

Mech 2531

Chapter 2531: Weapon of Last Resort

What a radical idea!

For a long time, Ves often stated that his mechs were alive. His design philosophy centered around the premise the mechs were just as alive as humans and should be treated as such.

While it was too impractical to grant them rights equivalent to that of a human, it was already good enough to treat them with respect and pay attention to their needs.

Yet despite sticking to this core principle, Ves hadn't entirely treated living mechs according to his own ideals.

It couldn't be helped. Mechs may be alive, but they were also products made to fight. Getting too attached to them was a bad idea for most people as the loss of a living companion was much more hard to stomach than the loss of a piece of hardware.

Another reason why Ves wasn't able to push for better treatment was because he needed to convince a lot of people that it was worthwhile to do so. While many of his clansmen had steadily come around to treating their mechs as if they were alive, only Joshua fully embraced this mindset.

Other Larkinsons were only partially there. Both their hearts and minds had to agree that mechs were alive. Otherwise, these people would continue to treat their mechs as machines for the most part.

This was what their learning and senses told them. They simply couldn't see the potent spiritual foundations of living mechs!

Ves shook his head. This was not the time to investigate this radical idea. He resolutely added it to his to-do list before shoving every related thought out of his mind.

He found it rather strange that he managed to generate several promising new ideas in a short amount of time. In his mentally-exhausted state, his creativity and imagination should have suffered.

Did he misunderstand his low state? Was there more to draining his spiritual energy than what he already ascertained?

Perhaps his current conditions were similar to that when he activated the remote domain fragment in his mind. When he was able to gain access to Gloriana's domain, he was able to view himself in the lens of another person.

By adopting a different perspective, he was able to pay more attention to details that his normal self overlooked.

Ves believed that he might be benefiting from a similar dynamic at the moment!

By draining a significant chunk of his mind, his personality and thinking patterns had changed. Since he hadn't lost too much spiritual energy this time, his changes weren't too severe, but it was noticeable enough to produce a contrast.

Contrast!

This was the key word! By creating contrast, his hidden biases became obvious and the flaws that he never took notice of became extremely eye-catching.

What all of this meant that it was not a waste to put himself in a low state sometimes! As long as he took advantage of his temporary conditions, he might be able to come up with solutions from angles he never would have considered when he was his old self.

Of course, just like every other tangent he came up with today, he intended to explore these ideas later. He still had to brainstorm two more potential mech design projects.

Since Gloriana had just finished her turn, Ves began to dig up another potential mech concept from his mind. As a mech designer, he frequently came up with new ideas for mechs. He stored everything that was interesting and viable enough in his implant. Therefore, he would always be able to push forward a potential mech design even if he wasn't able to invent one on the spot.

"My next proposal is more specifically geared towards the needs of our clan. As far as I'm concerned, the Transcendent Punisher is the foundation of our expeditionary fleet's defense. It is our greatest weapon against a variety of threats, whether it is vast swarms of pirate mechs or smaller numbers of elite mechs. With sufficient numbers, they can even pose a threat against expert mechs or weaker first-class mechs!"

That last part was especially important to Ves. In the Red Ocean, pioneers of all backgrounds mixed together in a relatively small pond.

Even though the Big Two divided the dwarf galaxy into many zones that restricted the conduct of more powerful pioneers, how could anyone possibly enforce the rules at a distance?

Even if some mad Terran and Rubarthan broke the rules and bullied a second-rate fleet, the punishment meted out to them only came in effect after the incident!

By that time, it was too late to save the victim!

The only way to avoid this unfortunate outcome was to present enough of a threat against these powerful parties to deter any hostile actions.

Order was in short supply in the new frontier. The Big Two's authority did not extend far beyond their star systems and the active frontline against the indigenous powers of the dwarf galaxy.

What happened in the already-conquered hinterland of the Red Ocean was hardly a priority to the mechers and fleters!

This was why Ves prioritized giving his Larkinson Clan some teeth. He added one tooth in the form of the successful development of a powerful heavy artillery mech was one tooth. He planned to add some additional teeth by developing some expert mechs.

Yet that was not enough to constitute an actual threat against first-class fleets.

"What makes first-class mechs so powerful against second-class mechs?" Ves suddenly asked.

His wife looked confused. "Why would you ask such a simple question to me? It's the same as pitting a second-class mech against a third-class mech. The quality difference is so great that the better mech can easily beat several weaker mechs. Of course, there are also other variables such as teamwork to consider, but overall much of the disparity comes from better tech, better materials and better mech pilots.

"The gap between third-class and second-class mechs is quite big, but not insurmountable." Ves added. "In the Battle of Kesseling VII, the Swordmaidens managed to take down some Fridaymen mechs with third-class swordsman mechs."

"I recall that part of the battle. The Fridaymen were too overconfident and brazenly dispatched a squad of knight mechs without sufficient support."

"My point remains. It is difficult but not impossible for third-raters to defeat second-raters. However, everyone says that you can basically forget about second-raters defeating first-raters. Why is there such a difference?"

"That's because the difference in tech and quality is much greater this time. I already know this." Gloriana answered with an annoyed expression. "This is one of the reasons why the cost of our expert mechs can be insanely high. It's too difficult for second-raters to catch up to the power of a first-rater."

"What would you say is the best way for second-class mechs to threaten a first-class mech?"

"Deploy a lot of second-class Ferocious Piranhas?" She replied. "The quality of a mech jumps by a huge margin, but the improvement of the mech pilot is not so drastic. The

Piranhas have to get close, though. I don't think the light mechs will be able to survive the approach. First-class mechs are usually equipped with a variety of miniaturized weapon systems. They almost always come with solutions against swarming opponents."

As much as he wanted to deny it, she was right. Throwing large amounts of relatively fragile mechs against a first-class multipurpose mech was no different from sending them to their deaths!

This was also one of the reasons why dispatching lancer mechs might not work.

While these mechs were capable of punching above their weight, their other parameters weren't able to catch up. It was too easy for a first-class mech to snipe the incoming lancer mechs at a distance or dodge aside a lance charge at the last moment.

First-class mechs were just as difficult to beat if not more as expert mech!

And Ves only considered the lowest and cheapest first-class mechs in his consideration. The range of performance between different first-class mechs was huge!

However, different from expert mechs, first-class mechs did not enjoy the power of true resonance. This made them more fallible in Ves' eyes, but that did not mean they were easy to threaten. Their shield generators were much more powerful than that of second-class mechs. This advantage was enough for them to toy with his expeditionary fleet!

"I have had my hands on a first-class alloy for some time now." He said. "I've been thinking about how to integrate them into our expert mechs to ensure the best possible defense. I have also been thinking about how such a mech can be defeated head-on. Do you know what I've concluded?"

"No, but I can tell you that if the rest of the expert mechs are still second-class, then they will be much more exploitable than a simple first-class mech. The difference is just too big."

"You're not wrong, Gloriana. It would be great if we can defeat mechs with strong protection by exploiting their weak points, but I don't think we can do that against first-class mechs. The only way to confront them is to confront them directly."

"Isn't that the stupidest solution?"

"Tricks won't work against first-class mechs. As far as I'm concerned, the only reliable method to threaten a first-class mech is to overpower them the old-fashioned way. We need to attack their shields until they pop, attack their armor until it has formed a hole and attack the internals to disable the functioning of the mech."

His rather basic explanation caused Gloriana to become even more doubtful at his sensibilities?

"Are you kidding me, Ves? Is this the answer you came up with? Even a six-year old could give you this answer. The difficulty does not lie in identifying the right method, it is coming up with the requisite power to accomplish such a feat."

Ves did not speak a word this time. Instead, he raised his finger and projected some very specific archival footage.

The clips he chose all centered around one of his other recent inventions, the so-called battle formation and battle network.

Gloriana became engrossed as she watched a tiny portion of the Battle against the Abyss. It depicted the Swordmaiden mechs entering into a battle formation. Every Swordmaiden mech pilot harmonized with the center of the battle network, which happened to be Venerable Dise!

Once the Swordmaidens united as one, Venerable Dise extended her power to her fellow Swordmaidens, causing them to become an extension of her will!

In a situation where Venerable Dise had just broken through to expert pilot, her overflowing power was immense. In truth, it was too much for her to harness!

However, by sharing some of that excess power to the other Swordmaidens, Venerable Dise was able to lighten her burden while at the same time spread out her force of will over multiple minds.

The result was that the Swordmaiden battle network managed to form a giant greatsword that literally scythed through large amounts of pirate mechs!

This wasn't the only battle network in play.

The Penitent Sisters entered into a battle formation as well! The battle network centered around the Superior Mother all caused the Hexer mech pilots to borrow some of her power and manifest her silhouette!

Gloriana instantly became more attentive. "Isn't this what I've just talked about? This is exactly what the Hex Army needs to defeat the Friday Coalition's expert mechs."

He knew that she would react in this fashion.

"Don't be foolish. This is a very sensitive invention. We can't share it with the public. Besides, the conditions to make this happen are simply too onerous. I don't think most Hex Army units are qualified to activate this power."

"Says who?"

"Says me, the inventor of this method!" Ves patted his chest. "Look, I'm too afraid of what might happen if more people find out the power of my battle formations. It should be reserved as one of the trump cards of our clan. I'm only putting it on the table today because I want to design an affordable solution against first-class mechs. It is a weapon of last resort. Under normal conditions, we should never reveal we possess this capability. Understand?"

Gloriana did not look convinced.

Chapter 2532: Overlooked

Compared to his lack of interest in turning the Larkinson Network into a true communications network, Ves was much more interested in making greater use of battle formations.

The power of battle formations was too attractive to him! Even in his low state, his heart pumped faster at the thought of designing a mech that specifically took advantage of the advantages that battle networks brought!

Unlike his other applications, battle networks gave him the greatest hope of being able to leapfrog challenges. It was one of the few ways in which Ves was able to make his mechs utilize the strength of a powerful individual, whether it was an expert pilot that had just broken through or a powerful design spirit like the Superior Mother!

Still, this application had many flaws. Aside from finding a group of highly-aligned mech pilots and choosing a compatible source of power, this seemingly-magical application was also very draining!

Normal mech pilots did not have much spiritual load-bearing capacity. They could only sustain the pressure for so long until they were unable to maintain their position in a battle formation.

Once the battle formation broke up, the mech pilots were usually at the end of their rope! Mentally, they could hardly fight any longer!

This only reinforced his determination to treat it as a weapon of last resort.

Its disproportionate power was too good for Ves to pass up! As for all of the practical problems surrounding this method, he could deal with them. After all, battle formations played a considerable role during the Battle against the Abyss.

The only issue right now was that Gloriana insisted on imparting the power of battle networks to the Hex Army.

Ves had to argue with her a lot. Eventually, he managed to cut her inquiries by coming up with a somewhat valid excuse.

"It won't work, Gloriana. Battle networks are principally connected to mech pilots, not mechs. It works for us because I can manually forge these connections to the individuals in question. It's not possible to do so to the Hexers fighting against the Fridaymen because there is no way we'll be in the same room. Just forget about it and focus upon what works, okay?"

That basically settled the matter.

Once the discussion went back on track, Ves began to explain the concept of his mech.

"There are three potential candidate groups for battle networks. The Penitent Sisters, Battle Criers and Swordmaidens are all highly homogenous and unified. They're also incredibly close to each other and can get in sync easily. I've already tested my battle networks on them and confirmed they are suited for this application."

"Who will you choose to focus on this time, Ves?" Gloriana asked with an unenthused voice.

She took his refusal hard. She had to grab Clixie in order to comfort herself.

"Miaow." Clixie glared resentfully at Ves for making Gloriana unhappy.

Ves paid no mind to the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat.

"For now, I am focused on gaining immediate battle effectiveness. I don't anticipate meeting any overpowering enemies in the near future, but it's best to have our weapon of last resort ready sooner than later. The Penitent Sisters are the best candidates in mind. They are true second-class mech pilots and the source of their strength happens to be the strongest out of all of the options. With the Superior Mother feeding them strength, I have no doubt their battle formation is the strongest!"

