did not need to persuade the MTA as a whole to leave him alone. That was impossible.

He only needed to win over someone powerful enough to cover for him and protect him from within the organization.

According to the public profile of Master Moira Willix, she was a distinguished Master Mech Designer who climbed up the ranks of the Mech Trade Association.

She originated from the galactic heartland, and quickly showed her talent in mech design. She traveled extensively and gained much from experiencing different locales and exchanging with many different mech designers along her journeys.

When she reached Master, she slowed down, but did not stop her travels. Right now, she had reached the edge of human space and was residing at Halcyon Citadel as a guest of sorts.

While Halcyon Citadel hosted many MTA Master Mech Designers, Ves did not believe they all had equal say in important matters.

The public profiles of the other MTA Masters mostly stated that they came from the galactic rim. Perhaps they were born and raised at Centerpoint, perhaps they came from a neighboring star cluster, perhaps they originated from another region in the periphery of human space.

The point was that these Masters were likely not very prominent due to the fact they emerged from the backwaters.

Certainly, the members of the MTA were technically equal to each other. Yet no organization was perfect, and no human was unbiased. Even if the Masters were of equal rank, Ves bet that those who originated closer to the galactic center had slightly more say than those who came from the galactic rim.

This was not the only part that was special about Master Willix. From what Calabast and Major Verle surmised, the visiting Master should wield a lot of power.

They weren't sure whether she possessed a higher rank in the hierarchy of Masters. What the advisors did know for sure was that Master Willix ought to possess a lot of soft power!

This was because of the huge network of contacts she must have developed through her travels. She resided at various MTA strongholds throughout her journey. There, she befriended fellow MTA mech designers, collaborated with them on certain projects and may have even stayed in touch with them. It was likely that at least some of these friends of hers were promoted to very high ranks after a time!

Admittedly, all of this could be wrong. Yet, Ves still felt very confident about this judgement. He had spoken with Master Willix often enough to get a sense of her identity.

While she mostly portrayed herself as an approachable Master who was easy to befriend, she occasionally revealed an arrogance that more closely reflected her exalted status.

These observations allowed him to make two tentative guesses.

First, Master Willix was very flexible. While she was obliged to project the authority of the MTA, she was more inclined to employ gentler means. This was probably a good approach to take when she traveled so widely and encountered so many different cultures.

Second, Master Willix possessed a lot of power. She was not above resorting to firmer means if that was what it took to get what she wanted. Of course, if the former solution could be employed, then there was no need for her to generate animosity.

Needlessly making enemies was not something a rational mech designer would do. There were too many downsides and not enough upsides.

The fact that Master Willix was mostly rational was a third additional factor that Ves considered. Different from passionate mech designers, someone like the woman whose projection he was facing should be making decisions based on objective costs and benefits.

While Ves did not believe that she had cut off her emotions entirely, at the very least she should be less affected by humanity's common faults such as pride, jealousy and greed.

This made it easier for him to formulate a proposal that appealed to her. He simply had to give her enough benefits.

Ves was about to commence his most difficult and riskiest negotiation to date. If he and his advisors had gotten the wrong read, then his upcoming pitch might easily backfire!

Even so, he made sure to project complete confidence in himself. He needed to show boldness, not timidity. There was no room for doubt or hesitation if he wanted to pull off this move.

"Master Willix. Before I make my proposal, can you guarantee that our upcoming conversation will remain between the two of us? I would like to make an appeal to you in private, not just as a Master of the MTA, but also as a friend."

This was the first time he called her a friend. Inwardly, he felt sick to his stomach for even calling her that.

Though they had developed a cordial relationship as of late, Ves never put down his guard in her presence.

He merely considered her to be a necessary evil and that he should make sure he remained on her good side.

It was kind of like pretending to like your boss. Even if you hated the stupid bastard so much you wanted to whack his head and trample him under your legs, it was best if you just acted as if you genuinely liked him as a person.

He never cared too much whether Master Willix saw through him or not. Human interaction was all an act to him. The masks that people wore in public played a vital role in smoothing over differences.

This time was no different. While Ves loathed Master Willix and wanted her to get out of his life most of the time, this time he needed something from her. He felt no shame at all for lying if that was what it took to further his cause!

A few tense seconds passed after he issued his request. Ves had the sense that she was contemplating whether it was worthwhile for her to indulge him. The matter they were discussing had wider implications.

"I cannot do that. As I have already said, what you and your fellow Larkinsons have managed to accomplish in the Nyxian Gap is of great importance to the MTA. I cannot deny you from my fellow colleagues. I hope you understand."

Damn. He really wanted to speak to her in private. Getting shot down meant that his plan would definitely become a bit more complicated.

He had no choice but to proceed onwards.

"Very well, then." He said as if it was not a big deal. "Let me begin by summing up our current circumstances. My clan has just won a difficult battle where we have done our utmost to defeat an overwhelming opponent. Facing warships is no joke, especially when one of them is the Gravada Knarlax, a heavy cruiser that not even your Association managed to destroy despite placing a bounty on her for several decades."

Master Willix did not like it when he pointed out the fact. "We would have punished the transgressions of the Allidus Alliance sooner or later."

Ves casually waved his hand. "The point is that we are the ones who have managed to accomplish this feat. Even if we had some unexpected help, the Allidus Alliance would have never lost their flagship and other prized warships if not for us. This is indisputable. We lost a lot of good men, but gained something great as well. Right now, our clan has five expert pilots, and that is just the start. Unfortunately, none of them have any expert mechs."

"I believe Miss Wodin is still in the process of approaching various Masters to address this need."

"That is so. Yet what if instead of approaching some random mech designer who is qualified to design expert mechs, I turn to you? You're a Master. You must have worked on plenty of expert mechs."

