

Chapter 1381 Cat Is Love

Lucky eventually tracked down Ves and his group while they were being surrounded by a veritable herd of cats!

"Miaow Miaow!"

"Mroooooow!"

"Mew mew!"

The sight riled Lucky up, especially since he saw Ves laughing while he fed some treats to a pampered white cat!

"MEOW!"

The domineering entry of the gem cat instantly caused the other cats to look up in alarm. Their cat senses told them that Lucky was a cat to take note!

"Meow."

The cats in the way stepped aside as Lucky majestically sauntered straight towards Ves. The female white cat who previously enjoyed his owner's attention grew scared and quickly jumped away!

With Ves' lap free, Lucky jumped onto it and perched on it like he was sitting on a throne!

"Meow!"

The cats started to disperse, though some of the more stubborn ones stuck around but ready to flee if Lucky made any hostile moves.

For his part, the gem cat ignored what he saw as lesser cats and began to look at Ves as if expecting his tribute of patting.

Ves obliged and stroked Lucky's back. "What have you been up to this last hour?"

\\"Meow.\\\"

\\"Haha, I can imagine the number of cat persons who want to buy you. It must have given you a lot of headaches when you tried to make it clear that you're not for sale.\\\"

\\"Meow.\\\"

\\"Oh, you decided to move elsewhere to escape the crowd?\\\"

\\"Meow meow. Meow meow meow. Meow! Meow meow.\\\"

\\"Interesting, interesting.\\\" Ves rubbed his chin in intrigue. \\"Did you find out anything else?\\\"

\\"Meow.. meow?\\\"

\\"Ah, sounds interesting. It's too bad this planet is too damn monitored and secured.\\\"

While Ves left Lucky to play by himself, his cat slipped away and utilized his miniature stealth generator to snoop at a nearby underground research and observation post he detected with his advanced sensors.

During his brief jaunt, his cat quickly explored the labs but found nothing interesting. The most his cat managed to do was to sneak to the local data banks stored in the bottom-most floor and utilize his automated CFA hacking programs to surreptitiously steal mountains of raw data.

While Lucky believed the hack succeeded, Ves did not expect to gain much out of the random data that his cat had retrieved. In a busy city like this where loads of people roamed around, House Laterna would be stupid to place critical data within the vicinity!

The only way he could obtain more valuable data was if he or Lucky could sneak onto the Talin Continent somehow.

All of Felixia's major research institutions were situated there, but no casual tourist was allowed to step foot in Talin. Ves saw no way of crossing an entire ocean unless he hijacked a very good stealth vehicle, and those weren't exactly close at hand.

He shrugged at Lucky. "Let's leave that aside. Let's just enjoy what Eron has to offer before heading to Asco so we can get a move on tracking down a huge cat."

A full day passed as Ves let himself go and enjoyed the various cat-themed attractions that the Eron Continent offered to its visitors.

A part of him thought that he should have brought Gloriana along. The festive cat atmosphere was perfect for dates!

Ves had a lot of fun during this time. Even if Lucky behaved rather cattily whenever he cuddled with a cat, at least his pet didn't exhibit too much jealousy anymore after Ves made a lot of promises that he wouldn't acquire any cats.

"Sheesh! You're just like Gloriana, Lucky!"

"Meow!"

His cat currently perched himself atop his head like he belonged there. Not only that, but Lucky also started licking the cat ear attachments as if they needed a bath!

Despite his grumbling, Ves thoroughly enjoyed his visit on Eron. Felixia had been in the tourism business for a very long time and knew exactly how to provide an enjoyable experience to their guests. The meowing, purring and yowling cats he encountered in cities, villages and in nature preserves won over Ves and the rest of his entourage!

The only person in their group that resolutely kept her distance from the affection-seeking creatures was Nitaa. His bodyguard dutifully remained alert to threats and refused to let any begging cat distract her from her mission!

Ves appreciated her dedication, though sometimes he felt she could use some relaxation herself. He had never seen her engage in any hobbies or take any time off at all.

"What do you do for fun, Nitaa?"

"I train. I perform my duty. I sleep."

"That.. doesn't sound very fun."

She smiled at him. "I know what you are hinting at, sir, but this is what I was made for. True Kinners are always able to derive our enjoyment from our work."

"That's because you've literally been raised this way."

"Is that bad?"

Ves wanted to say yes, but he couldn't summon up a sufficient argument. He thoroughly believed that a human would be able to reach their greatest potential if they had the opportunity to live a wholesome and fulfilling life.

Someone raised to be a bot in human form did not meet his standards of a wholesome and fulfilling life. Still, he knew that changing Nitaa's outlook on life was easier said than done. The Kinners indoctrinated their tribesmen very well.

"Besides, I don't like cats that much. I'm not a cat person."

"Why so? Don't you think they're cute?"

\nThey are too selfish and whimsical to my liking, sir. Your own cat Lucky is a prime example of this. To you, that makes them interesting and cute, but in my eyes they're nuisances.\n"

\nSounds like dogs are more to your liking.\n"

She smiled in a brief, indulging manner. \nThey're loyal, caring and obedient. What is not to like? Dogs are the favored pets of Kinners.\n"

\nI can see how they are to your liking.\n"

Perhaps Ves should get her a dog sometime, though not now. On Felixia, the existence of dogs was taboo!

During their visits, the Ingvar siblings also loosened up. Spending months among the Battle Criers and being subjected to daily training and attitude adjustment sessions took their toll.

The jovial atmosphere and friendly cats were exactly what the Ingvars needed to recall happier times and rediscover who they were before they became fugitive mercenaries.