Gloriana looked up again. "The Penitent Sisters are also Hexers! Why can't we design this mech for the Hex Army as well? We have permission to use its tech."

That was exactly what he did not want to do! Ves wanted to decrease his entanglement with the Hexadric Hegemony!

"Don't dream about it. Also, you're wrong. The Penitent Sisters are no longer Hexers. They're Larkinsons. The Hegemony has stripped them of their Hexer citizenship, remember? Even if they have a lot in common with orthodox Hexers, they will slowly turn into something else. There is no stopping their change."

His Larkinson Network might not be versatile, but it was quite good at performing its core functions. Ves did not believe the Penitent Sisters were able to succeed where Ranya failed!

Perhaps the only Penitent Sister that would be able to resist the Golden Cat's influence was Juliet Stamerros. As a Journeyman she was just as difficult to influence as Gloriana!

Wait a second.

Ves just realized he overlooked another important detail.

"Uhm..."

"What is it, Ves?"

"Do you know our Larkinson Clan has three Journeyman Mech Designers instead of two?"

Gloriana tilted her head. "Of course I do. The Penitent Sisters possess a lot of pride in their head designer."

He grimaced. "Why didn't you remind me?"

"I'm not your personal assistant, Ves." She sneered.

"What do you have against Miss Stamerros? She's a Journeyman!"

"She's also a criminal. An exile. A heretic!"

Ves had the feeling that Gloriana only cared about the latter. Nonetheless, the vehemence in her voice was very real!

"Our Larkinson Clan doesn't waste talent. Don't you think it is stupid to neglect a bonafide Journeyman? As far as I know, Miss Stamerros is just as capable of designing mechs as us. Adding her to the Design Department will increase its productivity by half. The difference she can make is immense!"

"She's a harmful presence, Ves. Why are you thinking about designing mechs with someone who revels in killing boys? The Penitent Sisters should have never been redeemed!"

"That's not fair to her! Look, as far as I know, the Temple of Hexism outright executed all of the boy-impaling priests and their lackeys. The cultists who were spared from this fate weren't culpable for these crimes. They're just brainwashed victims for the most part. The Hegemony forced them to become the Penitent Sisters as a more appropriate punishment. In the service of our clan, these exiles have fought bravely by our side. I

would have died in the Nyxian Gap if they weren't there to lend their strength. In my opinion, they have atoned for their crimes and should be treated as such."

He truly owed a lot to the Penitent Sisters. Their contribution in the previous battles were undeniable. Despite their heavy losses, the former Hexers never issued a word of complaint.

As for any concerns about their extremist views, Ves no longer worried about that problem. Aside from relying on the Golden Cat to mellow them out, he had also distributed enough idols of the Superior Mother to them to convert them to a less extreme interpretation of hexism!

It was unfortunate that Gloriana shared none of his sentiments. She hadn't taken part in the Nyxian Gap Campaign, so she never experienced the hardships he went through. She also did not acquire any gratitude to the exiles.

"I am not designing a mech with Juliet Stameross, and neither will you." She hissed.

"You're going too far. She's a Journeyman and a Larkinson."

"I already spoke with her a few times. She is content with her current lot. She just wants to keep serving the Penitent Sisters in her current capacity of head designer."

Ves grew increasingly more annoyed with his wife. "You are just saying that. Who knows if that's what she really wants? After all, it seems you have a different agenda."

"I don't want her anywhere near you. I'm your wife, Ves. I need to defend my territory!"

"Do you think we're animals? I'm faithful to you. I have no attraction towards Miss Stameross at all. Just because she has a Hexer background doesn't mean she poses a threat to our marriage."

His wife grew more intense. "You don't know anything about women, especially Hexer women. There is no way that Stameross is disinterested in the son of the Superior Mother."

This was ridiculous!

"I think she's professional enough to treat me as a colleague."

"You're a fool if you think that. I will not allow her to get anywhere close to you. Just leave her to rot with the Penitent Sister like she deserves!"

Suffice to say, neither of the two came to an agreement regarding this matter.

Ves was not willing to let go of another Journeyman! Regardless of what Gloriana thought, the Design Department was too short on high-ranking mech designers!

While Ves had high hopes for Ketis and Miles Tovar, it would probably take years before they advanced. This was too long considering how many mechs he wanted to design.

While it wasn't impossible for the Larkinson Clan to recruit a competent Journeyman, Ves did not even consider the option.

It was too risky. Any Journeyman could be a spy or hold nefarious intentions. With their solidified design seeds, assimilating them into the Larkinson Clan was much more difficult.

In fact, Gloriana and Stameross were in the same boat. It was just that they were more acceptable in his opinion.

The former was his wife.

The latter had gone through several life-and-death crises with his clan. Juliet Stameross had proven her courage and earned the trust of the Larkinsons. Because of this, Ves actually felt compelled to defend her honor!

Since Ves and Gloriana were at loggerheads over the Penitent Sister's head designer, they ended their discussion without concluding their list.

Gloriana glared at Ves and left the room while hugging Clixie.

Ves looked a bit annoyed as well. Dealing with someone as volatile as her was really frustrating sometimes.

He turned to his own cat. "Why did I marry her in the first place?"

Lucky shrugged. "Meow?"

"Well, thanks for that."

Ves took his cat and departed from the Stellar Chaser. He didn't want to stay on the ship for one minute longer.

He needed to talk to Juliet Stameross in person. He had to find out why she never contacted him about taking on a greater role in the Larkinson Clan and see if he could invite her into the Design Department.

Though Ves truly wanted to respect Gloriana's opinion, sometimes she was wrong! Some matters were too important to allow emotions to override his good sense.

His shuttle flew towards one of the few Penitent Sister ships that was still intact. Of course, the vessel was just a logistics ship, not a combat carrier.

The Penitent Sisters received word of his arrival. Many former Hexers lined up as Ves, Lucky and Nitaa stepped aboard.

"Patriarch, we did not expect your arrival today." Commander Valerie Chancy remarked after she saluted him. "Is there something you need from the Penitent Sisters?"

"Please allow me to speak with Juliet Stameross in private. I have some very important matters to talk about with your resident mech designer."

The Penitent Sister Commander sent a silent command through her implant. "Done, sir. Follow me, please. I will guide you to the upper decks."

As they began to walk through the hallways, Ves entered into a discussion with Chancy.

"I'm sorry about neglecting your group. After we returned to Cinach, I had to deal with a lot of issues. My wedding, the talks with the Cross Clan and finalizing my mech projects all took priority."

"We understand, sir. We are content with our lot. Our situation is not much different from that of the other mech forces. We are all waiting to receive our new mechs and combat carriers. We don't particularly require any special attention."

Ves sighed in relief. At least the Penitent Sisters didn't suffer from his lack of attention.

"That's good to hear. How is Miss Stameross doing, by the way?"

"Oh, she is keeping herself busy." Commander Chancy replied. "She has been helping us decide which commercial mechs we should buy in order to restore our battle effectiveness. There is quite a lot of choice, even if we limit ourselves to Hexer mechs."

"I see."

It sounded as if Stameross was truly engaged in her current responsibilities. While that was good, Ves still thought it was a waste to leave her with the Penitent Sisters. She could do so much more for the Larkinson Clan if she contributed to his design projects!

While Ves knew he was playing with fire by disregarding his wife, Ves did not give up on his current course of action. One way or another, he wanted to add another Journeyman to the Design Department!

Chapter 2533: Unredeemed

Ves had been in the company of a Journeyman for more than half a year without realizing it. For some reason or another, he mentally diminished the status and importance of Juliet Stameross.

It was as if he thought she was just another unimportant Apprentice!

How could he make such a colossal oversight? Why hadn't Gavin or any of his staff reminded him of the potential value that Miss Stameross held?

The former was a bit stupid on his part. He lived an incredibly busy life and work constantly occupied his mind. He spent most of his thoughts on planning his grand expedition, thinking about what capital ships he should acquire and what mechs he should design next.

The Penitent Sisters rarely occupied his thoughts. Though the Larkinson Clan operated several different mech forces, Ves did not exactly treat them equally.

For example, he openly favored the Avatars of Myth. It was originally 'his' mech troop, and even when it shifted towards serving the clan as a whole, Ves still showered it with attention such as bestowing it with the Bright Warrior design.

Of all of the mech forces under his command, Ves knew the most about the Avatars!

In contrast, the Living Sentinels earned very little attention from him. As the only non-elite mech force of the Larkinson Clan, he wasn't really interested in investing in them. Ves simply trusted Major Verle and the Sentinel Commander to run this large mech force.

The only reason for Ves to pay more attention to the Sentinels was when he wanted to design a mech that was specifically targeted to them. As the 'militia' of the Larkinson Clan, it was not suitable for the Sentinels to pilot the most advanced LMC mechs. He knew that he needed to design a more general purpose mech for them sooner or later.

Of course, that might take some years. There were other mech forces who were much more deserving of his attention such as the Flagrant Vandals and the Swordmaidens.

In a way, his unequal attention wasn't necessarily a problem. He was simply overlooking too many people and organizations. Forming biases and playing favorites was unavoidable.

What Ves really should have done was to split responsibilities. For example, since he hardly cared about the Living Sentinels, why not let Gloriana supervise their mech needs?

Sadly, that didn't really work as Gloriana was rather unsuited for this role. Her specialty made her much more suited to supervise the custom mechs and future expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

As a result, the Penitent Sisters fell through the cracks.

To be honest, Ves still wasn't used to having them. They were an unexpected and somewhat unwanted addition to his clan. He only agreed to let them in because of their loyal service and their exemplary behavior on the battlefield.

One of the principles he valued was to be fair to people who fought on his behalf. Just because the Penitent Sisters possessed a Hexer background was not a reason for him to mistreat them. The fact that the Hexer exiles had mellowed out a lot and shed their dislike towards him and the Larkinsons helped a lot in accepting them into the fold!

Yet even then, Ves was still trying to adjust that they were a part of his clan rather than a bunch of barnacles on the hull of his ship.

For these reasons and more, Ves essentially overlooked the value of Commander Chancy, Commodore Evern, Head Designer Stameros and the rest of the Penitent Sisters!

Luckily, less than a month had passed after Task Force Predator returned to the Cinach System. During this span of time, Ves truly became far too occupied to pay special attention to the Penitent Sisters. The women shouldn't hold it against him for neglecting their situation.

Once they reached a small meeting room aboard the logistics ship, the main mech designer of the Penitent Sisters was already present.

"Patriarch."

"Miss Stameross. It is good to see you again. How are you dealing with the changes to your life so far?"

"Are you inquiring about my professional or private circumstances?" Juliet frowned.

"Both. I've come to make some decisions concerning you and your sisters. I don't mean to pry, but it will help if you are willing to share more details."

As a mech designer, Juliet understood the importance of gathering lots of data in order to make the most informed decisions. Ves left it up to her to decide how much she was willing to say. He believed she was clever enough to be earnest towards him. Withholding accurate information would only hinder her opportunities.

Ves briefly turned his head to Commander Chancy. "Could you give me a private moment with Miss Stameross? I would like to talk to her as one mech designer to another."

The Penitent Sister Commander gazed at him for a few seconds before nodding. "If that is what you wish... sir."

She did not kick up any fuss as she turned about and marched through the exit. The hatch closed when she passed through, providing Ves and Juliet with a modicum of privacy.

Of course, Ves was pretty sure the monitoring system was still recording everything, but he did not bother to activate his signal jammer. His main purpose to send Commander Chancy out wasn't to ensure confidentiality, but to give Juliet some space to speak about herself outside of the presence of her direct superior.

"I am a Penitent Sister." She began.

When she didn't say anything else after a few seconds, the room turned awkward. Even Lucky, who had crawled onto Ves' lap, looked confused.

"...Okay?"

"I believe you have failed to comprehend what I said."

"Some clarification may help." Ves gently suggested.

