

Mech 2451

Chapter 2451: Outrageous Proposal

The Design Department already added 50 assistant mech designers less than a year ago. Not enough time had passed to complete their integration into the Larkinson Clan and their new positions.

Ves didn't want to wait too long before expanding the design capacity of the LMC another time. Even if his assistants were still adjusting to their new lives, they were already capable enough to mentor any new additions.

The help of the existing Braves and Erudites should make it much easier to get them up to speed. Ves and Gloriana wouldn't have to spend as much time and effort into hand-holding them into their new jobs.

When Ves made his proposal, his fiancé did not immediately agree.

"Let's talk about it when you return." She said. "Just hiring more assistants isn't necessarily good. Without more high-ranking mech designers to supervise them all, they're bound to go astray. Don't forget that we're just Journeymen at the moment. There are Seniors who have employed less assistants than us, you know!"

She had a point. Doubling the number of assistants under their control sounded a bit extravagant now that Ves reflected on his proposal. While he still supported it, it might be better if they took some time and stretched out their recruitment effort.

"Okay. We can discuss this topic and many other topics when we finally get together again."

Ves looked even more forward to reuniting with the other half of the Larkinson Clan.

As time continued to pass, the combined fleet of Wodin Warriors and Larkinsons uneventfully passed through Wreckage Paradise. The border to civilized space was only days away. Every survivor of Task Force Predator was practically waiting to cross over before they were finally willing to relax their nerves!

During the quiet return journey, Ves and the Larkinsons did not have much contact with their Hexer protectors.

The Hexers were reluctant to approach the Larkinsons. They also treated the captured pirate warships with great suspicion despite all of the work being done to take over their remaining systems.

If there was anything worth noting about the Wodin Warriors, it was that they always activated a lot of sensor systems whenever the expert pilots and the expert candidates deployed into space.

Of course, they tried to be somewhat sneaky about it, but Calabast had been watching her fellow Hexers like a hawk.

"The Wodins really want to know what you've done to enable so many breakthroughs." She told him during a regular meeting. "That spiel you gave to the public about the MTA restricting anything related to your innovations may have succeeded in giving you some room, but your future in-laws aren't fooled. They have been tracking your career and accomplishments very closely. I think they have a lot of confidence that you can actually induce breakthroughs."

Ves frowned when he heard that. He petted Lucky as he processed her words, only for his cat to 'lightly' bite his finger.

"Ouch! You naughty bastard!"

"Meow!"

Lucky still resented Ves for force-feeding him with B-stone. Trying to push out two spiky gems was not a pleasant sensation to say the least!

"Meow meow meow!"

"I'm sorry, okay?"

"Meow meow!"

"You're wrong! Who says that I'm not capable of feeling remorse? I reflect on myself all the time!"

"Meow!"

As Ves argued with Lucky, Calabast watched on with amusement. She leaned her backside towards the edge of his desk as usual as she tapped her fingers against the surface of her leg.

"Ahem, as much as I enjoy this sideshow, let's get back on topic. I've studied the Wodin Warriors for weeks. Several times, Colonel Alexandria Wodin was close to inviting you to visit her aboard the Parma Imago. She eventually decided not to after listening to some smart advice."

This sounded disconcerting to Ves. "Did they have any nefarious intentions in mind?"

"Not that. The Wodins would be fools to lay their hands on you. They're just greedy for what you can offer to them. I believe that once we return to the Cinach System, you'll be invited to talk with either Minister Constance or Matriarch Xiaphna. Whoever you talk to, the discussion will doubtlessly turn to greater cooperation between the Wodin Dynasty and the Larkinson Clan."

Ves found that hard to accept. "Our values are completely different. The Wodins are female supremacists while our clan values equality."

"You're too naive, Ves." Calabast smirked and huffed. "Differences of opinion haven't stopped anyone from forming alliances of convenience. If you leave ideology aside, there are many grounds for greater cooperation. With a bond of marriage tying us together, the Wodins will gain greater confidence that any alliance we may form will stick."

"We're close to departing the Komodo Star Sector. There is little meaning to forming an alliance if that's the case. The widening geographic distance between our main fleet and the base of the Wodin Dynasty will make it increasingly difficult to offer aid in emergencies and conduct physical trade. The growing distance will also increase our psychological separation."

"You're correct, Ves. You're quite smart, for once."

"You agree?"

"I do, but that doesn't mean you have grasped the main point, Ves. Now try and think this situation through. From what I have observed, there are indications that the Wodins are eager to establish a closer alliance with the Larkinsons. You have just remarked that such an act only makes sense if the Wodins remain physically close to our expeditionary fleet. What does that mean?"

It only took a few seconds for Ves to grasp her point. His eyes widened as a horrible guess came to mind!

"You mean.. the Wodins want to travel with us? They're readying a fleet as well?!"

"That is the most logical possibility. If the Wodins join forces with us, they believe they can derive continuous benefits from such an alliance. This will not only benefit them at home, but also offer them an opportunity to branch out and spread their lineage to another galaxy."

This was a very big move! Unlike the Larkinsons, the Wodins were rooted to the Komodo Star Sector. Sure, they were very cozy here, but the dynasty would have to make a lot of sacrifices in order to follow the Larkinson Clan into the Red Ocean!

"This doesn't make sense." He grew confused. "To pass through the beyonder gate, they need to muster up 100 million MTA merits. How can they possibly do that?"

"As long as the Wodins are willing to suffer some pain, it's not impossible for them to achieve this goal. For example, they can solicit the help of a Hexer Master Mech Designer who is capable of earning a lot of merits on her own. They can also earn the merits themselves if they fully commit to completing the missions that are open to non-mech designers. Finally, they can partner up with other ambitious dynasties and organizations in order to split the bill."

All of those sounded viable to Ves. Though gathering 100 million MTA was a tall order for just a couple of individuals, when massive organizations were involved, the story was different!

Even though certain restrictions such as the rule that only up to ten people could pool their merits together, it merely prevented a large number of weaklings from entering the Red Ocean.

"There is an even cheaper way for them to enter the Red Ocean." She smirked. "They can request to join your fleet. They just want some of the slots of the 20-ship quota of your beyonder ticket. I expect they will offer huge concessions in order to gain your favor."

Ves slammed his fist against his desk!

"ABSOLUTELY NOT! Do you know how much blood, sweat and tears we shed to work towards this goal? We almost got done in by warships and gods in the last battle! There is no way that I'll share the fruits of our labor to some arrogant women who think they are entitled to leech off the Larkinson Clan just because I married one of their daughters!"

This possibly sounded too outrageous! If the Wodins truly wanted to enter the Red Ocean, then they should do the hard work themselves!

Calabast looked as if she had already expected his outburst. "I believe the Wodins don't have the correct read on you. They're underestimating your dislike towards Hexers."

"I loathe them! Whether they're moderate or extreme, it's a fact that they look down on men. If that's the case, I don't want any more of them around me than necessary. Letting the Glory Seekers accompany us is already the limit."

After Ves clearly expressed his thoughts, he issued an instruction.

"I don't want to deal with this crap. Just convey them a message that they should forget about getting a free ride from us. In fact, even if they're reading an expeditionary fleet of

their own, I don't want it to be anywhere close to us. I have many ways to make their lives miserable if they insist on testing my patience."

"Gloriana won't like that."

"Too bad!" Ves shouted. "I'm putting my foot down for once! I don't want any more Hexers around us than what we have previously agreed to! I'm just aching to get as far away from the Hegemony as possible. I don't need the Wodin Dynasty to bring a piece of their own state with us. That would negate my purpose of leaving much of my baggage behind."

Calabast looked at Ves with approval. "I hope you'll be able to show the same amount of resolve when Gloriana issues her request to you in person."

"If she truly loves me, she won't force the issue." Ves snorted. "I have always made it clear from the start that I don't want to get entangled with Hexers. That hasn't changed no matter how chummy I've become with their state."

"Well, I'll be sure to communicate your message discreetly to the Wodins. They're very stubborn, though. It might be that they'll mistake your tough posture as an attempt to drive a hard bargain. It will take multiple messages to get your meaning across."

Ves let out a deep breath and pressed his palm against his face. "What do they possibly think they can offer that will get me to agree to this ridiculous demand? We don't need their capital, ships, mechs, people or anything for that matter."

"I don't know. You'll have to find out when you speak with the senior Wodins."

"What do you think, Calabast? Are you in favor of letting your Hexers keep us company?"

She sneered. "Don't paint every Hexer with the same brush. Besides, I don't consider myself a Hexer anymore. I'm a proud, card-carrying member of the Larkinson Clan. I look out for your interests, not the Hegemony's. As far as this issue goes, I agree with you. One of the biggest flaws of my former people is that we aren't good at diplomacy. This is fatal when you enter into an entirely new region of space that is filled with strong and very different powers. If the Hexers inadvertently cause offense to a powerful faction, then we'll likely suffer as well!"

Ves felt relieved that Calabast was on his side. With her support, he was very sure that the Wodins would never succeed in clawing their way into the Larkinson Clan.

"Continue to keep an eye on the Wodins and do your best to dissuade them from getting their hopes up. I'm not interested in anything they can offer to us. Perhaps in a decade, our Larkinson Clan may have already surpassed the Wodin Dynasty in terms of wealth and power. There is little reason for me to respect them when that happens."

Ves and the Larkinsons received a lot of help from the Wodins, but that did not mean he considered it anything but a fair transaction. They only rescued his task force in order to safeguard the benefits he provided to Gloriana, the Wodins and their state. Nothing more.

Chapter 2452: Standard LMC Mech Template

The combined fleet almost reached the border of the civilized space. In the past week, the engineers and other spacers focused entirely on making their ships FTL-worthy.

The surviving Larkinson ships that all sustained damage over the course of the campaign should still be sound enough to travel faster-than-light.

It was the pirate ships that generated a lot of concern. The FTL drives that the pirates smuggled out of civilized space should all be sound, but there was no telling what kind of traps or safeguards they contained.

From the start, a dedicated team of chief engineers had disassembled these large but delicate devices to inspect each and every single subcomponent.

The team detected a handful of traps, proving that the Allidus Alliance indeed buried some nasty surprises in their own FTL drives.

If the Wodin Warriors hadn't dispatched a massive quantity of superior engineers to assist in the process, the Larkinson engineers would have gone crazy by now. The complexity of FTL drives, especially larger ones, outright exceeded what they could understand.

Only engineers who spent decades serving aboard capital or very large subcapital ships were qualified to work with the heavy-duty FTL drives. Those military engineers usually served for life in the military or large trading companies. Due to their vital expertise, the Larkinson Clan failed to attract them during the previous recruitment round.

Fortunately, it was different now. The Larkinson Clan earned an immense amount of prestige, and the LMC became more famous by the day. The most desirable professionals no longer turned up their noses at what they previously thought to be a flash in the pan. A growing number of high-skilled job seekers converged at Cinach in order to be part of the rising stars.

Ves already received word that the MTA dispatched a small investigation fleet to perform extensive studies on the Gravad Knarlax and the surviving escort warships.

To be honest, the warships weren't all that interesting once their novelty had passed. Their power solely came from the fact that they were able to scale their crude weapon systems to immense degrees. When one of the Gravada Knarlax's main cannons

exceeded the mass and volume of multiple mechs, they did not need to be sophisticated in order to demolish other ships!

There must be other reasons why the MTA was so eager to examine them. Perhaps the mechers wanted to gather some clues about the Nyxian Gap's production capabilities. Maybe they wanted to ascertain the capabilities of Nyxian shipwrights.

Whatever the case, if not for the preliminary agreement between Ves and Master Willix, the MTA would have nabbed the prize ships the instant they returned to civilized space!

Ves knew that his next talk with Master Willix was crucial. Its outcome not only affected his future, but also the future of the Larkinson Clan.

