

Mech 2501

Chapter 2501: Wedding Reactions

The marriage between Ves and Gloriana was a joyous occasion!

From this moment onwards, the bride had truly become a part of the Larkinson Clan. Gloriana Wodin-Larkinson smiled with pure bliss and ecstasy as the newly-married couple finally ended their passionate kiss!

"I love you, Ves."

"I love you too, Gloriana."

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

Their two cats were happy for their union as well. All of the pets watching from below felt the energy coursing through the Larkinson Clan and expressed their jubilation in their own manner.

The loud cacophony of cheers, howls, music and fireworks blended together in an unforgettably grand moment to the lucky pair. Even Master Willix and Jovy floating high above got caught up in the energy. The MTA mech designers clapped when the lovers established their union.

"They deserve each other." Master Willix coyly remarked.

Jovy couldn't maintain a straight face either. "I know I shouldn't, but I feel kind of jealous at Ves. It's so rare for two compatible mech designers to click together to this degree."

The matchmaking services sponsored by the MTA claimed to be able to ensure a perfect fit between two mech designers, but every mecher knew that this was an exaggeration.

Love couldn't be calculated. Love wasn't predictable.

Sometimes, opposites attracted each other. Other times, couples broke apart in the ugliest fashion due to irreconcilable differences.

Jovy simply couldn't figure out how two very different mech designers managed to get along with each other. Gloriana was a thoroughbred Hexer while Ves possessed a much humbler background. Their ideals, design philosophies and values diverged so much that they should have been repelled by each other.

How could someone proud like Ves possibly overlook Gloriana's Hexer tendencies?

How could someone as exacting and precise as Gloriana tolerate Ves' chaotic way of life?

Master Willix glanced knowingly at Jovy.

"Love is one of the few areas where it's best not to adhere too closely to logic. Besides, even if we set aside irrational feelings, there are still several compelling reasons why the two are a great fit with each other. Their different specialties complement each other perfectly. The synergy they have already achieved is but a taste of what is to come."

"Is that why you go out of your way to support them, ma'am?"

"That, and more."

Many other people developed various thoughts about the union that had formed without a hitch.

The projections of Benjamin and Ark Larkinson both looked happy without any other considerations.

Though neither of them particularly liked the Hexers, they were glad that Ves finally got rid of his bachelor status.

"I hope I will live long enough to greet my great-grandchildren." Benjamin wistfully said.

"Don't be like that, father." The patriarch of the Larkinson Family frowned at him. "You still have some years left in your body. From the way Ves and Gloriana are barely holding themselves back from jumping at each other, it looks like we won't have to wait too long before we welcome some new relatives."

The old man sighed and looked down. "I know. I heard that most well-off Hexers have a tradition of raising six children. I will last long enough to meet with the oldest of my great-grandchildren by remote, but I'm not sure whether I'll be able to see and talk to the entire set before my bones finally collapse."

A melancholic mood swept over the two important figures of the family. They were not as young as Ves. They also weren't as wealthy as him. Though the family held some shares in the LMC, it invested most of the dividends in its more productive members. The family would only be able to grow stronger if its present and future generations gained the support they needed to develop themselves.

"Father.. if we ask Ves, I'm sure he'll.."

Benjamin resolutely shook his head. "No. The cost is too prohibitive. Whether you pay in credits or merits, the cost to prolong the life of a potentiate, especially one with brain injuries such as myself, is too much. The chance of failure is considerable and we won't be able to get anything worth preserving even if the procedure is successful. My time has passed, my son. Don't let me become a burden."

Though Benjamin's condition looked rather decent, that was mainly because of the increasingly more extensive treatments he received. His old war wounds had been acting up more and more as his body condition passed a certain stage.

Over on the opposite side of the isle, Constance Wodin and her close family each felt mixed emotions.

They were proud that one of their own managed to marry such a prominent and successful mech designer. They were also ashamed that the husband in question wasn't a proper Hexer boy, but an uncouth foreign 'man' with a history of savagery.

Colonel Kellandra Wodin curled her mouth into a frown. "These animals running around below us have no place in this wedding. If we didn't add so many cleaning bots and air purification systems to this platform, we would have been drenched in the stench of the droppings these ignorant creatures are leaving behind."

"I think the presence of all of these pets adds some variety to the wedding ceremony." Tarkus Wodin lightly spoke. "Gloriana's husband is a clear lover of animals. If he takes care of his pets as well as our little sister, then I have no concerns."

"He should have married his cat instead." Kellandra snorted.

"Please, sister. Let's not be so harsh on the boy." Amarintha Wodin spoke up. "Ves Larkinson is blessed by the Superior Mother. He may even be her child."

The faces of every nearby Wodin changed. This was a very contentious topic!

Though Gloriana bragged multiple times that Ves was the literal son of the Superior Mother, the rest of her family didn't quite know how to take that. It was not that they thought that Gloriana was lying, but she may have misinterpreted the relationship between her husband and the Supreme.

Still, from all of the signs the Wodins had witnessed so far, it was undeniable that Ves Larkinson possessed a definite relationship with the Superior. How a foreign boy of all people attained such an unprecedentedly close link with such an august Hexer figure mystifying. Gloriana's direct relatives held very diverging opinions on the matter.

Matriarch Xiaphna raised her wrinkled hand. The Wodin siblings immediately fell silent.

"The will of the Superior Mother must be respected. She is the most exemplary mother of our people. For too long, we have lived without the guidance of the Supremes. Now that one of them has returned to us, it is no surprise that what we think is true is actually at odds with what the Superior Mother originally advocated. Time and ambitious matriarchs have twisted our interpretation of the Supreme's tenets. Now that we have regained access to the original source, we should feel thankful to the boy who has brought her back."

Her wise words conveyed a considerable degree of authority. Minister Constance Wodin, Colonel Kellandra Wodin and many other important members of her dynasty all bowed to show respect.

Now that the Wodin Matriarch offered her unequivocal support to Ves in the clearest fashion to date, people like Kellandra had to watch her tone.

While it was still possible for haters of Ves to voice their discontent, they had to have a good reason for doing so. Since the Wodin Dynasty was already effectively cooperating with the Larkinson Clan to an extent, it was not wise to badmouth their partners.

Of course, there were many other people who were not restrained in voicing their displeasure at the wedding.

"VES! NOO! HOW COULD YOU!" A loud shriek echoed across a compartment on the Pallas Intaer. "I don't understand! That ugly woman practically ruined your life and forced you to consort with Hexers. Why are you playing along with your kidnapper? Are you afflicted by Stockholm syndrome or something? If I knew how bad Gloriana hooked her claws into you, I would have forced you to undergo therapy when you fell into my hands!"

The celebratory wedding was like hell to Aisling Curver! The Fridayman mech designer still yearned to capture Ves' heart, yet from the moment the lucky couple slipped the rings on each other's fingers, her dream finally broke.

Ves belonged to Gloriana from now on! Even if they broke up in the future, the ideal man and partner in Aisling's mind would have been tainted by the poisonous influence of her Hexer rival.

Unless she gained the ability to travel back in time, there was no way to undo this travesty!

A mech pilot who shared a faint resemblance to the groom strode forward. His boots clanked against the deck of the ready room.

Venerable Ghanso Larkinson burned with hatred as he stared at the live footage of the wedding.

His force of will grew more intense! Each time his loathsome cousin accomplished another success, Ghanso's rage grew more intense.

It was as if he derived strength from his vendetta against the mech designer!

As far as Ghanso was concerned, his fellow Larkinsons increasingly fell under the sway of the Devil Tongue. The wedding was the most egregious instance yet due to all of the pride the Larkinsons gained from holding such a grand event!

"I told you he's no good." He growled. "You deserve to be with a better man, Lady Curver. Someone who is depraved enough to love a hexer is no good partner at all. The two of them deserve each other."

Aisling angrily turned around and slapped the expert pilot's arm! "You don't understand, Brighter! His design philosophy is so magical! There are even signs that he has managed to imitate some of Master Huron's inventions. Do you know what that means? We would have been able to elevate neural networking technology to greater heights if I captured him first! Letting Gloriana make the first move is one of the greatest regrets in my life!"

Her heartache struck so deep that she began to cry on the spot!

"My Ves! My Ves! My Ves!"

Venerable Ghanso scowled in disgust. He never understood how a smart and successful mech designer like Aisling could become so smitten with his bastard of a cousin.

What annoyed him even more was that Ves didn't even reciprocate Aisling's affection!

Though he did not approve of Aisling's devotion to his cousin, at the very least their relationship would have restrained the tumor of the Larkinsons.

Now that Ves married one of the insane women of the Hegemony, there was no chance that he will hold back from ruining the Larkinson lineage!

As Ghanso and Aisling processed the outcome of the wedding in their own ways, an alarm suddenly sounded.

[ALERT! THE HEXERS ARE PRESSING US BACK! THEIR GLOW MECHS HAVE BECOME MUCH MORE ACTIVE! AS A RESULT, THE HEX ARMY HAS BEEN LAUNCHING SPONTANEOUS OFFENSIVES AND COUNTERATTACKS AGAINST OUR LINES! TAKE EXCEEDING CARE AGAINST ANY VALKYRIE REDEEMER, ESPECIALLY THE NEW VARIANTS!]

"Damn! I bet Ves is to blame for this again!"

Ghanso soon received orders to board his mech. He left Aisling to her misery and marched to the lower decks. Many panicked or worried crewmen were heading to their stations.

When he reached the hangar bay, the other expert pilot stationed aboard the Pallas Intaer was already standing before her mech.

"You Larkinsons are always sparking trouble."

"Shut your trap, Venerable Foster. I won't let you insult my family. Most Larkinsons are decent. Ves is an aberration, so don't lump him with the rest of us. Is that clear?"

Venerable Foster stared aggressively at her colleague. "I don't take orders from you, Brighter. My opinions haven't changed. Our star sector would have been a better place if Larkinsons such as you didn't exist. Ves is just the only one of you who doesn't bother to hide."

Though Ghanso wanted to punch Foster in the face, this was not the time. They could settle the score afterwards!

Chapter 2502: Regrets

The wedding between Ves and Gloriana continued to evoke strong reactions from people!

Both up close and from afar, many people familiar with the couple were either happy at their joy, jealous of their accomplishments or hated them for how their work impacted the Komodo War!

One of the people who didn't know what to think about the joyous occasion was Tristan Wesseling.

As the direct disciple of Master Katzenberg, he rooted for his own state. He cheered for the introduction of the Glow Crusher and the O-K alloy that was integral to its power.

When the mechs designed by the Miracle Couple suddenly received an upgrade that effectively invalidated the Glow Crusher, Tristan should have been upset. The ease in which the Blessed Squire countered his Master's work was humiliating.

Yet.. having met and briefly worked alongside Ves for a time, Tristan couldn't bring himself to view him as an enemy. It was just unfortunate that they happened to be on opposite sides.

"Now that your relationship with the Hexers has reached this extent, I guess we won't be meeting each other again." The Fridayman Journeyman Mech Designer stated.

The only reason for them to keep in touch no longer mattered. Ves had his homegrown clan to the point where he could leave the star sector whenever he wished. He did not need Tristan or anyone else's help to escape retribution should the Friday Coalition win the Komodo War.

If the Hexers happened to win, then Tristan would turn to other solutions rather than putting his safety in the hands of a close ally of the Hegemony.

Ves and Gloriana could have held a quiet wedding ceremony. For the Larkinsons and Wodins to hold the occasion with so much bombast meant that the former became permanently aligned to the Hexers.

The Larkinsons may not be turning into Hexers, but the sharing of interests would make Ves even more at odds with the Fridaymen.

"What a pity."

Tristan did not feel too much of a loss from this development. He and Ves always followed directed trajectories from the start. There wasn't a lot of intersection in their lives.

Still, if Tristan knew that the third-rater he only paid scant attention turned into such a monstrous threat to the Friday Coalition, he would have spent more effort in befriending him. The fact that Ves managed to pass the trials organized by the Rim Guards should have been an obvious clue that he was destined for greatness!

"Maybe I could have prevented Ves from meeting with Gloriana."

It was no secret how the two initially met. If Tristan took the initiative to spend time with Ves and possibly introduce him to some of the women he was acquainted with, it might be the Hexers against glows instead of his own side!

The realization that he could have changed the course of history weighed heavily on his shoulders.