Juliet crossed her arms. "For most of my life, I grew up in the presence of Hexers who believed that boys like you are abhorrent and should be punished for being born this way. My fellow sisters and I became damned because of this. Do you know the pain of being treated this way by the state and people you trusted and put your faith in? Do you know how much we suffered for realizing that we were the ones who turned out to be wrong?"

"I don't claim to have lived through these pains, but I have suffered similarly when the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate sold me out to please the Friday Coalition. I trusted these states and the people that govern them to cover my back."

Both of them shared a distinct glance. They held the eyes of someone who suffered from deep betrayal. This shared identity brought them a little closer to each other.

Juliet continued with her story. "After the Temple of Hexism determined our guilt and forced me and my surviving sisters to earn our redemption, we had already given up on our lives. It was already made clear to us that it is enough to repent by fighting the enemies of the state. We needed to fight until none of us were left."

"Then the Penitent Sisters fell into my hands."

"Indeed." She ruefully smiled. "We originally prepared to be deployed to the frontlines of the Komodo War. To be frank, many of my sisters looked forward to this deployment. Despite our shabby mechs and our older combat carriers, we would at least be allowed to fight against the Fridaymen. There is hardly any better way for us to earn our redemption. Being stripped of the opportunity to die a noble death in order to cater to a foreign boy of all people brought a lot of despair to us. No one, not even myself, looked forward to becoming your slaves!"

"I never treated you as such."

"And I thank you for that." Juliet replied earnestly. "I have to admit that many of us treated you and your Larkinsons coldly due to our unwillingness to be deprived of the opportunity to take part in the Komodo War. We were also unused to the outside galaxy."

After that, Juliet began to explain some of the changes she and her sisters went through after becoming attached to the Larkinson Clan. Their experiences during the Nyxian Gap Campaign caused them to continually adjust their views.

For one, they no longer held any ambitions to return to their home state.

"It is best for everyone involved if we don't return." She spoke with a determined voice. "We aren't welcome there, and we don't particularly like the Hexers there either. We will always be tainted in their eyes."

"Our clan thinks differently of your people."

Juliet shook her head. "Not really. There are plenty of Larkinsons who try to distance from us whenever we show up in public. To them, we are still Hexers and extreme ones at that. Don't deny it, patriarch. We don't deserve your pity. We deserve all of the contempt that we can get. You may have persuaded the Hegemony's government to redeem us and put us under your care, but that is mainly on account of your merits, not ours. In our hearts, we have yet to redeem ourselves. We are committed to serving you for as long as it takes to earn our repentance."

That sounded rather troubling to Ves. He did not want these new additions to the Larkinson Clan to act as if they were lesser than other clansmen!

Yet what could he do? He knew what fanatics were like. These Penitent Sisters may have changed some of their ways, but they carried too much cultural baggage for them to get rid of them all. Their former cult and the other Hexers around them had constantly instilled them with values meant to keep them under control.

Now that Ves essentially inherited the Penitent Sisters, he could work towards reducing their sense of guilt, but not immediately. This was going to be a long-term project.

He pulled his thoughts away from the Penitent Sisters as a whole. He did not come here with the intent to reform this group. For now, he just wanted to sound Juliet out and find out whether it was possible to pull her into the Design Department.

"Miss Stameross, thank you for sharing your views with me. I will definitely make sure your sisters will have ample opportunities to earn whatever redemption they seek in the future."

She looked pleased at his promise. Even if he sounded rather vague, it was the thought that mattered.

"We are grateful for any support that we can get. We don't expect to receive the best treatment, but it is already enough if the clan can meet some of our needs."

Ves leaned forward. "Do you want to have more control over how the clan treats your sisters?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"You are a Journeyman Mech Designer. That puts you on the same level as Gloriana and I. With your status, you can easily gain a much bigger say in our governance structure. With more power, you can make sure that the Penitent Sisters are properly represented at the highest levels of our clan. Of course, with power comes responsibility. You must perform your duties if you wish to enjoy the benefits."

"Are you asking me to become a politician or something?" Juliet dubiously asked.

"No. I'm asking you to take on an even better role. Come join the LMC's Design Department. As the third Journeyman Mech Designer of our clan, your talents are wasted elsewhere. If you join our Design Department and help us design new and better mechs, your standing within the Larkinson Clan will skyrocket. While I can't promise you will become as powerful as Gloriana or myself, as one of the main contributors to the earnings of the clan and the strengthening of our mech forces, our people will never neglect your interests."

His offer overwhelmed her. She never expected him to invite her into the prestigious Design Department.

This was where all the miracles took place! The true foundation of the Larkinson Clan did not rest in its mech pilots or expert pilots. It was actually the mech designers who ensured everyone's continued prosperity and growth. Without designing all of their great mechs, Ves and Gloriana would have never earned so much recognition!

"This... I don't think I can accept." The head designer reluctantly answered. "I don't deserve this honor. My only goal is to serve my fellow sisters. I can do that best in my current position. If I go somewhere else, who will ensure the mechs assigned to my sisters are working properly?"

As someone who always viewed herself as damned, tainted and burdened with guilt, Juliet simply did not feel comfortable with taking on a greater role!

Besides, she had another reason to reject his offer.

Her eyes looked strangely at him. "Your wife also made it abundantly clear I'm not welcome in the Design Department. I don't want to antagonize her or provoke any discord between your relationship. I don't think either of us can ever collaborate on the same projects."

Damn!

Chapter 2534: The Third Designer

"Don't worry about what Gloriana thinks. While I cannot deny that she dislikes you, don't let this stop you from stepping up. Our Design Department needs more Journeymen. She is not in charge!"

"That is not what she has said towards me." Juliet hesitantly responded. "She had mentioned many times that she doesn't want me to take part in any design projects. Your wife has made it abundantly clear that she will respond very negatively if I ever trespass her territory."

"The Design Department is not her personal castle! She is merely a lead designer in the LMC's hierarchy, while I am the boss! Nothing in the rules allows her to override my wishes! Listen, Miss Stameross. Just ignore what Gloriana told you and come with me. She'll be pissed, no doubt, but she'll get over it once she realizes that you're not a threat to her. In cases like these, we just have to show her the hard way that her fears are unfounded."

The entire situation sounded bizarre to Juliet. As a woman, she understood quite well why Gloriana told her off. It was just that the Penitent Sister designer did not wish to cross such a powerful woman.

No matter what Ves claimed about the limits to Gloriana's power, she was still his wife! Her influence and soft power in the Larkinson Clan was very considerable despite her Hexer background!

Ves was able to read what Juliet was thinking about as well. He grew more and more exasperated at what his wife had done behind his back.

Instead of recognizing Juliet's value as an indispensable design asset, Gloriana only saw her as a threat!

This was unfair. Why did his wife have so little faith in his loyalty towards her? He never looked at Juliet as anyone other than a Penitent Sister and a Journeyman mech Designer during this meeting!

"Patriarch Ves, it is not that I am unwilling. I just don't want to aggravate your relationship with your partner. If my entry causes your relationship with her to deteriorate, then I fear that my sisters and I will suffer from the fallout."

Ves cut the air with his palm. "Nothing of the sort will happen! Look, as long as you turn into a powerful contributor in the Design Department, you will gain enough clout in the clan to protect the Penitent Sisters. In fact, you will be able to resist any of her attempts to make your lives difficult. If you remain as you are, your importance to the clan is pretty much trivial. Any competent Apprentice Mech Designer can fulfill your current role."

"I understand that, sir. You have already made that clear. I just can't accept your generous invitation. You don't understand the rivalry that goes on between women like us. Back in the Hexadric Hegemony, competition between Hexers can get quite nasty. From what I have learned about Miss Gloriana, she's a lot more ruthless than you think."

His heart sunk. Though he did not want to acknowledge what he heard, in his heart he knew that Juliet was right. Ves had personally fallen victim to Gloriana's scheming, after all. Though he didn't take it to heart anymore, he still recognized that his wife was anything but an innocent wallflower!

So what, though? The Larkinson Clan belonged to him. He put in all of the hard work of founding it, nurturing it and helping it ascend to its current height. Though Ves had the help of many other Larkinsons, it was undeniable that his will trumped over hers! The Design Department was not her turf, and he had no reason to allow her to engage in sordid court scheming!

His determination hardened. The clan would miss out on too many benefits if it allowed a Journeyman to remain suppressed in the Penitent Sisters. What Gloriana had done was no less than to sabotage the interests of the clan she was a part of. This firmly put her in the wrong!

"Let's not mess around anymore." He stated in a firmer tone. "Accept your new position and embrace your new responsibilities. I will make sure our administration processes your transfer by the end of the day. Tomorrow, I will personally bring you to the Design Department and introduce you to all of our lovely assistant mech designers. While they might not know how to deal with a Penitent Sister, they are already used to working under Hexers."

He did not give Juliet the illusion of choice anymore. While he did not wish to resort to coercion in order to get her to cooperate, it was clear that she would remain reluctant if the choice lied with her. Rather than allow Gloriana to dominate her decision-making, Ves decided to take matters into his own hands.

This way, if Gloriana blew up, she would direct most of her ire towards him, not Juliet. As someone who had taken plenty of punches from different people, Ves was confident he could handle an angry wife!

Still, just because he issued a command did not mean that others were willing to play along.

"This.. does not sound entirely appropriate, sir. I cannot see how Miss Gloriana will be able to tolerate my presence."

Ves banged his fist against the armrest of his chair!

"Meow!"

Lucky jumped from his lap!

"Who is in charge of the Larkinson Clan?"

"The Patriarch, who happens to be you." Juliet replied.

"Who is in charge of the Living Mech Company and every department?"

"Uhm, I haven't studied the corporate governance structure of the LMC as of yet. Are you the CEO?"

Ves nodded and grinned. "I am the founder, chairman and CEO of the LMC. Even though I let others manage all of the tedious business operations of my mech company, I am still the absolute majority shareholder. This means I don't have to give a damn about what other people want."

Juliet looked impressed at him. "How much stock does Gloriana possess?"

"Nothing. I own 59 percent of the LMC. The Larkinson Clan owns 24 percent. The Larkinson Family, who you must have heard about, owns 1 percent."

"That does not add up to 100 percent. What about the remaining 16 percent?"

His face darkened for a brief moment. "That's not important. I'll be taking back those shares back in due time. Anyway, as a Journeyman, as long as you earnestly put your design capabilities to good use in my mech company, then I will not skimp on your rewards. You will get what you deserve, and you can use your gains to help your fellow

Penitent Sisters in many ways. This is the greatest opportunity that you can grasp in the Larkinson Clan."

She started to look interested. Though the shadow of Gloriana still loomed over her shoulders, Ves slowly pulled her into his rhythm.

"What sort of rewards can I expect to gain?"

"Let's start with the intangibles. Becoming the third lead designer of the LMC already puts you at the same level as the expert pilots of our clan as far as I'm concerned. This neatly solves the lack of high-ranking mech pilots among the Penitent Sisters."

Juliet looked swayed by that argument. "I can see how that can be useful."

"There is more. As a lead designer, you gain a say in determining which mech design projects we should start and how to shape the design of our mechs. Our assistants have no choice but to follow someone else's arrangements, but it is different for you. As a Journeyman, you should already be worthy of our trust when it comes to leading design projects. Am I wrong?"

Juliet couldn't help but puff her chest. "I graduated with a degree in mech design at the Artemis Institute! While my alma mater is not as prestigious as Kelma University, the gap is quite close. I can design most types of standard mechs!"

"According to your record, you have a Class IV design philosophy, correct?"

Now that the conversation turned towards her qualifications, Juliet exhibited a lot more confidence.

"That's right."

"The description of your design philosophy doesn't go in-depth of what you can actually do. It merely describes your specialization as 'high-mobility flight systems'."

Ves was already accustomed to vague and unhelpful labels that mech designers used to describe what they excelled at. Maybe they wanted to hide something. Maybe they wanted to be as open as possible.

It turned out that Juliet had another reason to keep her specialization vague.