He grew more apprehensive about his chances. Master Willix had to go out of her way to accommodate his demands. He had to offer some very compelling arguments to make it worth her time.

"If I fail, the consequences are unimaginable..."

Despite his concerns, he still made sure to make the best use of the time he had left. He not only wanted to wrap up the remaining two design projects, but also create the wedding bands of his dreams.

When Ves called up an overview of the Cat's Paw and Ferocious Piranha designs, he was quite pleased at what he saw. In the last few weeks, both projects had made large strides. The latter one was already complete barring its spiritual components.

"Well, I might as well take care of that immediately."

He delved into the schematics of the Ferocious Piranha in order to familiarize himself with the final iteration of the third-class design.

Originally, the Ferocious Piranha was supposed to be a light skirmisher derivative of the Doom Guard.

Fast, light and premium, the Ferocious Piranha basically utilized the Doom Guard's glow in an offensive capacity. Putting this powerful glow on a very mobile package opened up many more opportunities to debilitate opponents.

The only complication that stalled the project was that the Doom Guard's glow had changed.

It shifted from striking terror into people's hearts to generating a rapidly-fluctuating field of contrasting emotions.

Suffice to say, such a drastic change significantly changed the usage of the Ferocious Piranha.

The greatest advantage of the old glow was that its ability to induce fear was great at clearing crowds. Even when enemies close to an active Doom Guard managed to flee its range, their fighting spirit had already collapsed, causing them to keep running!

This was not the case with the new glow. Once Lufa replaced the position vacated by Nyxie, the glow produced by the Doom Guard mentally disabled those who failed to maintain their focus.

The mechs piloted by people affected by this condition either drifted away or convulsed. This turned them into sitting ducks which could be shot at will. However, once the mechs exited the range of the new glow, their pilots usually regained control pretty quickly.

Overall, Ves believed that most customers preferred the old glow over the new one, but that did not mean the latter was impractical.

"In the right circumstances, a single Ferocious Piranha should be able to annihilate an entire mech company by itself!"

This was unlikely to happen. Spaceborn mechs rarely fought in tight formations, so there should always be a lot of enemies that were able to remain outside of the range of a Ferocious Piranha's glow.

In addition, tests of the Doom Guard also showed that as long as the mech pilots by its glow were not total garbage, they eventually wrestled back some control as they became accustomed to the cycling emotions.

"What if there are multiple Ferocious Piranha's, then?"

Ves tried to imagine how a squad of his new mech model fared against a typical mech company. The odds should be substantially better, but their overlapping glows barely grew stronger.

"Wait a minute."

He suddenly recalled that he developed a little trick that increased the effectiveness of overlapping glows. While the improvement was rather modest, he already received early indications that it worked!

Ves easily tweaked the Ferocious Piranha design so that the glow of each individual mech varied just a little bit. By inducing these minor differences, stacking multiple of them together should produce a noticeably stronger effect.

"In fact, I should apply this trick to all of my mechs."

He called up a special document in his implant and added it as a standard rule.

This was something he had recently been working upon. He wanted each mech design to conform to a standard template. This leveled the playing field between his products as much as possible.

Right now, the template already contained a lot of requirements. A proper LMC mech should be alive, possess the potential to grow, carry his signature look, reach a high standard of reliability, be capable of conjuring up a phantom projection, be able to enhance itself up to a hard cap of 25 Ves, limit the effectiveness of its glow and more.

These were the standard requirements that every LMC mech designed by Ves and Gloriana had to meet. He might apply another template if he collaborated with other mech designers such as Ketis or Master Willix, but he would still try his best to implement his standard.

Once Ves applied every requirement dictated by his standard LMC mech template, the Ferocious Piranha design became significantly more useful in his eyes.

The addition of the retraction dial provided the mech design with a lot more flexibility in utilizing its disorienting glow.

The phantom projection the mech was able to project consisted of a large and rapidly-moving school of piranhas.

This cosmetic addition was the successor to the particle generators that he had previously used. He became inspired by the giant silhouettes that appeared whenever his forces engaged their battle formations.

In order to camouflage the future usage of battle formations by his mech forces, Ves simply decided to add the ability to project giant 'totems' to all of his mechs!

By themselves, the phantom projections were just illusions. Enemy mechs could easily see through them or filter them out. However, when used in conjunction with other properties such as glows, the phantom projections might be useful.

In the case of the Ferocious Piranha, projecting a rapidly-moving school of piranhas in the presence of enemies that were already affected by a debilitating glow might tip them over!

"Phantom projections not only look great in footage, but also compliments our psychological warfare doctrine."

That it was able to provide cover for the effects of authentic battle formations was still the most important reason why he implemented this requirement. The power of the network derived from Master Huron's work was so potent that Ves wanted to turn it into one of the Larkinson Clan's exclusive strengths!

As Ves turned his attention back to the Ferocious Piranha design, he thought about what kind of triggered ability he should add to it. The Doom Guard already came with a pulse ability, though it wasn't very strong.

"Hmm. I'm actually a bit afraid of adding any extra functionality."

The Ferocious Piranha was already strong. While it lacked the Valkyrie Redeemer's ability to affect enemies at a distance, up close its Doom Guard-like glow was very fatal to weaker opponents!

Of course, the biggest advantage to the Ferocious Piranha was that its glow did not harm the mech pilot and any friendlies!

By adding a part of Qilanxo, her influence successfully prevented Zeigra and Lufa from harming the people who were supposed to fight alongside the Ferocious Piranha.

This made the spaceborn light skirmisher a lot more practical to use! Together with the retraction dial, its suppressive glow shouldn't be able to harm anyone unless its current owners willed it. It became a lot easier for the Ferocious Piranha to fight as part of a larger unit or formation!

These compelling advantages put the Ferocious Piranha far ahead of its competition in the same price class. While the premium light skirmishers designed by other mech designers might perform better in some aspects, hardly any of them came with the ability to directly cause nearby enemy mech pilots to lose their minds in battle!

That said, the performance of the mech was still fairly good. Much of that was due to its generous budget, which was extravagant even by the standards of other expensive light skirmishers.

Costing 1.5 times more than a Doom Guard, the LMC made it abundantly clear that the potent advantages of the Ferocious Piranha came at a price.

It took a lot of courage to design an expensive light mech. No matter how much Ves invested in its armor system, the fact that it was limited to thin layers meant that it could never resist as much damage as a medium mech.

If the enemy managed to land a heavy blow onto the mech, then 3 million hex credits would pretty much go down the drain!

This was one of the main reasons why customers were very reluctant to spend money on expensive light mechs. No matter how much they excelled at evasion, just one lucky hit or a blanket of fire was all it took to ruin them! Most customers would rather purchase cheaper mechs and throw some unimportant mech pilots in their cockpits.

"Light mechs are often synonymous to expendable mechs." Ves grimaced.

Since he knew that, he wanted to make sure that the buyers of the Ferocious Piranha did not treat the mech model the same way. Inflating its price was a good way to make sure that his customers truly cared for them. After all, no one wanted to waste an expensive investment!

"Well, that's all I can do for you, Ferocious Piranha. The rest is up to you. I hope you will revolutionize the mech market even further."

The commercial potential of the Ferocious Piranha exceeded that of the Crystal Lord Mark II!

Chapter 2453: Impoverished Charlatan

After adding the Ferocious Piranha design to the pile of completed projects, Ves studied the final remaining project.

The Cat's Paw design was the last one to be completed for a good reason. The heavy artillery mech was so big that it simply demanded a lot more work to take shape.

Designing it was a great endeavor. It did not help that Ves and Gloriana were the only mech designers who effectively worked on it. As a second-class mech, the machine codenamed Cat's Paw contained a wealth of advanced components with very advanced features.

The powerful weapon loadout consisted of a pair of heavy Xcordon gauss cannons, a pair of heavy positron beam cannons and a pair of light pulse cannons all needed to rely on a host of supporting systems to function correctly.

Ves and Gloriana had to cram a lot of different systems into the Cat's Paw. While a heavy mech possessed a lot of capacity, it carried a lot of weapons, each of which imposed additional demands.

The internal volume of the design quickly filled up with power systems, damage control systems, heat management systems, targeting systems, sensor systems, communication systems and other necessities such as armor and ammunition bays.

Even though Ves had already reached the standard of a second-class mech designer, he still needed to strain his mind in order to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

Fortunately, this was something that Gloriana excelled at. Previously, she prioritized the Valkyrie Redeemer Project due to its importance to the Hegemony.

Ves did not begrudge her obvious favoritism, but he was a little disappointed that her priorities were skewed.

If she was a proper member of the Larkinson Clan, she should have devoted her efforts to finishing the Cat's Paw Project first. The Valkyrie Redeemer exclusively benefited a client while the Cat's Paw directly strengthened the Larkinson Clan.

"Well, it's okay." He shrugged.

Producing the Cat's Paw was difficult. Compared to the other mech models that were exclusive to the clan, the Cat's Paw far exceeded them in cost, scope and complexity.

In fact, Ves wasn't confident that the LMC was able to fabricate the second-class artillery mechs in its current state. He would have to outsource its productions to the Hexers or wait until his clan finally received its factory ship in order to commence production!

"Even then, I'll have to prepare all of the advanced materials needed to produce this difficult mech!"

The Cat's Paw was an expensive and difficult-to-produce machine. Even if Ves and his crew managed to establish a working production line, the production rate was bound to disappoint.

Was it worth it? Definitely!

Once the factory ship produced enough Cat's Paw mechs to fill up her bunkers, the Larkinson Clan gained a very powerful mobile bulwark!

Its budget was at least 50 percent higher than that of the Valkyrie Redeemer.

While comparing heavy artillery mechs to light skirmishers was like comparing apples to oranges, looking at cost was a good way to judge the power of a machine.

"It costs 600 million hex credits to fabricate one of these big bastards, and that only accounts for the cost of materials and licensing fees."

The actual cost was higher because Ves had to account for the cost of running the factory ship, the wages he needed to pay for the production crews and many other factors.

Rather than see it as a downside, Ves instead considered it a boon. The power of the Cat's Paw was so impressive that it should serve his clan well for at least a decade. Its

usefulness could even stretch on longer if he committed to implementing incremental updates.

In comparison, the Bright Warrior was already on its way out. Its current performance could no longer keep up with the demands of the growing Larkinson Clan.

The troublesome aspect about the modular mech platform was that it was a third-class mech that incorporated a couple second-class elements, most notably its armor system.

This meant that elevating its performance was not as simple as replacing a few outdated components here and there. Ves would have to rip out most of the internals of the Bright Warrior and design something completely different in their place.

To put it simply, if Ves wanted to improve the Cat's Paw, he could simply make enough changes to produce version 1.01 or even 1.1. For the Bright Warrior, nothing less than a Mark II version sufficed.

"Ugh. That's going to be a major project at least. Should I start on it right after the wedding or should I wait a few more years?"

Once Ves finished looking over the expansive technical design schematics of the Cat's Paw, he was very satisfied at how it turned out. While it still required more time to test and optimize even further, its foundation was sound and its performance parameters were already up to standard.

The only issue was that Ves was still unsure about its spiritual characteristics.

Of all of his design spirits, only a handful directly enhanced the performance of ranged mechs.

The newly-upgraded Illustrious One provided a noticeable boost to crystals and components based on luminar technology, but the Cat's Paw utilized conventional weapon systems.

The Solemn Guardian played an indispensable role in popularizing the Soldier product line, but that was solely due to its duty-based glow.

"My clansmen already have the Golden Cat."

This left him with Ylvaine. Not James, but the spiritual fragment version of the prophet.

"Is there even a difference between the two these days?"

Whatever the case, of his entire collection of design spirits, Ylvaine was the only one that was capable of providing active targeting assistance to mech pilots. Unlike the

predictive targeting systems sold by dedicated equipment developers, the assistance provided by the design spirit worked on entirely different principles.