If he didn't become distracted by passing the trials, he may have been able to spare the Friday Coalition from suffering so much harm!

"Maybe I should reinforce my fleeting relationship with him instead. Even if he's an enemy, being able to speak to him might be crucial in the times to come."

It was too bad that he was confined to a secret research station. While his status afforded him some privileges, he was not allowed to communicate with the outside galaxy. The most he could do was to call up information from the galactic net.

Someone else who held mixed emotions towards the wedding was Carlos Shaw.

Once he was one of Ves' friends and companions. Now, his career was as bleak as his future.

The Apprentice Mech Designer in the service of the Mech Corps wasn't supposed to access the broadcast. However, a mech designer like Carlos was easily able to circumvent the hamfisted information controls, especially when he was on leave.

He currently resided in a rudimentary settlement built on the surface of a planet that used to belong to the former Coman Federation..

Of course, Carlos still needed to be careful about the interest he showed towards his former classmate and boss.

Suffice to say, anything surrounding Ves and the Larkinsons had become taboo to the diminished Bright Republic.

Now that the Friday Coalition strengthened its control over the third-rate state, the once-glorious presence of the LMC and its leader had become a faded memory to many people.

Only the mech pilots of the Desolate Soldier and several other LMC mech models still reminisced about piloting the so-called living mechs. Every other mech they piloted after the state confiscated their LMC mech felt stale and lifeless to them. It just wasn't the same according to their words.

"What makes your mechs special, Ves?" Carlos idly asked.

If he didn't let his jealousy and his trauma get the better of him, he could have stayed by Ves' side. As long as he kept playing the role of loyal soldier, he might have been able to learn some of the secrets that caused the products of the LMC to be so insanely attractive to mech pilots.

All of that was for naught. Carlos felt as if he was one of the stupidest mech designers in the Bright Republic for throwing such a priceless opportunity away. He didn't think he was wrong for wanting to become as successful as Ves. His mistake was to be too impatient about it. If he listened more earnestly to Ves, he could have been among the lucky 'clansmen' sitting in the audience.

"I HATE THIS!"

He sharply waved his hand, causing the projection to shut down.

"Ves.. I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive if we ever meet again."

Carlos did not hold out his hope for that.

Ves had already left the Bright Republic far behind. Why would someone who was about to step into the galactic state look back at the backwater that previously held him back?

Not only was there nothing left to return to, the state had betrayed Ves. The government should be grateful that the famed Devil Tongue was too preoccupied with greater matters to take revenge on the people who betrayed his trust!

Some of Carlos' jealousy flared up again. He slapped his head in order to stave off another outburst!

"I can't lose control! Hold yourself together!"

It was too hard for him to do so. He held too many regrets to keep himself calm. Just thinking back on his feeble attempt to start his own mech business after he left the LMC was enough to send him into a spiral of negativity.

"Why did I fail while he succeeded? How come he improved even faster than me? I'm smart as well!"

Yet regardless of his artificially-boosted learning abilities, he remained stuck as a helper to more successful and qualified mech designers. He didn't even know how long it would take until he came within touching distance to Journeyman.

"I deserve better!" Carlos asserted!

It was too bad that nobody believed him. Not even his colleagues in the Mech Corps took him seriously these days.

Somewhere closer to home, the crowd of attending Larkinson clansmen each took pride in the grandness of the wedding. Each of them felt as if their clan had attained a greater status after today.

The members of the Larkinson Family who accepted the invitation to attend by projection looked envious. Unlike the clansmen, the members of the old family hardly felt worthy for the success of one of their original members.

Though the Larkinson Clan and Larkinson Family still shared many relations with each other, they were distinctly separate groups. Half of the people who decided to follow Venerable Ark Larkinson and help him restore the old family felt as if they made the wrong choice.

Why did they object to joining the Larkinson Clan?

Why did they throw away the opportunity to take part in so many glorious events?

What caused them to miss the chance to rise to greatness in the Red Ocean?

Though Ves Larkinson was a much more volatile patriarch than Venerable Ark, many family members began to think how their lives would be if they joined the clan instead.

Certainly, Ves had a habit of driving his clansmen into risky ventures. Just hearing about the horrendous casualty figures of the Nyxian Gap Campaign was enough to cause everyone to shiver.

Yet... Ves always found a way to make it worth it. His magnanimous promise buoyed many survivors of the campaign and helped take the sting off all of the traumas they suffered.

Melinda Larkinson's projection had moved closer to Raella Larkinson. The two cousins shared a deep look with each other.

"You should have been with us, Melinda."

"I don't know." Melinda frowned. "I don't regret sticking to the old family. It would have been great if certain people hadn't driven Ves out. He would have been able to help our family just like he is helping his clan."

Raella shook her head. "It's not the same. The Larkinson Family belongs to the elders and the expert pilots. Ves doesn't like that. I think he's far better off today now that he's basically in charge of us. Expert pilots don't have the most say anymore."

"Isn't that bad? The expert pilots of our family have always formed a stabilizing influence."

"We don't need no stinking stability, Melinda. Remaining stagnant or playing it safe won't get us anywhere. Besides, our expert pilots are a bit different. Just trust me. Putting our expert pilots in charge will just tear our clan apart."

The two watched the married couple begin to make their celebratory remarks. As Gloriana proudly addressed the public, the two Larkinson cousins ended their conversation.

Melinda still hadn't solved her confusion. His cousin's wife looked so glorious. Would she ever be able to wear such a magnificent dress? There was no way her own wedding would ever match the splendor of what she witnessed today!

Though she still believed in the leadership of her current patriarch, was it really worth it to pick virtue over ambition?

While she considered herself to be a proper Larkinson, she was still human. The values and traditions the Larkinson Family instilled to her clashed against the growing emotions

boiling in the depths of her heart. She faintly suspected that her decision to leave Ves forever might have cut off her only opportunity for greatness!

No!

It was a mistake to think this way!

Melinda furiously shook her head. She looked back at Ark and calmed again. Her current patriarch was strong and remarkable in his own right!

Though she held some regrets, she did not feel too bothered by them anymore. Life was all about making choices. Perhaps some might not work out as well as she hoped, but there was little point in moping about what-ifs.

One other person in the crowd held some regrets.

Ketis Larkinson sat next to her fellow Swordmaidens. While the warrior women were only mildly impressed by the pomp and circumstance, the only mech designer among them couldn't help but imagine herself in Gloriana's place.

What if she was the one who wore the wedding dress?

What if she was the one who allowed Ves to slip a ring on her finger?

What if she was the one that Ves passionately kissed?

She would be lying if she denied she was jealous of Gloriana. Before the Hexer ever entered Ves' life, Ketis thought she had a chance.

Unfortunately, despite spending so much time together, he never viewed her like he did his current wife.

Why?

What was she missing?

Sure, she wasn't as feminine and charming as Gloriana, but Ves trusted just as much if not more. The two of them had grown very comfortable with each other starting from the Aeon Corona Mission. Yet for some reason or another, she failed to win this crucial battle.

She lowered her head in regret.

"I don't have a chance anymore." She acknowledged under her breath.

Ves was someone who took his commitments very seriously. Ketis respected Ves too much to take him away from Gloriana.

"I should look elsewhere."

There were plenty of other cute boys in the Larkinson Clan. Should she set his sights on one of the mech designers or should he cast his gaze towards the mech pilots instead?

Her eyes fell on the high-backed chair that belonged to Venerable Joshua.

Chapter 2503: Blissful Life

A new era had begun for the Larkinson Clan!

The conclusion of the Nyxian Gap Campaign and the marriage between Ves Larkinson and Gloriana Wodin permanently shifted the landscape for the clansmen.

The clan founded by Ves permanently found its footing among the upper ranks of society!

Though most of this clout would become invalid as soon as the Larkinson Clan departed from the local region, some of it would still endure no matter where they traveled.

The prestige of the Larkinson Clan received a substantial boost by achieving feats that others could only dream about. From parading around captured warships such as the formidable pirate heavy cruiser called Gravada Knarlax to convincing an MTA delegation to personally attend the marriage boosted the profile of the Miracle Couple to insane heights!

As attention to their wedding increased, so did the sales of their mechs. The older models offered by the Living Mech Company experienced a resurgence in sales. Though the Komodo Star Sector's mech market had already reached saturation, sales in neighboring star sectors doubled or even tripled shortly after the wedding!

Though it was hard to imagine the Larkinson Clan being short on money these days, the endeavor it was about to embark upon demanded even greater investment.

Several years after Ves conceived of it, the grand expedition he long dreamed about finally came within reach! By his reckoning, he and the rest of his clan could formally begin their long journey across star sectors, star clusters and even galaxies in just a couple of months!

Of course, a lot of preparation still had to be done before the Larkinsons got to that point. The Nyxian Gap Campaign not only killed many clansmen, but also destroyed a lot of ships and mechs.

An even greater consequence of the continuous battles against the vicious Nyxian pirates was that it exposed the inherent weaknesses of the fighting forces of the clan. The Living Sentinels led by Commander Magdalena Larkinson exposed the dangers of fielding third-class mechs and starships against enemies that wielded greater power.

The Larkinson Clan could no longer entrust its safety on the cheapest and weakest tier of war machines.

In order to safely traverse the wider galaxies, the Larkinsons had to upgrade their entire fleet and mech roster.

So far, the newly-married couple of Journeymen Mech Designers only designed a handful of second-class mechs at the moment. What was worse was that two of them were Hexer mech designs.

There was no way for Ves to realize his dream of outfitting his mech forces with his own mech models in the short term!

To prevent his grand expedition from stalling, he had no choice but to allow his clan to purchase commercial mechs from the market. This was a complicated matter, not only due to the prohibitive cost of purchasing second-class mechs, but also the selection of models.

For obvious reasons, Ves could not buy his mechs from the two dominant second-rate states of his home star sector.

The Friday Coalition would rather kill itself than sell a single mech to the Larkinsons.

The Hexadric Hegemony was more than willing to pass some of its mechs onto Gloriana's husband, but hardly any Larkinson relished the prospect of piloting mechs that discriminated by gender!

The Larkinsons had no choice but to purchase their stopgap mechs outside of the Komodo Star Sector.

In short, the problems of the Larkinson Clan just kept piling up. Ves had a lot of long days ahead of him as his duties only piled up after the wedding.

Ves opened his eyes and stretched his arms. After he exchanged vows with Gloriana the day before, the rest of the evening was filled with celebration.

From giving speeches to receiving gifts, he and his new wife enjoyed the attention lavished upon them by their guests.

After witnessing the arrival of Master Moira Willix of the MTA and experiencing the power of glows exuded by the Larkinson Clan's two heirlooms, many guests acknowledged the Miracle Couple's incredible potential.

Even if Ves and Gloriana were merely Journeymen at the moment, they might become very influential Masters a hundred years later!

To the far-sighted leaders of the region, befriending them and giving them some valuable gifts was a worthwhile investment.

Receiving so much free stuff certainly brightened his day. What pleased him even more was enjoying his first night of honeymoon with his beloved.

A silly smile appeared on his face as he recalled that special night. One of the benefits of possessing a cranial implant was that he could remember every single detail.

"Meow?"

"Miaow."

The newly-wedded couple weren't alone. Aside from their bodyguards, their cats had also accompanied them all the way to the bedchamber.

Though Ves used to feel disturbed about the lack of privacy he enjoyed, he eventually got used to the new status quo.

He was too important of a person to be left unsupervised. The Larkinson Clan depended so much on him that it would definitely fall into ruin should he and Gloriana ever disappear!

Considering that their cats were secretly their strongest bodyguards, Ves had little choice but to tolerate their presence during their first honeymoon night.

"Did the two of you enjoy the show?" Ves yawned and asked.

The pair of felines lounging on the headboard paid little attention to him. The biological and mechanical pets weren't interested in human mating rituals.

They were cats.

Lucky had gotten rid of the little tuxedo but still retained his tail ribbon. Clixie retained both her head bow and her tail ribbon. It seemed she liked her new accessories very much.

"Nyaaaa~"

A third cat materialized into existence. Different from the other two cats, Goldie's glowing form emerged right in the middle between Ves and his beloved!

"Hmm...?" A female voice murmured. "Oh, Goldie! You sweetie. Do you want some cuddles?"