Of the two siblings, Ves thought that Casella was clearly the brighter of the two. During an evening meal where everyone except Nitaa enjoyed a sumptuous dinner in a restaurant served by catgirl waitresses, Casella took him aside for a private meeting.

\nI've been thinking about our situation during our assignment.\n" She began with a serious expression. \nIt has been a few more months since my brother and I embarked on this assignment, and the sting of House Ingvar's fall and the betrayal of our household guards has faded. The time we've spent with the Battle Criers has humbled us a lot. Though I can't speak for my brother, I really need to get this off my chest.\n"

\nWhat's the matter?\n"

\ "I think... it's best for us to work for you in a longer-term capacity. Though we aren't Kinners, I still prefer to continue working for you while our one-year contract has run its course.\ "

That surprised Ves a bit. He thought it would take a bit more hardship and humbling to get the noble Ingvar brats to realize their new reality.

\ "Working for me on a more fixed basis isn't impossible, but the two of you need to convince me that you are willing to follow my orders.\ " He spoke. \ "I'm not a noble and I didn't grow up in a feudal state. To me, the two of you are simply mercenaries on my payroll right now.\ "

\ "I'm aware. It has taken some time for me to recognize that we are no different from commoners now that we've lost the backing of our house. A part of me still wishes for us to retain our pride of our upbringing, but without the necessary backing, we are merely empty shells. I'm more than ready to discard it and begin anew as a simple mech pilot.\ "

\ "What about House Ingvar?\ "

\ "I don't know why the Royal House of the Black Poppy attacked our house. Maybe we intended to betray them. Maybe we had something they really wanted. Maybe they wanted to elevate another noble house in our place. Whatever the reason, House Ingvar is no more, and taking revenge will not bring it back.\ "

\ "You sound different than before.\ " Ves noted. \ "At the start, didn't you guys express some intentions of getting back at Black Poppy one day?\ "

She snorted. \ "Not even a Master Mech Designer can topple a royal house. Black Poppy is too strong! The only way we could ever pose a threat to them is if we raise enough forces to challenge their rule over their territories. Even if Imon and I one day raise such a humongous mech army, the other two royal houses won't sit still and let Black Poppy take the brunt of the assault.\ "

"Because they're afraid they'll be next."

"Right." She closed her eyes. "As much as I want to take Black Poppy to account for wiping out our relatives, we don't have any right to speak. After a long time to think, I think it's best for us to move on with our lives. The Kingdom of the Three Flowers no longer matters to me. They can rot in their corner of the star sector for all I care."

That sounded quite encouraging to Ves, though her story contained a huge caveat. "What does your brother Imon think about your willingness to move on from the tragedy that befell your house?"

"Imon is.. not at this point yet. He's very taken in by the pride and traditions of our fallen house. Getting him to let go is.. difficult."

Ves smiled sardonically at Casella. "The two of you are a package deal. It's all well and good that you've become aware of your new reality, but what if Imon wants to depart on a doomed quest to revive House Ingvar and tear down Black Poppy?"

She looked down to her feet. "I'm still working on that."

"Well, you better work at it harder. The both of you have potential, I can see it. I also understand the attachment the two of you hold for your fallen house. However, life isn't fair. There are winners and losers everywhere. If you find yourself on a losing end, you won't magically turn into an epic hero and become capable of toppling a ruling power of a state with justice and determination."

She let out a deep sigh. "We know that life doesn't resemble the dramas, but deep in our hearts we still hope to redress the injustices that have befallen our house. The difference between Imon and me is that my brother is much more optimistic."

"You've given up while he is still clinging on to hope."

"Yes. It is difficult for proud mech pilots like us to give up. We've been taught not to surrender if there is still a ray of hope."

Casella left after a short while. Ves reflected on their conversation and believed that it was up to Imon whether they would fully be able to start anew. Once they both reached this point in their development, Ves would be more than willing to invite them into the Avatars of Myth and nurture them properly.

He couldn't wait to develop methods that enabled and accelerated the development of expert candidates and expert pilots.

One of the theories he came up with was that spiritual attributes mattered. They reflected the personalities of the mech pilots.

Most mech pilots with a perceptible amount of dormant spiritual energy shared similar attributes. While there was nothing wrong with them as they could still advance to expert pilots and develop strong abilities, Ves suspected that rarer and more peculiar attributes yielded more exotic results.

This was why Ves paid special attention to the Ingvar siblings! Their attributes were different from that of every other mech pilot!

However, drawing out their strength and nurturing the two Ingvars to experts was a very consuming endeavor. Ves did not wish to have another Jannzi situation on his hands, where all of his efforts went to naught!

Having learnt his lesson, this time Ves would ensure he laid the groundwork to obtain the loyal service of any potential expert pilot!

"Don't disappoint me, Casella." He whispered.

#### Chapter 1382 Kemila

The Asco Continent. As Felixia's huge game preserve, Asco encompassed the largest landmass on the planet.



House Laterna needed all of that room in order to provide spacious habitats to as many huge cats as possible!

When cats grew to the size of mechs, their demand for space increased by quite a bit. The quantity of prey they demanded grew as well, and all of these giant creatures required more and more space to sustain their lives.

Asco offered this and more. Hundreds of hunting zones spread across the continent offered a very precise variety of prey and predators. By combining influencing technology with genetic programming, all of the beasts on Asco remained stuck within their designated hunting zones.

This gave every hunting team a very good idea of what they would face when they entered a particular hunting zone.

House Laterna deliberately arranged the hunting zone in this fashion to provide predictable challenges to hunting teams of every skill and experience level.

The rookie hunting teams could cut their teeth with the somewhat mundane huge cats, while the premier hunting teams went into the very depths of the continent to tackle the Crown Cats without facing any other interference!