"My design philosophy is not as mysterious as it sounds. It accurately describes what I can do. It is just that the emphasis is not entirely obvious. The key word is high-mobility. I excel at designing flighting systems that feature powerful movement characteristics. I constantly have to juggle between prioritizing, acceleration, top speed, agility, responsiveness, and so on to design aerial and spaceborn mechs with great maneuverability."

That did not sound specific enough to Ves. He felt that Juliet may be holding back a critical aspect that tied what she said together and clarified her ambitions.

There was no need for him to pry too much. He would learn about the essence of her design philosophy in due time once they began to collaborate on some mech design projects.

All he needed to know was that her relatively broad specialty was a useful addition to the Design Department. Many of the mechs he planned to design in the future were supposed to be multi-environmental mechs that could fight effectively in space and in atmospheric conditions.

Pairing these flexibility mech designs with excellent flight systems that were capable of enduring many different environments was very important!

The amount of help that Juliet could provide in this aspect was already worth it! In fact, she would probably be able to contribute much more to mech designs that conformed to the high-mobility aspect of her specialty. This meant she was highly suited to take charge of every light mech design project!

"Can you show off some of your past works to me? I need to gauge your overall skill and gain an impression of your design style." Ves requested.

She did as instructed. A few projections came to life. Ves immediately poured over the dozens of light and medium designs.

Each of them were fast. Some were faster than others, while others possessed significantly better evasion characteristics.

Overall, Juliet's mech designs were not that much worse than the mechs that Ves and Gloriana designed. This was already good enough.

The only problem was her design style. Each and every mech she designed shared one very notable trait.

"These are all female mech designs." He flatly stated.

"Yes."

"Have you ever designed a male mech?"

"Why would I do that?"

"..."

Of course she would say something like that. She was still a Hexer.

"If I order you to design a male mech, will you be able to fulfill my expectations?" Ves asked.

"Uhm... I.. suppose I can.. It's just... I could use some help..."

Her answer did not give him a lot of confidence.

Oh well. No one was perfect.

Ves proceeded to explore her work in greater detail. He asked her to explain her design choices and how her design philosophy empowered her mech designs. He learned more details about her design style. He even learned her signature look consisted of shaping the flight systems of her mechs as prominent pairs of wings coated in red.

Juliet Stameross passed all of the tests that mattered. While she possessed numerous shortcomings, they did not detract from her overall value as a Journeyman.

She was usable!

Ves wrapped up the meeting. "I have no more questions for now. The body of work you showed me along with the insights and understanding you have shared has given me enough confidence that you will be an excellent addition to our Design Department. I suggest you spend the remainder of this day on making arrangements for another mech designer to take over your current position. The Penitent Sisters must still have a head designer, but it shall not be you anymore. If your group lacks a capable Apprentice who can fill your big shoes, then you can always turn to me. There are plenty of mech designers in the clan who can fulfill this role."

He stood up and turned to leave the room without letting her voice any rejection.

However, just before he passed through the hatch, he stopped and turned. He pointed his finger straight at the ♂ symbol on her face.

"By the way. You can remove this mark of shame. A proud Journeyman of the Larkinson Clan should never carry such a disgraceful sign!"

Chapter 2535: Repulsed

Strangely enough, Juliet Stameross refused to remove the rather eye-catching ♂ symbol on her face.

"We Penitent sisters do not wear this mark with pride." She stated firmly. "It is a mark of shame, as you said. It reflects our guilt and reminds us that we are not finished yet for atoning for our crimes."

"But.."

"Do not make this request again! Not a single Penitent Sister will voluntarily remove this mark! If you help us to get rid of this sign, then help us earn our redemption faster!"

"You have already done enough in my eyes. You don't owe any debt to anyone."

Juliet stiffened her back. "I'm sorry, but that is not for you to decide. We are more than capable of making this determination ourselves. Not you, Miss Gloriana or any Larkinson Clan can make this judgement."

He didn't understand her stubbornness. This was yet another quirk of the Penitent Sisters that they still held close to their chests.

Ves reluctantly dropped the matter. There was no reasoning with the Penitent Sisters when it came to their core beliefs.

"I am afraid your mark of shame will attract too much attention when I attempt to introduce you to the Design Department tomorrow. Can you at least cover it up or something?"

"That would defeat the purpose." She immediately replied. "While I do not wear this mark with pride, it is essential for others to see me who I truly am. Don't make this request again."

His control over the Penitent Sisters wasn't very extensive. As long as he touched anything sensitive, the women immediately became prickly!

Ves let the issue slide. It was just a cosmetic mark that looked rather embarrassing. If Juliet and her sisters were tough enough to endure the shame of bearing it, then he was fine with letting them have her way. The mark played an important symbolic role in their subculture.

After he left the room and informed Commander Chancy of the imminent transfer, her reaction wasn't as bad as he feared.

"I see." The older woman spoke. "I had a hunch that you would come for her. I am glad for her promotion. She deserves more, and we are all grateful that you are willing to grant her the opportunity to develop herself again. Perhaps she will be able to smile again like old times."

"I am not taking her in because I take pity on her. As a second-class Journeyman, she can make significant contributions to the clan by contributing to our design projects. It is through designing new mechs that our clan is able to field more powerful mechs and earn enough money to afford new starships. No matter how you look at it, every Journeyman that joins our Design Department will have a direct effect on our growth trajectory."

This was also why Ves was so adamant about bringing Juliet Stameross aboard! With just one extra Journeyman, he could easily earn another trillion hex credits due to her effect on the productivity of the Design Department. This meant he would be getting a lot of good stuff sooner than he projected!

"I hope you will be treating her fairly, sir." Commander Valerie Chancy spoke. "If I recall, it is customary for Journeymen and higher to receive a stake in the mech company. While her design capabilities are not as strong as yours, she can still make a difference."

Ves suddenly regretted heaping so much praise on Juliet. Increasing her importance also raised her bargaining position.

"She still has to prove herself. Even if she has successfully integrated into the Design Department, it is still a question whether it is appropriate to award her with shares. The LMC is a much bigger mech company than the ones led by other Journeymen. My design philosophy plays a key role in its success. Any latecomers like Miss Stameross are essentially taking advantage of all of the effort and resources I invested into the LMC. She is also a lot more dispensable to the success of the mech company than myself. If I am gone for whatever reason, you can bet the LMC will collapse in a matter of years!"

This was undeniable. As Commander Chancy wasn't a mech designer, she did not pursue this argument further.

"I hope you won't shortchange her. I will be watching."

"I'm not a scumbag, commander. Every Penitent Sister is a Larkinson in my eyes. It is just that for the good of the company and the clan, it is best not to split or dilute the shares of the LMC."

He just didn't want to give up anymore shares. While Commander Chancy was correct that Journeymen were usually entitled to at least some stock in the company they worked for, Ves vehemently objected to the practice.

No one was allowed to pry a single share from his hands! The 59 percent that was currently on his name all belonged to him and him alone!

Therefore, he hoped to hoodwink and distract everyone who was eligible for this reward. Even if they deserved it, Ves would not hesitate to employ his Devil Tongue to the fullest in order to dissuade his high-ranking mech designers from requesting shares.

In fact, if Ves really wanted to be fair, he should have given some shares already to Gloriana.

He did not do so.

He might love her, but some possessions were too precious to give away, even to his wife!

With all of the trouble he experienced about the ownership of his mech company, Ves was incredibly sensitive about any further giveaways.

He vowed that his ownership in his mech company would never drop below 59 percent ownership for the rest of his life! In fact, it would be great if he could get back the 16 percent owner that had fallen in the hands of the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate. He would probably launch a party when that happened!

After successfully brushing aside the matter of awarding Juliet with some stock, Ves discussed one more topic with the Penitent Sister Commander.

"Do you remember how your Penitent Sisters fought in the previous battle?"

"Of course." Pride filled her face. "The Battle against the Abyss is one of the greatest battles of our lives. While it is regretful that many of our sisters have fallen, they have not died in vain. Defeating evil is one of the noblest ways to earn our redemption."

"Well, one of the factors that allowed your Penitent Sisters to exert so much power during the battle is the battle network I've implemented."

"We are very grateful for allowing us to receive the Superior Mother's blessing. You are truly her son for being able to convince her to give us a chance! We are unworthy. Each time we enjoy her blessing, our debt increases."

That was a very interesting detail. Perhaps their self-determined redemption wasn't getting closer over time. If the Penitent Sisters thought that every blessing from the Superior Mother cost something, then they might be laden with debt over time!

How did that even work? Did these crazy Hexers even accept the concept of bankruptcy, or would they just continue to allow their guilt to approach infinity?

Whatever. It was not exactly bad if the Penitent Sisters maintained the silly delusion that they were still damned. From what he had seen so far, they were remarkably obedient and open to compromise in their current state. Ves should cherish this advantage!

Besides, if Juliet Stameross thought the same way, Ves had even less reason to reward her with company stock.

In her current mindset, Ves could probably keep her happy by rewarding her with nothing but nutrient packs!

Of course, he wouldn't take advantage of her to this extent. As long as he threw enough scraps at her, he wouldn't invite criticism from the Penitent Sisters and the rest of the clan.

As Ves left the Penitent Sister ship, he began to inform some important people about his latest arrangements for Juliet Stamerros.

He left it to Gavin to process the administration and make Juliet's new appointment official.

"Boss.. uhmm.."

Ves grew annoyed at the projection. "Just spit it out, Benny."

"Did you.. discuss this move with your wife, perchance?"

"GLORIANA DOESN'T RULE MY CLAN!" Ves angrily barked! "There is no reason for me to consult her about this move."

Gavin panicked. "You're acting too quickly, boss. I highly advise you to slow down. Let us get to know Miss Stamerros better and ascertain whether she is a good fit for the Design Department. Just because she is a Journeyman doesn't mean she automatically fits in with your other mech designers."

"Every mech designer in the Design Department is subordinate to me." Ves replied with gritted teeth. "Their opinions don't matter. My orders are absolute."

"I can think of at least one mech designer who may have words about your choice!"

Ves glared at his assistant. "ENOUGH! Your job is to execute my will, not to hinder it. Right now, it is my will to transfer Miss Stamerros to the Design Department and promote her to our third lead designer. Now stop getting in my way and make it happen!"

He immediately closed the communication channel, causing Gavin's projection to fizzle out. He took a deep breath and settled into his chair.

"Why does everyone think that Gloriana is in charge?"

Lucky heard his question and rolled his eyes as he floated around.

"Meow."

"That's slander!"

"Meow meow!"

"You're wrong! I can teach Gloriana who is truly in charge! Just wait for me to get back home!"

Adding a third Journeyman to the Design Department wasn't a simple matter. Ves had to spend the rest of the day informing the most important stakeholders of the drastic and sudden change.

People such as Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and Ketis each reacted with shock at his decision. He had to explain himself over and over again before they acknowledged that he was being serious.

He also had to make some personal arrangements at the Design Department in order to make room for Juliet. He needed to ease her in as soon as possible so that he could briskly embark on his next round of mech design projects.

At the end of the day, Ves finished with his preparations. After considering his options, he reluctantly returned to the Stellar Chaser.

Fortunately, Gloriana's personal ship did not bar his way.

He took Lucky and slinked back to her stateroom. Once he entered, Gloriana was already lying in her bed. She directed a grumpy expression at him as she clutched Clixie against her chest.

"Did you have fun today?" She asked.

Ves moved to the attached bathroom but kept the hatch open as he changed his clothes and prepared for bed.

"I did not revel in the decision I made. I did what was necessary to strengthen our clan and bring us closer to our goals."

"Hmph! I bet you had an enjoyable time talking about mech design with our 'latest' lead designer."

"Gloriana... I love you. I would never hurt you by pursuing other women. You think too little of me. I take my vows seriously."

"I know you, Ves. You are ruled by your passions and emotions. Who knows what you have been thinking as you have been exploring her design philosophy today. Will you explore something else about her tomorrow?"