Gloriana satisfyingly opened her eyes and gazed at the half-physical form of the Golden Cat. Despite her identity as the ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan, Goldie was really just a year-old kitty.

Both cat and human pressed up and enjoyed each other's warmth.

Once Goldie had her fill, she floated over to the other two cats who were arguably her parents.

Now that she was deprived of her feline companion, Gloriana finally shifted her attention towards the husband of her dreams. Pure love filled her eyes as several of her dreams had finally come true.

Her wedding may not have been absolutely perfect, but it was every bit as magical as she had hoped.

Not only that, she finally bound her ideal husband and partner to herself. Pure satisfaction flowing through her body as she raised her arm and admired her new wedding band.

Now that Ves became her man, there was no way he was ever going to leave her! The possibility that other women would be able to steal him away was gone!

"Hihihih!"

"What are you laughing about, honey?"

She quickly composed herself. "Oh, nothing. I'm just happy that we're finally together like this. I almost feared this day would never come when you experienced some trouble in the Nyxian Gap. Don't ever put me in such a position again, okay?"

"Uhm, I promise! Don't worry, Gloriana. I've had my fill of adventure in the Nyxian Gap. I don't have any urges to repeat the experience. I have too much work to catch up to anyway."

One of the downsides of holding too many responsibilities was he couldn't enjoy a proper honeymoon with his wife. He would have loved to take a few weeks off and just forget about his burdens, but Ves couldn't stand wasting so much time.

Fortunately, Gloriana was kind of a workaholic as well, so she didn't mind spending their first weeks as a married couple on work.

Of course, not just any work would do. She attempted to pinch his skin, only to fail due to his toughened body.

"Now that we're married, we should take advantage of our good moods to fabricate some mechs! We've completed six design projects in the last month, but we haven't made any first production models as of yet! We've waited long enough to realize our mech designs. This is our best chance yet to make another masterwork mech!"

His first day as a married man and already his wife was making demands.

To be fair, she was already like this before they tied the knot.

She was right, though. Aside from the Valkyrie Redeemer, the other mech designs merely remained virtual existences despite completing them weeks ago. This effectively gave the pair five good opportunities to earn another masterwork certificate.

With each and every successful attempt, their affinity for mechs increased a little bit further. This was incredibly valuable as they had already become better mech designers due to their initial successes.

"Alright, Gloriana, but not immediately. I still have to handle some matters. I have some meetings scheduled with Master Willix, the Cross Patriarch and some of the wedding guests who will be departing soon. I also have to sort out the gifts we received. Some of them are quite valuable."

She grinned impishly at him. "I love the gift provided by my state. We have received permission to produce and make use of our own Hexer mech designs! This is such great news!"

"Yes.. great news..."

To be fair, this was nothing more than restoring some of the original rights that Ves had given away in his initial contract with DIVA. The eight Hexer mech designs he promised to provide to the Hexadric Hegemony incorporated a lot of exclusive design elements of the Hex Army.

For various reasons, it was not a good idea for states to spread out their military mech designs.

The Hexers made an exception for the Larkinson Clan. It made some sense now that Ves thought about it with a sober mind.

First, he was one of the lead designers of the Blessed Squire and Valkyrie Redeemer. He was familiar with all of their secrets already.

Second, the Larkinson Clan became permanently associated with the Wodin Dynasty after yesterday. Marriages were one of the most solid methods to secure alliances, and this was no different. Before Ves joined with Gloriana, there was always the faint possibility that the Larkinsons could have turned their backs on the Hexers and reconciled with the Fridaymen.

Now, that frightful possibility was completely ruled out. As far as the Hexadric Hegemony was concerned, the Wodin Dynasty succeeded in ensnaring the Larkinson Clan!

Since the Larkinson Clan effectively became attached to the Hexer state, it was no longer a big deal to release some Hexer-exclusive hardware.

In fact, the Hexers probably hoped that adopting more Hexer hardware would make the Larkinsons more aligned to their state!

Though Ves recognized the ulterior motives behind this seemingly magnanimous gift, he really did not want to pass it over.

Though Ves had no stomach for the Blessed Squire, the Valkyrie Redeemer was far too powerful for him to pass over!

Also, it just so happened that his clan recently absorbed a strong and cohesive group of former Hexer citizens.

"The Penitent Sisters will probably be happy to pilot our Valkyrie Redeemers."

"And so will my Glory Seekers!"

The gift also extended to the household troops of the Wodin Dynasty. There were no legal barriers anymore that prevented Gloriana's personal guardian force from making use of military hardware!

Ves yawned again. "Let's get out of bed, honey. We have a long day ahead of us. Every second is precious."

"Okay!" She smiled. "But first, I have to do this!"

She leaned in to peck his cheek. Her lips briefly pressed against his fine stubble.

"I love you, Ves."

"I love you too, Gloriana."

Their marriage solidified their relationship. Their commitment to each other had grown stronger. All sorts of pleasant emotions rolled through their minds as they seemed to sync with each other.

Both of them raised their hands. Their special wedding bands connected the two lovers in some way. Each ring was bound to a spiritual fragment taken from their minds and transplanted to each other. Aside from granting them limited access to the domain of their spouse, the rings also brought other benefits.

Chapter 2504: Awake

The newly-married couple spent their first honeymoon night aboard the Stellar Chaser.

Though Ves did not particularly enjoy spending time on Gloriana's personal ship, the Stellar Chaser was the closest substitute of home for her. Until the Larkinson Clan finally received its long-awaited factory from the Hexer shipbuilders, there was no better ship to spend their first night.

Once the pair left their bed and freshened themselves up, they moved to the dining room where they enjoyed a sumptuous breakfast.

Both of them expended a lot of energy yesterday. The wedding stretched all day and all of the joys they experienced had drained their bodies extensively.

"Meow~"

"Miaow~"

Both Lucky and Clixie sat on the table and bent their heads in their respective bowls.

Though Clixie looked small, it was very expensive to keep her fed. She only accepted a diet of high-energy food such as exobeast meat or high-class pet fare. She would starve to death if she just ate regular cat food!

As for Lucky, he eschewed organic food entirely. His artificial digestion system only took in minerals and metals. Ves had no idea how it worked, but Lucky could eat damn near anything as long as it was inorganic.

As for Goldie, she had already dematerialized her physical avatar. It still cost too much energy to solidify her spiritual form. Besides, she did not need to sustain her existence through eating. The spiritual feedback of the clansmen connected to the Larkinson Clan already took care of her essential needs.

The married couple were just as content as their pets. As they sedately sated their hunger and thirst, their assistants stood by their side, ready to inform Ves and Gloriana of the matters that required their attention.

"Matriarch Xiaphna Wodin and many other Wodins have already departed this star system. Your mother and your brothers and sisters intend to stay here a few days more." Melody Raft reported.

"What of the guests?"

"Most of our guests will be leaving within the week if they haven't already. There are some who intend to stay in order to curry favor with us or expand their networks, but these people are not worth your attention."

"Hmm. What of the Wodin Warriors?"

"Most of the Wodin Warriors will be escorting our matriarch and much of our dynasty members back to the Hegemony. A mech regiment or two will continue to remain here to protect the Larkinson Clan and handle some of the remaining affairs."

One of those developments was preserving the hexagonal platform where the wedding took place. It was a bit of a waste to break it down. Though many of the materials used in its construction were precious, neither the Wodin Dynasty nor Larkinson Clan had any need to recycle so much bulk materials.

Both Ves and Gloriana agreed to convert it into a public monument. Its existence commemorated their unforgettable union and could also serve other purposes. The idyllic garden environment and the various ornaments would surely turn into a tourist attraction, especially after Ves promised to craft a new statue that depicted the Superior Mother holding the Larkinson Mandate!

While Gloriana became engrossed in Hexer matters, Ves busied himself with affairs that directly related to the Larkinson Clan.

"The Cross Patriarch wants to resume talks with you as soon as possible. He seems eager to partner with our clan. He has already informed us that he has slightly increased the amount of strategic materials he is willing to transfer to us in the event of a successful deal." Gavin Neumann reported.

Ves smirked as he sipped his syrupy caffeinated drink. "The wedding must have dazzled him to the point where he finally realizes his weak negotiating position. I'm not quite sure whether it is best for us to join forces. We've received other offers to split the burden of obtaining passage to the Red Ocean, right Benny?"

"Yes, but don't rule out the Cross Clan too soon." Gavin advised. "The other offers come from organizations that are already established and successful. Since they are not in any danger, their proposals contain fewer benefits and more demands. In contrast, the Crossers are desperate and don't have as many options. As long as we drive a hard bargain, we can gain a lot of advantages."

This was a very complicated matter. Pushing the Cross Clan hard might give the Larkinson Clan a lot of benefits in the short term, but would also weaken the foundation of their alliance.

The Crossers needed to feel they benefited from banding together with the Larkinsons. If any of the two sides felt they were being exploited, then a premature breakup would happen sooner or later.

The Red Ocean was a dangerous place. The news he heard spoke of many accidents and enormous blunders. Without sufficient power and wealth, the pioneers who ventured into the dwarf galaxy could collapse at any moment.

Travelling together with the Cross Clan for a time would definitely increase his sense of security. The biggest downside was that there was no way for him to exert too much control over his allies.

Ves had to juggle all of these tradeoffs. Fortunately, he didn't have to do all of the work alone. While the Larkinson Clan lacked a stellar diplomat, his clan had beefed up hiring in this department. He had numerous negotiators who could hash out the finer details with their Crosser counterparts.

"While the Crossers don't bring as much MTA merits to the table as us, they're quite sincere now. I think it might be good to have a firm grip on a junior partner. It is absolutely unacceptable for us to be in the weaker position."

If the Larkinson Clan cooperated with two additional smaller partners, it would be able to maintain a prime position within the alliance. That was much more preferable to Ves than allying with equals.

Once they finished their discussion on the Cross Clan, Gavin moved on to another important point.

"Master Willix insists on meeting you as well. I'm not sure what she has in mind, but you should probably have a good idea."

Ves nodded. "Correct."

Their discussion on his spiritually-enhanced mechs wasn't over yet. They also needed to form a plan on the five expert mech projects that Master Willix agreed to collaborate on. Finally, their meeting would surely turn to the gift that she had personally presented to him yesterday.

He was completely surprised by what she had given him. According to her, the value of the gift was 1 million MTA merits or an astonishing amount of MTA credits. While it wasn't a problem for her to afford it, giving him such a valuable gift raised a lot of eyebrows from the guests.

There was a deeper meaning behind the present. Ves hoped to gain some clarity when he met with Master Willix.

"Are there any other matters that I should know about, Benny?"

"Yes. The Komodo War is experiencing another shift. The glows of the Blessed Squires and Valkyrie Redeemers had become a lot more active since yesterday. Many Hexers are questioning why, but some have begun to believe that the Superior Mother is celebrating your marriage."

It was hard to miss the power boost of the two spiritual entities who were involved in the wedding. Both Goldie and the Superior Mother seemed to derive a lot of spiritual feedback from all of the emotions people felt about the wedding.

Goldie's boost was fairly modest since the amount of Larkinsons she was connected to was still rather modest.

The Superior Mother was different. She came in touch with an increasing number of Hexer citizens.

Many of those citizens happened to tune in to the broadcast of the wedding. Even though any marriage to an inferior foreign boy was frowned upon, Ves had already transcended that category!

As far as most average Hexers were concerned, he was a 'good boy'!

Regardless of how the matriarchs rationalized their increasing cooperation with a foreigner, they did not block people from watching the wedding.

Instead, the Hegemony's government actually encouraged its citizens to tune into the broadcast!

Given all of the recent bad news trickling back from the front, the Hexers could use a distraction to lift up their morale.

One of the reasons why Gloriana took part in a long list of Hexer rituals prior to exchanging vows was because it was a giant influencing operation!

The broadcasts of the weddings targeted towards the Hexers were also slanted towards their sensibilities. The Hexer media outfits heavily alluded to the Superior Mother throughout the broadcast!

All of this meant that a many more Hexers than before became adherents of the resurgent Supreme. The glow radiated by the statue also succeeded in bleeding through the live broadcast to an extent, thereby reinforcing the Superior Mother's presence in the minds of trillions of Hexers!

Though Ves had become too caught up in his devotion towards Gloriana and the festive activities last night, he definitely recalled the Superior Mother becoming more active all of a sudden.