As long as Ylvaine assisted the mech pilots to the fullest extent, they were capable of hitting critical targets with unerring accuracy!

Of course, Ves already noticed that this help did not come for free. During the Sand War, Ylvaine carefully rationed the ability to the most dedicated Kronon marksman mech specialists.

These days, Ylvaine was forced to ration its existing spiritual energy reserves even more!

When the Friday Coalition turned the Ylvaine Protectorate into its puppet state, the Kronon Dynasty was forced to scrap all of its Holy Soldier and Deliverer mechs.

The loss of hundreds of thousands of Ylvainan mechs directly crippled Ylvaine's spiritual feedback. These days, it was only able to harvest the spiritual feedback of a small number of exiled Ylvaining mech pilots.

That was enough to sustain its existence, but it was not enough fuel any further growth.

"I guess you'll have to rely on quality rather than quantity." Ves surmised.

The Cat's Paw mech should help a bit, but Ylvaine's still wasn't optimistic. He needed the help of an expert pilot in order to gain a singular powerful source of spiritual feedback.

"Maybe I can do something about that as well."

With his current capabilities, producing expert pilots was no longer an impossibility. While Ves didn't think he could produce expert pilots on command, he could probably invest in a batch of 100 promising mech pilots and produce a yield of 1 or 2 expert pilots after a couple of years.

The yield would be drastically higher if he subjected the pilots to a lot of intensive combat!

The only reason why he hadn't done so already was because his clan already attracted too much heat.

"This will have to wait. For now, I should be happy with Cat's Paw mechs piloted by regular Ylvainans."

Ves ultimately did not add too much to the Cat's Paw spiritual design. Its Ylvainan mech pilots already received a huge morale boost when they piloted a mech blessed by the prophet.

The only triggered ability he added to the design was a more refined and reliable version of the Deliverer's Guided Aim ability.

The concept was the same. Ves expanded upon it by adapting it to the different weapon systems of the Cat's Paw. He also tried to optimize and ease any possible input from Ylvaine in order to reduce the cost of activating the Guided Aim ability.

Ves contemplated on adding another triggered ability, but nothing came up. The heavy mechs were so cumbersome that they would likely spend most of their time slotted in a bunker. There was a limit to what they could do in their positions.

"This is enough, I suppose. Aside from the requirements mandated by the standard template, I don't need to add anything else. The mech is already strong enough."

In the end, he tweaked and finalized his contribution to the mech design. He sent it back to Gloriana so that she could bring it to completion by herself.

"Well, that's it. I'm free now."

He felt liberated now that he effectively completed six mech design projects. As this was the first time the LMC adopted such a hefty schedule, Ves wanted to make some changes for the next round of projects.

Enough time had passed for the combined fleet to reach the border of the Nyxian Gap. As this was a special moment to everyone, Ves headed to the bridge in order to witness the crossing.

"We're almost out." Calabast noted.

She had already arrived to bridge by the time that Ves entered through the blast doors.

"I guess everyone is sick and tired of staying one more day in the Nyxian Gap."

"That's an understatement."

The two chatted a little as the fleet came nearer and nearer to the border.

Once the fleet finally passed through the invisible barrier, the Larkinsons and Hexers finally got rid of their persistent unease.

Ves noticed the difference even more. When he peeked into the imaginary realm, he no longer witnessed the mighty vortex that held the Nyxian Gap together. He only saw a huge mass of darkness in its place.

A lot of Larkinsons turned emotional for a moment. Some had tears in their eyes while others spontaneously hugged each other. Even the Kinners manning the bridge cheered and celebrated the occasion!

"We're safe again!"

"No more pirates!"

"I need a vacation!"

Once the Larkinons regained their composure, they quickly readied themselves for the critical moment.

Right now, the combined fleet exited into the middle of nowhere. It was too difficult for the MTA investigation fleet to travel to these precise coordinates, so Ves had agreed to bring his fleet to a star system in the vicinity.

"Commence FTL travel."

With bated breath, many Larkinsons and Wodins observed the captured warships as every other ship and mech distanced themselves from the potential hazards.

Though the engineers had worked hard on the Gravada Knarlax, the Ailing Frey, the Cartin Motiva, the Livid Seven, the Artis Fly and the Sundown, no one was able to ensure that they worked normally.

After some final checks, the first pirate warship initiated her FTL drive.

The armed frigate called the Sundown easily slipped into FTL.

When the captain of the warship successfully communicated back to the fleet with a borrowed quantum communication node, a lot of people slowly let out their breaths.

"The Sundown reports that all of her essential systems are running normally!"

The Artis Fly followed suit. Then came the destroyers. The Livid Seven and the Cartin Motiva exhibited no problems, but Ves grew a little worried when the Ailing Frey came next.

The ship suffered a lot of damage during the previous battle. Fortunately, the emergency repairs held up as the ship reluctantly zipped away.

Then came the largest and riskiest ship of all. The Gravada Knarlax lost huge chunks of her structure. She even lost one of her primary turrets.

With all of this damage, no one was sure whether she was able to reach another star system.

Yet with all of the effort put into inspecting, repairing and tuning up her FTL drive, the damaged warship eventually disappeared as well.

"Success!"

Chapter 2454: Relaxed

As the remnants of Task Force Predator and the Wodin Warrior fleet both entered FTL travel, Ves constantly kept himself appraised of the condition of the travelling warships.

While the Larkinsons had lost all of their quantum communication nodes, the Wodins had plenty to spare. It did not burden them too much to lend some to the Larkinsons so that they could be mounted on pirate-built vessels.

With the help of these nodes, the prize crews who ran the captured vessels constantly transmitted their status to the rest, thereby reassuring everyone of their continued existence.

No accidents took place during the first traverse. The Gravada Knarlax remained stable despite missing large chunks of her hull. The state of the smaller warships remained stable as well.

In less than a single day, a large number of ships emerged at the edge of a nameless star system.

From the large Parma Imago to the smaller Scarlet Rose, every single vessel successfully reached true civilized space without any accidents!

While many of the Larkinsons celebrated their successful departure from the Nyxian Gap yet again, Ves was one of the few who did not join in the celebrations.

As he studied the projection of the local plot, he noted the presence of a handful of very powerful vessels.

Though the frigate and destroyer-sized ships didn't look impressive, their quality far surpassed anything the Larkinsons or Hexers owned!

Ves gulped. A heavy weight fell on his shoulders. He recognized Master Willix's Ubiquitous Force.

This time, she brought company.

Even without communicating with the recent arrivals, the ships already activated their powerful propulsion drives and quickly approached the sides of the Gravada Knarlax and other pirate warships.

"Don't panic and don't do anything stupid!" Ves quickly broadcasted to all of his clansmen. "We already have an appointment with the MTA. Just stay put and don't make any aggressive moves."

No sane person would ever launch an attack on the MTA, but who knew how trigger-happy his men might be. The rapid and alarming approach of the Association's ships might bring up bad memories.

Fortunately, no incidents took place. Most of this was because the Larkinsons and Wodin Warriors only deployed a minimal amount of mechs after exiting FTL travel.

Normally, this was not enough to protect so many ships, but the presence of MTA vessels already guaranteed that no one would stir any trouble.

Ves received a short message from the Ubiquitous Force. It stated that he should be making his way to the advanced frigate.

His face grew ugly. He really did not want to talk to Master Willix on her home ground. With all of the technology packed inside one of the most modern vessels of human civilization, it was far too easy for him to expose himself.

Nonetheless, the commands of the MTA were absolute and Ves saw no way out of this predicament.

He exited the bridge and returned to his stateroom. He changed his clothes and left some sensitive articles behind.

"Meow."

Lucky woke up and looked at Ves while swishing his tail.

"I'll be going out for a short time. Don't stir up any trouble. Hold yourself in, okay?"

"Meow meow."

"You could offer me some sympathy, you know!"

"Meow!"

Was his cat looking forward to seeing him get screwed?

"Whatever!"

Once he checked himself over for the final time, he addressed his bodyguard.

"You can't come with me this time, Nitaa. Just stay on this ship and guard the vault."

"Understood."

He had grown so used to her silent presence that he felt disconcerted that she was no longer covering his back.

Even though he had never ended up in a situation where he needed her protection lately, he still knew that many people were out for his head.

"Well, it's not like any of foes are lurking around the corner here. I only have one that is staring straight at me right now." He muttered.

He entered his shuttle in a fatalistic mood. The vehicle boosted out of the Scarlet Rose's hangar bay and steadily approached the Ubiquitous Force.

Ves noted from the local plot that a number of other shuttles launched from the ships controlled by the Larkinson Clan. He already received word that one of the other MTA vessels issued an invitation to the expert pilots.

Venerable Joshua, Venerable Jannzi, Venerable Orfan, Venerable Dise, and Venerable Tusa all made their pilgrimage to the MTA. Doubtlessly, the mechers wanted to interrogate them in private while checking whether they legitimately broke through to their current ranks.

Perhaps the MTA suspected that the Larkinsons had resorted to dangerous and improper means to force out the potential of the expert pilots.

Ves wasn't worried about that. Ranya and the other doctors already verified that they were as healthy as they could be. At most, Tusa still suffered a few sores.

Hopefully, the expert pilots knew what they should say. While the Larkinson Network was not effective at ensuring their loyalty anymore, they had already been influenced by it prior to their advancement.

In order to make sure they didn't say anything incriminating, Ves had already told them the consequences of doing so. No matter what, he doubted that any of them wanted to see the Larkinson Clan breakup or forcibly absorbed by the MTA.

What happened next was out of his hands.

It only took a short time before his shuttle docked inside the Ubiquitous Force. After encountering this small but powerful frigate several times, this was the first time he had the privilege of stepping aboard an MTA starship.

As soon as his feet touched the deck, he beheld the hangar bay.

Modern. Advanced. White. A couple of large and heavy multipurpose mechs stood dormant. Almost no one was present to service them or perform any other chores.

Their presence was redundant. A typical first-class multipurpose mech already possessed a suite of self-maintenance and self-repair capabilities. Mech technicians only needed to inspect them occasionally unless they incurred serious damage.

"Mr. Larkinson! Ves!" A familiar voice called out.

"Mr. Armalon!"

"Just call me Jovy, haha!"

The proud but capable MTA Journeyman floated over to Ves with an eager expression. Once he reached Ves, he offered his hand.

Ves tentatively shook hands with Jovy. He hadn't expected to meet him again so soon.

"Uhm, I was expecting to meet with Master Willix."

"She's occupied right now." Jovy answered as he gestured to Ves to move forward. "While she is very interested in your case, she can't abandon her current obligations. She carries a lot of responsibilities on her shoulders."

"How long until she's free to talk."

"I can't say, but it will only take a few hours by my reckoning. Let me keep you company in the meantime. I've heard all about your adventures and I'm dying to hear what you've encountered!"

"Oh, it's not as exciting as you think. We only fought against a couple of shabby pirate gangs. Just look at the ships we managed to haul back. They're shambling rafts compared to your Association's sleek and powerful vessels."

Jovy chuckled. "That's why they're so interesting! The Gravada Knarlax looks so quaint. How the Allidus Alliance believes they could deter our Association with this primitive toy is beyond me. Oh, no offense to you. I heard it was a tough fight for you. How did you manage to defeat the pirates in the end?"

Ves nonchalantly shrugged. "I'm not so sure myself. We had some lucky breakthroughs and a friendly alien dropped by as well."

"Can you describe the alien who helped you? I haven't read any descriptions."

"She looks like a giant humanoid alien. There are scales over her form and she also wears something similar to a robe..."

As Ves continued to answer Jovy's seemingly-casual questions, he knew that the interrogation had already begun.

He had to admit that the MTA was quite shrewd. Ves had entered the Ubiquitous Force filled with tension. Yet just a single minute of talking to Jovy, he no longer felt much apprehension.

Compared to his first meeting with Jovy, the talented Journeyman was much easier to talk to. Either the mech designer had gone through special training or he simply regarded Ves with more respect.