Several cities dedicated to servicing the hunting outfits were spread across the Asco Continent. Ves decided to bring his group to the city of Kemila, which was situated in the tropical zone of the planet.

Hot and humid air greeted their faces as they emerged from their long-distance transit aircar. Ves breathed in the air and smelled the familiar air of metal and grease associated with mechs in use.

As far as cities went, Kemila wasn't as big as the cities on the Eron Continent. While the kid-friendly side of Felixia drew in billions of tourists, much less traffic diverted to Asco.

The hunting community did not like to be bothered by their fans. House Laterna knew that and imposed moderate entry requirements to anyone wishing to travel to one of the cities in Asco. Only those who held permanent residency on Asco or held jobs related to the mech or hunting service industries on Asco could travel to the lightly-populated continent.

Ves, by dint of his Journeyman status alone, easily secured passage to Asco. Hunting outfits of all stripes respected mech designers quite a bit, and for good reason as their lives literally depended on good design work in some cases!

Higher-ranking mech designers were particularly respected. People like Ves were very capable of designing or modifying mechs to suit the specific hunting circumstances of a hunting zone.

This was critical when a hunting team attempted to track down a Crown Cat. The challenge of hunting these apex predators on Felixia was so considerable that every preparation mattered. Optimizing a mech to withstand razor-sharp claws or improve their targeting systems to account for illusionary abilities could mean the difference between death or escape!

Indeed, as soon as Ves emerged onto the dirt-laden streets of Kemila, a lot of bystanders noted his arrival and distinctive appearance.

His luxurious semi-formal clothing along with his entourage marked him out as a wealthy person.

His young age and the presence of the Ingvars who still possessed the demeanor of nobles yet acted subservient in his presence marked him out as special.

"We're being stared at by lots of people, and not all of them look friendly."

Nitaa warned in a low voice as she gripped her holstered pistol.

"It's fine." Ves waved aside her concern. "No one is going to cause trouble to a mech designer here. Our profession is too respected among the local hunters."

Different from Eron, Asco was a dangerous continent. Aside from the threat posed by the huge cats, the rowdier hunters also got into fights with each other from time to time.

House Laterna maintained a much looser security regime on Asco for reasons that Ves could only guess at for the time being.

Perhaps they wanted to give the residents of Felixia an outlet for their frustrations. As long as the troublemakers diverted to the Ozzo and Asco Continents, all the violence they unleashed would only affect those used to danger!

In this way, the Eron Continent and its immense amounts of tourists wouldn't be bothered by violent incidents on the streets.

Whatever the case, the reality on Asco meant that anyone treading foot onto this continent should better come with protection!

Nitaa wore her full suit of combat armor. Crindon, Imon and Casella all wore standard suits of combat armor as well, though Ves did not expect a lot from them if a battle happened to break out. Infantry combat was not exactly their forte.

Ves reached out his hand towards his head where Lucky still clung for some reason! His hand patted both Lucky and the cat ear attachments that Ves hadn't removed as of yet. He had grown quite attached to the new cat ears!

Even now, he was able to eavesdrop on conversations that he ordinarily shouldn't be able to hear!

"Hey, look at those fresh new arrivals! Look at that wealthy-looking fellow with the cat ears! Hee looks like he came straight from Eron!"

A snort. "Don't think about approaching them. That bodyguard of theirs is alert. They don't look like easy marks."

"Shame. Our gang is getting rather short on spending money."

"You dimwits! Why are the two of you talking so close to the new arrivals?! Don't you know what those cat ear attachments can do?!"

The pair of thugs leaning against the side of a shop suddenly realized their mistake. They quickly darted into an alley and ran out of sight!

Ves merely smiled. These cat ears attachments were proving to be quite useful! He would hate to part with them, though he knew it was necessary. Who knew what kind of shady bioprogramming the organic attachments contained.

He really ought to find a reliable biotech researcher or something. This was the second organic gadget he received that he didn't dare to make use of on a permanent basis! His inability to judge the veracity of his Archimedes Rubal and now a premium pair of cat ears was seriously hampering his upgrade opportunities!

A huge part of Asco's industry revolved around hunting alien or genetically-modified cats. Exobiologists and geneticists, many of them unaffiliated with House Laterna's research institutions, offered their services to the hunting outfits.

Nonetheless, most of the biotech researchers working here were not skilled or knowledgeable enough to work for better firms. That, or they simply wanted to conduct their research independently without any obligations.

"Let's check into the hotel first before we explore our surroundings."

They did so, arriving at one of the more upscale hotels. Ves was sure that a lot of watchers noted his entry into the establishment, but he didn't care.

Once they settled in, Ves gathered his crew in order to distribute some tasks.

"Now, all of you know what I'm here for. I'm not here to hunt a huge cat, but study one. Killing them isn't necessary but I don't particularly care whether a hunting team kills them or not after I am done with them. As long as their rates are within my budget, I don't mind which hunting team I get in bed with. What truly matters is the cat that I wish to study up close."

"You've never told us what you are looking for, boss."

"That's because I can't quite judge what I want from footage alone." Ves calmly replied as Lucky started tugging at his cat ear attachments with his paws again. "I need a better impression of the cats that I have in mind, and for that I require information that isn't necessarily available on the galactic net. I need hearsay and testimony from the hunting teams that have encountered the specific cats before."

"Do you want us to interview the local hunters?"

Ves nodded, and then directed his gaze to the Ingvars. "Imon, Casella, I'll leave this task up to you two. I'll give you a modest budget that you can spend on loosening up the tongues of the hunters drinking at the bars or lazing about on the streets."

"Do we really have to, sir?" Imon scrunched his face in disgust. "No offense, but the hunters are predominantly..."