Master Willix frowned and crossed her arms. "I recall that we have already spoken about this topic. I am engaged in projects that are far more important than any private project. In addition, the neutrality issue you have mentioned earlier applies here as well. The MTA cannot show favoritism to any single human state, faction or organization."

"Come now." Ves smiled as if she had just made a joke. "Everyone knows that's nonsense. If the MTA is truly neutral, then your relationship with the first-rate superstates wouldn't be so tense."

"That is not something you are qualified to comment upon." She said to him with a chilling undertone.

Ves innocently raised his hand. "I just think that the MTA is flexible and open-minded enough to make exceptions. How else can a trans-galactic organization remain dominant across human space for so many centuries? Not even the Terran Confederation or New Rubarth Empire managed to attain as much legitimacy and support as the Association. Clearly, your approach to governing and living alongside local humans such as myself is more enlightened than the hamfisted approach employed by your predecessors."

"While I appreciate your views, I do not see how this is relevant."

"Oh, it is very relevant. You see, I think it is in your best interest to make an exception of the rules. I want you, or one of your subordinates if that isn't possible, to help our clan develop our new expert mechs."

Master Willix began to grow impatient. "I have already told you the reasons why this is not possible."

"I think you are wrong, ma'am! You are not looking at my proposal closely enough! Look, do you want to examine and work with my design philosophy? You can do this if you collaborate with me on some expert mech design projects. The mechs I intend to design for my expert pilots are so important that I will definitely pull out all the stops. Wouldn't it be nice for you to work alongside me and understand my perspective on mech design as it happens?"

"That is not a reason to set aside our objections, Mr. Larkinson."

"The neutrality rules only prohibit individual MTA officials from playing favorites with the locals, right? This is not the case this time! Participating in our expert mech design projects is a matter of public interest to the MTA. There is no better way to understand

my design philosophy and learn what is special about LMC mechs than to design a couple of expert mechs with me. Isn't this what you want?"

Master Willix looked a bit perplexed at his specious argument. "You are twisting my arguments. Why should I possibly agree to your proposal?"

"I'm a very private person, as you might undoubtedly know. My ideas are rather unconventional. I have only shared them with Gloriana up until now. I am willing to extend my trust to you if that is enough to end any intrusive inquiries from the MTA. Since you are a part of this organization as well, I think it is enough to reveal some of my trade secrets to you, but only if you promise not to spread what you have learned from me. My design philosophy is not yet ready to be shared with the MTA as a whole. So what do you say, ma'am?"

He looked at her with a hopeful smile.

Unfortunately, Master Willix did not appear to be very receptive.

"Are.. you bribing me, Mr. Larkinson?"

Chapter 2417: Attracting Master Willix

"Not at all, Master Willix!" Ves quickly refuted her accusation. "I am merely offering an arrangement that should provide mutual benefits for everyone involved."

He raised a finger. "First, my concerns about my trade secrets spreading to the entire mech community will be assuaged if you are the one from the MTA that manages this case. As my friend, I trust you not to betray my trust and put me at a disadvantage without at least discussing the matter with me. I am sure that any deal you want to make with me over the course of our partnership will be equitable to both myself and the MTA."

The physical projection of Master Willix looked quite impressed at what he said. It was too bad that she did not see how this could work.

"As professionals, it is important for us to separate our personal lives from our professional lives. While it is good to maintain friendships, it is not proper to allow personal bonds to interfere with your professional obligations. You may not fully realize it, but the responsibility that I bear as a Master Mech Mech Designer in the employ of the Mech Trade Association is immense. I oversee quite a number of matters of great importance to the MTA and the people it watches over. I cannot allow my personal biases to affect my judgement when I exercise my duties."

That sounded like a very officious answer. It was the kind of spiel that politicians said when their constituents questioned their integrity.

While Ves guessed that Master Willix was indeed someone who acted with integrity, he still believed he had a way of changing her mind.

No one was perfectly honest!

No one was completely selfless!

No one could deny every temptation!

In his opinion, humanity was flawed by nature. They possessed both virtues and vices. It was what made people complex and diverse. From the lowest administrator of a backwater village to the greatest Galactic Mech Councilor that ruled the MTA as a whole, Ves believed that all of them were equally susceptible to temptation!

He just had to offer the right incentives. Master Willix should still be a human with goals and ambitions. Otherwise, she wouldn't have worked so hard to attain her current accomplishments.

He continued listing out his reasoning despite her refutations. He raised a second finger.

"Second, what I am offering is experimental, dangerous and radical knowledge that could easily lead to disaster if something goes wrong. I care for the wellbeing of my fellow colleagues. I cannot subject them to dangerous fruit that they cannot resist taking a bite of. Don't believe me? Let me show you the outcome of some of the perfectly legal experiments that I recently conducted during my excursion into the Nyxian Gap."

He dug into his implant and began to dig out and decrypt some of the sensitive research data he accumulated.

He rapidly selected a few noteworthy excerpts and transmitted them to Master Willix through the Darkbreak module.

She frowned and lifted a finger.

The projector began to display a recording of one of his more dramatic experimental results.

[There is no reason to worry.] Ves transmitted to the cockpit. [Calm down and don't resist. Just interface the mech and everything will be over soon.]

[MMHMMHPHMM!]

[Wait a minute. This is heading into dangerous territory!]

["MMMFFWMEFWMEWOWW—"]

Bang!

[GODDAMMIT! NOT AGAIN!]

The short recording ended at that point. Master Willix paused for a few seconds before directing a cold glance towards Ves. "Have you been engaging in human experiments?"

"I was engaging in legitimate science!" He defended himself! "As the extensive and complete documentation that I have sent to you will show, I did not cross any boundaries that merit sanction. It is your Association that has ruled that individuals who are proven to be pirates are stripped of their human rights. Am I wrong?"