A faintly ominous possibility came to mind.

"How has the performance of the Blessed Squire and Valkyrie Redeemer changed exactly?"

"Their glows are substantially stronger than before, both in intensity and range." Gavin answered. "They're more resistant against the known Fridaymen counters. The Hexer mech pilots that fall under the influence of the glows have also become more fervent. Words don't quite do justice to how extensively this power boost has affected the Hex Army. We've requested battle footage to study the changes, but it will take a few days for us to receive some."

Ves could already imagine why his Hexer mechs changed. This was because he became increasingly more certain what exactly happened!

In order to verify his suspicion, he concentrated his mind and reached out to one of his more powerful design spirits.

As he spiritually probed the powerful entity, Ves immediately received a response!

"Ouch!"

Ves abruptly felt a sting on his mind!

"What's the matter, boss?!"

"It's nothing! I'm fine! I just.. ate something wrong maybe. Please tell the chefs to check their ingredients."

"..Very well."

Ves didn't pay much attention to the concerns of the people around him. In truth, he was in utter shock at the moment!

His probe confirmed something incredibly important.

"She's awake." He muttered under his breath.

Different from his other spiritual products, the Superior Mother had always been dormant as soon as she came into existence. Ves guessed that she possessed too much power at the start, thereby forcing her into immediate metamorphosis.

This state lasted for many months. Ves speculated that the Superior Mother might have completed her transformation sooner if not for the escalating amounts of spiritual feedback pouring into her. She constantly had to extend her growth in order to process all of the power she was absorbing!

Ves thought that the Superior Mother might take years to end her transformation, but somehow his theories were off. His probe earlier definitely proved that she was awake and cognizant!

His heart beat faster as he realized how much his life might change as a result of this development.

His wedding actually came with a 'buy one get one free' promotion.

In addition to obtaining a new wife, he also gained a new mother!

The most important priority for him right now was ascertaining the personality of the awakened spirit. While the Superior Mother was supposed to be his mother's avatar, how much of Cynthia was present?

Ves cautiously communicated with the entity he had just probed. This time, he behaved himself and approached her politely.

The Superior Mother communicated by thoughts and emotions rather than words. This was not unusual among his design spirits. After a short exchange where he was able to gain a solid impression of the awakened spirit, he was finally able to put down his worries.

For the moment, Cynthia Larkinson did not appear to be present. The Superior Mother was still a distinct entity who possessed her own personality and identity.

Though Ves loved his birth mother, he did not relish her watching over his every move for the rest of his life!

While the worst-case scenario hadn't happened, Ves overlooked an important detail.

The Superior Mother was still a mother! And like every mother, she adored her child!

"Ooof!"

Just as Ves relaxed, his head suddenly received a firm push out of nowhere!

Did.. the Superior Mother just pat his head?

Chapter 2505: Pylon

The awakening of the Superior Mother spelled both good and bad news to Ves.

The good news was that her glow had become substantially more powerful. The difference between a dormant entity and an active entity was considerable!

Aside from being able to channel more power, the Superior Mother was also able to exert more control over her influence!

This meant that just like Qilanxo, the Superior Mother could play favorites!

Anyone who earned a favor might receive a helping hand. Ves already anticipated that the mech pilots of his Hexer products would start to receive several boons!

Of course, the more immediate consequence of the Superior Mother waking up was that she was capable of interacting with him! The few invisible pushes he received were signs of his new mother's care and affection.

Even though the Superior Mother possessed an independent personality, for some reason or another she considered him to be her son!

This was ridiculous! He created her! He breathed life into her! If anything, he should be her father, just like he was a father to all of his other spiritual products!

Ves grabbed the Larkinson Mandate from Nitaa and directed his attention to Goldie.

"I'm your daddy, right?"

Nyaaaaa!

"Good girl."

The Golden Cat may be tied to him through the Larkinson Network, but she was sensible enough to recognize his primacy.

Unfortunately, Ves sensed the opposite vibe in the Superior Mother! He was pretty certain that she considered herself above her progenitor!

After all, what mother would take her son seriously? If Ves was being extra naughty, she might even spank him or something!

"Ugh. I'm already an adult!" He groaned and palmed his face.

If there was one consolation, it seemed that she wasn't paying close attention to him all the time. After she finished abusing his body by patting him with her invisible fingers, she retracted her presence.

As Ves cautiously peeked at the Superior Mother from afar, he sensed an abundance of activity.

The spiritual network that centered around her existence became a lot more vigorous. Ves could sense that she was already regulating the network by withdrawing power from some sources, reducing her output to some destinations while showering specific individuals with her favor.

She was being a lot more proactive about this than his other design spirits. The Solemn Guardian and so on did not possess an enhanced connection to people through spiritual networks. This largely prevented them from exerting fine control over the users of the mechs they watched over.

After all, they were connected to mechs, not people.

Ves immediately realized that the Golden Cat, the Superior Mother and Lufa were distinctly better than his other design spirits. Not even the newly-evolved Illustrious One possessed a spiritual or battle network!

Maybe he should add networks to his other spirits. Allowing them to establish direct connections to mech pilots could potentially make his mechs much more valuable.

Of course, this was only the case if the mech pilots gained the design spirit's favor. If the opposite was the case, then it would become a bit harder to sell his mechs to a broader audience!

Not everyone respected living mechs. Mech pilots were very diverse, and each of them learned from teachers who possessed different views on mechs.

Some treated mechs as disposable goods. Others treated mechs as treasures. This was just one of the many differences that could affect a design spirit's attitude towards mech pilots.

Perhaps it might be best if Ves held off on adding more spiritual networks to his design spirits.

Right now, the Superior Mother was the first entity who utilized her ties to countless Hexers on a wider scale. Ves was not surprised that she was too distracted to pay too much attention to him. As far as she was concerned, every Hexer was her child!

"I'm her favorite, though."

At least he had that. Ves carefully withdrew his perception in order to avoid drawing the Superior Mother's attention again. If she was paying active attention to him all the time, how could he perform his shameful acts in peace?

Ves deliberately halted himself from speculating any further about what the Superior Mother had exactly observed last night.

He quickly finished his breakfast and departed the Stellar Chaser with Lucky and Gavin.

His shuttle crossed over through the void of space. Ves idly activated his comm and called up a projection of the local star system.

A lot of ships had departed the star system. Many guests had already left. What Ves found noteworthy was that the captured pirate warships were nowhere to be seen.

As soon as the Larkinson Clan no longer needed to parade around the Gravada Knarlax, the MTA immediately dragged her and her escorts back to Centerpoint.

"A shame."

Fortunately, his clan already plundered plenty of valuables from the former Allidus Alliance ships. The Unending alloy, the strategic materials stored in the vaults and the stockpiles of other valuable exotics all fell into his hands.

The MTA didn't seem to care about these loose materials. The mechers only restricted the Larkinsons from ripping out the fixed components from the ships. They needed the ships to be as functionally intact as possible in order to ascertain the state of Nyxian pirate shipbuilding development.

"Speaking about ships, we'll be getting a bunch of them as well."

The Larkinsons already ordered a lot of second-hand combat carriers from the Hegemony. Their factory ship was also scheduled to be delivered on schedule.

Though Ves was thinking about acquiring additional capital ships, he wasn't sure if his clan had enough money to place a new order. The five upcoming expert mech projects would definitely eat a lot of money if he wanted to aim for the highest possible quality within his reach.

There was no way that Ves was going to settle for average expert mechs for his demigods! He highly valued their long-term potential, but in order to realize that, he needed to invest considerably in the short-term.

"How much disposable money do we have, Benny? How many hex credits can we spend without putting our clan or our mech company at risk?"

"It's complicated." Gavin replied. "There are many factors that are complicating our calculations. The LMC's monthly sales has spiked, but we aren't sure how long it will last. The profit we earn from selling a Doom Guard in the Komodo Star Sector is higher than the profit from selling the same mech in a distant star sector. In addition to all of this, our expansion in manpower and assets has caused our expenses to skyrocket. Also, don't forget about your promise of providing a basic set of second-class augmentations to all of the survivors of the Nyxian Gap Campaign."

As Gavin continued to ramble about the many factors that affected their available cash reserves, Ves grew impatient.

"Just give me an estimate!"

"Uhhh, leaving out the money that we have already reserved for future investments, you can probably spend up to 1 trillion hex credits without too many repercussions."

"That's enough to order another capital ship."

Gavin cautiously nodded. "Correct."

"Then let's prepare to order some in the future. I'm thinking about acquiring several capital ships while we're at it. With the financial strength of our clan, I'm sure we can borrow a few trillion hex credits."

"While you're right, there are very few lenders who are willing to hand over that much money at once. We'll need to develop a good relationship with one before we can apply for such a giant loan."

"Then start laying the groundwork. The sooner we round out our expeditionary fleet, the sooner we can leave the Milky Way. While I don't mind spending a few more years in our home galaxy, I don't want to obtain our new capital ships right before we pass through the beyonder gate. We need to break in our new vessels and become accustomed to them before we are ready to begin our true adventure."

Ships that big were rather temperamental and difficult to control. The sheer amount of parts and components practically guaranteed that some of them produced flaws. A critical error might disable an FTL drive in mid-transition. This would cause the ship to drop out of FTL travel at best or cause the entire vessel to disappear from the known universe if her luck was worse!

"Schedule a meeting with the Tsais. I need to secure the services of a good shipwright as soon as possible."

"Yes, boss."

"Also, prepare a detailed update on the current progress of our factory ship. If we can add some convenient upgrades, I'd like to do that now when the ship is still under construction. Just like mechs, it's a lot harder to improve a completed vessel."

Even though Ves intended to spend a lot of money in the coming months, he believed he was capable of bearing the burden. The LMC already had a couple of excellent commercial designs in reserve. The Crystal Lord Mark II and the Ferocious Piranha possessed a lot of sales potential. Once the LMC rolled them out, he'll probably be raking in a lot more money!

Before Ves could talk to Gavin any further, his shuttle finally arrived at the Ubiquitous Force.

Some time later, Ves met with Master Willix. They met in a highly-advanced mech workshop this time.

"Mr. Larkinson. You've arrived. Come over here." She called as she stood in front of a high-tech obelisk-like structure.

He approached until he stood next to her and stared at her gift to him. Master Willix already introduced it to him yesterday evening. However, hearing about it was very different from seeing it in the flesh!

The exterior of the obelisk consisted of advanced metallic alloys that Ves didn't recognize. Several electronic components were embedded throughout its structure. He didn't know what role they played.

The obelisk was as tall as a light mech but considerably skinnier. If Ves ignored all of its remarkable properties, it pretty much resembled a giant, primitive antenna!

It didn't take much effort for Ves to realize he was looking at a product of high technology.

However, its actual function was a lot more remarkable than the tech that made it work.

Different from every other tech in the hands of the MTA, the obelisk was actively radiating spiritual energy!

The existence of this device confirmed his suspicion that the MTA succeeded in applying spirituality in some of its tech!

"Our profession is remarkable and unique in our society." The older woman began. "From the moment we advance to the rank of Journeyman, we develop psionic power. This remarkable power system has several reality-defying effects, the most important of which is to bestow our mechs and mech designs with special, reality-bending qualities."

Ves nodded. "I'm aware of that, ma'am."

"Have you ever wondered why this effect is confined in a certain range? Journeymen can only psionically affect a range corresponding to a star sector at the start. As they develop their psionic power further, their range expands. Seniors are even more exaggerated in how many light-years their reach extends, while Masters such as myself can affect the entire galaxy and beyond."

"I hope to reach this level as well one day." Ves modestly said.

Willix smiled. "That will take a lot of time, and that assumes you won't fall along the way. In any case, until then, your range only stretches over a couple of star sectors for now. This is very problematic for your mech company once you begin your travels. If you head to the Red Ocean, how will your mechs still retain their strength in your home star sector? I believe you have already witnessed the consequences of disappointing your customers."

If Ves hadn't moved quickly and turned the situation around by introducing the Living Star Club, the LMC's reputation would have sunk into the ocean!

However, Master Willix might not be entirely correct in this case. Ves had theorized a long time ago that the range she was talking about might not be affected by his design seed.

This was because there were stronger spiritual entities with greater ranges connected to his mech designs! His collection of design spirits were more than capable of taking over his burden in his absence!