"I know they're rough, Imon, but you've spent months with the Battle Criers. Interacting with this kind of ilk should be within your capabilities."

The male Ingvar still looked ill at ease.

"If you can manage it, you can approach the more professional hunters instead." Ves sighed. "Just make sure you squeeze some reliable information out of them without prematurely emptying your budget. Make sure to ask Crindon to load your comm with a lie detector module so you can verify if the hunters are telling the truth."

This suggestion caused both Imon and Casella to look a lot more relieved! With their noble identities, they felt much more comfortable interacting with the upper ranks of the local hunter community!

"You can rely on us, Mr. Larkinson!" Imon confidently patted his chest, as if his earlier doubts never occurred at all!

While Ves held some doubts, he nonetheless let Imon and Casella decide on their own approach. The task he handed to them partially served as a test. He wanted to see if they were resourceful and adaptable enough to handle this simple task.

Once he gave the Ingvars a list of huge cat specimens that he wanted to know more about, he turned to Crindon.

"As for you, I'd like you to look into the hunting teams themselves." He instructed. "What I've read from the galactic net only consists of official records and dry reports. While they are already informative, I know better than basing my judgement on official papers alone. I need you to go out and discreetly listen to the rumors circulating around Kemila. Discreetly. Don't attract any attention or make it too obvious what you are doing."

Unlike the Ingvars, Crindon did not show any hesitation. "Understood, sir. Do you have any priorities in the intel I gather?"

"I'm preferably looking for hunting teams that put themselves up for hire. I want to know which ones have a reputation for reliability and customer service. I don't want to hire a hunting team without knowing that they have a

penchant for ignoring the instructions of the client even if they don't pose a threat!"

"Got it. I will be on the lookout for obedient hunting teams, though I think there aren't that many of them here. Hunters are by their nature self-sufficient and unwilling to bend to authority in hunting-related matters."

Once Crindon received his instructions, Ves turned to the last two members of his group. "Gavin, Nita, the two of you will be coming with me to the hunting hall. While Crindon and the Ingvars collect information from informal channels, we'll be paying a visit to the local hunter hall and meet with the officials."

As a Journeyman Mech Designer, Ves expected a good reception from the local officials. Unfortunately, Ves would be disappointing them as he did not intend to set up shop on Felixia.

The mech designers who worked in Asco predominantly consisted of Novices and Apprentices. High-ranking mech designers had better things to do than tinker with a handful of hunting mechs engaging in an artificial circus.

As much as the hunting activities here required real skill and preparation to succeed, Ves had no illusion that everything about the entire experience had been carefully crafted by House Laterna.

The savvy rulers of Felixia planned out almost everything except the behavior of the cats themselves, and even that Ves wasn't sure of. From what he learned so far, House Laterna wasn't above employing secretive means to spy on people.

He wouldn't be surprised that the biologists under their employ secretly influenced the behavior of the Crown Cats, to the point of being able to instruct them to kill a certain number of hunters!

The Asco Continent was more of a playground than a true hunting preserve.

## Chapter 1383 Hunting Hall

"Mr. Larkinson! I am Benedict Vinzler, senior relations manager of the Kemila Hunting Hall. Welcome to our fine establishment!"

Ves offered the middle-aged manager a polite smile while they shook hands. "I hope my unscheduled arrival hasn't brought any inconvenience, Mr. Vinzler."

"Greeting an esteemed guest such as you is no inconvenience to us at all!" The hunting hall representative gushed. "Journeyman Mech Designers such as you are highly prized in Kemila. A lot of doors will open up for you as long as you offer up your expertise!"

As they started to enter the austere and way too clean hunting hall, Ves decided to burst the hunting hall's bubble before their misunderstanding stretched any further.

"Mr. Vinzler, please don't assume I am offering up my services. I am only paying a visit here. I don't intend to stay longer than a couple of months."

That caused the manager to stop short. "You are not here to help the hunting teams improve their mechs?"

Ves smiled. "Not for the long-term, no. However, I may be amenable to offer up my expertise for a limited duration in lieu of other payment."

That caused the manager to regain some of his cheer. "I see! I know some hunting outfits who value their mechs very highly and would appreciate such a favor. It isn't every day a Journeyman such as you graces Kemila."

Kemila wasn't the largest or the most popular of settlements on Asco. Other cities had access to many more Crown Cats or were close to lots of hunting zones.



The city that Ves decided to visit only ranked in the middle in terms of hunting team density. Hardly any top-tier hunting outfits based themselves in Kemila as only a single Crown Cat resided within range of the city.

Still, Ves decided to visit Kemila over other cities because the nearby hunting zones hosted many huge cats that sparked his interest. He judged that he had the highest chance of encountering a huge cat with spirituality if he started his search in this tropic city!

"Meow."

Ves reached out to scratch Lucky's ear as the cat comfortably observed the surroundings on his shoulder. "Don't wander off, Lucky."

"That's a very impressive mechanical cat you have." The manager complimented. "I don't recognize this exquisite model."

"It's a present." Ves curtly replied. "Don't ask me where you can find him. I also upgraded him numerous times, hence his unusual appearance."

"You have quite a taste for cats! If you put your mechanical cat up for auction in Felixia, I'm sure you can earn a fortune from his sale!"

"Lucky is not for sale."

"Well, if you change your mind, know that Felixia is by far the best destination for you to sell your exquisite cat."

The group entered the interior of the hunting hall. The huge lobby partially served as a showcase for successful hunts. Enormous preserved cat heads hung on the walls as trophies. They were so huge that even Ves felt threatened by their snarling appearances!

"Impressive, is it not?" Vinzler grinned. "Sadly, these honored trophies have only been taken from the younger and smaller prey in the hunting zones. The larger trophies would have taken too much space in our halls."