This was literally one of the MTA's rules! It was meant to serve as a chilling deterrent to any malcontent who was thinking about going pirate. Perhaps most people might treat the rule as a symbolic signal, but as long as it was in the books, there was no problem for Ves to take advantage of it! Plenty of researchers who needed to perform experiments on humans already did so as well!

"No, but I cannot fathom why a mech designer who does not specialize in neural interfaces or any other apparently dangerous specialty has a need to conduct experiments that may result in.. fatal consequences. Did you leave something out when you initially explained your design philosophy?"

Ves began to sense actual anger from Master Willix! He was entering really dangerous territory this time!

"My design philosophy is based on the symbiosis between man and machine!" He quickly stated. "As various disasters involving improperly-designed and configured neural interfaces have shown, trying to do anything that puts the two together is inherently risky! While I have not messed with the neural interfaces, my specialty does entail some aspects that affect the man-machine connection on a different level. This is the reason why those experiments sometimes produced undesirable results."

"Did you perform any of these experiments on non-pirates, Mr. Larkinson?"

"No! Absolutely not! Never!" Ves lied.

Master Willix looked incredulous.

"Well.. I didn't do it before I entered the Nyxian Gap." He offered her a less outrageous falsehood. "You see, after we learned that the Allidus Alliance is targeting us, I became a little.. desperate. On paper, my forces were wholly incapable of overcoming the might of the Gravada Knarlax and her escorts. If I didn't do anything, the pirates would have surely crushed my fleet!"

"And that led you to perform dangerous human experiments?"

"I had to pursue unconventional solutions in order to narrow the gap, and some of them involved new and creative applications of my design philosophy. I tested my ideas on the pirates first. After understanding what I shouldn't do, I conducted more refined experiments on my own men. Each of them has volunteered to take part in them. I did not supply any of my newly-developed solutions to mech pilots who did not offer their consent."

To be more precise, there weren't any mech pilots who refused the offer to allow the clan patriarch to upgrade their assigned mech. Ves built up a towering reputation for his ability in mech design. His mech pilots would have to be stupid to refuse this opportunity!

"And have those experiments succeeded?"

"Yes." Ves nodded. "While I do not dare to transmit any data on them because of how much they reveal, it is safe to say that I have found a measure to improve the effective performance of my mech pilots by as much as twenty percent! And this is without changing any component or setting of my mechs!"

The Master looked a little shocked this time! If Ves was truly telling the truth, then his solution might have very large implications for the future of mech design in the galaxy!

Ves knew he was taking a huge gamble, but he believed that it was very difficult for others to believe such a ludicrous statement. He was just a Journeyman. What could he do when he was still in the early stages of his development?

Nonetheless, Master Willix knew him better than most people. Perhaps she was used to hearing nonsense from him, but in the few times he made any concrete claims, he was usually honest!

"I have solid, empirical proof." Ves spoke the magic word for mech designers. "I have tracked the performance of every mech pilot who utilized the mechs that I have altered. There is always an immediate boost depending on how much I invested in them. After that, there is a gradual but very accelerated trend of improvement as the symbiosis between the mech and mech pilot continues to deepen. It's also fairly safe as long as I don't go too far. This is perhaps one the greatest reasons why our clan has managed to overcome the odds."

"Can you send me the data?" Master Willix leaned in. Her eyes expressed an increasing amount of interest in his claims! "I would like to verify whether you are representing your research properly."

Ves immediately shook his head. "The data is proprietary. Anything that can elevate the performance of the mech pilots of my mechs to such a degree is incomparably precious. No offense, but I do not want to share the fruits of my hard work and labor. Even if I agree to show them to you, I am not going to transmit it over any network. You'll have to

come and study my research data in person. You are the only mech designer from the MTA who I trust to keep my work confidential."

"Improvements as drastic as these are usually subject to stringent conditions."

"There are limits.. but they are not as severe as you think. At the very least, it is not based on an expensive component or unique material. While it is not entirely feasible to apply this solution on a wider scale, it can theoretically be applied to every mech design that I have contributed to. I empowered hundreds of mechs with this specific solution before the battle. The result? A victory, and several new expert pilots to boot."

"Those are bold claims."

"I know. This is why I don't want to share it with anyone except you. The implications of my research is great, but so is the danger and risk of abuse. As far as I see it, the most responsible course of action you can do is to vet my research and work alongside me on a couple of private projects. To prevent many mech designers from engaging in experiments that causes millions of mech pilots to lose their heads, you should keep what you have learned to yourself until my research has matured to the point where it is safe!"

Another pause ensued as Master Willix fell silent. She was probably contemplating what he said while also deliberating with her fellow colleagues.

Meanwhile, Ves was sweating inside. When he saw that regular arguments didn't work, Ves had to resort to exposing sensitive and dangerous information in order to generate interest in her. As a powerful Master who had traveled the galaxy, she must have witnessed a lot of great solutions from many different mech designers.

In order to generate a sufficient amount of interest in Master Willix, Ves had no choice but to appeal to her inner mech designer.

Everyone who designed mechs for a living wanted to attain better results. He believed that rational mech designers who stole other people's design philosophies as a habit should not be immune to this temptation! Their desire to improve their own work should be just as great as their passionate counterparts!

Eventually, Master Willix broke the silence.

"We should continue this discussion on a more private channel. Please stand by for a moment while I switch us to a more secure setting where you may speak to me in greater confidence."

"Wait a minute, Moira!" A white-bearded figure dressed in a resplendent suit appeared. "Mr. Larkinson is a native of the Komodo Star Sector. Any work he produces falls under

the purview of Halcyon Citadel. You cannot just shove us aside while Mr. Larkinson has the potential to propel our branch to greater heights!"

Ves recognized the second figure. According to his research, Master Colin Drexel was a 200-year old Master Mech Designer who originally came from the Winged Serenade Star Sector. He didn't know much else about him other than that he specialized in quantum teleportation systems, whatever that meant.

Moira calmly faced the newcomer's projection and raised her finger. "You are not invited to this conversation."