Perhaps both were the case. As they reached some sort of lounge and entertainment compartment, Ves sensed that his MTA counterpart genuinely admired him for going on such an exciting adventure.

Jovy sighed in admiration. "I really envy you, Ves! The life you live is exciting and fit for a drama. With everything that you have gone through, it's no wonder you're making so much progress."

"Why don't you enter the Nyxian Gap yourself, then?"

"There are too many rules limiting what I can do. Besides, the Nyxian Gap is special hazard zone to us. Not even Master Willix is allowed to enter!"

"Really?!"

Jovy offered Ves a wry smile. "Our Association already lost too many talents to this abyss."

"So the MTA is powerful enough to keep the first-rate superstates in check, but it isn't even capable of overcoming a single anomalous region of space?"

"Oh, if we wanted to crush the Nyxian Gap, we would have. It's just that it takes too much effort to do so. Anomalous space regions such as the Nyxian Gap are uncommon but not rare in the galaxy. There are so much of them and the resources we need to mobilize to crush all of them are so much that it isn't worth the trouble. It's a thankless job and we'll only drain ourselves in the end, allowing the CFA to get ahead."

"I see."

To Ves, it sounded as if the MTA was a cleaning bot with a limited charge. Instead of doing its job of cleaning up the messes that people left on the floor, it would rather do nothing so that it had energy to butt heads against another bot that was supposed to tidy up the exterior.

The two mech designers continued to chat casually about various topics. They didn't talk about anything important. Instead, they were merely querying each other what they did in their daily lives or which mech types they liked best.

While Ves let himself be lulled by the discussion, a portion of him still remained alert. He felt that Jovy was deliberately trying to relax him and make him feel at ease.

The decor of the lounge only reinforced his urge to release all of his tension. The warm interior and tasteful ornaments along with the impressive artwork made him feel as if he was Jovy's honored guest.

While Ves expected Jovy to steer the conversation back to the Battle against the Abyss or something, the MTA mech designer instead brought up something completely different.

"You know, the Ubiquitous Force is quite an impressive little ship, but she doesn't offer much in the way of excitement. Would you like me to bring you to Design World?"

Ves grew confused. "Design World?"

"It's the virtual portal where mechers like me have fun! There's lots to do there! We can challenge others into design duels, we can test our mech designs by letting the mech pilots there pilot our virtual mechs, we can watch some high-tier mech duels and even bet on them if you'd like. I hope you still have some of the MTA credits you won from me. It's not the same if you put some money on the line!"

Of course, the Reality Trickster would say that. While it was unlikely that Jovy was capable of swaying the outcome of these mech duels, perhaps his probability-manipulating specialty might give him some hunches every now and then. Betting against him was never a good idea!

"I'll pass." Ves gently rejected the offer.

"Why?"

"It sounds like doing anything in Design World is expensive. Besides, I'm not a mecher. Bringing me there is like taking a space peasant into the Galactic Mech Council. Attracting scorn or receiving looks of disdain from your fellow mechers doesn't sound like fun to me. Is that enough?"

Jovy did not look deterred. "Every mech designer who heard of Design World wants to enter it, you know! Do you realize what kind of opportunity you are rejecting?!"

"Oh? What's so special about it? Is it more than a virtual theme park?"

Chapter 2455: Gravitic Threat

The Ubiquitous Force was a ship of understated luxury. Just like her owner, the frigate was modest and relatively unassuming.

Certainly, the logo of the MTA, her personal emblem and some exceptional-looking ornaments made it clear that the Ubiquitous Force was an extension of one of the most powerful organizations of humanity.

However, much of the actual guts of the ship was buried beneath closed hatches, classic tiled decks and white-coated bulkheads. Ves encountered hardly any bots or crewmen when Jovy guided him to the lounge compartment.

As for the space he was currently in, the wood-paneled walls and the rich red carpeting made him feel as if he entered someone's home.

What drew his attention were the oddly playful gravity traps.

For example, a green-and-purple exoflower hovered above the coffee table.

The plant radiated a pleasant aroma that could only be smelled between 1.1 and 1.2 meters above the deck. Gravity firmly kept a grip on the scent molecules so that they did not spill outside this very specific band.

To water and feed this plant, streams of sparkling nutrient water emerged out nowhere and threaded a morphing, sophisticated route before enveloping the roots of the exoplant.

The threaded water changed shape every ten seconds, morphing into aesthetically-pleasing forms such as a sunflower, a roaring lion, the face of Master Willix when she was younger and so on. All of these transformations took place without spilling a single drop of water.

And this was just one of the decorative gravity traps!

A moving chandelier made out of crystals and crystal dust glittered above his head. From the hand-sized crystals to the tiniest mote of dust, each and every single one of them moved with remarkable precision as they adopted various shapes. The light they emitted caused the lounge to cast different shadows that somehow soothed his eyes.

Together with Jovy's amiable approach, Ves felt increasingly more at ease. Even if he knew that Master Willix engaged in some clever manipulation, it was simply too hard for him to keep his guard up when his body just wanted to sink into the ultra-comfortable couch that was already starting to massage his back as if it was an actual masseuse.

Yet beneath this friendly facade hid extreme danger.

While he wasn't able to observe any threats with his regular vision, he had a trick up his sleeve.

After contemplating the risks, he decided to take a risk. He concentrated his mind and rapidly created a spiritual augment based on a template stored in his implant.

Once he was finished, he gained access to a small and discrete spiritual eye. He was unsure whether the ship contained any means of detecting and tracking spiritual energy, so sending out a little spiritual eye also served as a test to probe Willix's capabilities.

When Ves cautiously sent the spiritual eye through the decks, bulkheads, ceilings and other solid objects, his blood began to freeze.

Underneath the warm decorations, he detected a large amount of dangerous and unknown machinery.

While at least three-quarters of the components he observed were too advanced for him to decipher their functions, he was still able to identify the remainder.

More than a dozen dormant plasma turrets rested in the ceiling above his head. Ves estimated that each of these turrets were so powerful that they could burn holes straight through his Bright Warrior mechs!

A handful of powerful positron beam cannon mounts were buried behind the bulkheads.

Ves almost jumped from his comfy massage couch when he noticed that an antimatter bomb was buried underneath his butt!

Yet no matter how scary all of these weapons appeared, it was still possible to resist them as long as he wore proper armor.

What truly destabilized his mood was the sophisticated gravitic modules taking up a lot of space beneath the deck.

The modules that were responsible for sustaining the gravity traps only channeled a fraction of their power. If they truly came online, Ves loosely estimated that they might be able to ramp up the artificial gravity to at least 10,000 g!

This alone was enough to unbalance his heart. What was the concept of generating 10,000 g? It meant that anything in the area of effect would suddenly become 10,000 heavier than normal!

Someone who weighed 100 kilograms would suddenly weigh 1 million kilograms instead!

Forget about being able to walk to walk or crawl, when someone's body was subjected to so much gravity, their bodies would instantly collapse in itself! With so much force, the hyper-advanced gravitic modules should easily be capable of squashing his augmented body into a cube the size of his thumb!

What was worse was that these powerful gravitic modules were everywhere. Their degree of miniaturization was incredible, so Master Willix was easily able to integrate them between the decks, behind the bulkheads and even in the furniture!

He suddenly understood why the ship was called the Ubiquitous Force. The moment someone stepped aboard the ship, there was no way to hide from her lethal gravity!

Throughout his examination, Ves gained a deeper respect for Master Willix's design philosophy. He thought that specializing in gravity systems mainly entailed designing highly-mobile mechs.

While that may be true, her specialty also enabled her to develop horrible weapons!

Of all of the possible ways to attack a mech, most of them had to overcome its armor system before dealing any serious damage.

Gravity happened to be one of the few forces that directly affected the mech pilot and the internals of mech.

Usually, modern mechs integrated numerous gravitic modules or inertial stabilizers to prevent excessive gravity or g-forces from crushing anything delicate. They were a necessity in spaceborn mechs, because otherwise a sharp turning maneuver might be enough to flatten a mech pilot against the side of the cockpit into a pancake!

What happened when mechs attempted to weaponize gravity?

If a gravitic weapon was powerful enough, they had the potential to bypass the armor of a mech and directly crush the mech pilot and delicate internal components. This was an incredibly powerful effect that was very difficult to defend against!

It wasn't entirely hopeless to fight against gravitic weapons. There were still ways to defend against it. Certain special armor systems were capable of blocking or weakening external gravitic attacks.

One of the troublesome aspects of gravitic weapons was that they weren't that effective at range. The fact that the mechs that employed these weapons had to get close also exposed a vulnerability.

However, as long as these weapons were powerful enough, it was easy for them to overwhelm the defenses of most mechs. Even mechs that were specifically designed to counter Master Willix's works would have a hard time defending against powerful gravitic weapons.

She was one of the top authorities in this field!

Few mech designers were capable of developing defensive measures that exceeded what she could already do! Contesting her on her home ground was a losing prospect.

Opponents were better off trying to counter her mechs at range, but even then Master Willix probably had answers for that as well.

Perhaps her mechs were capable of deploying pylons that created a strong gravitic cage.

Perhaps they were capable of launching missiles that generated powerful implosions akin to black holes on impact.

Perhaps her machines were able to exert gravity onto themselves in such a way that allowed to accelerate a hundred times greater than a regular mech!

While Ves had studied some of Willix's publicly-known works, the MTA was remarkably opaque when it came to their main machines. Releasing their specs made it easier for enemies to counter them. What little he knew about her mechs did not encompass any offensive applications of gravitic technology, but he would be a fool to think that they didn't exist.

When he realized the magnitude of his discoveries, he could no longer take comfort in his surroundings.

The warm interior, the plush carpet, the pleasant scents were all camouflage in his eyes. Without any way to control or defend against the weapons hidden beneath the surface, how could someone as paranoid as him ever feel secure?

His conversation with Jovy quickly grew stilted. Ves paid more attention to the many methods the ship could kill him. There were distressingly few options to defend against these threats.

"Are you really sure you don't want to enter Design World with me?" Jovy asked again. "For mech designers such as us, it's one of the steadiest ways to earn MTA merits. As long as you obtain a pass, you can enter whenever you want. Isn't that great?"

"It's all fake." Ves shook his head.

"Pardon?"

"Will our mechs be able to showcase their full strength in Design World?"

"Not entirely. The tech that supports it is incredibly advanced. It's capable of simulating reality to near-perfection. It's even able to simulate our design philosophies by at least half their potency, if not more. Don't look down on that, Ves. This is a remarkable achievement considering that many ordinary virtual simulations can't even reach 5 percent. What's even better is the location of the mech designer doesn't matter."

While Ves had to admit this accomplishment sounded incredible, he became more wary of it by the second.

The main reason he didn't want to enter Design World was because it would certainly entail interfacing with his implant.

Even though his implant came with various security measures to prevent unauthorized intrusions, he did not believe they stood a chance against the MTA's state-of-the-art hacking measures.

No matter what, establishing a connection between his mind and any virtual interface that was not under his control sounded like a bad idea!

Of course, he couldn't say his suspicions out loud, so he resorted to another excuse to decline the other Journeyman's invitation.

"Look, Jovy, I've dabbled with virtual mechs for a time. They're easy to design and easy for others to access. Piloting virtual mechs is a boon because they provide mech pilots with abundant training opportunities that they can't get in reality. Yet despite these conveniences, most professional mech pilots still value training in a real mech."

"Design World offers opportunities for you to design mechs that you can never design in reality. If you are willing to exchange some of your merits or credits, you can easily unlock the ability to design a first-class mech or even an expert mech if you can find some help."

"While all of that sounds attractive, it's all fake." Ves sighed. "How much time have you spent in Design World?"

"A lot. I've logged in plenty of times in the past few years. It's one of the main ways for me to earn more merits."