If the younger and weaker huge cats were already this intimidating, then Ves wouldn't want to see a massive Crown Cat up close!

After the manager spent some time to show off the trophies, they moved to an open meeting room decorated as the interior of a hunting lodge. Smaller cat trophies along with fur pelts lined the floor and walls. The comfortable seats were made of leather skinned and treated from notable huge cats.

Fortunately, despite seeing all of the treated remains of dead cats, Lucky exhibited no fear or displeasure at all. It was as if belonging to a superior cat species made him immune to the same fate that befell the lesser cat species!

Nitaa and Gavin remained standing while Ves enjoyed the luxurious seat.

"Alright, Mr. Larkinson, how can our hunting hall be of assistance?"

After a brief moment of contemplation, Ves decided to be open about his motives. It wasn't as if he needed to keep them secret anyway.

"I'm considering designing a bestial mech. A tiger mech to be exact."

The hunting hall manager nodded in understanding. "So you are looking to gain inspiration from studying the carcass of one of our huge cats?"

"It depends." Ves said in an uncertain tone. "It's difficult to describe what I need. I may have to get my inspiration from observing a living huge cat. Killing one might not be what I need."

"That.. is a rather unusual but not unheard-of request, Mr. Larkinson. Kemila has played host to a number of clients like you who seek to base their next mech designs on our huge cats."

The manager began to explain the basic procedures and options to Ves. There was a substantial difference between hiring and sponsoring a hunting team.

\nFor your purposes, it is best for you to hire a hunting team rather than sponsor them. Sponsoring is a long-term commitment that isn't suitable for your needs.\n"

\nThat's true. Do you have any hunting teams in mind?\n"

\nMany hunting teams can do what you ask, but I know of half-a-dozen of them who are more than willing to trade favors with notable mech designers. As long as you make yourself available as a mech consultant who can assist in modifying and improving their mechs, you can secure a significant discount on hiring these teams.\n"

\nCan you give my assistant a list of suggestions?\n"

\nCertainly.\n"

Once Vinzler sent a brief message containing a list of names to Gavin's comm, he began to explain some of the basic traits that Ves had to take into account.

\nMech hunting teams and mech hunting outfits operate in a similar way to mercenary corps, but there are several critical differences. First, the mech pilots on Asco are generally professionals to varying degrees. Hunting is a ritual to them, and they aren't very tolerant to interference from laymen in the art of hunting.\n"

\nI understand.\n" Ves replied. \nI know better than to instruct the hunters on what they should do, have no fear of that. I wouldn't want a mech pilot to tell me how to design a mech either.\n"

Vinzler smiled. \nIt is good to hear that from you. Disputes between clients and hunting teams are depressingly common. As long as you know your boundaries, you will find the hunters to be more than willing to accommodate your more reasonable requests.\n"

As the discussion continued, Ves got the sense that the value of a Journeyman was even higher than he expected. Most hunting teams used standard landbound mech models designed for general purpose or war in mind. Rarely did they pilot mechs specifically optimized for hunting activities. It couldn't be helped. The hunting market alone simply wasn't as lucrative enough. Ordinary mercenaries numbered so much more.

Mech designers who specifically designed hunting mechs generally did so out of lack of confidence. They didn't think they were good enough to compete in the larger markets.

This was where people like Ves could help. As a Journeyman, his design abilities were very formidable, at least compared to the Novices and Apprentices who advised or directed the maintenance crews responsible for keeping the mechs in tip-top shape.

This gave him a considerable advantage as he could easily issue a couple of suggestions and modification plans that could considerably alter the performance of a hunting team.

A boost of five or ten percent may sound small, but to the hunter mech pilots who put their lives on the line, every little bit helped!

Ves did not even have to stick around to make his contributions. Merely analyzing the mechs and composing detailed, annotated design plans was sufficient! It would be the job of the resident mech designers to follow the instructions that Ves laid out beforehand as he had already performed the heavy thinking.

At some point in the discussion, Vinzler looked at Ves with an intrigued expression. "Please allow me to be presumptuous for a moment. As a relations manager, it is my responsibility to connect with every significant

figure in Kemila. I am familiar and on friendly terms with every big figure in this city."

"Are you trying to refer me to someone?"

The manager smiled apologetically. "There is a.. special individual who is currently residing in the city that may be of interest to you. She can dearly use the services of a Journeyman such as you, though the favor she may request from you may be quite significant."

"Who is this individual you are talking about?"

"A noble scion from House Laterna."

"No thanks."

"Pardon?"

"Mr. Vinzler, I prefer not to get entangled in political matters during my tour through the Sentinel Kingdom. Felixia is just the first Sentinel planet that I intend to visit, and I don't want to take any sides at this point."

"I.. see." The man looked defeated. "If that is your wish, then it is better not to engage with Lady Laterna."

Obviously, there must be a huge story behind this young Lady Laterna. Ves wasn't interested in her troubles or ambitions. The Sentinel Kingdom was simply a stopover point to him and he didn't care who rose to the top or fell from power.

As their talk neared the end of the session, Vinzler made one more suggestion.

"The majesty of Felixia's huge cats are indisputable, but reading about them and witnessing them in the form of projections does not do them justice. If you want to get a better idea about the creatures, you should visit the underground holding cage complex. Whenever a hunting team subdues and captures a

huge cat alive, they're temporarily placed in one of the holding cages before they are shipped offworld."

This aroused Ves' interest. "I read that the holding cages are off-limits to the public."

"To the public, yes. To an esteemed mech designer such as you, I'm sure we can make some arrangements. The holding cage complex is under our purview, after all. The only reason why we bar the facility from the public is because we don't want footage circulating of our huge cats in their most pathetic state."