A small zap shot out from her finger. After striking Master Drexel's projection, it quickly began to break apart!

"MOIRAAAAA!"

Once the projection disappeared, Master Willix paused for a while before she calmly turned back to Ves. "Now, let us proceed with our discussion. You were saying?"

"Uhhh..."

Chapter 2418: Mech Designers With Integrity

Ves succeeded in making Master Willix hot.

As soon as she expressed her intent to move their conversation to a more private channel, he knew he had succeeded in arousing the great MTA Master's desires.

While he knew that he did not present a flawless case, he managed to persuade her just enough to gain a chance!

Still, just because she pushed out Master Drexel did not mean that she was onboard with Ves' proposal. He knew he still had some ways to go before he gained her support.

Ves did not receive any indication that they changed to a different channel. He had no control over how the Darkbreak module worked.

"Can we speak.. more openly now?" He tentatively asked.

"I cannot guarantee that no one else is listening in." She warned. "However, I am confident that none of the other Masters from the Komodo Branch should be able to patch in. There are others within our vast organization who can do so, but unless they vastly outrank me, we will receive a warning if they attempt to intrude."

"Okay."

"We take privacy very seriously within the MTA." She said with a straight face. "Many mech designers within our ranks collaborate with colleagues who are located many light-years away. Our internal network is designed to be extremely secure and resistant to any unauthorized intrusions. This is the only way we can facilitate earnest cooperation without burdening ourselves with concerns that our work will be leaked."

Yeah, right. Ves would be a fool to take her at her word! Not a single network was truly secure as far as he was concerned. When two people wanted to communicate to each other, there was always room for others to sneak in and intercept some crucial tidbits.

He had little choice but to continue on his current course. After successfully working Master Willix up, he needed to do his best to take advantage of her receptive state.

She had opened herself up to Ves. How could he refuse her generous invitation?

The two began to enter into a deeper discussion. Ves put down his guard a bit and revealed a little more information.

"One of the goals that Gloriana and I are pursuing is to find a method to increase the chances of breakthroughs."

Ves felt very nervous about saying this, but he knew that Master Willix would not be satisfied anymore with his usual routine of misdirection and obfuscation.

This was not the time to flood her with nonsense about proto-gods and divinities!

His serious and plain approach may have been one of the reasons why she paid more attention to his words. He usually wasn't as straightforward about his specialty.

"Go on. Please explain why you think that the two of you are able to accomplish a feat that many other mech designers have failed to achieve. What gives you the confidence that you have any chance to succeed."

Ves raised one finger. "One battle."

He raised four fingers. "Four expert pilots."

He raised ten fingers before lowering and raising one of his palms. "Fifteen expert candidates."

For her part, Master Willix looked intrigued. "That is certainly a persuasive argument. The issue is that it is difficult to attribute these outstanding outcomes on whatever innovation you have claimed to develop. I am sure you agree that there are many other factors that may have played a role in facilitating those breakthroughs."

"You are free to inspect our data once you meet me in person, but only if we can come to an agreement."

She frowned and tapped her heel against the deck. "You are putting me in a difficult situation. While I am inclined to accept your views on the implications of your groundbreaking research, it is very difficult for me to deny it from the rest of the MTA. What you are asking is not normal procedure. I will face considerable pressure from my colleagues and supervisors if I insist on breaking protocol to accommodate your requests."

"I believe in you, ma'am. You're a big shot within the MTA, right? I am confident you can make things done."

"..Perhaps." She conceded, but she did not soften her expression. "That does not mean that I am willing to do so. I will have to cash in many favors and expend a considerable amount of political capital in order to keep our cooperation between ourselves. This is a private deal that breaks many rules."

"I disagree. That's the wrong way to look at it. Even if our arrangement breaks some rules, you can justify it as long as it serves the greater interest of the MTA. Some of my experimental innovations are literally head-popping. Do you think that faced with the temptation of unlocking the secret behind producing more expert pilots, your fellow mech designers within the MTA could resist the urge to conduct experiments on a massive scale?"

The silence was deafening. Though she did not explicitly deny his prediction, her silence was a very obvious signal in itself.

Ves inwardly grinned. He knew it! From what he heard about their secret manipulations and unethical experiments on unwitting mech pilots, the MTA was hardly as pristine as outsiders thought.

Those lurid tales shared by fellow mech designers made Ves suspect that the researchers of the MTA may not be so different from their counterparts from the Five Scrolls Compact!

Of course, Ves did not think that his own kind were too unscrupulous. Unlike the nutcases of the secretive cult, the mech designers of the MTA generally served a greater cause. An organization as strong as the MTA probably invested a lot in indoctrinating its members.

This was why Ves never phrased his suggestions in a way that gave Master Willix the impression that she would be turning against her own organization.

He needed to delude her into thinking that his attempt to bribe her would actually serve the MTA's overall interests!

The opening was small, but as long as it existed, Ves was confident he could succeed!

Since Master Willix didn't say anything, he proceeded as if she tacitly consented with his words. He continued to paint a distorted picture.

"Mech designers like us are greedy for progress. That is not inherently bad. I am sure that Masters such as you have managed to achieve great feats that have elevated the standard of mech design. Yet the pursuit of knowledge can easily go astray. I am also plagued with temptations."

"Are you saying that you are filled with unclean desires?"

"I wouldn't put it that way." He frowned. "Many of my ideas are both great and terrible, but that does not mean I am eager to try them out. You are lucky that I am someone who possesses excellent restraint. As a classically-trained and educated mech designer, I follow the scientific method to a tee. I have never let my intense desire for progress override my sense of what is right. We have seen how depraved researchers can be during the Age of Conquest. We have moved beyond that and become better humans as a result."

"Well said, Mr. Larkinson." She offered him a warm smile. "Many people take this for granted, but it is truly important to safeguard our current standards. When we no longer show any restraint, we devolve into monsters."