"Don't put words in my mouth. I am fully in control of my own actions. I have never lost control!"

Once Ves finished his evening routine, he emerged from the bathroom and approached the queen-sized bed. Just as he was about to slip in, a repulsive antigrav field emerged from the bed and pushed him away!

His body soared in the air and landed a short distance away. As his back smacked against the deck, he couldn't believe what had happened.

He rose to his feet and approached the bed yet again.

The antigrav field arrived yet again and slapped his body back!

"Gloriana. Let me in! I'm your husband!"

"No." She huffed. "You can sleep on the couch or go back to your stolen Fridaymen vessel. Whatever you choose, you are not sleeping in this bed tonight."

Ves tried to approach the bed several times, only to be repelled again and again. After the fifth time, he stopped and attempted to hack the device that was responsible for keeping him away.

Unfortunately, Gloriana's arrangements were too good! He couldn't hack her programming unless he borrowed his cat's CFA-derived hacking abilities.

"Lucky. Where are you? Help me beat this stupid repulsion field."

"Meow?"

"Miaow."

To his astonishment, Lucky had curled up next to Clixie. Both cats were lying comfortably on what was supposed to be his pillow!

"Wake up and help me already!"

"Meow!"

"Arrgh!"

Chapter 2536: Design Department Changes

Aboard the Scarlet Rose, a tense atmosphere settled over the design lab. The Braves and Erudites that entered the compartment each walked with nervous gaits as they took their regular seats behind the terminals and work stations.

Only a handful of mech designers took less notice of the ambiguous mood in the design lab.

"What's going on?" Ketis asked as she sauntered over to Miles Tovar. The satisfied smile on her face was completely at odds with the grave expressions of the other low-ranking mech designers. "We're finally about to design some mechs again. Isn't this great?"

The former Brighter mech designer raised his palms in a sussing motion. "Quiet down. Don't attract too much attention today?"

"Why?"

"Because there is trouble on the horizon?"

Ketis looked confused. "Huh? What trouble?"

The man leaned forward until his lips came close to her ears. "The marital kind."

"Oh."

The Swordmaiden mech designer still looked clueless.

"Haven't you been paying attention to the messages on the internal net?"

"No. I am preoccupied with something lately. I've been... ahem.. training some personnel over at the Hall of Heroes."

She couldn't help but smile in a mischievous manner as she said that. Venerable Joshua rapidly improved his swordsmanship after he began to follow her high-intensity training program.

Alas, she couldn't spend as much time with the expert pilot as before. Her duties to the Design Department came first, and she also had to spend enough time on her own projects in order to progress her design philosophy.

Her improvement never stopped. Though the prospect of advancing to Journeyman was still fuzzy to her, she continued to work diligently in order to get closer. She had already completed all of her early mech designs and had begun to design another wave of swordsman mechs.

Perhaps other mech designers might go bored or crazy after designing one swordsman mech after another, but Ketis was different.

She loved swords! She loved mechs! She loved combining the two! As long as she had enough time, she could design an infinite variety of swordsman mechs!

This was how a hyper-specialized mech designer worked! The more restrictions they imposed on themselves, the more they were able to expand their options in the areas they excelled at. There was never a case where Ketis would run out of ideas!

As she and Miles spoke in low tones to each other, the entrance to the design lab slid open again.

Everyone sat up straighter.

The air became even tenser.

Gloriana did not pay attention to the nervous expressions of her assistants. She marched over to the front of the lab. Her white coat billowed as she advanced like a woman possessed.

"Miaow."

Clixie dutifully followed the mech designer while keeping a close eye on the other mech designers.

A number of Glory Seeker bodyguards had entered as well. They hardly attracted any attention as they took position around the design lab.

No one spoke as Gloriana quietly sat down at the seat reserved for her. Clixie jumped up and perched on her lap. A delicate hand soon began to stroke her fur.

A few minutes passed as every mech designer tried to keep themselves as still as possible. No one wanted to be the one who attracted Gloriana's ire!

Rather than sticking their necks out, it was better to stay still and act like statues. After all, Gloriana didn't have a problem with them. Only one person was responsible for putting her in a foul mood!

The hatch slid open yet again. Everyone turned to face the entrance.

Several people passed through. The assistants automatically dismissed the presence of Nitaa and the other Larkinson bodyguards.

Lucky attracted a bit more attention. The eye-catching mechanical cat floated forward as if he served as a scout for the people who were just about to pass through.

"Meow."

Two more people passed through.

One of them wore a familiar red-and-white uniform that possessed some ornate touches. This was the Larkinson Patriarch uniform that Ves wore on a daily basis.

The woman next to him wore a very different uniform. Only one mech force issued the fairly distinctive black and orange outfit.

The logo on the front of the uniform attracted even more attention. The very distinctive orange ♂ symbol surrounded in a black circle left no doubt to the identity of the mech designer walking next to the clan patriarch!

An invisible storm seemed to form around Gloriana as the pair of mech designers approached.

The intensity of her barely-restrained fury caused one of the two newcomers to falter in her steps.

Ves turned his head to his companion. "Stiffen up. You're a soldier, aren't you? You're a Journeyman, just like her. The Penitent Sisters have fought against pirates mechs and warships without flinching. Will you shame your sisters by showing cowardice in front of another woman?"

The Penitent Sister's body froze. Ves was right. The Penitent Sisters had shown undaunted courage and valor throughout the Nyxian Gap Campaign. No matter how many sisters perished, none of the exiled Hexers ever broke!

Yet defying Gloriana was easier said than done. If there was one weakness the Penitent Sisters possessed, it was that they were never able to show strength towards other Hexers.

The Hexadric Hegemony held the power of life and death over them once. Though Gloriana wasn't an extension of the Hexer state, she was the closest thing to a proxy in this situation. She even had the Glory Seekers at her beck and call!

Right now, aside from the Cross Clan, the Glory Seekers possessed the greatest might in the Cinach System. On the other hand, the Larkinson Clan wasn't able to exert that much strength anymore as it was in the process of drawing down its third-class assets.

How could the Penitent Sisters hold their heads high in this situation? Despite their common origins, the Glory Seekers did not regard the Penitent Sisters as their own! In fact, it was the opposite!

Every Penitent Sister knew that if they made one wrong move, the Glory Seekers might take the initiative to wipe them out, their affiliation to the Larkinson Clan be damned!

Though Ves was vaguely aware of this dynamic as well, he didn't think the situation could deteriorate to this extent. Relations between the Wodin Dynasty and the

Larkinson Clan would instantly sour and his marriage with Gloriana might fall apart as a result.

The Wodins would never let such a disaster come to pass!

Therefore, Ves bet that no matter how he interacted with the Penitent Sisters, Gloriana and her guard dogs wouldn't do anything.

The Penitent Sisters may possess a troubling history, but that was in the past. As far as he was concerned, the former Hexers were Larkinsons now. Since they were his clansmen now, Ves had an obligation to treat them as warmly as his own kind.

Once the pair of mech designers approached the front, Ves turned around to face the assistants.

He gestured to the woman he brought into the Design Lab.

"This is Miss Juliet Stameross, a Journeyman Mech Designer from the Hexadric Hegemony. She is a graduate of the Artemis Institute in her former state. That means that she is a real second-class mech designer. Her specialty is high-mobility flight systems. Given these qualifications, I have decided to appoint Miss Stameross as the third lead designer Design Department, effective from today."

He really went through with his intentions! Despite Gloriana's darkening expression, Ves pretended as if his wife didn't exist at this time as he began to unveil some procedural and administrative changes as a result of the latest addition.

The sudden changes to the hierarchy of the Design Department necessitated a lot of new rules! No longer were Ves and Gloriana able to command their assistants as casually as before. They needed more structure in place so that the department would continue to run smoothly even if some irregularities took place.

"We will be adopting a different project schedule for this round." He announced. "Due to our growing need for second-class mech designs, we will temporarily stop working on minor design projects. For the next round, we will all be working on six major design projects. Since the workload is much greater for all of us, I've decided to raise the time limit from four months to six months. Within half a year, I expect us all to complete six different second-class mech design projects!"

Six second-class mech designs!

Just half a year of time!

Many assistants couldn't help but gasp when they heard the news. The challenges were much greater this time! None of the Braves or Erudites were truly up to the task of designing a second-class mech as of yet. Even if they were relegated to an assisting

function, they needed to work much harder and draw on a much greater body of knowledge in order to perform even the most trivial of tasks!

Sure, the Design Department had two more months to complete the design projects, but the magnitude of work was much greater.

With just two Journeyman Mech Designers at the helm, it was extremely doubtful whether the mech designers of the LMC could complete so many projects at the same time.

This was when everyone began to shift their gazes to Juliet Stameross.

Only the addition of a third Journeyman would allow them to finish their projects within the time limit!

Ves smiled in satisfaction as the Braves and Erudites began to look at Juliet in a more positive light.

Through applying pressure, he easily manipulated his assistants into regarding Juliet as their savior and helper instead of an interloper. Whatever negative influence Gloriana exerted to them became a lot less effective.

One of the lessons that every Larkinson learned was that they should always aim to complete their assignments! If they were late or failed to perform their assigned tasks, they might miss out on earning precious Larkinson merits.

No one wanted this to happen!

The Larkinson Merit Exchange that Ves had set up added more and more valuable goods and services to its redemption list. There was definitely something for everyone!

Ves clapped. "As you can imagine, designing six second-class mech designs at once is quite cumbersome. This is why Gloriana and I will share ultimate responsibility for the design projects with Miss Stameross. While she is still unaccustomed to working here, I have high expectations for her. Every lead designer will soon be in charge of leading two design projects each."

This meant that Ves, Gloriana and Juliet would only have to pay attention to two projects instead of all six. Of course, this did not mean that they were supposed to isolate their projects from each other.

An LMC mech was not an LMC mech if it did not possess any life. Ves played an essential role in applying his design philosophy to all six upcoming mech designs.

In the same fashion, Gloriana was indispensable when it came to optimizing and elevating the performance of the mech designs.

As for Juliet, her role was a bit more specialized. It was her task to empower and maximize the performance of the flight systems of every mech design. In fact, her specialty actually encompassed some smaller mobility systems as well such as modular thrusters and boosters.

Since every second-class mech including the landbound kind possessed at least some form of extra propulsion, Juliet could still play a role in the design of mechs devoid of flight systems.

Even if that somehow wasn't possible, the fact that she was a Journeyman meant that she could already handle many other aspects of a mech. It was just that the areas that fell outside of her specialty wouldn't be as remarkable.

That was okay. The third lead designer wasn't supposed to excel in every area. What mattered more was how much value they could impart in a mech design when they pooled their respective specialties together.

Ves truly looked forward to how much faster and more agile his next products would be! With the addition of Juliet, it was the perfect time for the LMC to develop a lot of new light mechs!

Chapter 2537: Second Round

Throughout the entire announcement, Gloriana did not speak a single word.

Usually, Ves and his partner jointly handled these matters. They were used to sharing power and responsibilities on an equal basis whenever they were on duty.

In practice, Ves handled more responsibilities on some days while Gloriana took charge on other days. It mostly depended on what mood they were in and how preoccupied they were.

Yet no matter who took the lead, Ves and Gloriana basically supported each other's decisions by default. Even if they didn't agree with something, as long as the issue was small enough, it wasn't worth kicking up a fuss.

Now, this dynamic would no longer hold. The insertion of a third Journeyman meant that it became a lot harder to keep everyone aligned. This was especially when two of them were antagonistic towards each other.

To be honest, this situation was anything but ideal to Ves. If he didn't manage the situation properly, then the next six months might end up in disaster!

However, as Ves laid his eyes on Juliet, he believed it was worth the risks to integrate her into the Design Department. The benefits she brought were too great for him to

pass up. He just had to placate his wife and find some way to prove that her concerns were unfounded.

For now though, he had to address their goals for the current design round.

He raised his hand, summoning a projected list.