As a business owner, Ves agreed. Felixia marketed Asco as an exciting and dangerous continent where humongous cat species prowled the wilds and ambushed mechs. All of their promotional footage centered around showcasing the impressive cats in their prime.

Seeing the same cats injured, defeated and stuck inside a cage would present a completely different image that wouldn't be good!

"When can I visit?"

"Preferably tomorrow. Today is not a good time as some transfers are taking place in a few hours."

"That is acceptable."

The two quickly wrapped up their meeting. After shaking hands with Vinzler, Ves grabbed Lucky and led Gavin and Nitaa out of the hunting hall.

As Ves idly admired the trophies on the way out, he noted that he attracted a lot more attention than before. The hunters and other people milling in the lobby seemed to recognize his appearance as if they had seen an image of him beforehand.

"Mr. Larkinson!" A hunter stepped forward. "Our Dire Hogs have heard that you are looking to hire a mech hunting team. How about picking us up? We'll waive fifty percent off our regular fees in exchange for your help in upgrading our mechs!"

Another hunting team representative shoved aside the first fellow. "Don't listen to this pig! His Dire Hogs are a bunch of hogwash hunters! They've been in operation for less than two years and only have ten successful hunts on their belt! Come to us instead! Our Zinc Asps have been in the hunting business for over a decade!"

As more hunters started to press closer to Ves in order to solicit his services, Ves raised his arm in a brief but clear message to Nitaa.

The woman in armor stepped forward, her armored feet clanking against the floor with loud metallic clacks. Her face, surrounded by an open helmet, glowered down at the hunters.

Nitaa's tall stature and armored form instantly caused the hunters to wither and step backwards. A straight line spontaneously formed in the middle, allowing the group to exit the hunting hall without any further obstruction.

On his way out, he threw out a single remark at the hunters. "Your interest is appreciated, but I will come to you, not the other way around. Don't approach me again."

He and his group departed from the hall while leaving behind a silent crowd of staring hunters.

### **Chapter 1384 Hunting Teams**

Later in the evening, everyone returned to the hotel room. Ves ordered Lucky to set up his ECM field before he made his subordinates report their findings. He also stowed away his cat ear attachments in another room under a locked

box just to make sure they weren't actually recording his conversations while bypassing the jamming.

"Alright." He clapped his hands. "I know that half a day isn't enough time to get a complete picture of the local landscape, but I hope you've at least made some early gains. Let's hear it. You first, Crindon."

His resident security expert and spy stepped forward with a smile. "Well, the first good news is that Journeyman Mech Designers are in demand by many mech hunting teams."

"I'm aware. I almost got swamped by them earlier in the day when I visited the local hunting hall."

"With good reason. A good mech designer can suggest improvements that allow the mech hunting teams to improve their performance quickly without outright replacing their mechs. While the expenditure is still significant, a ten percent boost in overall performance ensured a higher rate of success while preventing significant damage. Studies have been made on how much of a difference it makes. Did you know what the researchers found? Hunting teams with mechs customized by Journeyman earned up to forty percent more profit!"

"Forty percent! That big?"

"Half of it is due to the objectively better performance of the hunting mech. The other half is attributable to the confidence the overhauled mechs bring to their mech pilot."

Basically, it came down to confidence. If mech pilots utilized ordinary mechs, then they would unlikely see themselves as hotshots. If they piloted more expensive and higher-performing machines, then entering the cockpits already boosted their confidence and self-esteem before they deployed for action!



Equipment mattered. Mech pilots equipped with better mechs possessed higher morale. This was a very proven fact that applied in almost every situation in the galaxy. It shouldn't surprise Ves that it played a key role in Kemila as well.

"Okay, I get it." Ves waved his hand. "Continue with your briefing. What did you find out about the individual hunting teams?"

"I've looked into a number of hunting teams and hunting outfits on your list. I manage to gather some compelling information on a number of them. I've already written up a condensed report that lists out all the rumors associated with these groups along with my judgement on the reliability of the hearsay."

"Give me a summary. Let's leave aside the outfits associated with negative rumors. Are there any groups with notably good reputations operating in Kemila?"

Crindon pressed a finger to his lips. "I think there are three smaller hunting teams that may be of particular interest to you. All three are fairly small, but they have close ties to the Kemila hunting community and are also professional to boot. Their mechs aren't the best, but that is also an advantage for you as you will easily be able to upgrade their aging mechs. Some of them are even lastgen machines!"

These groups didn't sound too powerful, but Ves probably did not need the services of anything superior.

Besides, the stronger hunting outfits only worked with known clients with established reputations. Journeyman or not, these better-equipped hunters already piloted pretty good mechs, so they exhibited less urgency for upgrades and modifications.

A projection came to life as Crindon showed snapshot footage of the first mech hunting team in question.

"The first group that caught my notice are the Cadence Stalkers. They're a small hunting team that has been operating from Kemila for just over two decades. They stand out from the other hunting teams in their degree of preparation."

The projection switched to public footage of one of their hunts. The edited snippets show numerous light mechs coated in a mottled green camouflage pattern hiding a few hundreds meters away as an unsuspecting huge cat with a beautiful fire-red fur pattern padded forward.

Just as Ves expected the mechs to open fire with their ranged weapons, the huge cat suddenly roared in pain as his front limbs got caught in a massive bear trap-like contraption!

Though the huge cat quickly began to slice the trap into pieces, the huge exobeast's momentary immobility proved incredibly unfortunate as ranged mechs started to pepper it with medium-range electric attacks that continually paralyzed and hurt the beast, slowing it down from freeing itself from the trap!