"I feel as if you and I are like-minded mech designers." Ves quickly continued. "While we are completely different in terms of age, background, design philosophy and many other details, we are still mech designers who humbly wish to serve mech pilots. How many of your fellow Masters will keep this mission in mind when they have gained access to one of my dangerous new methods?"

"The Association holds its mech designers to a higher standard."

"Do you truly stand by this statement? Can you seriously tell me that the MTA is truly filled with virtuous mech designers?"

While it was difficult for Master Willix to acknowledge the MTA's dirty laundry, she possessed too much integrity to say anything disingenuous.

"It is not wise to speak of this. As with any large organization, the Association has its fair share of bad apples and skeletons in its closet. As a whole, the MTA still serves a noble cause. The proliferation of mechs is key to pacifying humanity. The advancement of mechs offers everyone the hope of moving beyond warships. Developing the minidrive has brought us one step closer to phasing out destructive warships as humanity's ultimate weapon of choice."

She was simply waving the flag at this point. Her words were largely hollow to Ves. She merely wanted to restore some dignity.

"Let's be real. If I told you that my method can potentially double the chance of breakthroughs, but can also backfire and kill 10 percent of the mech pilots who participate in an experiment, will all of your fellow mech designers really show restraint?"

Ves certainly wouldn't, that was for sure!

"You have made a very persuasive argument." She conceded. "However, it is not enough for me to take you at your word. If your experiment is truly dangerous enough to warrant withholding your research data from the rest of the MTA, then I will need to inspect your complete records in person."

"Does this mean you agree to my proposal?"

She shook her head. "Not so fast. While I am open to studying your complete research data, that does not automatically mean that I am receptive to collaborating with you. Aside from the substantial gap between us, the services of a Master of my stature is immensely valuable. You do not deserve my help."

"I disagree. Sharing some of my research with you and letting you see me at work during our collaborative mech design projects should be enough, right?"

Ves began to fear that Master Willix would suggest that he pay her with much of the merits that he had earned from defeating the Allidus Alliance.

This was not acceptable! Ves needed to steer her away from this topic as soon as possible!

"Don't discount the value of my accomplishments just because I'm a Journeyman. How many Journeymen developed something as unique and effective as glows? How many Journeymen produced mechs with enhancements that have contributed to the sheer amount of mech pilots breaking through during just a single battle? Even if my methods are still rudimentary, my radical paradigms are completely unique and unlike any other established methodologies. In the future, my methods will only become more effective. Wouldn't it be better for you to get in on the action before they have lifted off? With you involved, you can also make sure that I do not go astray."

Master Willix raised her palm. "Enough. You have made your case. While I have not made any definite decisions, I am open to make some exceptions if it turns out that this course of action is truly the best way forward. Let us meet when you reach Cinach. I need to comb over all of your research data and study your mechs."

Yes! While she hadn't accepted his proposal, Ves knew that he had passed the most difficult hurdle. Her willingness to do this much already showed that she was inclined to accept his proposal!

The thought of gaining the services of one of the best Master Mech Designers in the star cluster in his expert mech design projects already made him salivate!

There were hardly any other mech designers who could fulfill his need better than Master Willix!

Though Ves no doubt had to make a lot of concessions, it was worth it if he gained her support!

"Can you keep the rest of the MTA off my back?" He asked. "As I have already stated, I work best if I have ample space to innovate. Too much meddling and intervention will only slow me down and rob the mech community of my revolutionary new solutions."

"I can do that, but remember, you better make sure that you can justify these extraordinary measures. I do not enjoy breaking or bending the rules without a good cause."

Ves grinned. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. My mechs will prove you have made the right decision!"

It was at this moment that he truly began to relax. He succeeded in hooking Master Willix! Now he just had to reel her in so that he could have fish for dinner!

Chapter 2419: Happy Gloriana

The conversation ended after he agreed with Master Willix to discuss their new arrangement in greater detail when he returned to civilized space.

He kept his face carefully composed as Master Willix's physical projection disappeared. Who knew whether this module was still transmitting recordings of him back to Centerpoint.

Inwardly, he felt both ecstatic and defeated.

The reason why he felt defeated was because he had no choice but to reveal some of his secrets to someone outside of his circle of confidence. There was no other way for him to get out of this predicament.

He could either share his work with someone from the MTA, or expose it all to the MTA as a whole.

Between these two unpalatable options, he chose the least-bad solution!

Fortunately, his choice worked out. With the help of his persuasive ability, he managed to get Master Willix on his side.

This was the reason why he felt ecstatic!

It didn't matter if he managed to convince Master Willix completely. It didn't matter if she was more shrewd and observant than she showed.

What just took place was mostly theater. It was similar to trying to bargain with a stall owner to buy something on the cheap.

Ves certainly wasn't stupid enough to assume that Master Mech Designers were easy to fool.

There was no way a thirty-odd year old brat like him could get the better of a supreme Master who traveled the breadth of the galaxy! Master Willix definitely interacted with all kinds of people from many different parts of human space throughout her long life. Successful people like that ought to be very socially adept.

That simply meant that Ves had to be sincere enough. While he lied plenty of times throughout the previous conversation, his underlying message still conveyed an earnest concession. He was willing to share some of his trade secrets to her as long as she kept it to herself.

All of the excuses he spouted such as tempting other mech designers into performing dangerous experiments on mech pilots were merely window dressing. Ves didn't care if his research corrupted other mech designers to the point where they made the Skull Architect look like a compassionate researcher. Their misdeeds were none of his business!

He merely wanted to establish a convenient excuse to make their arrangement work. An organization as big as the MTA abided by a lot of rules, so it was important to ensure they wouldn't get in the way.

"Well, now that I've got this out of the way, it's time to talk to my beloved."

He called Gloriana. As expected, it took no time at all for Gloriana to accept the call!