"As I've stated earlier, we will be starting six new design projects. For the next couple of weeks, you will be put on exploration duty. Depending on the nature of your assigned project, you will have to gather as much relevant information as possible. We need you to explore which criteria and requirements we must set, which tech and components we should use and so on. For our Larkinson mechs, I need you to interview our mech pilots and find out what they wish to see in their mechs."

Performing market research was essential to designing the right mech. It didn't matter how good his mech was if it did not conform to the needs of his fighting forces.

After explaining these basic matters, Ves moved on to explaining the focus of the six mech design projects.

"Three projects will be oriented around designing Hexer mechs for the Hex Army. The other three projects are centered around designing commercial mechs or mechs that are exclusive to the Larkinson Clan."

Someone couldn't help but raise his hands.

"Yes, Mr. Ringer?"

"How many commercial mechs will we design this time?"

"Just one."

"Isn't that rather small?" Moltar Ringer frowned. "Why aren't we designing any commercial mechs this time? Shouldn't we focus on increasing our revenue?"

Due to his poor and debt-laden background, the former Reinaldan citizen was very sensitive towards money. One of the reasons why he loved the Larkinson Clan was because it excelled in earning lots of money!

Ves sent a disapproving glare at the eager assistant. "In fact, I'm not certain yet whether we will publicly release the mech with commercial potential. It is an uplift of one of our recent third-class mech designs, but its value and utility is on a whole other level when it becomes a second-class design."

He did not want to disrupt the mech market too much! Even with his rising prestige, Ves knew that competing against second-class mech companies was a lot more dangerous than competing against third-class mech companies.

Even if the LMC stole half the market share of the latter, what could they do? Aside from performing some small tricks, those inconsequential mech companies could never affect the LMC's dominant market position in many foreign states!

It was different once the LMC stepped in a second-class mech market. The competitors there were not inferior to the Larkinson Clan. In fact, many of them were far more powerful by virtue of their strong physical presence!

The LMC was foreign to every state. In every second-class state, its subsidiaries had to keep their heads down and avoid attracting too much attention from the local tyrants.

If the domestic mech industry of a given state all joined hands, the LMC would definitely lose its foothold!

For now, Ves did not feel that the LMC and his clan were strong enough to set up a strong foundation in those powerful foreign states. There was not that much sense in selling a powerful second-class LMC mech at this time.

Since his assistants were all curious about this potential commercial mech, Ves simply decided to unveil it first.

He waved his arm, causing the projection of a very familiar mech design to dominate the design lab.

"That's the Ferocious Piranha!"

Ves grinned. "I'm sure you can guess it already. One of the projects will be centered around translating our successful Ferocious Piranha design to second-class standards. In the interests of saving time and effort, we will be borrowing heavily on the data we have generated when designing the original version."

"Who will lead the project, sir?"

"As the Ferocious Piranha is a light skirmisher that relies heavily on its flight system to perform its role, it is most appropriate to hand over this project to Juliet."

Everyone switched their gaze towards Juliet, who Ves had referred to on a first name basis in order to bring her closer. To her credit, she did not exhibit any nervous tension.

The lack of any hostile action from Gloriana made Juliet feel more secure about joining the Design Department. Though she still didn't feel very comfortable here, it was enough to avoid the other Hexer as much as possible.

She knew what to do now. She took a step forward.

"While I have not taken part in the development of the original design project, the patriarch.. Ves.. has filled me in. I possess a different understanding of light mechs. In my eyes, the Ferocious Piranha Mark I is an adequate light skirmisher design with some very interesting properties. However, when you leave out its glow, its performance characteristics still have room for improvement. These openings will grow larger when we translate the mech concept to a second-class design, so there is room to add some extra modules to the mech depending on the budget."

She looked towards Ves, who paused before answering her implied question.

"We will set an exact budget for each project after we have completed our preliminary research. It has to be high enough to make it useful to our clan, though. I don't want to assign any budget mechs to our clansmen. They deserve better."

This meant that the Ferocious Piranha was definitely going to cost a lot compared to other second-class light skirmishers.

Ves moved on to announcing Juliet's second design projects.

"In addition to supervising the second-class version of the Ferocious Piranha, she is also responsible for designing a mech with a narrower focus. For various reasons that I won't explain to you, the Penitent Sisters require a new mech model that is geared towards resisting very powerful individual opponents."

He gave the word to Juliet again.

"We are still exploring the basic properties this mech must possess in order to fulfill this difficult goal." The Penitent Sister spoke. Despite her unconventional background, she possessed genuine leadership ability, which was good. "At the moment, I am inclined to design a rifleman mech that can combine its firepower with identical mechs. This mech must be fairly mobile but also possess sufficient protection to defend against area attacks."

They could have chosen to design a melee mech instead, yet Ves did not favor this plan. It was far too easy for a powerful mech to wipe out an entire mech company up close. While such a powerful opponent also posed a threat against distant targets, the attack power might not be as great.

Once Juliet finished outlining her thoughts on the Penitent Sister mech, Ves called up the projection of another familiar mech design.

It was the Bright Warrior design!

"I am sure you are familiar with this bridge mech design. While our clan has not deployed this model in greater numbers, the Avatars of Myth fought well with the few Bright Warriors they possessed. The model is also responsible for facilitating the rise of heroes such as Venerable Joshua. While there are various shortcomings to the Bright Warrior concept, it is worth it for us to reimagine it as a second-class mech design!"

"Will the armor system still be made out of Breyer alloy?"

Ves shook his head. "I have no plans to do so this time. While I have not finalized this decision, from a logistical viewpoint it is much more convenient to design an armor system that does not rely on any overly-scarce materials. In fact, every material we incorporate in our mech must be commonly available in many regions. This is how we can keep building them no matter where we travel."

This was a rather complicated matter. Not only did Ves have to account for the distribution and availability of lots of exotics, he also had to look ahead and adapt his work to the materials available in the Red Ocean.

Fortunately, this was what staff and assistants were for. He did not have to waste his time on performing this tedious but essential research.

"The Bright Warrior Mark II will be the true successor to the original version. I have no intentions to design another third-class Bright Warrior. The Mark II will largely adopt the same principles and design choices of the original. I doubt there will be any room for additional modules, but if there are opportunities, then we might be able to add some extra functionality."

Catherine Evenson raised her arm. "Sir, what is the purpose of the Bright Warrior Mark II? How long do we intend to keep it in our mech roster?"

Ves looked sharply at the former noble Sentinel. She understood the objective of this project right away.

"The Bright Warrior Mark II is another transitory mech. The Mark I has succeeded in its goal of serving as a bridge between third-class mechs and second-class mechs. Now, due to the shortage of clan-exclusive designs, the Mark II is intended to give as many of our mech pilots an opportunity to pilot a second-class LMC mech as possible. Once we complete its design with four different configurations, its modular nature ensures that our clan will effectively receive four powerful mech models at once. This will largely alleviate our critical lack of second-class LMC mechs!"

In other words, the Bright Warrior Mark II probably wouldn't last very long! Once the Design Department designed a comprehensive set of different mechs, the performance of the Mark II shouldn't be able to keep up with the Larkinson Clan anymore.

At that time, the clan might dump the Bright Warrior Mark II's to the Sentinels or simply recycle them to reuse all of the expensive materials used to make them. As much as Ves valued living mechs, it simply did not make sense to keep them around once they served their primary purpose. There was no way that Ves was willing to give them a second life by selling them to third-party clients.

If possible, there might be a case for passing them on to the Larkinson Family, but that depended heavily on whether his clan would still be in the Yeina Star Cluster!

After he introduced the Bright Warrior Mark II Project, he also moved on to detailing his second design project.

"I can't say much about the other project I'll be taking charge of. For now, it is meant to be an exploration of a Hexer mech that may be able to restrain the rampant Fridayman expert mechs on the battlefield. Don't put your hopes up, though. A lot of people have tried to figure out a way to counter expert mechs without relying on any of their own. None of these attempts succeeded as far as we are aware of. Even if an amazing solution exists, it's probably in the hands of the MTA."

Given how much the Mech Trade Association values high-ranking mech pilots, it made no sense for it to publicize a method that could easily take down their extraordinary mechs.

In fact, Ves had a hunch that if he somehow developed a killer mech against expert mechs, the MTA might come knocking on his doors to prohibit its deployment!

Chapter 2538: Conflict of Interest

To be honest, Ves had no idea how he should go about designing a mech that restrained expert mechs.

He only dared to come up with a mech that restrained expert mechs. Countering them was out of the question. It was too unrealistic to design a mech that could actually threaten these powerful killing machines. Just hindering them was already worthwhile enough for the Hex Army.

In fact, a mech that was powerful enough to act against an expert mech would definitely have a much greater effect against weaker machines! This meant that even if this design project failed in fulfilling its primary goal, it could still meet its secondary goal.

Ves held the attitude of trying it out. Succeed or fail, he would at least learn some valuable lessons. Since he intended to add some expert mechs to the clan as well, he needed to know how they coped with various situations. They were powerful, but not invincible!

"We have introduced four out of six design projects so far." He addressed the crowd of assistants. "Juliet and I will supervise two projects each, so that leaves two more. Gloriana, would you like to introduce them to our design teams?"

She glowered at him. Just because she maintained her composure throughout the session didn't mean she was happy with how Ves handled the situation!

Unfortunately, this trend could not be stopped. Ves had gone through with his intentions, signalling that he was not abiding by her stance.

It was unseemly for her to express her dissatisfaction to Ves. She had an image to uphold and she could not air her dirty laundry in public. How could she possibly face the mech designers who looked up to her after showing her ugly side?

Besides, even if she argued with Ves, she knew in her heart that he would not budge on the matter. He was too materialistic for his own good. The moment he realized the Larkinson Clan possessed a third Journeyman was the moment he was determined to expand the Design Department!

Given this unpalatable situation, Gloriana had to make a difficult decision. Every viable choice was a bad one. She could choose between the least-bad solution or the most catastrophic solution.

She still possessed enough logic and good sense to choose the lesser of two evils.

She stood up and took a few steps forward. She composed her face and pressed down her anger and resentment as much as possible.

"I will be in charge of leading two Hexer mech design projects. The first one is centered around the concept of a light communications mech. Through taking advantage of some of the unique properties of my husband's glows, we believe it is possible to design a mech that can transmit and receive data without becoming affected by conventional ECM and jamming."

Several mech designers looked up when they heard this. These individuals were aware of how much such a mech could affect the course of major battles.

One of the most troublesome aspects about planetary campaigns was the sheer amount of jamming and interference set up by both sides!

While it was possible to maintain short to medium-ranged communications depending on the proximity to the enemy, it was difficult to keep in touch with units at the frontlines!

This meant that requests for reinforcements, warning messages of enemy reinforcements, footage recorded by scouts and other forms of crucial data weren't able to reach their intended destination!

Out of all of the assistants, Moltar Ringer and Mayer Torto possessed the greatest interest in this design project!

Mayer Torto was one of the youngest and most junior mech designers among the assistants, but he had made great strides towards expanding his expertise in communications, command and control systems.

If he was able to participate in a design project that made use of a communication system based around entirely different principles, he might be able to make a considerable harvest!

In contrast to Mayer, Moltar was interested in the opposite. His specialty lay in signal disruption. In his opinion, no foolproof communication system existed. As long as one mech transmitted a signal to another mech, there should be a way to disrupt this exchange!

He wanted to take part in the design of this Hexer communication mech as well. He wanted to understand what made it tick and how to break it. While that sounded rather counter-productive, it was actually very valuable to LMC to learn what could interfere with the transmissions of this unusual Hexer mech.

What they didn't know was that Ves did not think highly of their chances. If the unique communication system of the Hexer mech was based around spirituality, then how could a pair of spiritually-dull Apprentices be able to perceive what was happening?

"This is not the most exciting mech design." Gloriana warned everyone. "As an auxiliary mech, it is not necessary to add additional functions to this mech. It merely needs enough mobility and survivability to last on the battlefield."