However, this was a secret that he wasn't eager to expose. If there was a technological alternative to the range problem of a mech designer, then that would be much more convenient!

The Master Mech Designer gestured towards the obelisk. "Your new P.P. will solve your lack of reach."

"P.P.?"

"It is short for psionic pylon." She explained. "For obvious reasons, you are not allowed to refer it by its actual name to others. P.P.'s are very sensitive and you should not reveal them to anyone unless we grant you permission. In most cases, mentors and Masters provide them to Journeymen who are travelling and need the capabilities of these devices the most. Otherwise, Journeymen such as Mr. Armalon would be much more reluctant to go on tour. Carmin Olson would have provided you with one if you were still her apprentice."

"I see."

"This pylon is worth 1 million MTA merits if you attempt to obtain one yourself."

That much?!

Chapter 2506: Neutral Spiritual Energy

Ves became very intrigued by the P.P. that Master Willix gifted him. The tall obelisk-like device exuded a sense of mystery.

Aside from his mechs, the P.P. was the first example of a device that interacted directly with spirituality that Ves had ever seen.

Since the Mech Trade Association depended so heavily on specific applications of psionic power, it was a given that they would research how to leverage it outside of the minds of mech designers.

However, the difficulty in observing and manipulating it severely hampered any research in this nebulous field.

Yet that did not stop the best researchers of the galaxy. The MTA was one of the two apex organizations of humanity. If their scientists and mech designers failed to grasp psionic power directly, then there were many ways to manipulate it indirectly.

The P.P. was probably one of the results of their painstaking research.

Unlike the Darkbreak module, which was another exclusive MTA product, the P.P. was coated in white.

As Ves tuned his senses towards the P.P., he made a number of remarkable discoveries.

First, much of the structure of the P.P. was purely technological. The only portion of the obelisk-like machine that directly harnessed psionic power was a small lump buried deep in the center of the pylon.

What was the purpose of all of this tech? Ves refused to believe they were useless. The MTA was not the kind of organization that encouraged waste. The expensive, unknown parts each thrummed with power generated from an internal reactor.

Yet as Ves peered deeper, it wasn't the technological components that stood out.

The P.P. already radiated the presence of spirituality despite not being keyed into his design philosophy yet. Someone or something already filled it up with spiritual energy.

As Ves studied the properties of what he felt, he discovered to his surprise that it was very neutral!

Yes, neutral!

He had never encountered spiritual energy with this property before. Every variety of spiritual energy he encountered came with defined attributes. This was because spiritual energy came from life, more specifically sentient life. The thoughts and emotions of intelligent creatures formed the basis of spirituality.

How could any life who possessed emotions generate spiritual energy that was essentially devoid of flavor?

Ves previously thought it was impossible!

Generating neutral spiritual energy was not as simple as stripping spiritual energy of its attributes. This wasn't possible, as spirituality came in defined 'shapes' for a lack of a better description. Each shape was slanted towards a specific attribute.

For something to have no attribute, they shouldn't have a shape. Yet this was a logical trap as something that didn't have a shape was non-existent!

This was what he always thought, but now it turned out that his theories were wrong.

As Ves partially tuned out Master Willix's explanation, he continued to look deeper into the special spiritual energy contained within the P.P.

He eventually found out that neutral spiritual energy actually possessed a 'shape' as well. It just came in a form that he did not expect!

It was difficult to describe what he sensed. Neutrality did not signify the absence of flavor. Instead, it was an attribute in itself! All he knew was that the MTA somehow developed a way to produce a unique variety of neutral spiritual energy.

What was the purpose of its existence? Why would the MTA put this highly-specific kind of spiritual energy into P.P.'s? Its unnatural properties suggested to Ves that it was a lot harder to generate than normal attributes. Ves was pretty sure that no natural process could generate something that felt so artificial!

The quality and purity of the spiritual energy locked inside the P.P. was also very high. Despite its small quantity, the neutral spiritual energy gave him the impression that it transcended the regular barriers of distance.

That reminded him of something. His eyes shifted to Master Willix.

Was she.. the source of this neutral spiritual energy?

He did not dare to peer directly at her blindingly strong spirituality. Yet when he compared her strong presence to that of the P.P., he believed he might be on the right track!

The P.P. made a lot more sense if the two shared a relation! Either Master Willix or some other powerful mech designer supplied precious neutral spiritual energy to the device in order to activate its functionality.

Through these clues, Ves quickly deduced how the P.P. was able to extend a mech designer's influence.

According to his theory, the P.P. likely demanded a spiritual fragment from him. Yet holding his spiritual fragment wasn't enough to make his mechs retain their special qualities imparted by his design philosophy.

The neutral spiritual energy probably served as a carrier or amplifier. Due to its completely inoffensive properties, it could easily blend in with his spiritual fragment. Once the two combined, his fragment probably received a lot of strengthening.

The advantages of fusing these two elements were probably two-fold.

First, it increased his spiritual fragment's influencing range to the point it could act as a substitute for his design seed.

Second, it added a sense of permanency and stability to his fragment. This prevented it from decaying or aging over time.

Ves became increasingly more certain that neutral spiritual energy actually originated from Master Mech Designers, and not just any of them. The only method of generating neutral spiritual energy that he could think of was trying to generate them from sentient but unfeeling minds!

This theory made a lot of sense! It added another reason why rational mech designers existed and why the MTA valued them so much. Their ability to strip their minds of their emotions and rely on pure logic was probably the key to adding a neutral attribute to their domains!

Master Willix had no idea that Ves might have figured out the essence of P.P.'s! While all of the technological components signified that there was still more to them than he currently understood, they probably played auxiliary roles at best.

The spiritual core of a P.P. was what truly mattered!

"...Our Association developed psionic pylon technology with great effort to solve the range problem of younger and developing mech designers. Before the existence of P.P.'s, Seniors and lower were largely confined to a specific region. As soon as they

moved far enough away, their existing products in the hands of local users largely lost the qualities that gave them an edge. This is undesirable for both the mech designer and his customers. Can you explain why, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves quickly turned back to the conversation. "Ah, for one, the professional reputation of the mech designer who went away will be ruined. No one likes to buy a product for its strong defense or something, only for it to lose that advantage a few years later. Such incidents will stain the track records of the mech designers in question, thereby hampering their future endeavors."

"Correct, but there's more."

"If incidents like this take place too often, then the overall market for mechs will become a lot less attractive. Consumer confidence will dip as no one will know for sure whether a mech designer will commit to a specific star sector or star cluster."

Master Willix nodded. "In general, we encourage mech designers to remain confined in a single region. Journeymen should stay in their native star sectors while Seniors should not travel beyond their star clusters."

Ves frowned. "Then why do people recommend that Journeymen should travel around to widen their horizons?"

"Traveling is okay as long as it stays within an acceptable range. Did you not go on such a tour yourself a few years ago? You have gained much from your travels, I am sure. This is usually sufficient to enrich most Journeymen."

Ves grew a bit suspicious about these circumstances.

"Are there any underlying reasons why it's better for mech designers to remain in their local haunts?"

She gave him an approving nod. "Since you are observant enough to recognize it, I will not deny it. We have ulterior motives to keep mech designers in their respective regions. It is for their own good. If the mech market is truly borderless, then what do you think will happen from a competitive perspective?"

It didn't take much for Ves to imagine the consequences.

"Stronger competitors from the galactic center will probably be able to squeeze out the weaker ones from the less-developed regions. The standard of mech design in the Komodo Star Sector is quite low. While the local mech designers are quite good at minimizing costs and making efficient use of local materials, we are much worse off in terms of maximizing performance or adding more sophisticated functionality to our mech designs."

"The Association thinks so as well. Novices, Apprentices, Journeymen and Seniors should be able to earn a comfortable living as long as they are able to design and sell decent mechs. Too many careers will be strangled if they are subject to a huge amount of unrestricted competition. The market for mechs designed by Seniors and lower must be inherently divided in order to provide development opportunities to as many mech designers as possible."

More successful mech designers translated to more realized design philosophies. The MTA did not want a small group of mech designers capturing the bulk of the galactic mech market. That went counter to their goal of improving the overall standard of mechs until they were able to supplant warships!

"What about Masters?" Ves asked. "Are they confined from conducting business as well?"

"No." She shook her head. "Masters do not require protection anymore. We are proficient enough to compete in any market in any possible region. In actuality, few Masters actually take the opportunity to expand their business to every corner of human space. Different markets have different preferences, and the availability of specific exotics can fluctuate very drastically from region to region. Therefore, in practice, Masters will still focus primarily on marketing their products closer to home."

"What about the trans-galactic mech companies?"

"They are immensely wealthy and immensely powerful. These publicly traded megacorporations have invested an immense amount of sums in building up branches and subsidiaries in almost every star sector or star cluster. A sufficient local presence allows these huge mech companies to push their mainstream mech models to a wide variety of local mech markets by relying on the branch headquarters to translate standardized mech designs into localized variants."

This was an enormous subject matter and not something that Ves was qualified to be involved with at his current stage.

Due to the sheer amount of stakeholders, mech designers and money involved, these megacorporations were almost always public rather than private. They were too big to be owned or controlled by a single entity.

They turned back to the original topic.

"Does this P.P. only work for a single mech designer?" Ves asked.

"Yes."

"Then what about my wife?"

"I have already gifted Miss Wodin with her own P.P." Master Willix replied. She waved her hand, causing a projection of another P.P. to appear. "Her model is a little more advanced than yours. Normally, you would have to exchange 1.2 million MTA merits to obtain this device."

The projection of Gloriana's P.P. was noticeably bigger than his own!

"What? Why is her P.P. longer than mine? This is unfair!"

The Master Mech Designer crossed her arms.

"Bigger isn't necessarily better, Mr. Larkinson. In truth, the effective range of P.P.'s is partially dependent on the mech designer in question. Your design philosophy harnesses psionic power much more directly than that of your spouse. This means you need less of a boost than hers. Your partner's design philosophy is considerably more nuanced than yours, so she deserves a larger P.P. Don't feel too bad about yourself. Size doesn't matter. It's how you use it. I have faith that you can make the most of your compact P.P."

Even if Ves accepted her rationale, why did he still feel inadequate?

Chapter 2507: Expensive Instruments

The process of activating the P.P. was fairly simple.

After Master Willix fiddled with the configuration, she commanded Ves to approach the device and put his arm through a slot that opened up at the base of the pylon.

An energy clamp suddenly held him in place while some sort of force tugged at his mind and spirit!

"AAHHH! WHAT THE HELL?!"

The P.P. generated some kind of energy field that was very disturbing to Ves! Not only that, but some of the neutral spiritual energy stored within the depths of the obelisk flowed out and enveloped his body.

Despite its neutral quality, the foreign spiritual energy was very high quality and therefore quite painful to come in direct contact with. Ves felt as if he was submerging his head in a pot filled with boiling water!

"Endure, Mr. Larkinson. This binding process will fail if you put up too much resistance."

This painful process lasted for up to half a minute. By that point, the neutral spiritual energy receded into the pylon, taking something extra in the process!

The process ended quickly after that. The binding that held his arm in place disappeared, allowing him to pull it out. He quickly took a few steps back as he looked fearfully at his P.P.

"What was that?!"

"That is the P.P. extracting some of your psionic power. It hurts because it is damaging to you. While you will recover in time, I advise you to avoid playing with other P.P.'s until you have recovered from this experience. This may take months or years."

As Ves recalled what took place at the end, he realized that the neutral spiritual energy somehow managed to siphon away some of his spiritual energy!

Ves lost enough to constitute a small spiritual fragment. If he knew this would happen, he would have carved it out on his own accord and just handed it over to his P.P. without any fuss!

He looked quite sour.

"Are P.P.'s dangerous?" He asked.

"They can be. If you bind just one of them, then there is no concern. It is when weaker mech designers become greedy and want more that will pose a problem. Mech designers who are in need of large amounts of funds think that using P.P.'s is a convenient means of expanding their market presence. Reaching more customers means higher sales, which in turn leads to higher revenue. However, binding too many P.P.'s consecutively will permanently damage their psionic power. For you and your partner, one should be enough. There is no need for your mech company to extend its effective market reach beyond the Yeina Star Cluster."

She was right. In the future, his design focus would be oriented around the Red Ocean's mech market. Ves only wanted to maintain a presence in the Komodo Star Sector and the surrounding region because the LMC was already rooted here. He also wanted to make sure that his father and the Larkinson Family would be able to make use of his products at their prime.