Ves crossed his arms. "I see. While you have been playing with virtual mechs, I have fought the Friday Coalition, wiped out numerous pirate gangs, razed Ulimo Citadel and

defeated actual warships. I led my men in battle, losing thousands of them in the process, and came close to losing my life several times. I accomplished all of this with just a fraction of the strength that you are able to muster!"

"That.. Design World is.."

"No matter how close Design World is able to mimic reality, there is no chance that people there will actually die!" Ves burst out. "Do you know why? Because it doesn't matter! Nothing in a virtual reality ultimately matters! Take my last battle for example. Do you think you could have won against the Allidus Alliance if you were in my shoes? The odds were so low that I had to squeeze my design philosophy to the limit in order to come up with various means to eke out a victory. With my mechs, almost twenty of my mech pilots managed to break through in battle, thereby achieving their lifelong wishes, if only for a moment! Is that what you can do in a virtual reality?!"

"No..."

While it wasn't unheard of for mech pilots to break through while piloting a virtual mech, these were outliers. The fact that every mech pilot knew that there wasn't any skin in the game meant that they were never desperate enough to reach their full potential!

Chapter 2456: No Nonsense

Though Jovy firmly grasped the initiative in the first half hour, he no longer held it after Ves launched his counterattack!

"I wasn't born in the MTA." Ves started. "I didn't go to the best schools. While I gained some opportunities that boosted my career, I had to work harder and take more risks than you in order to catch up with the likes of you. While I acknowledge that you are likely far ahead of me in terms of knowledge and ability to design more advanced mechs, I believe I am ahead of you in at least one important criteria."

"And what is that?" Jovy frowned.

"Impact. My mechs are piloted by millions of people. In fact, my actual impact is far greater. The contributions I've made in the Sand War and the Komodo War have affected the lives of trillions of people. Even now, my mechs are so desirable that my mech company is starting to sell them in adjacent star sectors. Have you ever helped so many people with your mechs?"

"You can't compare something like that with me, Ves." Jovy grew even more severe. "Mechers such as myself aren't allowed to interact with the native population. If we did, native mech designers such as you would have been crowded out of the market. While I cannot come close to matching your sales, my mechs did make a difference. Due to the limitations of my specialty, I work best with small batches of mechs. Venues such as Design World offer me an opportunity to practice and polish my craft more often."

Ves shrugged. "I'm sorry to hear that MTA mech designers like you are confined within your golden cages. That doesn't change my point. Instead of getting comfortable with a false reality like Design World, you should head to the limits of your cage and seek to translate the knowledge you've learned and the skills you've developed into products that actually matter. When real mech pilots entrust their lives to your work, then you don't have much margin for error. This is especially the case when you put your life on the line as well!"

As Jovy took in the words, he became less and less staunch about Design World. It was clear that he was a very big fan of the virtual setting. This made it more difficult for him to see it in a negative light.

Yet when Jovy reflected on what he did during the time when Ves and his clansmen ventured into a hazardous region like the Nyxian Gap, he realized he hadn't done anything exceptional.

Aside from studying, designing practice mechs, hanging out with his fellow peers and so on, his life as a mech designer was much more bland.

A part of him began to yearn to live a life as exciting as Ves. It was worth it to take a few risks in order to experience what lay beyond the peaceful and ultra-secure Centerpoint System.

It was just that he wasn't allowed to. Mech designers with valuable and strategic specialties like him needed to ask for permission whenever they wanted to go out. This time he only managed to get out because Master Willix personally requested him to accompany her on a quick journey.

When Jovy processed his feelings, he slumped a bit. "I never imagined that a native mech designer from a poor little star sector would make me feel inadequate. I shouldn't feel this way."

"Why not?"

"I have designed several mechs that are strong enough to defeat your entire Larkinson Clan by themselves. In the future, I will definitely become one of the mainstays of the MTA and design mechs that affect the very course of human history. While you have made amazing gains, there is no guarantee that you will be able to sustain your success. Without reaching Master, your work will always be confined."

Ves confidently maintained his smile. "Even if that's the case, my work still has meaning. A good mech designer doesn't necessarily have to be a Master Mech Designer or Star Designer. The mechs I've designed up until now have already changed many people's lives for the better. Even if I can reach a thousand times more people in virtual reality, I would still not change my mind."

An uneasy silence fell over the lounge as Jovy became too deflated to respond. He was no longer able to feel proud of his accomplishments. Winning prizes, meeting the expectations of his teachers and engaging in thrilling design duels all sounded trivial to the very real impact that Ves managed to accomplish as a Journeyman.

Was Jovy truly better off in the MTA? Certainly, but that did not stop him from wondering how he would fare if he was free to do what he wanted.

Perhaps he should spend less time in Design World and more time on pursuing missions that would allow him to see the galaxy more. While he wasn't allowed to accept missions that would take him to dangerous regions such as the Nyxian Gap, there were plenty of other assignments that would expose him to the galaxy outside MTA-controlled star systems.

As Ves reveled in his little verbal victory, a third voice spoke up without warning.

"Mr. Armalon, don't compare yourself to Mr. Larkinson. Both of you are excellent mech designers for your age. Both of you have the potential to design mechs that can impact humanity as a whole. The Journeyman stage is just the first step of becoming an actual mech designer. Wait until you reach Master before you judge yourself."

"Master Willix!"

Ves didn't expect her to show up at this time!

Jovy on the other hand regained some of optimism. "Ah, thank you, ma'am. I understand my position. My time has not yet come."

With just a couple of sentences, Master Willix managed to straighten Jovy out again. She possessed so much authority that her words were much more compelling than that of Ves.

The Master did not look pleased when she turned to her guest.

"Mr. Larkinson, please head to my lab. I am ready to meet you now."

"I thought you were preoccupied with your duties." Ves questioned.

"I freed up my schedule. Please make your way to my lab."

Her projection disappeared. Instead, a faint line came into view that led out of the lounge compartment. That must be his route.

"You've heard her, Ves. You shouldn't keep her waiting."

Damn. Ves didn't really look forward to talking to Master Willix. Perhaps he shot himself in the foot when he argued with Jovy.

"Very well. I'll be leaving now. It was nice meeting you. I hope you'll have some accomplishments under your belt the next time we meet."

"I'll definitely complete some missions!"

When Ves left the compartment, he continued to follow the line as it reached deeper into the bowels of the ship. He refrained from activating his spiritual eye to spy into the other parts of the vessel. He didn't understand most of the technology and it would only scare him further when he observed all of the hidden ways the Ubiquitous Force took care of hostile intruders.

After descending a few decks, Ves eventually reached a guarded hatch. Two heavily-armed guards inspected him thoroughly before allowing him entry.

As he did so, he entered a brightly-lit lab that was filled with numerous advanced lab equipment.

Though each of them looked sleek and advanced beyond his wildest dreams, he wasn't actually able to distinguish their functions. So much of it was far beyond him that the white machines might as well belong to the gods!

When Ves entered the bright and sterile compartment, Master Willix turned around on her chair and gestured to him to sit next to her. "Come. We are long overdue for a talk."

Like a war criminal who was about to meet his execution, Ves reluctantly stepped forward until he sat down on the chair facing the MTA Master.

She peered down on him as if he was a naughty boy. "I do not approve of your handling of Jovy. He is an excellent mech designer, just like you. There is no need to put him down."

Ves shrugged. "I thought the MTA advocated that mech designers should be tough and shrewd enough to achieve success in the galaxy. Since the MTA is so great, why is Jovy so inexperienced? The mech industry will eat him alive if he tries to compete with them without your Association's backing!"

"The two of you are suited for different roles. Mr. Armalon possesses a unique insight in probabilities. This is useful in many ways that I will not go into today."

"What will we be addressing today, then?"

"Don't play ignorant. You know why you are here." Master Willix waved her hand, causing a strong interference field to envelop the two of them. "It's safe for you to talk

now. I can guarantee that no one else is listening in. All forms of spying, monitoring and eavesdropping should no longer work either."

Ves didn't buy into her explanation. He was sure the MTA developed a lot of ways to defeat interference fields.

Noticing his doubts, Master Willix expressed a bit of annoyance. "You are not making a good impression, Mr Larkinson. Are you still interested in gaining my cooperation?"

"I am! I just want to be sure that I'm only speaking to you. I don't want to talk to people who don't understand me that well."

"I built this ship. I personally fabricated every single nut, plate, component that keeps my Ubiquitous Force together. I have precise control over the vessel."

"Very well..."

Master Willix let out an exasperated sigh. "Let us move on to where we previously left off. If I recall, you wish to enter into an agreement with me that calls for collaborating on some expert mech design projects. Is that correct?"

"Yes." Ves nodded.

The intensity that was buried within her mind blazed a little further as she sharpened his eyes at him. "It sounds as if you will gain most of the benefits. Having a Master such as myself facilitate the development of your expert mech is worth millions of merits. Perhaps I should deduct some of the rewards that you are due. Does this sound fair to you, Mr. Larkinson?"

"No!" Ves strongly pushed back. "I earned those merits fair and square. What impression would your organization leave behind when you unilaterally deprive me of the reward that I deserve? I'm afraid less people in the galaxy reduce their trust in the Association."

"We are talking about a separate matter."

"Then let us keep it separate! Don't touch my merits!"

She smiled a bit. "Let's leave this discussion for later, then. Now, don't stall any further. I want a straight answer out of you. Are you able to help mech pilots advance in rank?"

The fateful question had come. Ves had come up with multiple ways on how to answer this direct query, but he wasn't sure which one he should choose.

"Before you begin to blabber about faith and proto-gods, please don't insult my intelligence. Miss Wodin may be sincere in her beliefs, but you are different. I have met

politicians and diplomats who have mastered the art of deception to a much greater degree than you ever will."

Ves couldn't help but grow sour. He hoped that she would continue to abide by the unspoken accord between them, but evidently she ran out of patience. He could no longer slip away from this predicament by putting on his crazy hat.

"Okay. I admit it. I have been engaging in some highly experimental research that may or may not improve a mech pilot's chances of advancing to a higher rank. Now, let me tell you that my results are anything but certain. During the battle we fought against the Allidus Alliance, there were many factors in play that could have led to so many of my men breaking through. I cannot determine at this time that my work played a decisive role."

Master Willix stared at him with calm and measuring eyes.

"You lie."

Damn!

Chapter 2457: Ves the God Progenitor

Since Plan A, Plan B and Plan C no longer kept Master Willix at bay, Ves decided to enact Plan D.

He wasn't out of options yet! Even though he was forced to step aboard the Ubiquitous Force and enter Master Willix's lab, he did not believe he had reached a dead end.

Certainly, the easiest option he could take was to confess almost everything. While speaking about the System and his involvement with the Five Scrolls Compact was out of the question, he still had to explain how his task force produced so many high-ranking mech pilots.

Yet Ves still did not want to tell everything to her. He wanted to keep as many cards to himself as possible, but he also couldn't get away with substituting the truth with nonsense like before.

The solution he came up with was to mix a little more truth with falsehood.

When Ves looked back on his previous conversations with Master Willix, one topic stood out to him. One of the lies he uttered to her might have played a substantial role in how she treated him.

Even to him, she acted unusually generous to him. While she treated Gloriana in the same way, Ves was suspicious about that. If not for him, a mech designer like Gloriana wasn't remarkable enough to justify how much time Master Willix was willing to spend

on them. Masters weren't known for being idle. Every decision they made furthered their goals in some fashion.

What could make Master Willix pay so much attention to him? He could think of only one reason.

"Master Willix." He began. "It's not that I don't want to tell you, but you will put me in a different position if you force me to reveal certain matters. I am not entirely in control of what I know. I originally set out on this path after receiving the guidance of someone wise, old and benevolent. I cannot betray the trust of someone who has meant so much much to me. He literally transformed my life for the better."

"You are referring to Mr. S."