While auxiliary mechs sounded rather boring, they were still vital to many larger mech units. Trying to command and coordinate several different mech companies over wider areas was quite challenging. Any decent opponent would try its best to set up a lot of interference.

The consequences of neglecting this vital step were very dire!

Perhaps a group of mechs might get surrounded by enemies from all sides.

Perhaps some scout mechs on the ground were accurately able to transmit coordinates to mechs in orbit which were able to launch precise orbit-to-surface attacks.

Whatever the case, stopping the enemy from communicating with other elements was very much worth it, even if it hindered friendly communication attempts!

As Ves played a very vital role in the design of this mech, he had to say something as well.

"The core communication principles behind this Hexer auxiliary mech will largely be based around my design philosophy. This is an experiment to see whether it is possible to establish a communication system that is not counterable by ordinary technological means. If this design succeeds, we may start a follow-up design project to design a Larkinson-exclusive scout mech that takes advantage of the same system."

This was a good attempt to pioneer a new application of his design philosophy. If the concept delivered on its promises, Ves would be able to refine it until it turned into a second-generation implementation. Through all of this maturing, the scout mech exclusive to the Larkinson Clan should be able to perform even better in this regard!

Once he had his say, Gloriana turned to the second mech design project she intended to lead.

Ves had briefly spoken to Gloriana about this before. He gave most of the decision-making power concerning this last project to her. It was his way of soothing her anger. He hoped that by being able to dictate the overall form of the sixth design project, she would no longer be preoccupied with driving Juliet out of the Design Department.

"The sixth mech design project that we will be working on is another Hexer mech design." Gloriana announced. "Unfortunately, I don't have much time to specify what exactly it should be. For now, I have some ideas which I will share in private with the design teams assigned to this project. The Komodo War is continuing to tilt in the favor of the Friday Coalition. While we aren't the only ones who seek to turn this situation around, I believe we can play a vital role in helping the Hex Army regain the initiative."

Everyone carefully composed their expressions as they listened to Gloriana.

To Ves, their actual feelings were poorly hidden. Hardly any of his assistant mech designers harbored any sympathy for the Hexers. In fact, some of them were probably looking forward to seeing the Hegemony collapse!

It was not easy to figure out why this was so. Many of the new hires came from states aligned with the Hegemony. This included people like Catherine Evenson who still had a lot of relatives in the Sentinel Kingdom.

If the Hexadric Hegemony vanquished the Friday Coalition, the Hexer culture would probably spread throughout the rest of the star sector!

In contrast, if the Fridaymen defeated the Hexers, the Sentinel Kingdom would probably continue to be business as usual.

This was because the Coalition didn't possess an abnormal culture!

Sure, every Coalition partner developed some quirks. The Carnegie Group was filled with merchants, the Gauge Dynasty was too full of itself, the Konsu Clan obsessed too

much over hierarchy and so on. Yet compared to the galactic standard, they were pretty much within the range of normality.

Ves suddenly realized that this might become a serious problem. Even though people such as Catherine Evenson pledged to sever all of their former ties, it was hard to get rid of their sympathy and sense of belonging to their former states or the people they grew up with. Why should people like her contribute to a mech design that might very well plunge her former family and friends into a society where people like Gloriana were considered normal?

This was a massive conflict of interest!

The worst part about it was that Ves had no easy way to solve this problem. He understood people's reluctance to contribute to a potential Hexer victory. Yet for the sake of his mother and his wife, Ves had to ensure that his clan assisted the Hexers as much as possible.

He paced around the lab. "Before we go any further, let me just say something else. Each of you are Larkinsons. Each of you have pledged an oath to put the interests of the clan above the interests of any third-parties. While I don't expect you to disregard your own interests, it is best if you remember your current allegiance."

He pointed at Catherine and some other assistants. "Each of you come from the Sentinel Kingdom, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you assist in the design of our Hexer mechs knowing that your efforts will help the Hegemony defeat the Coalition?"

The mood in the design lab changed yet again. Both Gloriana and Juliet became more attentive as they figured out what Ves might be doing.

"We.. will perform our jobs as long as it furthers the interests of the clan." Catherina glibly answered.

As a former aristocrat, she understood she needed to express a firm stance. The sooner, the better!

The other Sentinel assistants followed suit. Once Felicia Slenn affirmed her duty as well, Ves began to grin.

"I am glad you know what you are supposed to do, but knowing is not enough. You must stick to your words and act according to our expectations. If you ever feel troubled by what you are doing, you are welcome to visit me in private. This is the only time that I will show sympathy to any moral dilemmas or conflicts of interests you might harbor."

His grin grew cruel. "However, if you keep your feelings to yourself, then you must bear the consequences of doing so. If any of us ever find out that you are hindering our design projects, we will treat you according to the rules and regulations of the LMC and the Larkinson Clan. If you haven't read them already, then I suggest you skim over them. If you ever run afoul of them, don't say I didn't warn you. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

No one dared to stick their necks out. They weren't stupid. Even though Ves knew that plenty of former citizens of the Komodo Star Sector still harbored very mixed feelings about assisting a Hexer mech design project, he did not need their approval. He merely requested their compliance.

This was how reality worked. Employees rarely got to choose how they worked. Situations might arise where they would be working on behalf of those they feared or detested.

So what?

All of his assistants worked for him now! Ves had the final say here, and his interests trumped over theirs!

If these mech designers wanted to choose their own design projects, then they should have started or continued to run their own mech company rather than joining his clan. Once they became a Larkinson, they lost the right to speak on these matters!

Chapter 2539: Dysfunctional Department

Several weeks went by as the design teams received their preliminary assignments.

The LMC was a very different company from just a year or even half a year ago. While Ves and Task Force Predator dove into the Nyxian Gap, Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson slowly beefed up the overhead of the company.

This not only resulted in the growth of the Marketing Department, but also led to the formation of the Product Research Department.

When Ves confronted the COO of the LMC about this surprising addition, Raymond supplied his reasoning.

"The Design Department is purely focused on designing mechs while the Marketing Department is mainly oriented towards marketing our existing products. " He explained while he stroked the back of Freddie, his grey Persian cat. "Certainly, the latter is also engaged in researching market trends and such, but the analysts who work there do not possess a good grasp on the technical side of mechs."

"Then why not add some low-ranking mech designers to the Marketing Department?"
Ves asked in puzzlement.

"We've tried. It doesn't help. The mech designers assigned to the Marketing Department are too disconnected from the Design Department. There are physical, organizational and information barriers keeping the two departments apart."

"Then why not drill a hole through those barriers?"

"That is what the Product Research Department is for, Ves. It may be a bit more elaborate than a simple channel, but it is the best way to connect the Design and Marketing Departments without leaking too much sensitive data. It is becoming increasingly more vital to keep the core operations of the Design Department confidential. It is easier to do so if we keep it relatively small. For now, it only consists of mech designers. You haven't even hired any secretaries."

Raymond's explanation started to make more sense to Ves.

"I see. You want to keep the departments focused on their primary missions. If the Design Department has to split its focus between designing mechs and performing market and product research, then it may become too muddled."

"I know that time is precious to you and your fellow mech designers. While some aspects of technical market research can only be performed by a mech designer, there are many other forms of research that don't require such an individual. The Product Research Department is filled with analysts of various different backgrounds that select the most suitable mech component licences, discover the availability of specific exotics that play a key role in producing your mechs, identify specific cultural norms or local laws that allow or prohibit certain types of mechs and so on. These are tasks that used to be carried out by your assistants but can now be off-loaded by people who are dedicated to this research."

Ves recognized the greatest benefit of the Product Research Department. "One of the advantages of using this model is that we can easily hire hundreds of analysts without caring about their mech design qualifications. They can be basic Novices or not know anything about mech design at all, thereby sparing my assistants in the Design Department a lot of needless effort!"

He became sold on the idea. The time of mech designers was too precious. Each day, each hour and each second that went by should ideally be spent on work, studying, essential body maintenance and occasional leisure activities. Ves felt increasingly more pressured to increase the proportion of the former and reduce the proportion of the latter.

Of course, humans weren't machines. It was inhumane to live a life that completely revolved around working as much as possible. Just like overstressed machines, humans tended to break when pushed to the brink so many times.

The Design Department did not go so far. Ves had implemented a fairly generous work schedule. As long as his assistants put in enough work hours, they were free to do what they wanted for the rest of the day.

Rather than forcing his assistants to work more hours, Ves instead implemented a lot of incentives. Those who worked harder, longer and achieved more results would always be rewarded with Larkinson merits, more attention and other benefits.

By driving the competitive spirit of his underlings, they voluntarily increased their output without feeling exploited.

It was rather tasteless to whip their backs. Not only would Ves tire out his arm, his assistants would all build a lot of resentment towards him. Subordinates who began to hate their own bosses might become prone to acting irrationally. Aside from that, they wouldn't put their all into their work.

As someone who believed in the power of mutual interests, Ves was much more inclined to appeal to someone's greed and desires. While it was rather expensive to satisfy the constant needs of so many people, the LMC was already doing well. There was no need to skimp on salaries and other benefits.

After Raymond fully explained the role of the LMC's latest department to him, Ves began to ask for a lot more data. He wanted to obtain broader and more detailed market research. He wanted to know the habits and preferences of the mech pilots of each of his mech forces.

He also wanted the Marketing and Product Research Departments to set up subgroups that were specifically geared towards the Red Ocean. Ves wanted to obtain some reports on how the mech and material markets of the new frontier were shaping up. As his future playground, he needed to master the rules in advance.

Once he entered, he needed to know straight away which kinds of mechs were in high demand and what materials he could build them with. Knowing this early would allow Ves to design Red Ocean mechs prior to passing through the beyonder gate!

As every mech designer and the related departments of the LMC paved the way for the next round of design projects, Ves tried his best to manage his two other Journeyman.

"Don't bother me." Gloriana warned the other Journeyman. "Ves may have let you in, but that doesn't mean we're friends."

Juliet grimaced. "I will stay in my own corner of the design lab. If you need anything from me, you can pass your request through Ves."

"As if that would ever happen!"

Neither women liked each other. Gloriana put herself above Juliet in very obvious ways. There were four reasons why she acted high and mighty towards Juliet.

First, Gloriana came onboard the LMC a lot earlier. She played a considerable role in the design of many of the company's bestsellers, such as the Desolate Soldier and the Doom Guard. The Ferocious Piranha and the Crystal Lord Mark II, which were only just catching on to the mech market, also brought a lot of credit to her name!

While Ves was the most central mech designer of the Design Department by virtue of his indispensable design philosophy, the quality of his products would have never been good enough to sell in so many foreign markets if Gloriana hadn't boosted this aspect.

Second, there was a difference in status between the two women.

In the Hegemony, Gloriana firmly belonged to the upper class. As the granddaughter of a matriarch and a member of a prominent dynasty, she was pretty much a noble in her former society.

Of course, her official status wasn't so noble in the Larkinson Clan. The hierarchy was a little flatter and more casual, and that was largely by design. Even so, Gloriana managed to build up a formidable reputation by virtue of being Ves' wife and lover.

In contrast, Juliet was a criminal and an exile. Worse, she was damned.

Not just Gloriana, but also Juliet herself recognized their difference in status.

"I still don't know why you accepted one of the damned in our ranks." Gloriana grumbled to Ves without bothering to lower her voice. Not just Juliet, but every other assistant in the lab heard her words! "In the past, the cult that Juliet belonged to performed deeds that were too awful to even the most conservative Hexers."

Ves sighed for the umpteenth time. "I know. I've heard that already. That is all in the past and peripheral members like Juliet were never materially involved in these sordid rituals. While I don't like the Hegemony, I see no fault in how it judged the guilty."

His wife only became more pissed when she heard this answer!

Third, the addition of a third Journeymen messed up the collaboration between Ves and Gloriana. What made this cooperation so great was that they both complemented each other without encroaching on each other's territories.

Ves was in charge of the spiritual design of the mech while Gloriana dictated its technical design. Simple.