Ves cared little about selling his mechs to the rest of the galactic rim. While he was sure that his glows were desirable enough to be in high demand in many more star clusters, he doubted that the LMC would be able to control so many regionalized operations at once.

Perhaps he might have a chance if he continued to reside in the galactic rim, but since he and his entire clan would be leaving for the Red Ocean, the distance was too great to do anything more.

In a way, he agreed with Master Willix's underlying message. Journeymen such as him shouldn't be too eager to enter into markets he had no business touching in the first place.

Instead, he should develop himself honestly and advance his design philosophy. Once he advanced to Senior or Master, a lot more markets opened up to him without messing with any P.P.'s.

According to Master Willix, only Masters were truly qualified to compete against the entire mech industry!

While Ves already tasted the benefits of selling his mechs to a large number of states, he knew he couldn't be too unbridled in his expansion. Already, the competition in other star sectors was pushing back hard against the encroachment of LMC mechs. His mech company didn't have the energy to fight back against too much organized opposition.

He turned his attention back to his activated P.P. Now that it took some essence from him, Ves perceived some mysterious transformation taking place inside its depths. Soon, the pylon's technological components started to activate.

A powerful wave of spirituality spread from his newly-bound P.P.!

His P.P. spurted several times as it kicked into gear. Eventually, it achieved equilibrium, causing it to propagate weak but very familiar waves that extended across vast distances.

The pylon copied his design seed's ability to extend its influence across a huge distance!

Another way to look at it was that his P.P. turned into his surrogate. It turned into a serviceable substitute for his physical presence!

Master Willix called up a console and studied the data supplied by the pylon.

"The binding process has succeeded. From now on, you can depart to the Red Ocean without the concern that your business empire in your native star cluster will collapse."

Ves relaxed. He was glad it succeeded in one shot. He didn't want to repeat this experience!

"What happens to my P.P.? Will I need to take care of it myself?"

"That won't be necessary." She shook her head. "We will ship it to our cluster headquarters."

"Not Centerpoint?"

"No. Your P.P. is a cluster-wide model. It is not optimal to store your P.P. in this star sector due to its remote location. The Winged Serenade Star Sector sits in the center of the Yeina Star Cluster. Placing your P.P. here will ensure your design philosophy affects the most territory that matters. You don't need to be concerned. The Komodo Star Sector will still fall under its range."

Now that Ves completed the process, they withdrew from her mech workshop. They entered one of her offices in order to discuss other matters.

"Mr. Larkinson. I have extensively examined your lessons on your design philosophy. I have also analyzed the extensive footage, logs and other data of your latest battle. I've developed numerous questions."

"Ask away."

She proceeded to ask some tricky and insightful questions. Ves had to reach deep into his design philosophy in order to clarify her confusion.

Even though she was still incapable of designing living mechs, her theoretical understanding of his design philosophy had caught up very fast!

In some instances, her questions opened some angles to him that he hadn't even considered. This provided some useful avenues for future research!

Once they finished the question-and-answer session, Master Willix moved on to her remaining obligation.

"Now that you have concluded your wedding and surrendered your captured warships to us, my presence isn't needed anymore. I will be returning to Centerpoint soon."

That was both good and bad to Ves.

On one hand, Master Willix was one of the most effective protective talismans that he possessed. She was one of the scariest guard dogs in the galaxy. As long as she was nearby, not a single pirate or enemy dared to launch an attack on him, especially when she showered him with so much favor!

On the other hand, Ves continued to feel uncomfortable about doing anything when the MTA was close enough to look over his shoulders. No matter what deal they struck, their different identities ensured they would never be completely aligned!

"Does that mean that you will contribute to our planned expert mech design projects by remote?"

She nodded curtly. "Your Darkbreak module is secure enough to allow us to collaborate without concerns. Let's move onto the projects themselves. Have you developed any ideas on the mechs you ideally wish to realize?"

"Well, I don't have any solid draft designs, but I have sounded out the expert pilots who will receive work and take stock of my available resources. Overall, I want to start with designing high-tier expert mechs right away."

He elaborated on his expectations while he transferred some of the files and documents he prepared to Master Willix. It soon became clear that he intended to incorporate a lot of first-class materials.

"These materials are very remarkable." She raised her eyebrow. "Do you know the value of what you hold?"

Ves smiled at her. "There is little sense in hoarding them. I can think of no better use for them than this. At this time, my partner and I have to go through a lot of effort to design an expert mech. Since we are able to collaborate with you for a time, I don't want to waste this opportunity to design some basic models that will only serve their purpose for a couple a years. I want to invest in the development of our high-ranking mech pilots as much as possible, and providing them with high-performing expert mechs is a necessity!"

She understood his rationale, though she didn't entirely agree with him. "High-performance expert mechs are very difficult to utilize effectively when their intended users are still just starting out as expert pilots. While you are correct if you only consider the long-term outcomes, in the short and medium term, your expert pilots must constantly struggle to channel the raw power of their extraordinary machines."

The problem appeared to be greater than he initially thought. It was like handing over an extremely expensive musical instrument to a beginner artist. The individual in question wasn't proficient enough to make full use of such an extravagant device!

Even so, Ves still believed his course was correct. He would rather deal with this problem than face the prospect of having to design a new set of expert mechs to replace the simpler machines down the line.

"It's not cost-effective to go for the traditional route. First, I am pretty sure that all of our expert pilots under our care will be able to progress faster and with fewer hindrances than others. Second, since we only employ Journeymen at best, we have to find an external Master to collaborate with, and that will cost me millions of MTA merits that I can't afford to spend."

That last reason was the most important one to Ves. He may be swimming in MTA merits right now, but he earned every single merit through blood, sweat and tears. He

did not relish going on another dangerous campaign in order to harvest another batch of merits!

She seemed to realize this as well, so she no longer attempted to discourage him. She just wanted to ensure that Ves became aware of the consequences of his decision.

"Let's talk about the process of our collaboration." She moved on. "You told me that you wish to maintain as much creative control over your expert mech design as possible, is that correct?"

He nodded. "I want the expert mechs of our clan to reflect our unique strengths, not yours."

"The quality of your expert mechs will not be on par, then. You will be wasting a considerable amount of potential of the materials you put into your expert mechs."

"I am confident that Gloriana and I can continue to iterate on the designs over time."

"Very well, then. Personally, I approve. While you may have been tempted to rely on my formidable design abilities to maximize the performance of your expert mechs as much as possible, you will not be able to gain as much from their development. Your choice also minimizes my time commitment, which is also a boon."

Of course she would mention that.

Ves also hadn't forgotten about the original reason why she agreed to collaborate with him. She wanted to witness him apply his design philosophy and proprietary methods to his mech designs up close. He wouldn't have much room to do so if she was doing most of the work!

Chapter 2508: Resonance Matching

Master Willix provided him with a brief lesson on the most essential property of an expert mech.

He had learned a bit more about what it took to design an expert mech. The choice and matching of resonating materials played an essential role in empowering them. Without resonating materials, expert mechs wouldn't be the powerful machines that everyone knew and admired!

"While you have brought a surprising amount of interesting first-class materials to the table, none of them possess resonating properties." She explained. "While they are excellent in reinforcing the base performance of your envisioned mechs, you will need to source resonating materials as well in order to complete them. A mech doesn't need to incorporate a large quantity of resonating materials, but more is mostly better."

This requirement added a considerable burden to his ambitions. Resonating materials were far scarcer and harder to obtain. The better ones were treated the same as high-grade exotics. They were solely in the hands of states.

Fortunately, Master Willix understood his difficulties and offered him a reprieve.

"You do not need to source these materials yourself. I promised to take care of the aspects that you are unable to satisfy when it comes to the development of your expert mechs. It is not a problem to provide you with some materials taken from my own reserves."

His eyes lit up. "You would do that for me, ma'am?!"

He loved getting free stuff!

"You shouldn't celebrate too soon, Mr. Larkinson. My generosity has limits. I will only provide you with the amount of materials I deem necessary. They will be enough to last for your expert pilots for some time. If you want to obtain more, you will have to pay for them. Mind you, be prepared to exchange a large amount of merits."

His face soured. "This.. is not exactly what I had in mind."

"You have received more than enough welfare from me. I am not your nanny. This is for your own good. If we incorporate too much resonating materials in the expert mechs, your expert pilots will exhaust themselves too quickly in battle due to the enormous strain in controlling them. It is easier to swing a data pad than a chair."

"Isn't there a way to cut off the resonating materials until the expert pilot is ready to handle the added power?" Ves suspiciously asked.

"Such a solution indeed exists. It won't be necessary for us to employ it in any of your expert mech designs."

What a bummer. Ves had no right to demand Master Willix cough up additional resonating materials.

Though she wasn't willing to provide him with much, she assured him that she would be picking the most fitting resonating materials that she was readily able to provide.

"You may not know this, but resonating materials have varying degrees of fit with specific expert pilots. Some materials resonate fully with an expert pilot. Achieving 100 percent resonance is very rare. In practice, the chance of stumbling upon the most ideal resonating material is too small. Most expert mechs incorporate materials that resonate around 40 to 80 percent with the expert pilot in question."

"That.. sounds quite bad." Ves frowned. "Why can't we go higher?"

"The mech designers or the organizations they are working for only possess a finite collection of resonating materials. In the absence of a perfect resonating material, the mech designers must make do with alternatives that come close enough. In any case, 40 percent resonance is better than 0 percent resonance, which is the case for every other material."

The chance of winning the jackpot was too small. Humanity discovered an endless variety of exotics in the galaxy. Only a small proportion of them possessed resonating properties, but by far most of them did nothing to expert pilots who weren't compatible with them. Trying to match suitable resonating materials with unique expert pilots was quite a cumbersome effort!

"Is there a possibility that a resonating material will result in detrimental outcomes?"

"There is." She nodded. "This is one of the dangers of recklessly putting expert pilots in expert mechs that are designed for others. If the incompatibility is high enough, the mech or pilot might meet an unfortunate accident."

He already suspected that this might be the case. Standard, universal expert mechs did not exist. They were customized to a specific individual by definition. This meant that it was highly inappropriate for them to be piloted by someone other than their intended pilot!

"So.." He said. "I suppose you'll ensure that my expert pilots will receive the best possible resonating materials for their intended mechs?"

She smirked. "Don't push your luck. While it is true that our Association possesses the largest collection of resonating materials in the galaxy, even I cannot obtain every sample. Far from it. While I can try to obtain perfect resonating materials for each of your expert pilots, the expense is too great. This treatment is largely reserved for ace mechs and god mechs. You can forget about attaining perfection at this stage."

"Gloriana will be disappointed."

"She's a big girl."

What did that make Ves then?

"Don't be such a cry baby, Mr. Larkinson. You underestimate my reserves. I dare say that I have the largest collection of resonating materials in the Komodo Star Sector. I've obtained many of them while traveling through the galaxy. Attaining at least 80 percent resonance for all five expert mech design projects is assured. In fact, the ongoing matching process has already resulted in a number of positive hits."

It turned out that when the expert pilots initially underwent a complete examination by the MTA, her personnel already recorded their unique resonance signatures. They

could then subject this resonance signature to different materials in order to find out whether they reacted with each other.

This was not something Ves needed to deal with. Master Willix only provided him with a brief explanation to keep him in the loop. He needed to take into account that he needed to incorporate some resonance materials in his designs. She determined the exact use and placement of those materials.

Though Ves was a bit peeved about the lack of control in this matter, he had no choice but to surrender to her terms.

"If I want to obtain resonating materials without exchanging a huge amount of merits, what do you suggest?"

"Resonating materials are mostly in the hands of states or very powerful organizations. You will have to approach them directly and convince them to provide you with some. Mind you, it is customary to trade one resonating material with another resonating material. Any state that reduces its stockpile of resonating materials will weaken the potential of its expert pilots. This is why this trade mostly takes place between states at the same level."

In other words, private individuals such as Ves wouldn't be taken seriously unless he whipped up resonating materials himself.

"I believe the Friday Coalition is highly engaged in this type of trade at the moment." She added. "The state has employed a large number of foreign expert pilots. Each of them require expert mechs that are up to standard. In order to make sure that the needs of every new expert pilot is met, the Fridaymen must acquire specific resonating materials that they hold in short supply. It makes sense for them to trade away the resonating materials they have in excess to obtain specific exotics that match well with individual expert pilots."