"Ves! You've finally called! It was about time!"

She wore a stylish red fabric coat with golden buttons that depicted the emblem of the Larkinson Clan. The way it hugged her svelte body looked lovely, so much so that Ves couldn't hold back. He stepped forward, embraced her physical projection and dove in for a kiss!

"Hihihi!" Gloriana giggled as her projection leaned into him. "I heard the good news some time ago. You can't imagine how many fretted for your safety! Our fellow Larkinsons were deeply concerned whether we would lose all of our best soldiers. My blood relatives were also concerned whether the wedding would even go through. The Wodin Dynasty invested a lot to build a grand wedding stage for our coming union. Losing you would have dealt a great blow to our prestige."

"Did you ever doubt our ability to win?" He smiled as he brushed her soft cheek.

"I knew you would make it through. You're so great, Ves. Not even a bunch of overconfident pirates with some bootleg warships can take you down."

Ves wasn't sure whether she meant what she said. In the last month, she expressed plenty of concern. She placed plenty of blame on him for stirring up so much trouble in the Nyxian Gap.

Well, it wasn't important. His task force managed to overcome the unthinkable, though not without paying a heavy price.

The two of them began to sit down on the deck while leaning against each other.

"We lost a lot of good clansmen, Gloriana. I'm sending you the current list of casualties right now. Aside from losing hundreds of mech pilots, our fleet has also lost thousands of spacers and support personnel. You need to prepare the Larkinsons back in the Cinach System for the bad news."

She rapidly skimmed the list. "Did you lose anyone important?"

"Other than the six newly-advanced expert candidates, not really. All of our expert pilots are still alive, and we still have 9 expert candidates left. The Avatars lost more than half of their mech pilots, but the Sentinels that have traveled with us were almost wiped out. I don't look forward to explaining that to the rest of the clan.

"Expert pilots? Expert candidates? Did you gain so many?" Her eyes widened at him. The revelation that the Larkinson Clan gained so many exceptional mech pilots completely caused her to ignore what he said afterwards. "Tell me what happened!"

He began to spend a bit of time to explain what had taken place. Of course, since he was conveying his words through the MTA's private network, he made sure to control his information. He barely glossed over the fact that they were fighting gods, but even then Gloriana ate it all up. That was one thing he could count on. She never doubted him when it came to these matters!

"Those disgusting Nyxian gods had it coming. It's a given that they lost. They were fighting a female god!"

"Uhm, the Inexorable One is female according to the pirates."

"She fought for the wrong side! The moment she stood in your way, she was destined to lose!"

To Gloriana, the battle against the gods did not merit that much attention from her. She hadn't witnessed the battle up close, so it was difficult for Ves to convey the full magnitude of how difficult it was to defeat them. If not for his mother's timely assistance, the dark gods could have easily devoured his fleet!

Instead of focusing on the gods, she instead wanted to know more about their new expert pilots.

"Did all of our expert candidates back then break through?"

"Yep."

"That's remarkable!" She grinned, but her face quickly fell. "It also places a huge burden on us. Don't get me wrong. I'm happy that we gained so many expert pilots at once. The news will definitely turn a lot of heads once we announce it to the public. It's just..."

Ves grabbed her hand and took comfort in its warmth. "We need to supply them all with expert mechs as soon as possible. We can't allow Venerable Jannzi, Joshua and the rest to remain in squalor by depriving them of the machines they need to further their growth."

"It's already difficult for me to negotiate a single collaboration with a Master Mech Designer. Now we need to arrange for the development of four more expert mechs." She suddenly jerked. "Wait, defeating the pirates must have netted you at least 10 million merits, right?"

"I'm not sure. The bounty on the Gravada Knarlax and Lord Hivex is very generous. I'm also expecting a reward for all of the warships and illegal possessions we've taken from the pirates. We'll know for sure how much I've earned once the MTA completed its investigation."

"Well, it's bound to be a large amount. Instead of keeping it all to ourselves, we ought to invest a portion of it into our expert mech design projects. It is a lot easier to gain the help of a Master when we are willing to spend!"

Ves held up his palm. "Woah, before you take this idea any further, let me tell you about a new arrangement I've made with a familiar Master."

He quickly explained the preliminary partnership he struck with Master Willix. He left out a lot of details, but he knew that Gloriana should be smart enough to realize the implications.

She became impressed at his ability to negotiate this deal. "Did you really get Master Willix to make an exception for you? That's amazing! Someone in her position can't easily bend so many rules."

The way she looked at him was if he had convinced the Hexers to put a boy in charge. While Ves felt very flattered by her compliments, he knew that it wasn't entirely due to him that he managed to get Master Willix to play along.

They cuddled and kissed each other for a bit. Despite the immense distance separating them, they felt closer than ever to each other. The intense crisis he lived through had given him an even greater appreciation of life. He could have lost it all if he had fallen short in some way.

"Our wedding is up soon." She happily noted. "After so many years, we will finally bind ourselves to each other. We will be together forever!"

She lifted her finger to show off the engagement ring he made for her. One of Lucky's gems proudly glinted in the light. Ves lifted his own finger and clinked it with his own ring.

"The wedding preparations are pretty much complete on my end." She stated. "Have you prepared our wedding bands yet?"

"Uhm, I'm still working on them." Ves admitted. "Don't worry. I'll get it done. I managed to plunder a lot of special materials from our defeated opponents. The Gravada Knarlax alone is practically a treasure house when it comes to how many goodies she carried. All of it is ours now. I already have a great design in mind for our wedding rings."

"You better do a good job, Ves. I don't want to see any of the sloppiness that you usually exhibit in your work."

"Hey! I can be careful when I need to be! I know how important it is for my work to be perfect this time. Just trust me, Gloriana."

They discussed a few other household matters. Gloriana brought him up to speed on some of the developments that took place in civilized space.