The melee mechs of the Cadence Stalkers swiftly rushed forward with great speed. The predominantly light mechs closed the distance rapidly and began to club the trapped creature with blunt-tipped staffs.

"The Cadence Stalkers wanted to kill the huge cat without damaging its exquisite fur. Hence the use of electrifiers and blunt weaponry." Crindon noted.

Ves admired the smooth execution of the hunt. "They've prepared very well for this hunt. They set the trap ahead of time at a place they knew their prey would pass through. They also hid their mechs relatively close and downwind and managed to obscure their presence to a high degree."

"The Cadence Stalkers are very methodical, patient and prudent in their hunts. However..."

"They aren't daring enough." Ves guessed.

"Correct, sir. They don't dare to tackle larger or more dangerous huge cats than this one because their traps won't last as long against their claws, teeth and other possible abilities. The Cadence Stalkers are great in bullying the weaker cats but can only flee when faced with stronger cats. They're also not very time efficient as their study and preparation eats up lots of weeks."

"So if I want a job done quickly, I shouldn't go to the Stalkers."

"Yes. Nevertheless, all of that time spent in preparation has done them pretty well. Despite their low earnings, they rarely suffer a loss. Their death rate is among the lowest of all the huntings teams in Kemila, and that is saying something for their twenty-year track record."

It figured that Crindon showered a lot of favor for the safest hunting team.

"I get it." Ves crossed his arms. "If I happen to have a weaker huge cat in mind, I'll approach the Cadence Stalkers first. What's next, Crindon?"

The projection switched to mechs that adopted a completely different style from the Cadence Stalkers. The blood-red coated mechs didn't bother at all with camouflage or patiently stalking their prey.

Instead, the mechs boldly crashed into the forest, toppling numerous trees along the way and raising a huge commotion in the process. The mechs brazenly butchered the large wildlife that served as the food source for the huge cats with their heavy greatswords and axes!

Such a naked provocation and a threat to the food supply had to be answered! The huge cat that held this territory had no choice but to confront the invading mechs up front!

\The red mechs belong to the Rocit Butchers. As their name suggests, the Butchers aren't believers in the hunting tradition and instead prefer to butcher their prey up front.\"

The somewhat reckless strategy the Butchers adopted led to a sudden surprise attack on their mechs. As the blood-stained melee mechs of the Butchers passed through a heavily-forested area, a huge cat suddenly emerged from below the ground and mauled an unsuspecting axeman mech into pieces before the rest of the mechs could reorient themselves!

With the initiative on its side, the soil-stained brown-coated huge cat began to lash out at the surrounding mechs, using its formidable strength and jumping capabilities to avoid getting surrounded!

To their credit, the Rocit Butchers responded well by grouping up, thereby forcing the attacking cat to endure several heavy attacks whenever it wanted to pounce on the mechs that razed its territory!

A huge roar escaped from the creature before it pounced!

Unfortunately, a knight mech quickly moved into place to intercept the pounce! Though the mech sustained some stress damage, the lunge had been successfully blocked!

As the cat recoiled from his failed pounce, the offensive Butcher mechs quickly moved to the creature's sides and began to hack its body with their brutal swords and axes!

The huge cat quickly succumbed as its fur wasn't capable of repelling sharp attacks as well as mech armor!

\Well, none of the fur will be left after such a brutal slaughter.\" Imon muttered with contempt.

The uncouth hunting style of the Butchers offended his residual noble sensibilities. Even Casella, Gavin and Nitaa looked a bit disturbed.

Their reaction fell within Crindon's expectations. "The Butchers might look dubious, but among the smaller hunting teams, they are the only ones who dare to hunt the higher-ranking huge cats. While their casualty rate is not very pretty, they are notable for their courage and their willingness to go after the more challenging prey, though they stop short at hunting the Crown Cats."

Casella nodded. "For good reason. The tactics these Butchers exhibit are rudimentary. I'm not sure their leader can be trusted."

"I share the same concerns." Ves said. "The Butchers probably make a lot of money since they seem to be making a lot more turnover. However, if every battle is like this, they're spending a fortune on repairs. Hunting teams like these probably value their mechs the least."

Crindon knew all of this. "Those are valid points, but as I've mentioned before, they are one of the few small-scale hunting teams willing to tackle riskier hunts. They're also fast so if you're short on time for some reason you can move out with them in an instant."

All in all, the Cadence Stalkers and the Rocit Butchers both sat at different ends of the spectrum. Based on his demands, either one or the other served his purposes better. Ruling out the Butchers just because their hunting style looked distasteful would be foolish.

"There's one other aspect about the Butchers that I haven't mentioned." Crindon added. "Their team commander usually doesn't go on the hunts themselves. He's a very formidable mech pilot and his mech is a cut above the machines you've seen in the footage. If the team commander leads a hunt in person, then the battles will usually go a lot smoother. He only rarely sets out, and only when the Butchers are tackling the more challenging cats."

"Ah. I see."

That was an interesting aspect about the Butchers.

The projection then switched to footage depicting white-and-blue mechs. Just like the Butchers, these mechs eschewed camouflage. Unlike the Butchers, they didn't charge at their target like berserkers.

"The mechs you see before you belong to the Mark of Caantz. The Mark is an unorthodox hunting team that fields skill hunters with better-than-average mechs."

Ves recognized the quality of the mechs in an instant. Whereas the previous two teams made use of budget mechs, the Mark of Caantz fielded midrange mechs.

The difference this quality bump provided was significant. As the footage continued to run, Ves saw to his astonishment that the huge cat failed to gain an advantage against the melee mechs of the Mark!

After a bit of pushing, five of the mechs surrounded the cat on all sides, blocking its escape route. The mech at the front brandished its sword in a very elaborate flourish, as if taunting the huge cat to attack!