This was an important strategic matter! If the Friday Coalition failed to make these trades, the expert mechs of the foreign guests wouldn't be as good!

As it was, due to the haste in designing and fabricating so many expensive expert mechs, the Fridaymen had to make a lot of compromises. Whether it was in cost, fit, sophistication or resonating materials, they were not as good as the Coalition's proper expert mechs.

It didn't matter. Quantity was a quality of its own. Fielding two weaker expert mechs against a single stronger expert mech almost always resulted in the defeat of the latter!

"What about the Hexadric Hegemony?"

"The Hegemony.. has less trading partners. To be fair, the state is under less pressure to source materials elsewhere. The Hexers occupy the most prime territory of this star sector. They have access to richer deposits of exotics. Of course, they can't meet every possible need. The reason why the Coalition is much keener on trade is because it needs to expend more effort to achieve more parity with the Hegemony. This case shows the importance of finding and holding onto a good starting position. If you ever intend to found your own state, then pick the right location."

Ves brushed aside her advice. "I don't have any intentions to anchor myself to a fixed location. I am much more in favor of the nomadic way of life."

That elicited a heightened reaction from the Master.

"I advise you to reconsider. Living in space for the rest of your life is not natural. The spaceborn clans are not good role models. Long-term living in confined spaces results in many detrimental behavior changes that will seriously affect the mental health of your entire clan. Do not forget how the collapse of the Age of Conquest initially came to pass."

"What does that have to do with living in space?"

She frowned. "The admirals and naval officers who were in charge of the warfleets that guarded their space had all become detached from general humanity after too much separation. Their long service aboard their battleships and other warships has caused them to forget where they originally came from. At some point, the spacers developed a superiority complex. They considered themselves better than the humans living ignorantly on their planets. Once they no longer identified themselves with these lesser humans, it has become a lot easier for them to justify the act of slaughtering innocent civilians."

Ves shrugged. "I'm a mech designer, not a fleet admiral. What does this have to do with me? My fleet is nowhere near as powerful as a warfleet. There is no way that I'll follow in the footsteps of these arrogant spacers. I thought we all learned from the Age of Conquest and tempered our use of augmentation!"

"You are not understanding my point, Mr. Larkinson. The evil that humans inherently possess has a greater chance of getting free in insular environments. The smaller the environment, the greater the problem. Not just ships, but other small communities such as isolated villages and small churches are subject to this rule. If you want to ensure the long-term health of your Larkinson Clan, then you should strongly consider finding a good planet to settle. Humanity is simply not a race that is suitable to live in space."

Of course, a representative of the MTA would say that.

Ves was a bit skeptical about her advice. She was clearly biased against the CFA. The elite spaceborn clans that Ves admired seemed to be doing fine despite never ruling over any permanent territories.

That was pure freedom! With the entirety of human space within their reach, the spaceborn clans could evade any danger and move to any star sector that held the greatest opportunities to them. Their lack of territory may deprive them of some very useful advantages, but the upside was that they weren't shackled to the fortunes and misfortunes of a specific region!

This was an extremely relevant advantage to Ves as he had to worry about some very powerful enemies such as the Five Scrolls Compact.

He could never allow himself to be cornered if the worst came to pass!

His meeting with Master Willix soon came to an end. Ves boarded his shuttle which brought him to his next appointment.

Ves fell into thought. While he was convinced that going nomadic was the best solution for him, was that really true?

Though the CFA and the spaceborn clans embraced this way of life, they weren't exactly the most wholesome people that Ves had met.

"They're strong, though. That counts for something."

Chapter 2509: Widening Scope

After Ves concluded his meeting with Master Willix, he decided to meet with Patriarch Reginald of the Cross Clan at the seat of his power.

Though discussing with someone at their home ground would put him at a disadvantage, Ves did not think too highly of the Crossers. They were brutes who mainly ruled with their fists. Even if they were helped by a comprehensive staff of professionals, as long as the head was a muscle-headed gloryhound, the governance of the clan would always be dysfunctional.

Ves just wanted to visit the flagship of the Cross Clan in person, nothing more.

Though the Larkinson Clan still awaited the delivery of its first capital ship, Ves intended to obtain much more. With the amount of merits he possessed, a substantial proportion of the 20-ship quota that came with passage through the Red Ocean would fall into his hands.

That was 7 to 8 ships if Ves succeeded in negotiating his fair share.

He did not want to waste this quota. While he knew that a blooming shipbuilding industry had set up in the Red Ocean, right now demand far exceeded supply.

Most industries in the Red Ocean were still in their infancy. What development humanity had set up on the other side of the inter-galactic beyonder gate mostly belonged to the Big Two. As the MTA and CFA still had to complete the conquest of the dwarf galaxy, the output of those established industries all went towards supporting the frontline mech armies and war fleets.

This meant that the pioneers essentially had to start from scratch in order to satisfy their own needs.

It was quite hard to get the ball rolling. Without a lot of existing infrastructure, many settlements had to be built, and that took a lot of financial and material investment.

The few organizations who managed to get their shipyards up and running were flooded with orders from eager and wealthy pioneers. Combined with the fact that the supply of high-quality materials necessary to build starships was still in very short supply, a factory ship like the one ordered by his clan might cost twenty times or even fifty times of what he ought to pay!

This reality showed him that he would undoubtedly get ripped off if he wanted to acquire more capital ships once he reached the new dwarf galaxy. It would take at least another decade for prices to drop to reasonable levels.

"Fortunately, the pricing of subcapital ships shouldn't be so extreme."

Capital ships were much harder and more cumbersome to build than smaller vessels. It was relatively easy for a shipbuilding company to set up a small or medium-sized orbital shipyard. The only reason why the prices of most smaller ships were inflated as well was because of the shortage of materials.

This was not a critical problem to Ves. He would deal with the problem of acquiring combat carriers and logistical ships when he reached the new frontier.

For now, his priorities mainly concerned the expert mechs and the capital ships of his clan. Their acquisition increased the actual strength of his expeditionary fleet.

Ves was not blinded by the reputation and prestige he had accumulated in recent years. He also did not intend to put too much stock in Master Willix's overt support.

Perhaps the yokels of the local star sector might respect the Larkinsons, but it would be a very different story once he crossed over! By nature, the pioneers who were able to afford a beyonder ticket were all exceptional in their own right. There were too many whose strength and accomplishments completely crushed his little clan.

With the mixing of so many crouching tigers and hidden dragons, an adorable cat like the Larkinson Clan wouldn't scare anyone.

"The only way to earn their respect is for the cat to bare her claws."

After all, even if a cat was not a threatening animal, she could inflict a lot of pain with her claws!

"Isn't that right, Goldie?"

The spiritual cat didn't manifest, but Ves stroked the emblem affixed on the cover of the Larkinson Mandate regardless.

The book had grown more vigorous and exceptional in recent times. The explosive growth of the Golden Cat also initiated some unknown transformations in the ancestral heirloom.

To be honest, Ves actually didn't expect such a process to take place. While the book still remained the same from a physical standpoint, in his spiritual vision he observed the intrinsic spiritual foundation growing and transforming into something different.

The book had to grow in order to accommodate the expanding strength of the Golden Cat. The two of them were tied to each other. While this breed a dangerous degree of interdependence, it also offered opportunities as well.

"It's kind of like the synergy between mechs and mech pilots."

He suddenly realized that he could apply presumed specialization in a broader context than just mech and mech pilot.

If he broadened the scope of his specialty, wasn't it just an instance of establishing symbiosis between an object and a living entity?

This idea had potential. He was already capable of producing totems, which were simply objects that possessed a bit of life. While Ves wasn't able to impart as much spirituality into objects that weren't mechs, it was not impossible for him to achieve some results if he put in some effort.

Could he expand this relation? Was it possible to strengthen this clan by widening the application of his design philosophy?

He began to formulate several interesting possibilities.

What if he turned the Larkinson Regalia into his exclusive totem?

What if he paired a Larkinson ship captain with his factory ship?

What if he bound Venerable Joshua to a life-oriented totem?

"It can't be that simple!"

He shook his head. Though these ideas all held promise, he did not forget about the inherent danger of performing spiritual manipulation on living people. If anything went wrong, death was a very real possibility!

If Ves somehow caused Venerable Joshua to blow up his own head, then his loss was incalculable!

At the very least, Ves had to perform his experiments on more expendable test subjects.

"Should I import some captured pirates?"

Ever since he figured out that human civilization did not extend rights to pirates, he discovered that there was quite an active underground market for them. While it was a lurid and unsavory means of earning a living, there were still plenty of Peacekeeper outfits and other organizations that eagerly wanted to supplement their income by extracting the most value out of their pirate captives.

The only problem was that the documentation surrounding the merchandise could easily be forged or falsified.

Sometimes, innocent spacers forced to crew the ships of their captors were lumped into the same groups as murderous pirates.

Other times, the Peacekeepers even snatched random civilians from nowhere and slapped the label of pirates on their heads!

Therefore, this unregulated market was very murky. A proper, upright warrior clan such as the Larkinsons would never engage with such filth.

"Forget it." He shook his head. "I'll solve this problem some other way. There's no hurry, anyway. I have too much work on my plate to devote much time on this side project."

That said, he did not intend to ignore the potential of this idea. He actually felt quite motivated to explore what he could do even if it wasn't directly related to mechs.

"It's as if I'm a Star Designer!"

Naturally, this was just a delusion. Compared to the real deal, Ves was just a baby trying out a new trick.

Soon enough, his shuttle approached the fleet of the Cross Clan. Ves studied the main fleet and the ship composition.

The Crossers had done a fair amount of work in patching up the holes and fixing some of the damage to their battle-scarred vessels. However, more work had to be done to restore the vessels to their prime.

Despite the shabby appearance of the fleet, its strength was still undeniable. With around 70 combat carriers and 200 support ships, the Cross Clan could easily defeat a typical Fridaymen mech regiment.

The two fleet carriers were even more impressive. The Antonio Cross was only 1.8 km long, but she was quite a mobile capital ship that was perfectly suited for exploration.

The Hemmington Cross was a lot more unwieldy at 3 km long. Not only that, but she possessed a considerably broader shape, making her look like an alligator.

The internal volume of such a vessel was immense. At first, the Larkinsons thought the Hemmington Cross held around 500 mechs.

In actuality, she carried at least 1000 mechs!

Of course, packing so many mechs on a single ship, even a big one, came with a lot of tradeoffs. The Hemmington Cross didn't possess a lot of cargo capacity. She also lacked a sufficient number of mech workshops to service the vessels and her mobility and defensive attributes were abysmal as well.

To Ves, the Hemmington Cross was nothing more than a giant transport for mechs. She served her basic function well, but her many shortcomings turned her in a liability in a frontier environment.

If the Crossers had any sense, they would sell off this white elephant as soon as possible and invest the proceeds into acquiring some more sensible capital ships. Obtaining another fleet carrier similar to the Antonio Cross was ideal for a martial clan like the Crossers.

Of course, the chance of someone as proud as Patriarch Reginald following his advice was minimal. Even if the Larkinsons partnered up with the Crossers, the influence they could exert on each other was not great. Both clans had their own ideas on how to run their affairs.

Besides, the larger fleet carrier was named after the Cross Clan's only ace pilot. The Vicious Mountainers would rather die than letting anything happen to this precious ship!

It didn't take long before the shuttle approached one of the hangar bays of the flagship. As the immense bulk of the Hemmington Cross loomed larger, Ves had to admit that despite her many weaknesses, she still looked impressive on a primal level.

Once the shuttle landed on a designated landing spot, Ves emerged along with Lucky and Nitaa.

He briefly swept his gaze and spotted a lot of activity. The Cross Clan may have lost most of its assets during its flight, but there was no way the Cross clansmen neglected the need for mechs!

Each of the mech models employed by the Crossers were excellent products designed by competent Seniors and Masters.

It was too bad that the clan failed to retain these precious mech designers. The mechs the Crossers currently utilized had no chance of being updated or upgraded in the future. They would have to be replaced entirely if the Crossers wanted to keep up with the times.

"Patriarch Larkinson. Welcome aboard our flagship!"