Ves inwardly smirked. "Yes."

He didn't say anything else, leaving Master Willix to wonder how much he was actually allowed to say. This uncertainty made it difficult for her to judge how far she could actually push him without turning him hostile.

"Mr. Larkinson, what do you know about Mr. S?"

"Not much. He taught me a bit and conveyed some unique concepts to me. After that, he fell silent and remained out of contact for long stretches of time. I'm pretty much doing fine by myself."

Ves had grown less dependent on the System. Ever since it cut off his easy supply of DP, the System hadn't really interacted much with him either. It was as if it was patiently waiting for him to complete its Supply Missions before doing anything further.

"I see. Can you tell me anything else about Mr. S. as an individual?" She carefully asked. "Our Association has only observed scant traces of his presence. We know precious little about him. His origins, ideology and goals remain unknown. You are the first 'disciple' of sorts that can design a mech that echoes his work. You must know more about him, surely."

"I'm afraid I truly can't tell you much. He only contacts me through electronic interfaces and projected screens."

The System wasn't user-friendly enough to adopt some sort of avatar. It would have made a much better impression on people if it adopted the guise of a human or animal.

After asking a few more questions, she became dissatisfied with what little she learned. Ves mixed truth and deception by describing Mr. S. as he truly was instead of the mysterious mech designer that Willix constructed in her mind.

Seeing that she expressed so much interest in the fake mech designer that Ves invented to explain his rapid rise, he couldn't hold his curiosity.

He coughed. "I actually don't know much about Mr. S. either. In fact, he barely counts as a teacher. Can you tell me why he's so special? I doubt he would matter to you if he was not exceptional in some way."

"You don't know?"

"Do I look like I know something like that? I barely know what's going on outside this star sector!" Ves genuinely told the truth this time.

She peered very closely at Ves and seemed to judge that he was being sincere. "It's surprising that you don't know the importance of Mr. S. I just told you the main reason why he has become a person of interest to our Association."

"You mean.. the Ouroboros? I've heard how powerful the mech has become, but shouldn't you be able to design something just as capable?"

"You don't understand!" Master Willix raised her voice this time! "The MTA is not impressed by the power of the Ouroboros. As an ace mech, it is truly a pinnacle of Terran mech design, but that does not mean our own ace mechs are inferior. There is something else about the Ouroboros that is very unique and incredibly valuable. In fact, if the Ouroboros is not an iconic Terran mech, we would have taken possession of it. The Terrans are unworthy to own this great work!"

Ves looked stunned. He really couldn't imagine how the sloppy competition mech he designed with the help of an auto designer could attract so much praise from an MTA Master. Even though the first-class hero mech received continuous upgrades from a string of mech designers, its base was just a mech with a comparatively weak X-Factor compared to his modern products.

Back when he entered Axelar Streon's mind, he didn't have any access to any design spirits. He resorted to using images to breathe life into the Ouroboros.

"Why is it a great work if the mech isn't exceptionally powerful?"

"It's true value to the galactic mech community has never rested on its power." She spoke with a steady voice. "Rather, it is how it is able to grow its characteristics that are of interest to us. You are doubtlessly aware that General Axelar Streon is currently an ace pilot, correct?"

Ves nodded.

"Ace pilots are exceedingly rare in the galaxy, Mr. Larkinson. No matter whether you are looking at the galactic rim or the galactic center, the amount of ace pilots emerging from a given number of expert pilots is disappointingly small."

"Are you saying that someone like the general only managed to advance to expert pilot and ace pilot because he received help from the Ouroboros?"

Damn. Was it his fault that this former drug addict and wastrel turned into one of the most influential Terran heroes of today? Maybe he shouldn't have pushed Axelar into the Trial of Tears training program!

"You're on the right track. This is indeed what we have speculated." She told him. "It is a great pity that the mech is too attuned to General Streon. Any other mech pilot who attempts to pilot it will.. not meet a good end."

"Is it.. the explosive kind of end?" Ves cautiously asked.

Her gaze grew sharper. "How did you know?!"

"Ah, I was just guessing, haha!"

"In our previous discussion, you mentioned that your experiments on pirates yielded some fatal results, did you not?" She raised.

"Now that you tell me, it's truly a coincidence that the results are identical, haha! I think that should prove that my innovations are extremely dangerous. Some of my mechs pose a serious threat to their own mech pilots!"

If the Ouroboros was anything like the Quint, then the former must have grown and enhanced its spiritual foundation to a scary degree. Ves wondered how much Ves its enhancement had reached. How much spiritual feedback was an ace mech pilot capable of supplying to a mech? 500 Ves? 1,000 Ves? 10,000 Ves?

It should be far higher than the 150 Ves of the Quint! The first-class hero mech was around a century old by now. The mech and its pilot already experienced a lifetime of growth!

Rather than eliciting disapproval, his admission instead caused Master Willix to nod!

"The connection between you and Mr. S. is undeniable, then. It is understandable that progress as great as this is not without its own risks. The two of you are tampering with aspects that are beyond our comprehension."

"Uhhh.. what are you talking about, ma'am?"

While Ves enjoyed being flattered by a Master Mech Designer of all people, the praise she was showering on mechs like the Ouroboros was a little excessive!

"It seems you still don't know. Perhaps I should refrain from telling you. If Mr. S. did not see fit to inform you of this crucial aspect, then I don't want to encroach on his decision."

What?! How could she do that to him! She teased him so much that Ves simply couldn't let go at this point!

"Mr. S. doesn't care! He's never around and I barely know anything! Can't you do me a favor?"

Seeing that he was pleading so much, Master Willix decided to relent.

"Very well. What I am about to tell you is very delicate. For your own good, you should not speak to anyone about this, not even your future wife. Do you understand?"

"I get it! I'm already keeping her in the dark about plenty of matters."

"Good, because what I am about to tell you can change your life drastically, and not necessarily for the better. The truth is that.. when I had the opportunity to observe the Ouroboros and meet with General Streon, I did so in the company of a Star Designer."

WHAT?!

"A Star Designer." Ves gasped with utter reverence. "Which one?"

While he didn't believe in gods, the closest ones he was willing to worship were definitely the mech designers who stood at the top of the mech industry!

"That's not important." She brushed aside his query. "The point is that once the Star Designer took a good look at the ace mech and ace pilot, she made an astonishing remark. Do you know what she said? General Streon's growth as an ace pilot hasn't stagnated. Despite reaching the latter stages of senior ace pilot, he is still making progress. This may mean that our civilization may welcome another god pilot in the future."

Ves completely froze. He never imagined that the sloppy hero mech he designed with the help of an auto designer program could have grown to the point where it was able to nurture a god pilot!

A god pilot!

Only 100 known god pilots existed throughout human space, and each of them were so powerful that they could have probably slapped the Unending One to death!

As the ultimate mech pilots, these immensely powerful individuals completely transcended their humanity. James even described them as manifestations of pure willpower!

"This.. I can't believe.."

"You see now why this is a matter of great interest to the MTA and to a select few people who know more." She told him. "The Star Designer concluded that the mech has definitely played a key role in General Streon's development. If he is forced to pilot another mech, then we may be depriving the galaxy of a god pilot. This is the actual reason why we haven't taken it away."

"Has this Star Designer ever attempted to replicate the Ouroboros?"

"Oh, she tried, more times than you can count. Sadly, the properties of the Ouroboros are so unique, strong and unfathomable that it cannot be copied. While it is not the strongest mech by far, it is truly a work that deserves to be considered as one of the greatest mechs that humanity has ever produced."

That was incredibly high praise! Ves grew numb at the fact that Master Willix thought that his sloppy little hero mech that he designed in a couple of days with the help of an auto designer outranked some of the best mechs in the galaxy.

The entire situation was surreal!

"Wow." He shakingly uttered. "Mr. S. must be the best, most handsome, and greatest mech designer of all time if that's the case."

"He might.. even be a Star Designer." Master Willix whispered.

Ves couldn't take any more surprises. His entire mind crashed.

Chapter 2458: Dark Child

The news was too much for Ves to take!

His mind completely blanked for a time. Master Willix seemed to expect such a reaction. Instead of shaking Ves out of his daze, she turned on her chair and fiddled with one of her lab machines.

A slot in the machine slid open, exposing a glowing liquid substance held in a stasis cage. A small bot flew down to pick it up and take it away.

Another bot appeared to deposit a similar material in the slot. Soon, the lab machine began to perform some unknown procedures.

It was only then that Ves pulled himself out of his shock. He looked at Master Willix with a lot of doubt.

"Is Mr. S. truly a Star Designer?" He whispered.

He knew that this wasn't true. The Ouroboros wasn't an impressive mech at all compared to other Terran mechs. How could the MTA possibly mistake the former dueling mech as the work of a Star Designer?

Ves needed to know the answer! If he knew what the MTA watched out for, he might be able to impersonate a Star Designer again in order to reinforce the lie that Mr. S. truly existed!

By building up Mr. S. as his secret unfathomable mentor, Ves gained an exceptional identity. While he had little ways to prove that he was apprenticed to a legendary Star Designer, it didn't matter as long as at least Master Willix bought into this story.

He had no desire to push his luck. Announcing to the galaxy that he enjoyed the tutelage of one of the pinnacle mech designers in the galaxy would only attract a ton of heat on him. With so many powerful people investigating his background, there was no way for him to maintain his lies!

Still, with how much attention Star Designers attracted, would he still be able to avoid this outcome at this point?

He grew concerned. "Master Willix, how sure are you about this conclusion?"

"It is a guess." She replied. "The Star Designer who examined the Ouroboros did not detect enough traces from Mr. S. to issue a definite judgement. Yet designing a mech that is capable of nurturing ace pilots into god pilots has never been done before. This is a completely unprecedented development, one that the MTA would gladly embrace if only Mr. S. came to us. It is a pity that he remains elusive and wanders the galaxy incognito to this day."

"Why would a Star Designer avoid the limelight?" Ves asked.

He knew why Mr. S. never went public. He didn't exist! He just wanted to hear what the MTA thought about it so that he could tell better lies.

Master Willix looked a bit more hesitant. "There are several possible reasons why Mr. S. is avoiding the MTA. The uncomfortable truth is that as much as our Association opens its doors to every mech designer, not everyone from our profession agrees with us. There are.. dissidents who reject some of our core tenets. There are also war criminals who have committed heinous crimes and even individuals who have colluded with aliens. They're more common than you think. You just haven't been exposed to them very much due to the relative isolation of the Komodo Star Sector."

Ves looked shocked! While he knew that there were always a couple of bad apples in a crowd, according to Master Willix, the number of deviants were quite concerning!

"And these people are allowed to exist?"

"The galaxy is big, Mr. Larkinson. There are too many ways to hide from us. There are sizable communities of dissident human organizations hiding outside human space. It is not realistic to root them all out. That said, don't overestimate their importance either. They are vermin who can only eke out an existence by remaining in the dark. They resist human order and have no value in today's society."

There must be quite some stories behind these so-called dissidents. Master Willix probably lumped in the Five Scrolls Compact in this group of people as well.

"So you think Mr. S. is one of these dissidents as well?"

"Likely so." Willix nodded with a bit more certainty than before. "There are aspects of the Ouroboros that are radically different from conventional mech design. The paradigms are so different that there is nothing comparable to them except from what I've seen in your own work. In any case, to the few people who are aware of the depth of the Ouroboros, Mr. S. may or may not be a Star Designer, but he is likely to be a dissident."

"I see. What does that mean for me? Am I in trouble because Mr. S. might be an irredeemable monster?"

"You do not need to be concerned." Master Willix reassuringly smiled. "Masters shall not be put to death for their disciples, and nor shall disciples be put to death for their Masters. Everyone shall be judged according to their own sin. There is no definite proof that Mr. S. is opposed to humanity. Besides, his great accomplishment is of such great importance to the future of mech design that many problems can be overlooked as long as he cooperates. It is unfortunate that he has never deigned to approach us. He must have his reasons."