Now that Juliet had joined the team, the situation for Ves didn't change. As someone who held a monopoly on spiritual components, he did not have to worry about anyone displacing his role.

It was different for Gloriana. Her broad Class I specialty covered entire mechs in a holistic fashion. Her influence ran through every physical part of a mech.

Did this prevent her from collaborating with mech designers who delved into the same parts? No. Gloriana was fully capable of ceding ground and letting someone more specialized take care of a specific aspect. Otherwise, no mech designer other than Ves or some other Class IX weirdos would be willing to work together with someone so demanding.

It was just that Gloriana loathed the prospect of ceding every ground related to flight systems and other mobility systems. It was as if she used to own an entire house, but suddenly had to give away the kitchen to a stranger.

Even if the newcomer was a much better cook than Gloriana, the latter found it very difficult to recognize this basic truth.

Ves let out an exasperated breath. "Just accept it, honey. You may be better in designing the other aspects of a mech, but Juliet remains the undisputed authority when it comes to flight systems, thrusters, boosters and other movement modules."

Fourth, Gloriana was afraid that Juliet would steal Ves from her. She exhibited much more paranoia than her husband when it came to this touchy subject!

"I already told you a thousand times, I'm not going anywhere! Why can't you just trust me when I say I would never cheat on you? I'm a man of my word!"

His wife looked contemptuously at him. "I failed to be on guard when that boy-stealing Fridayman snatched you from my grasp. After almost losing you to Aisling Curver, I promised to myself that I would never dismiss the threat of another woman!"

And she did. With each passing day, her vigilance towards Juliet remained intact.

Still, it was difficult for her to remain on high alert. Her work was a heavy burden and she couldn't spend all day on staring at Juliet in person.

Ves and Juliet always interacted professionally to each other. Even without his overprotective wife, he would have acted in the same decent fashion.

As for the third lead designer, her main motivation was to contribute to the Larkinson Clan in order to provide more benefits to the Penitent Sisters. Juliet did not do anything that could jeopardize this process.

Over time, Gloriana became less tense. Ves and Juliet both acted so carefully that she genuinely couldn't find fault in either of them. Since her fears didn't come true, she eventually dropped most of her guard and put most of her attention on her work.

The needs of the Hex Army were very important to her. She needed to flesh out the sixth design project all herself, and that was not very easy. She needed to come up with a good mech concept and vision that complemented the mech lineup of the Hex Army.

She couldn't do it alone. As a specialist in custom mechs, she needed to consult frequently with Ves. She even had to seek Juliet's input in order to set the requirements of the flight system of her design project.

If she wanted to design the best possible mech under the current circumstances, Gloriana had little choice but to accept the latest changes. She did so grudgingly and with gritted teeth.

That was good enough for Ves.

Chapter 2540: Bright Warrior Mark II

The collective efforts of the Design Department, Product Research Department and the Marketing Department yielded a lot of results.

Each day, Ves gained access to a flood of new reports and other data. It was excessive for him to go through all of this reading material, but fortunately he didn't have to. He merely had to quiz the assistants responsible for managing a specific task or order them to write a summary of their findings.

With so many people dedicating themselves to so many different tasks, Ves gained a lot more pertinent information and insights than in the past. Every additional detail lit up the darkness that was ahead of him, allowing him to stop groping in the dark.

Rather than guessing something, Ves could simply dig through the constantly-expanding database for the right proof. By backing up his decisions with solid data, he gained more confidence in his design choices.

The chances that his assumptions were wrong were much smaller, though he was careful to allow for at least some room of error.

After all, not every data was accurate. Ves also had to account for the shortcomings and biases of the people who provided, collected and interpreted the data. With each additional step in between, the data became more distorted.

It would have been a significant burden to keep track of every detail concerning the six design projects, but that was exactly why he split them up. While Ves regularly discussed the direction of every project with the other two Journeymen, he mainly focused his energies on fleshing out the concepts for the two projects that fell under his purview.

The Bright Warrior Mark II Project was the most straightforward of the two. On the surface, it was nothing more than converting a third-class mech design to a second-class mech design.

Of course, it was a lot more complicated in practice. A lot of changes took place during this conversion process. Design choices that made sense for lesser mechs became suboptimal if he attempted to apply them to greater mechs.

Before Ves specified anything else, he first had to set a budget for the mech design.

He couldn't set the budget too high because it would be a waste to invest too much in a second-class mech he only intended to field for a few years.

On the other hand, he couldn't be too stingy either. The Larkinsons needed to pilot something better than the second-class commercial mechs that were already being shipped to the Cinach System. Otherwise, what would be the point of switching mechs?

"I think aiming for a production cost of 200 million hex credits per copy is reasonable."

This was fairly generous but not too luxurious in Hexer standards. The highly-successful Blessed Squire design also cost the same amount to produce.

However, it was not appropriate to make a straight comparison between the Blessed Squire and the Bright Warrior Mark II.

Their roles were completely different.

The former was a purely supportive mech that was designed to be nothing more than a projectile sponge, a moving battery and a glow dispenser.

The latter was initially meant to become the mainstay fighting machine of the Larkinson Clan. Ves wanted as many of his mech pilots to switch to a Bright Warrior Mark II once he completed its complicated design.

This was quite easy to accomplish as the Mark II catered to many different mech pilots, just like its predecessor!

The Mark I version came in four different configurations.

The second design choice that Ves had to make was determining whether he wanted to keep the current configurations.

Gloriana happened to have an opinion about this topic. She sought him out and explained her views.

"We can do more with the Bright Warrior concept this time."

Ves raised his eyebrow at him. "Explain."

"A second-class mech isn't as limited in terms of capacity as a third-class mech. Components can be smaller as long as we invest more money into them. What I suggest is to make more room in the basic configuration of the Bright Warrior so that there is more room for customization. This way, we don't have to stick to choosing between a rifleman mech, knight mech, lancer mech and swordsman mech."

Though her argument was sound, Ves did not immediately accept her suggestion.

"Just because we can doesn't mean we should. The four configurations already cover 80 to 90 percent of every medium mech pilot. Sure, there are other mech types absent from this list, but will their inclusion truly matter to our mech pilots? I think not. Even if some of our mech pilots specialize in piloting striker mechs or auxiliary mechs, almost all of them are proficient in piloting the four basic configurations. In fact, all we really need is the rifleman mech and knight mech configurations."

Every mech pilot first learned how to pilot those two basic mech types before choosing their specialization. Even if a mech pilot didn't score well in piloting them, they should at least be decent enough.

Adding the swordsman mech and lancer mech configurations added a lot more practicality to the modular mech platform. Ves already thought it was more than sufficient to leave it at that, but Gloriana thought differently.

"You're treating the new Bright Warrior like the old one. It doesn't have to be like that, Ves. I think there is untapped potential in the concept. As long as you increase its scope, it can become a truly useful asset to the Larkinson Clan, just as you envisioned."

Ves shook his head. "It's not possible. Our mech pilots are too specialized. They don't want to switch mech types according to the situation. I still think the Bright Warrior Mark II is best suited to serve as a stopgap mech and a reference for upgrading the Quint."

"You don't understand! As long as we free up enough capacity, we don't have to spend a lot of effort in adding at least four more configurations. We can turn the Bright Warrior Mark II into a platform that can become a striker mech, a cannoneer mech, a construction mech or even a stealth mech!"

Her list of suggestions did not impress him at all. He stared flatly at his wife.

"It will take too much time to design these extra configurations. Our clan can't wait that long. Also, the overall design will have to give up a hefty chunk of its budget in order to incorporate all of these miniaturized components. That means we have less money to spend on its armor system and the configuration-specific parts. In other words, the performance of the entire design will drop."

He decided to retain the original mold as much as possible. Not only did it save a lot of time and effort, it also ensured that its performance of the Bright Warrior was reasonably up to standard relative to its cost.

Perhaps the biggest deviation to the original design was the switch to another armor system. Ves wanted to implement armor plating made out of materials that were widely available in the Yeina Star Cluster and elsewhere. He didn't want to resort to using Breyer alloy anymore because its supply was too limited and Ves had much better uses for this material.

This led to a very strange situation. Almost all of the specs of the Bright Warrior Mark II exceeded the original, but its defensive attributes were actually worse!

No matter if it was impact resistance, thermal absorption, electric insulation and other relevant properties, the successor of the Bright Warrior was actually easier to destroy!

It couldn't be helped. Ves intended to fabricate thousands of them from his own factory ship. There was no way that the constant cycle of melting down Cassandra Breyer's escape pod could output so much Breyer alloy in so little time. This was especially because Ves already reserved much of the current and future output to armoring and decorating the prow of his flagship!

As Ves steadily absorbed a lot of reports and other data concerning this design project, he began to sketch a draft design.

Overall, the modular mech platform with its four configurations looked fairly basic. Ves made a deliberate design choice to leave less room for optional modules.

The mechs didn't really need too many fancy functions. The Bright Warrior Mark II might be an average performer in the eyes of other second-raters, but Ves treated it as the bottom model of his clan. This was the mech that every Larkinson mech pilot should start with before moving on to more powerful machines.

Therefore, Ves didn't want to make it too complicated. He wanted to keep the configurations as dedicated to their primary functions as possible.

"A rifleman mech should be a rifleman mech. There is no need to issue a sword to this machine. The only way for this configuration to keep itself safe is to use its superior

mobility to kite its pursuers. At most, I'll add a knife. Anything more will just slow down the mech."

"A swordsman mech should be a swordsman mech. A sword suited for chopping through mechs is all it needs. Okay, maybe I can throw a small shield and a pistol in the mix, but they are only there for emergencies."

"A lancer mech should be a lancer mech. It should do fine with a lance and shield. Whatever capacity is open should be put into increasing the shock and impact resistance of the mech. If there is still room left, I'll throw in a collapsible spear."

"A knight mech must definitely be a knight mech and nothing else. A tower shield is indispensable. As for the other weapon, it doesn't matter if it's a sword or spear. Aside from that, a pistol is all I'm willing to add."

While there was still room for additional weapons and modules, Ves merely filled them up with various auxiliary functions.

For example, the rifleman mech received an upgraded sensor system and some ECCM and anti-jamming systems.

The other configurations received some goodies as well, but they all augmented the primary functioning of the mech.

Perhaps the only other major change from the Mark I was its much-improved flight and maneuvering characteristics.

When Ves approached Juliet and asked her to complete his draft design, she went to work. Ves had purposefully left out the flight systems and other mobility systems from the incomplete draft.

This was a small test to see if Juliet was able to achieve greater performance than him. What he didn't tell her was that he had already completed the draft design himself.

Once Juliet did what he asked, Ves briefly admired her work and began to compare the current draft design to the one he made before.

The differences were clear. While Ves noticed that the techniques and solutions selected by Juliet were not too advanced, she achieved considerably better results!

The Penitent Sister designer exhibited a deep sense of understanding and proficiency in drafting the flight system of the Bright Warrior Mark II. Compared to his own work, the difference may be as much as 20 percent!

This might not sound impressive to some people, but in an instance where Ves would have to work for months to squeeze out an extra percent of performance, this was quite impressive!

Of course, only a few parameters received such a huge boost. The acceleration of a mech and the other parameters received much more modest boosts in comparison.

The only variable left out of the draft was the effect of Juliet's design philosophy. This was something that Ves would have to explore very carefully once he moved to the actual design process.

"Thank you for your input, Juliet." He said softly to her. "I know it's been difficult to work with my wife staring at you all of the time, but I could have never imagined that my Bright Warrior Mark II could be so nimble."

Juliet shrugged. "I am only fulfilling my obligations."

"Has my wife annoyed or harassed you in any way this past week?"

"Not quite." Juliet shook her head. "Aside from glaring at me, she is content to ignore my presence. This makes it difficult to coordinate with her. It has gotten better as of late."

Ves grinned. "Reality is dawning on my stubborn wife. There is nothing she can do to stop our collaboration. The sooner she accepts this change, the sooner she'll get back to normal."

"Has she ever been normal, sir?"