A small but respectful greeting party stood in front of the arriving shuttle. Ves calmly stepped forward and nodded. "Thank you. Your fleet carrier is an impressive vessel. Is it possible for me to tour your fine flagship?"

The Cross officer beamed with pride. "The Hemmington Cross is our greatest home! However, I'm afraid I have to refuse your request. We cannot allow too many people to decipher the secrets of our flagship. I hope you understand."

"Understood."

"Please follow me, sir. Patriarch Reginald is already expecting you at one of our conference rooms."

They traversed a substantial distance. They took some elevators that took them to the upper decks before boarding a small floater platform that rapidly zipped through the hallways.

Once they arrived at an ornate hatch, Ves had to leave Lucky and Nitaa behind while entering the opulent conference room by himself.

Two people stood up at his arrival.

Patriarch Reginald Cross looked exceptionally pleased at the moment.

"Patriarch Larkinson! You're just in time! I have just concluded an agreement with this fine gentleman. Please welcome the latest addition to our clan. I'm told he is quite a formidable Senior Mech Designer. Now that we have regained some mech design capabilities of our own, I hope you will revise your expectations of us. Our new guest designer shall be in charge of designing my new expert mech!"

This was new! Ves hadn't expected the Cross Clan to make such a big move, but in hindsight, it made a lot of sense.

Perhaps the Cross Clan observed how well the Larkinsons were doing and wanted to join in on the action.

As Ves shifted his gaze to the man standing next to the Cross Patriarch, he frowned a bit. The middle-aged man looked a bit familiar.

"Mr. Larkinson! It has been some time." The Senior strode forward with a strong and vigorous stride. "Don't you remember me? We used to have business dealings."

Ves quickly accessed the databanks of his Archimedes Rubal implant and executed a face-matching program.

His heart sank as soon as he saw the results.

"You.." He uttered with shock. "Why are you here?"

"Why can't I be here? The Sand War ruined all of my industry. I might as well hitch a ride to the Red Ocean rather than wasting my time in this worthless region. The Cross Clan has been generous enough to accept my terms. We might even become collaborators again. Isn't that good news?"

"Yes... good news.."

Benedict Cortez smirked in satisfaction. "I can already imagine what stellar mechs we can design now that you have grown so much."

While Lord Reginald Cross looked happy that he managed to employ a Senior, Ves knew that this matter was not so simple.

This was because Ves was one of the few people who knew the actual identity of Benedict Cortez.

In truth, the new guest designer of the Cross Clan was actually Professor Reno Jimenez, who was more infamously known as the Skull Architect!

Ves was standing in front of a bigger war criminal than himself!

Chapter 2510: Reformed

The Cross Clan gained a new guest designer!

Such a surprising change was quite a coup to the defeated and exiled Garlaners. Ves abruptly had to change his entire approach towards his negotiation with the Crossers due to this development.

A Cross Clan without a high-ranking mech designer was just a homeless and sorry-looking collection of warriors.

A Cross Clan that was presided over by a genuine Senior Mech Designer could easily reverse its declining trajectory!

As long as the Senior began to design some decent commercial mechs, the Crossers would no longer be bleeding money left and right. In a couple of years, the clan might even turn a profit again. Ves would no longer hold much leverage over them when that happened!

However, this was just the case if the Crossers partnered up with a normal Senior.

The problem right now was that the actual identity of the mech designer in question was wanted by the MTA!

The Skull Architect was one of the most notorious mech designers of the Friday Coalition. In a fit of obsession, Professor Jimenez assassinated an expert pilot and attempted to integrate the demigod's bones into one of his mechs in order to achieve a breakthrough in the elusive X-Factor!

Suffice to say, his insane experiment failed to yield the desired result.

Once the authorities traced down the missing expert pilot and uncovered Professor Jimenez's heinous deeds, the so-called Skull Architect had no choice but to flee from civilized space and eke out a new living among the pirates of the frontier.

As a second-class Senior Mech Designer, the Skull Architect's products were in extremely high demand among his new if unsophisticated clientele. The man became even more ruthless and even adopted some pirate traditions such as wearing clothes bearing the trophies of his kills on his person.

When Ves initially met and spoke with the Skull Architect via projection, Professor Jimenez possessed an extremely intimidating demeanor.

The fugitive mech designer was no stranger to violence and death! Even when the Skull Architect lost his entire foundation in the Friday Coalition, he continued his efforts to realize his design philosophy.

Of course, the poor and underdeveloped Faris Star Region was not very conducive towards his progression. The Skull Architect barely made some accomplishments before the sandman race went berserk!

Like unstoppable locusts, the entire sandman race swept towards the Komodo Sector! Any planet, space station or ship in their path soon became drowned in a tsunami of living sand!

The Skull Architect lost everything for the second time. This unlucky Senior had to pack up his bags and flee yet again.

The only consolation was that he was able to sneak back into civilized space by mingling with the trillions of refugees who desperately departed the border states in panic.

Due to the sheer chaos and confusion of this immense exodus, the frontier pirates were easily able to forge new identities for themselves.

Calabast played a pivotal role in crafting a new identity for the Skull Architect. Now he was known as Professor Benedict Cortez, a third-class mech designer from a fallen border state.

That was the extent of what Ves knew. He didn't bother to track the man's exploits. Therefore, it was a complete surprise for him to encounter the Skull Architect once again at this time!

What was worse was that this meeting might not be the last time they met together.

Ves began to sweat a bit. While Ves was not opposed to reuniting with old acquaintances, the Skull Architect was anything but simple.

The fugitive mech designer was incredibly bold to enter the Cinach System where the Ubiquitous Force was still present!

If Master Willix knew that a mech designer who had disgraced their entire profession was within arm's reach, she would definitely act with extreme prejudice!

This was bad, because Ves was not an uninvolved bystander. He secretly exchanged with the Skull Architect. Much of what he knew about stealth technology originally came from the former pirate mech designer's hands!

As long as the MTA captured Jimenez alive and read his memories, Ves might very well get implicated in the process.

All of this meant was that Ves had to ensure that no one ever discovered the older man's actual identity!

"Mr. Larkinson, we have much to catch up to." Professor 'Benedict' amiably smiled and spoke. "Come. Let us sit and discuss our future cooperation."

Though Ves was caught off-guard by the Skull Architect's surprise appearance, he quickly tried to regain his composure.

He couldn't afford to let his shock affect the Larkinson Clan's ongoing negotiations with the Cross Clan.

In the following half hour, Ves held a small back-and-forth with Patriarch Reginald. As the Skull Architect was still a new addition to the Cross Clan, it was not appropriate for him to speak too much.

However, the presence of a Senior evidently emboldened Patriarch Reginald quite a lot. The Cross Patriarch became a lot more firmer in his demands.

"I don't agree with this change." Ves frowned. "You promised thirty percent more strategic materials than before last time."

"We can make much better use of these exotics than you. After all, you are just a Journeyman at most. Our clan has a Senior now!"

"That doesn't necessarily change the equation. With respect, while Professor Cortez is a competent Senior, his foundation lies in third-class mechs."

The Senior in question coughed. "In actuality, I have been studying second-class mech design for some time now. As a Senior, it does not take much effort to master the basic principles of second-class mechs in a short amount of time. At the very least, I can design a better and more optimized second-class mech than you, Mr. Larkinson. In a decade, I will probably be able catch up with the likes of actual second-class mech designers."

Damn. Ves wanted to use the Skull Architect's cover story to diminish the guest designer's status, but the disguised mech designer did not play along.

In truth, both of them knew that the Skull Architect was already very proficient at designing second-class mechs. Just because Jimenez had been slumming it in the frontier for some time did not cause him to lose the ability to design superior mechs.

Now that he had become attached to the Cross Clan, he might soon be able to return to designing the mechs he originally excelled at. Back when Professor Jimenez was still an honest mech designer, he was already a renowned and accomplished Senior.

Ves just hoped that the Skull Architect did not resume his 'other' habit!

After doing his best to preserve the Larkinson Clan's negotiating position, the talks eventually stalled out again.

"I see that you and our new guest designer have a lot to catch up to." Patriarch Reginald noted with a tired expression. Sparring against the man known as the Devil Tongue was quite exhausting! "I will leave you two mech nerds to yourselves. Professor Cortez..."

The Skull Architect tactfully nodded at the Cross Patriarch. "You need not be concerned. My friendship with Patriarch Larkinson will not affect my loyalty. As an honorable mech designer, I take my pledges seriously."

What the hell?! Ves felt like puking blood as the Skull Architect hoodwinked Reginald. The Crossers had no idea who they were dealing with! Jimenez's mild and polite facade was nothing but a facade!

Still, Ves had to admire his old acquaintance's acting skills. As the two older men interacted with each other, the disguised mech designer exposed none of the tendencies associated with the infamous Skull Architect!

Once Patriarch Reginald departed the conference room, the new guest designer immediately pulled out and activated a signal jammer.

"We can talk safely now."

"Uhm... "

The professor smiled. "There is no need to concern yourself about the Ubiquitous Force. Just be careful about what you say. There is no need to refer directly to some of the shameful matters of the past."

This still made Ves uncomfortable.

"You.. why are you here?"

Professor 'Cortez' chuckled. "Because of you, of course! What I said earlier is true. The Sand War destroyed everything that I have built. While I have been doing fairly well for myself in recent times, I am tired in some aspects. If I settle down in another state and rebuild my industry, who is to say it won't get knocked down yet again? I am tired of repeating this futile cycle. For this reason, I've been looking to make a new start. What better way to do so than to start over in the Red Ocean?"

His explanation made complete sense to Ves. If he was in the Skull Architect's shoes, he would make the same choice.

The normal reasons that shackled mech designers to a region hardly applied to the fugitive. The man had no reputation or business to uphold. He didn't really have any family holding him back and his loyalty to the Friday Coalition was pretty much zero.

The only fact that made Ves a bit concerned was why the Skull Architect specifically chose to partner up with the Cross Clan of all choices.

As a very competent Senior, many pioneers in the region would have accepted him in their ranks. The Cross Clan was undoubtedly less desirable to more well-organized expeditions.

"If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have wasted my time on the Crossers." The Senior sneered for a moment before plastering an eager expression on his face. "While we haven't collaborated on too many mech designs, I have become endlessly fascinated with your work! Together, we can design great mechs! In fact, I envy Miss Wodin. She has managed to gain your permanent allegiance. If I was a woman, I would have moved to secure you right away. Perhaps I should have undergone a gender change procedure years ago..."

As the professor openly rambled about turning himself into a woman for the express purpose of seduction, Ves shuddered.

Despite everything that happened lately, the Skull Architect was still the same!

"Professor..." Ves coughed.

"Call me Benedict. Forget about who I was before." The Skull Architect snapped back to the present. "I have completely left behind my past. There is nothing to go back to. I have made too many mistakes to count."

"With respect, sir, but.. what if you return to your old habits?"

"I keep telling you, Mr. Larkinson. I am a changed man. There is no need for me to play my previous role anymore. I know what you are worried about. Please be reassured that I have substantially shifted my research approach. I was wrong back then. I was dabbling in matters that fell outside of my specialty. In the end, I fell victim to my own greed."

Ves slightly narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Are you truly different?"

The Senior sighed. "Truly. You can't understand how desperate I was back then. It is the greatest dream of someone of my rank to advance to Master. While I have made a lot of progress, I encountered a bottleneck. I have tried many solutions to break past this point, but none succeeded. Knowing that this is the most important obstacle to realizing my design philosophy, I drew on more and more spurious theories."

A normal mech designer did not just randomly come up with the idea to integrate the skull of an expert pilot into mech!

The professor definitely had problems before he performed this grievous crime!

"I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot bring myself to believe it is safe for me to be around you. I don't want to get implicated should you draw any trouble upon yourself."

"Hahaha!" The Skull Architect laughed. "There is no need for you to fear me! You're my best friend, Mr. Larkinson! It was only when you revised my mech designs that I realized what I had been doing wrong all this time. In order to push my mech designs to the next level, I shouldn't have tried to solve the problems I wasn't good at. Instead, I should have collaborated with the likes of you! I am already certain that working with you is the key to progress my design philosophy past the final hurdles. Joining the Cross Clan is a convenient way to remain in your company!"

His underlying message was clear. The former pirate designer was determined to cling onto Ves. He was no different from Gloriana in this aspect!