From the yearning in her words, Ves had the illusion that even if Mr. S. broke some taboos such as blowing up a planet or two, the MTA would still be willing to cooperate with him! Anything that could increase the likelihood of ace pilots breaking through to the ultimate rank was of great value!

It turned out that the MTA had more in common with Ves than he thought. It didn't matter how many rules they violated. As long as they designed mechs that were good enough, anything could be forgiven!

"So what does this all mean for me, exactly? How many people know about Mr. S. and my possible ties with this possible Star Designer?"

"Let me ask you something first. What do you want, Mr. Larkinson?"

"I just want to get back on track and design mechs while leading my clan to prosperity. No offense, Master Willix, but I don't want to limit myself by becoming a part of your Association. I would suffocate if I have to live like Jovy Armalon."

Master Willix did not exhibit any disapproval, which reassured Ves somewhat.

"I think you have made your stance very clear. To be honest, I believe this is for the best. You are indeed a mech designer who gains the most out of stimulating experiences. Bringing you into our fold not only restricts that, but also attracts too much attention from too many factions and groups within the MTA."

"If Mr. S. is skeptical towards the MTA, he probably won't like that either."

"That too." She acknowledged. "The will of every Master or Star Designer must be respected. Since he has evidently selected an ordinary mech designer such as you towards a design philosophy related to his field of research, he must have his reasons. Maybe an excessive degree of interference on our Association's part will ruin his arrangements and prevent you from developing the applications he seeks from you. There is too much at stake to gamble on a possible solution to a problem that has plagued Mr. S. for at least a century."

Ves inwardly chuckled. Master Willix grossly overanalyzed his circumstances. He hardly needed to say anything as she had already constructed an elaborate story that explained everything!

Still, he grew curious at the problem that Master Willix was referring to. Was there a flaw in his work?

Master Willix noticed his confusion. She generously explained what she thought.

"According to the judgement of the Star Designer who examined the Ouroboros, the mech is indeed capable of nurturing a god pilot. It is just that the process is very gradual. At his current rate of progress, General Streon will have a chance of making the ultimate transformation after at least 200 years have passed."

"200 years! That's way too long!"

That was half of the current duration of the Age of Mechs. 200 years might be half the lifetime of the most powerful people in the galaxy, but it was an eternity to everyone else. Since Axelar Streon obtained the Ouroboros a century ago, his total growth period actually amounted to 300 years, which was even more excessive!

"This is still an important achievement, Mr. Larkinson. On one hand, Mr. S. has achieved something brilliant by opening up a more reliable pathway to god pilot. On the

other hand, his solution is considerably flawed. It may be because of this reason why Mr. S. has not come forward yet. Masters and Star Designers are exceedingly careful about their innovations. If they do not believe it is mature enough to propagate, they will continue to work on them until they reach the necessary standard. Anything less is an insult to their reputation."

"Okay..?"

"This is where mech designers such as you come in. You're not constrained by the rules and customs of high-ranking mech designers. It is more permissible for you to experiment freely and play fast and loose with the rules. Your youth and different perspective might yield surprising results that your hidden mentor, for all of his brilliance, could have never developed by himself. Perhaps you may be one of his hopes of solving this time issue."

Ves blinked. "Just one of his hopes? Are there more like me in the galaxy?"

"Did he pass on his design philosophy to someone during one of his time travel jaunts?"

"As far as we are aware of, you are the only dark child we've discovered so far. However, from how Mr. S. travels, it is likely that he has guided multiple dark childs into following a research direction that is related to his own. This is how powerful mech designers usually operate when faced with a difficult and unsolvable problem. Only one of you need to succeed, but the more people he has taught, the greater the chance that he will obtain his desired result."

Well, if that was what Master Willix and the MTA thought, then Ves would certainly try to reinforce this impression in the future! This false story provided a lot of convenience to him. He would be a fool if he didn't take advantage of this misunderstanding!

"Well, I would have loved to meet some fellow like-minded colleagues. I've been groping in the dark for years. I haven't received any actual guidance."

"There is little point to that if Mr. S. seeks a solution that is out of the box. While we do not know how Mr. S. selects his disciples, it is fairly clear that his research direction is very difficult to get into. Similar to how Mr. Armalon is one of the rare mech designers who is suited to specialized in probability manipulation, you must possess a vital trait as well. That alongside the creativity and ingenuity that you have demonstrated means that your value is not small."

If Mr. S. was truly the Star Designer that Master Willix described, then Ves would feel very proud of himself.

As it was, he felt it was a bit redundant to pat himself on the back. Besides, he still didn't know why the Ouroboros caused other powerful mech designers to mistake it as the work of a pinnacle mech designer!

"This is a lot to take in." Ves truthfully admitted. "I hardly know what to think about the possibility that I might be of use to a Star Designer."

"We don't know for certain whether that is the case. The best solution is if you can get me into touch with Mr. S. We can clear many ambiguities as long as I can speak with him directly."

"That's not possible."

"A pity." Master Willix regretfully shook her head. "We will have to proceed with assumptions if that is the case. I will try my best to deal with you in a manner that is in the best interest of all of the parties involved."

Ves straightened his back. This was the critical moment.

Chapter 2459: MTA Cover

"First, let me reiterate to you that everything I have said to you should not be spread." Master Willix stated to Ves. "After the Star Designer I was travelling with completed her examination of the Ouroboros, she declared the mech to be of special interest to her, thereby discouraging the MTA from looking too closely in the mech. This is her way of safeguarding Mr. S.'s interests."

"So the rest of the MTA doesn't know all of this?" Ves asked.

"The Mech Trade Association is an enormous organization. There are different branches, arms and factions within the Association that each hold their own secrets. I cannot tell you how many people are aware of the truth hidden within the Ouroboros, but even if there are more, they have all chosen to stay mum. This means that it is unlikely that our Association as a whole will immediately tie you to a possible Star Designer."

Ves let out a sigh in relief. He was quite afraid that he had inadvertently pushed himself into a corner. He never expected that fooling around during a single Mastery experience would have so many serious implications to his actual life!

All of the complications and paradoxes surrounding time travel still gave him headaches. He still wasn't sure whether the Ouroboros already 'existed' before the System shoved his consciousness into Axelar's mind.

Had all of his current and future Mastery experiences already affected the past? Was this why Master Willix already constructed an elaborate backstory for Mr. S.?

Whatever the case, Ves knew he had to act in accordance with her suspicions. If he no longer fit in her narrative, then the truth might come out. That would be devastating for him! Without her support, Ves couldn't fend off the MTA by himself.

Though he hated to admit it, he needed Master Willix's protection. She was his only ally within the MTA. Even if he didn't slip up during the Battle against the Abyss, he would have entered the Association's crosshairs eventually.

In his opinion, the best way to get an authority like the MTA off his back was to bribe and subvert one of its members!

"What do you propose, then?"

"Irrespective of your connections to Mr. S., your research is of great interest to the MTA." Master Willix declared. "Your work has already attracted enough attention to make MTA scrutiny inevitable. What I can do is to take responsibility for your case and limit the involvement of others. If your innovations truly pose a risk to mech pilots, then that is sufficient to justify this step. You are not the first mech designer to seek out a way to encourage breakthroughs. The few success cases are so heavily flawed that our Association does not allow them to be publicized."

Ves grew interested in what she said. "There are truly others who have already succeeded in this goal?"

"It's not an actual success in our point of view. Would you be willing to obtain an expert pilot if it means the deaths of thousands of mech pilots?"

"That sounds gruesome!"

Master Willix looked grim. "There are those within the MTA who consider this price to be acceptable. I do not, and so do many of my other colleagues. The Association is governed by cooler minds. Do not forget that the MTA has emerged as a response to the abuses that took place during the Age of Conquest. One of the founding principles that our predecessors have set is that mech designers must always serve mech pilots. In no manner are we allowed to abuse, exploit or endanger those we serve."

He actually agreed with her. Though he hadn't always stuck to his principles, on a fundamental level he approved of this mindset.

When mech designers lost their restraint, they turned into reprehensible monsters who would sacrifice as many lives as possible in order to obtain their desired results. Ves was disgusted by this approach because these mech designers were just as unhinged as the fanatics of the Compact!

"Our work must always better the lives of our customers." He voiced his support. "The mech industry has no place for sadists and murderers who masquerade as scientists. I can promise you that I will never sink to their level."

Master Willix gave him an encouraging smile. "I am relieved to hear that from you, Mr. Larkinson. Too many mech designers who have pursued this goal have slammed into

walls. Unable to accept their own inadequacies, they go through extreme lengths, not realizing that they have lost their humanity."

The way she spoke and the changes in her expression hinted to Ves that she might have encountered these unhinged individuals in person. The horror of meeting a monster must have left a strong impression in her mind.

Ves grasped the angle she was going for. There was a reason why she brought up these extreme mech designers.

"So if I understand you correctly, the existence of these corrupted mech designers gives you an excuse to supervise my work. With someone like you around, the rest of the MTA will feel assured that one of their own is on the case."

"Not entirely, but close enough. In truth, I cannot accompany you in person. I can only put an administrative block on your name so that those who do not outrank me are unable to study your complete record or contact you through official channels. I am also not allowed to show obvious favoritism to you. While I can bend the rules, I will never break them unless a superior intervenes. The protection I can offer to you is limited."

"It's better than nothing, ma'am. I truly appreciate everything you can do for me. I need enough space to develop myself."

Master Willix leaned forward. Despite being over 170 years old, she looked as old as a mother. "Do not mistake my actions for charity. I expect some sincerity from you. The research you are engaging in is of great importance. It would be a pity to lose your gains because of an untimely death. Unless Mr. S. steps forward himself, it is best if you confide in me so that I can properly back up your research."

Though she sounded noble, to Ves she sounded just as selfish as any other bastard. While he wasn't pleased with her demand, he already accepted this outcome. The only way he could trust her to cover for him was if she had a vested interest in doing so. Divulging some secrets to her was an acceptable price to pay as long as she did not divulge what she learned.

"I am.. reluctantly willing to share some of my research results with you." He carefully replied. "However, I have already made my own demands clear. I want your promise that you will not divulge my research to anyone else. Can you do that, ma'am?"

He hated this situation. He was all alone in the territory of someone else. While he managed to secure some bargaining power for himself, it was all based on smoke and mirrors. He did not dare to leverage Mr. S. too much in this negotiation for fear that Master Willix might suspect the truth!

Master Willix slowly shook her head. "I cannot entirely promise you that. As I've already said, a Star Designer that I am acquainted with is involved. In the process of running

interference for you, I may need to borrow her influence. It is only right to inform her as well."

Ves froze. Getting a Star Designer of all people to pay attention to him sounded awful. Star Designers were probably intricately involved at the highest levels of the Association. That meant that they were surely aware of the Five Scrolls Compact.

If Ves ever exposed the System or his relation to the Compact, that Star Designer would probably be the first person to deal with him! With the immense amount of power and influence these inhumanly brilliant visionaries possessed, there was no way for him to resist!

Master Willix misunderstood his reaction. "You do not need to be concerned. Star Designers are preoccupied with affairs far beyond your imagination. You are just a tiny Journeyman who hasn't realized his design philosophy yet. Until you reach Master, all of your gains are temporal. Besides, Star Designers do not have the habit of interfering with the disciples of their fellow peers."

Ves relaxed a bit. "So she won't do anything?"

"Let me just say that she shall remain apprised. What she chooses to do with the information I supply to her is not something I can influence."

His regard for Master Willix shot up tremendously. She spent time with a Star Designer, but was also in speaking terms with one! This was an amazing connection and partially explained why her influence at the Komodo Branch was so great!

He was both fortunate and unfortunate to be in contact with someone who had access to the top level of the MTA. If he played his cards poorly, he could kiss his life and freedom goodbye!