"On our end, my assistants and I made sure to progress all of our mech design projects." She stated. "Even without your help, we have made a lot of progress. Some of them have even reached the prototype testing phase."

"That's great news!"

"He was worried whether the six projects would stall, but Gloriana did an admirable job of compensating for his absence."

Certainly, Ves knew that he might need to do a hefty amount of makeup work in the coming month, but it wouldn't take long for the designs to be complete.

He had waited a long time to complete all of these projects. All of them were running behind schedule and Ves was more than ready to move onto other projects. He also wanted to publish them so he could obtain a lot of Design Points from the System.

After neglecting it for so long, Ves intended to focus on it for the next few years. In order to lessen his dependence on Master Willix, he needed to gain the capability of designing his own expert mechs by himself as soon as possible.

To do so, he needed to accumulate at least 1 million DP. That meant he needed to design a lot of mechs.

As long as he didn't engage in any distractions for the next couple of years, Ves should easily be able to earn this sum of Design Points!

"There's something else that you should know, Ves. The Komodo War has taken a new turn."

"Did the Friday Coalition turn the tides or something?"

"In a way. Its Masters have finally begun to push out their counters against our mechs. The Blessed Squires can't exert their glows onto the battlefield with impunity now. While only a couple of counters have appeared, they are already nullifying some of the advantages of our mech design."

A heavy weight fell onto his heart. He knew this day was coming. "Show me."

Chapter 2420: The First Counter

Ever since the Blessed Squire debuted on the surface of Marrakath III, the Hex Army embraced the new mech model with great enthusiasm.

Not even the hesitation exhibited by the council of matriarchs could stop the adoption of the mech designed by the Miracle Couple.

Its unique benefits amplified the success of the Hexer mech pilots fighting alongside this seemingly-modest supportive knight mech!

With the Fridaymen defenders constantly being put on the backfoot by invigorated Hexer soldiers, the border territories of the Friday Coalition came under threat of Hexer aggression a lot sooner than the Fridayman strategists had anticipated!

And this was just due to a single odd mech model. Everyone could see that the Blessed Squire was just the start. The Miracle Couple had a history of publishing mechs that had

the potential to change the way that mech pilots fought their battles. As long as the two unusually talented mech designers pumped out a few more mech designs, the tyranny of glows would probably swamp the Coalition!

Hardly any Fridaymen of importance looked down on the Miracle Couple's work. Many Fridayman strategists and analysts already concluded that they needed to find some way to counter Ves' design philosophy. It took almost no effort for the Hexers to employ glows as a force multiplier.

In fact, in just a few months, the majority of the Hexer military mech pilots had already become 'addicted' to the glows. They began to fight much better in the presence of a Blessed Squire, but also a little bit worse than normal if a glow was absent!

Before the introduction of counters, the Fridaymen mech pilots all learned that taking out the Blessed Squires within the ranks of the enemy was the most effective way to defeat the Hexers.

While the Hex Army units did not make it easy for their opponents to target their critical Blessed Squires, the Fridaymen had already begun to employ various solutions at ranges where the glows could not reach.

These were clunky methods. It forced the Fridaymen to favor ranged combat over close-quarters combat. It limited the options of their fighting forces and directed a lot of resources that could have been spent elsewhere.

All in all, these stopgap measures failed to stall the growing Hexer momentum.

This was why the Coalition tasked a lot of top-level design teams to develop true counters. While it still took up resources to design and produce these specific counters, as long as they proved effective, the Coalition wouldn't have to expend as much resources to counter the Blessed Squire as before.

This was a pretty good deal to the Fridaymen!

"Show me what Master Olson cooked up first." Ves requested. "My former Master knows me best. Her counter will probably serve as a reference on how other mech designers ought to be able to counteract my glows."

Gloriana frowned briefly when she mentioned the Master from the Vermeer Group.

"Master Olson is really shameless for targeting you. Masters normally don't bully their students like this, you know!"

"We're on the opposite sides of a war, Gloriana. She is merely doing her duty to her state."

"She still deserves to be scorned for betraying you! I hope the Hex Army manages to raze the Vermeer Group for her treachery!"

Ves decided it was best not to comment any further on this issue. He deliberately did not point out that Gloriana was at fault here. She was the entire reason why Master Olson cut ties with him and subsequently treated him as an opponent.

Gloriana projected a design of a distinct-looking lancer mech. The mech looked fairly economic relative to other second-class mech designs.

"This is the mech designed by a team led by Master Olson." She began. "It's called the Glow Crusher OGC-1000."

Ves studied the design schematics with great interest. He wasn't surprised that Gloriana had access to such detailed design files. The Hexer intelligence services probably obtained it within days or weeks of the Glow Crusher's release.

Leaving aside its purpose and distinctive features, the Glow Crusher design was a magnificent work. Master Olson designed mechs in a way that was elegant and efficient. Ves knew that he and his fiancé were far from reaching this degree of sophistication!

"What a well-designed mech!" He sighed. "Sure enough. A Master Mech Designer can easily surpass us in pure design ability alone. The degree of performance that Master Olson can achieve with such a limited budget is astounding!"

"Hey!" Gloriana angrily punched his arm. "Don't get all googly-eyed by the work of our enemy! This mech is causing my fellow Hexers a lot of grief on the battlefield!"

Ves tried to see how the Glow Crusher was able to counter a Blessed Squire.

Of all of the mech types that Master Olson chose, he was surprised that she opted for a melee mech. These days, the Hex Army treated its Blessed Squires like treasures. None of them stepped onto the battlefield without being accompanied by their own guards.

This was actually pretty ridiculous to Ves. He initially conceived the Blessed Squire as mech that was meant to take a beating. It was piloted by boys, after all. Before its introduction, the Hexers always valued their female Hexer mechs more!