"As long as it's just a single Star Designer, I can live with that." He spoke with resignation.

"Good. We have an agreement, then?"

"Hey! Don't forget about helping me develop some expert mechs." He reminded her. "My clan needs at least 5 of them and more in the future."

"I haven't forgotten that, Mr. Larkinson. While I am intrigued at the prospect of collaborating with you on a mech design that incorporates your innovations, it has been much more difficult than I thought to obtain an exemption from the neutrality rules. Do you recall Master Colin Drexel? He and several other recalcitrant Masters within the branch are preventing me from abiding by this term."

Ves sunk a bit. "Does that mean you won't be able to help?"

"You do not need to be worried. This is why I told you that I might need to involve a Star Designer. Once she makes a move, there will be no problem anymore."

This was what the authority of a Star Designer was capable of! The onerous rules and regulations of the MTA no longer formed a hindrance to such an individual!

The two talked a bit more about what they expected from each other. Ves promised to be sincere about teaching her his trade secrets, while Master Willix would do everything in her power to keep the MTA off his back.

"Mind you, there are limits to what I can do." She warned him. "Unless you join the MTA, I cannot offer you our protection. I can suggest to the public that you are of interest to me, but not everyone will respect this signal. I have enemies as well, and certain powers such as the Terrans and the Rubarthans will not be deterred. Keep your behavior in check and do not go on any wild adventures such as your most recent trip. Is that clear?"

"I understand. I'll be on my best behavior, ma'am."

She looked suspicious at him. It was as if she didn't believe a word he said!

"I'm serious! The Nyxian Gap has already traumatized me plenty enough to haunt the rest of my life."

"It is for that reason that I really do insist that you share your findings with me. Your risk profile is so alarming that archiving your current progress is one of my highest priorities. I cannot let your entire work be forgotten because you failed to control yourself."

What a cynical viewpoint. She sounded as if Ves was ready to throw himself to his death at any moment!

His face grew ugly, but he did not deny her request.

"What do you want to know?"

She smiled and leaned back on her chair. "For a start, tell me the premise of your design philosophy. Please speak in plain terms, and do not bring up any irrelevant distractions such as 'faith' or 'the power of love'. I believe we have moved past these childish tricks."

Ves wasn't sure. He would have liked to stay there instead of moving on. He dreaded telling the truth!

Chapter 2460: Schooling Master Willix

Inside the lab of the Ubiquitous Force, two mech designers faced each other.

Despite the immense disparity in age, knowledge and accomplishments, the older of the two listened attentively to the younger mech designer.

In a complete flip of normality, the Journeyman Mech Designer was in the process of schooling the Master Mech Designer!

"The basic premise of my work is symbiosis." Ves began. "As you certainly know, I categorize my design philosophy as Metaphysical Man-Machine Symbiosis. Each and every word has meaning."

Master Willix looked intrigued. "I believe I understand the meaning of three of the four words in this description. However, the exact meaning of the first eludes me. Metaphysics encompasses many different fields. You need to be more specific."

"Ah, I don't disagree. To be honest, another word is supposed to stand in its place. Am I allowed to say the P-word here?" Ves cautiously asked.

Master Willix dismissively waved her hand. "Only the two of us are in this discussion. The rule prohibiting you from mentioning psionic power is mostly to prevent its dissemination. Too many people are unaware of how little privacy they truly possess. Our Association does not believe that spreading awareness of psionic power to the public will benefit the current order. However, this is a different situation. You are exempted from this rule."

"That's good to know. As you may have already guessed, the symbiosis that I have been trying to develop functions on a psionic level." He revealed, using the MTA's own terminology for spirituality. "I can enable my mechs to form bonds with their mech pilots that transcend physical reality. The neural interface doesn't even play a role as this bond is intangible and exists on an entirely different level."

"How do you form this bond?"

"By making my mechs alive."

She frowned again. "I thought I told you to leave your deceptive practices behind."

"I'm telling the truth! Why don't you believe me?!"

"Don't raise your voice, Mr. Larkinson. Be serious. Now, what are the essential conditions that allow you to form this symbiotic bond?"

Ves threw up his hands. "I make my mechs alive first. Wait! Before you think I'm messing with you, let me elaborate. Symbiosis describes a mutually-beneficial relationship between two living entities. This means that both sides have to be able to reciprocate to each other. Do you think that symbiosis can be achieved with something that has no life?"

"Cooperation between living organisms and lifeless objects is not unheard of, Mr. Larkinson. In fact, the classic relationship between mech and mech pilot is already a good example of that. I believe this is a definition problem. You are not providing me with a clear explanation of what it actually means for a mech to be 'alive'. Please clarify."

"A living mech is.. can you pull up one of my mech designs?"

She did so. She sent some commands to her implant. Just a second later, the lab projected his Valkyrie Redeemer design.

The MTA wasn't supposed to get their hands on it. Ves did not ask how she managed to get her hands on a privately-commissioned design.

"Can you feel it, ma'am?"

"I do 'feel' a faint external stimuli that reminds me of your Blessed Squire design."

"That's the proto-god. It's one of the two living elements inside my mech."

The Master frowned at the mention of the word proto-god. "There is another life in your mech?"

"It's complicated. Can you let me manipulate this design? It's easier if I strip it down."

"Be my guest."

Ves copied the design in order to develop a variant that wouldn't affect the original. Once he made sure that the copy would not affect the regular functioning of the Valkyrie Redeemer mechs, he straightforwardly stripped the Superior Mother from the design.

The feel of the modified schematics immediately dimmed. The presence of the Superior Mother was overpowering. It covered any other living activity for the most part. Only those who piloted the mech or were blessed with a lot of spiritual sensitivity could sense the full range of life within a machine.

From how Master Willix became more attentive, she must have sensed the difference as well. Ves paid a lot of attention to her reaction. He knew that Master Mech Designers were powerful in many ways. He wondered how her spiritual sensitivity matched up against his own. Were Masters really capable of matching him in this area?

She looked studious at the changed design. "I sense something missing. I cannot feel anything else."

"You can't? It's right there! The Valkyrie Redeemer is a harbinger of death. It is a design that channels the death phase of existence in hexism belief. While the intrinsic life of the

design doesn't have a powerful glow, it is still perceivable to me. Let me try and alter it. You might be able to sense the fluctuations."

He grew quite interested in her ability to sense the spiritual foundation of his mech designs. If a Master like her was blind and deaf towards it, then Ves would have much greater assurance that he would be able to keep his spiritual component monopoly!

Since the variant of the Valkyrie Redeemer design was separate from the base model, Ves did not hesitate to do something that he would never do in his normal work.

He deliberately messed up the spiritual foundation. He began to make some meaningless changes to the design schematics. At the same time, he did the opposite of concentrating his mind. He began to fill it up with all kinds of junk to distract him from his core purpose.

He thought about whether Venerable Ghanso Larkinson was still alive.

He thought about how many days it had been since Gloriana demonstrated the real value of physical projections.

He thought about how he would miss experimenting on pirates. Once he left the Nyxian Gap, he needed to curb his habit of performing dangerous experiments. With Master Willix paying closer attention to him than ever, he might not be able to satisfy his cravings as often as he wanted.

His chaotic wanderings quickly messed up the surprisingly-fragile spiritual foundation. The neat order and unified direction it previously held quickly turned into a discordant mess.

It was as if Ves took a very elaborate wedding cake and put it into a blender until everything was mixed together.

While the end product was still sweet and edible, the blended cake completely lost its original identity!

Master Willix looked closely at the design schematics. She saw that Ves did not mean to do anything by shifting the physical design. She tried her best to peer underneath the surface.

"I believe I sensed something. It is.. difficult, however. If you hadn't pointed this out to me, I would have never realized that this aspect exists in your mech."

Ves turned to Master Willix. "Every mech possesses this distinct element. It's just that they are much more chaotic than mine. It's the foundation upon which all mech designs derive their psionic power."

That got a reaction out of the Master! "Tell me more about this foundation."

"As I just said, it's how high-ranking mech designers like you and me impart our specialty into our mech designs. Did you think they would just get stuck in the lines of the schematic? The.. psionic foundation of a mech design is what truly makes it special! As far as I know, it can only be formed by sentient mech designers. AIs do not count. Every design philosophy shapes it in a different way. Mine basically makes it alive and gives it conscious direction."

He just revealed a lot of information of great import! Ves was surprised that Master Willix wasn't aware of the existence of a mech's spiritual foundation. Had the MTA developed another theory?

Master Willix slowly took in the revelation. She frowned and fell silent for a minute before she called up a projection of another mech design.

It was a very simple third-class mech, yet it was clean and optimized beyond any level that Ves had ever seen!

"This is one of my casual works. Does it possess a psionic foundation as well?"

"Definitely." Ves nodded. He could sense it clearly and matched its character to what he felt from her. "This mech probably reacts to gravity and gravitic systems differently if I read its psionic foundation correctly."

"Is it 'alive' as well, then?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

"It's malformed, stillborn and defective. You didn't employ the right method to give it a chance of life."

"Is this what Mr. S. has taught you?"

Ves replied with a half-truth. "He taught me some basic concepts and left me to fend for myself."

"How difficult is it to learn your special method?"

"It's easy. You just need to concentrate your mind and design your mech with purpose. Let me show how."

He began to instruct her how to do so. He already taught this method to Ketis and Gloriana in full. He also gave some instructions to his assistants, but not enough to reveal anything sensitive.

Given that she was one of the best mech designers in the star sector, Master Willix only needed a minute to understand his simple method.

"Let me see whether your method works."

Master Willix called up a design interface and began to design a third-class mech at an insanely fast speed!

Ves couldn't even keep up with her work as she designed so quickly that she would probably be able to complete her design in less than twenty minutes!

There wasn't any point in studying her design work. The design was irrelevant and she didn't add anything strange that would make the mech special.

He decided to do what was expected of him and observe the spiritual foundation that formed under her ministry.

Once she finished her casual design, Ves grew inquisitive. "Is this design alive?"

The results surprised Ves. He hadn't expected this outcome.

"No."

"Why?"

"I.. you did a good job. Its spiritual foundation is remarkably smooth and largely conforms to the vision of the mech. It's just.. still without any inkling of life."

"What am I missing?"

"Did you design this mech while believing that it is alive?" Ves guessed. "I think that's pretty important. If you approach it as an ordinary machine, then it shouldn't be of any surprise that the mech will ultimately match your expectations. You need to regard the design process as bringing a mech to life. Anything less will not allow you to accomplish what I do on a daily basis. Without designing a living mech, you will lack the basis that is needed to implement my other solutions."

"I shall try again with your advice in mind."

She proceeded to make several more attempts. Due to her rapid design speed, the spiritual foundations of her mechs were much weaker than usual. Even so, they should still be capable of coming to life if Ves was performing the work.

Instead, no matter how Master Willix approached the design process, her mechs remained cold and sterile.

Certainly, this was already better than what many other mech designers accomplished. Their mechs were pretty much lifeless pools of mud due to all of the mech designers imprinting their muddy thoughts onto the designs.

"I seem unable to replicate your ability to design these so-called living mechs." She concluded without much emotion. "I believe that mech designers must abide by several stringent prerequisites in order to accomplish this feat. Perhaps this is why Mr. S. selected you to carry on a part of his legacy. You must be one of the few individuals in the galaxy who happen to possess the right qualities."

Okay. Let's go with that as well.

"I guess so." Ves nonchalantly shrugged. "I can't tell you why I can do this while you can't. I'm still figuring out this stuff myself. It's a pity that you can't get this far. I'll have a very hard time finding disciples of my own to expand my design philosophy."

In truth, he was ecstatic! His mind had practically turned into a party as he celebrated Master Willix's inability to copy his design philosophy!

If even a Master Mech Designer who excelled at simulating other design philosophies couldn't do something as basic as designing a living mech, then his secrets still remained safe!