"I don't see how this so-called Glow Crusher mech can neutralize a Blessed Squire." He murmured after some time. "Sure, in a one-on-one duel, the Glow Crusher can just charge forward and impale the Blessed Squire on its lance. In practice, this is never the case. The Glow Crusher has to go through at least one defensive line in order to attack any Blessed Squire mech."

Gloriana nodded. "You're right. As efficient and optimized as the Glow Crusher design looks, the chances of this mech running down a Blessed Squire is low, at least in the early stages of a battle. Later on when the Fridaymen have worn out the defenders, a Glow Crusher may be able to get a straight shot at impaling a Blessed Squire."

"It's too late by then. The Blessed Squire should have remained active up to this point. The Hexers gained plenty of advantages during this lengthy period."

"This is also true. I do have to mention that the Glow Crushers aren't designed to be deployed by themselves. They are relatively cheap because they are meant to be deployed in greater numbers."

He could see how that could make a considerable difference. A single Glow Crusher charging forth was hardly intimidating to the typical Hexer unit. It was a different story if an entire mech company of Glow Crushers rushed a Hexer position!

Nonetheless, he still hadn't figured out what made Master Olson's work so effective against the Blessed Squire.

With a name as plain and brutal as the Glow Crusher, the model was meant to restore confidence to the beleaguered Fridaymen mech pilots. It would be a disaster if the mech model failed to live up to its name!

"This design is not as simple as you think. There's more to the mech than what is obvious on the surface. Can you see what gives this mech the ability to counter the Blessed Squire?"

He already observed some unusual traits from the Fridayman mech design. These unique traces denoted the areas that high-ranking mech designers empowered with their design philosophies.

"The engines and movement systems clearly stand out to me. When I try to look at them closely, I begin to get a headache."

It was not so easy to decipher the inner workings of other mech designers. While rational mech designers possessed the ability to simulate someone else's design philosophy, they didn't always achieve success. Otherwise, Master Willix would have succeeded in replicating his design philosophy!

"I don't get it." Ves sighed after trying and failing to decipher the meaning of what Master Olsosn had imparted to the Glow Crusher design. "Can you just show me instead of teasing me like this? I'm dying to know what makes it so special!"

"Very well. There's plenty of footage available. I've selected some of the clearest ones for you. Watch carefully."

The first footage showed a typical urban battlefield on some Coalition planet. A lot of structures had been flattened by incessant bombardment and fighting.

At a certain supply depot, a unit of Hexer mechs were trying to overrun the defenders. Ves recognized the emblem of the Carnegie Group's Fortune Legion from the resisting mechs.

Though the Fortune Legionnaires put up a valiant fight, they were slightly outnumbered and fought with much less zeal than their Hexer counterparts.

Just as the Hexer melee mechs succeeded in collapsing the defensive line, a squad of reinforcements appeared from the flanks. The eight lancer mechs were all armed with long lances and kite shields.

The Hexer mechs were initially caught off-guard, but quickly redirected some mechs to engage the newcomers.

Ves paid close attention to what happened next.

As expected, the Glow Crushers did not back off. They all charged forward, building up a lot of momentum in a short amount of time. Not just their powerful legs, but also the boosters built into their rear made sure that the lancer mechs got up to speed without much delay!

As the new Fridayman mechs neared the closest Hexer mechs, something odd happened.

The Hexer mechs assigned to block the lancer mechs all jerked for some reason. Though the interruption was minor, the lancer mechs already ran through them by the time their Hexer mech pilots recovered!

"Huh?"

Ves wasn't stupid. He could tell that as the Glow Crushers neared the enemy mechs, the glow exerted from a nearby Blessed Squire somehow failed to cover the affected mechs.

How?

While he wondered what had happened, the footage hadn't ended yet. Not all of the Glow Crushers had stopped after impaling their lances on their unbalanced opponents.

Two more mechs designed by Master Olson proceeded onwards to attack the critical Blessed Squire!

A second defense line consisting of some Hexer knight mechs stood ready to meet the charges with their heavy tower shields.

Ves estimated that even if the charging Fridayman mechs managed to pierce through the shields of the enemy mechs, they shouldn't be able to go any further. The Blessed Squire should remain safe if that was the case!

However, just as the new mechs neared the Blessed Squire, Ves faintly sensed as if something significant occurred.

From the way the Hexer mechs all reacted abnormally for a moment, Ves knew that the Blessed Squire's glow no longer affected the entire unit!

"So this is why this model is called the Glow Crusher!"

What happened next surprised him as well. Instead of continuing on, the two Glow Crushers forked away and beat a very hasty retreat!

The Glow Crushers had done their job. Somehow, the lancer mechs managed to break the Blessed Squire's glow once they came close enough. As soon as they accomplished this job, they disengaged and let the other Fortune Legionnaires resume the fight.

While Ves was a bit confused why the Glow Crushers didn't continue to pressure the Hexers, it turned out that their presence weren't needed anymore.

Surprised and alarmed at the sudden loss of their Blessed Squire's glow, the confused Hexer mech pilots fought with a lot less enthusiasm than before.

For their part, the Fortune Legionnaires regained a lot of confidence. Not only were their opponents fighting significantly worse, they didn't have to fear anything if they fought their opponents at close range!

The final result was a complete rout for the Hexers. The surviving Hexer mechs pathetically ran back to friendly lines after losing over half of their attacking force.

The footage ended.

Ves remained silent for a time. The performance of the Glow Crusher completely surprised him, and not in a good way.

"How?" He asked with a hollow voice.

"Master Olson's new mech design is called the Glow Crusher for a reason, Ves. As far as we can ascertain, these mechs don't have to impale the Blessed Squires in order to

fulfill their function. They only have to get within a certain range to overwhelm a glow! Once this happens, it takes up to ten minutes for a Blessed Squire to repair its glow!"

Ten minutes! This was enough time for the Fridaymen to swing a battle around!