The creature, seeing no other avenues of escape, pounced ahead!

**CLANG!**

The swordsman mech at the front miraculously blocked both of the huge cat's claws! Not only that, but the mech pilot skillfully pivoted the mech so that it redirected most of the force aside!

As the cat made a very rough landing, the swordsman mech continued to pivot and quickly stabbed forward, cutting deeply in one of the huge cat's rear limbs!

A pained roar escaped from the creature. Despite its crippled limb, the ferocious huge cat counterattacked with a devastating bite!

Unfortunately, the swordsman mech anticipated the attack and swiftly managed to step aside in time. As the half-crippled huge cat missed again, the mech raised its sword with both arms in a movement that conveyed a strong and graceful touch of finality.

SWISH!

The mech beheaded the formidable huge cat with a single, heavy chop!

\\"FOR CAANTZ!\"

\\"FOR CAANTZ!\"

\\"FOR CAANTZ!\"

The cries thundered from the speakers of the mech as if they had just completed a sacrifice!

Ves had a very bad feeling about the Mark of Caantz. Seeing them fight in such an abnormal fashion and now raising the weapons of their mechs while chanting their victory cries throughout the entire hunting zone gave him a very familiar feeling of foreboding!

\\"The Mark of Caantz is a religious hunting team.\" Crindon said, confirming Ves' suspicion! \\"They are very dedicated to their ritual hunts.\"

Of the people in the group, only Gavin knew something was wrong. Nitaa, Crindon, Imon and Casella failed to notice their employer's unease!

\\"Aside from their greater capabilities, what makes the Mark of Caantz so special?\" Ves asked in a whisper.

\\"They are the only small-scale hunting team in Kemila that successfully hunted a Crown Cat!\"

That caused everyone in the room to gasp! A Crown Cat!

### Chapter 1385 Huge Cats

Three hunting teams. More of them existed, but Crindon found these three to be notable enough that Ves should consider them first.

Each of them exhibited very different combat styles.

The slow and methodical Cadence Hunters.

The fast and furious Rocit Butchers.

The strong and mysterious Mark of Caantz.

Ves regarded each of them with doubt. In his perspective, the three neatly embodied three different extremes.

The first drew strength from rationality.

The second fought with passion.

The third followed a belief!

For some reason, Ves saw bits and pieces of himself in each of the three hunting teams!

The thought discomfited him a bit. How could he see himself in the Mark of Caantz! He wasn't a religious nut! He was a Brighter, a born secularist! He hated superstition!

Ves furiously shook his head and rid himself of the nonsense that polluted his mind.

"Let's leave aside the Mark of Caantz." He said gently, trying not to be too explicit with his bias. "They are probably overqualified for my needs and they might pose unusual demands. I think it's better to start with the Cadence Stalkers and the Rocit Butchers and keep an eye on other mech hunting teams that haven't been mentioned yet. Any opinions?"



Imon raised his hand. "I think the Mark of Caantz ought to be under consideration, Mr. Larkinson. The footage depicting the three hunting teams couldn't be more clear on which one is the best. The Cadence Stalkers haven't shown any fighting spirit while the Rocit Butchers indulge too much in senseless violence. If the footage represents them accurately, then I'd say Mark possesses the right balance!"

"My brother is right. The Stalkers appear to be our safest option, but they're too methodical to the point that they're probably far weaker when they are faced with unanticipated situations. The Butchers are willing fighters, but their lack of tactics leaves me doubtful that they'll be able to provide adequate protection to you while they are high on battle lust."

"The Mark aren't the easiest hunting team to hire, but they are still rather open compared to the more exclusive hunting teams and outfits. They have a good track record and are known for their honor."

Of course they were, Ves inwardly scoffed. Religious fanatics always abided by their rules!

"Let us not cast our vision too high and overlook the lower-hanging fruit." He spoke, hoping to dissuade the others from considering the Mark any further.

"Let's move on from this topic. It isn't the time yet for me to make a selection. I first have to determine which huge cat suits my needs the most. Ingvars, please report on the progress you've made so far."

Casella Ingvar shuffled forward with some hesitation.

"We've managed to gather some descriptions of some of the animals on your list, sir. Although we haven't been able to ascertain the reliability of the information we've gathered, I think they are reasonably accurate."

Ves looked at her sharply. "Can you judge that for sure or is your gut feeling telling you that?"

\"...The latter.\"

\Then don't say something like that. You are letting your own bias taint your findings.\ He pointed out.

He conveniently ignored how he expressed his dislike of the Mark of Caantz just then due to their religious traits!

\Ah, my apologies, Mr. Larkinson.\ The female mech pilot said. \The information we've gathered came from professional mech pilots who we've managed to befriend while drinking at a couple of bars. They opened their mouths easily enough when we plied them with free drinks.\"

\How much of the budget I've allocated to you is left?\"

\We spent all of it. We had to end our investigation sooner than I thought when we ran through the money.\"

Ves refrained from palming his face. He set a fairly generous budget! Yet the pot had been emptied far too quickly! Were the Ingvars even aware of the value of money?!

\Ugh. Whatever. It's only 100,000 bright credits.\ He muttered before he turned his attention back to Casella. \Please sum up the stories you've heard. They better be good.\"

She smiled. \Kemila is rife with stories about the huge cats. The tales spoken about the Crown Cats are the most popular, but anecdotes related to the other huge cats in the hunting zones are prevalent as well. The older the huge cat, the more stories it accumulated.\"

She activated the projector and loaded it up with her own files. The first recording displayed a white-furred snow leopard-like beast. The only abnormal detail that set it apart from terrestrial snow leopard was its strange, shining green eyes that pulsed with light!

"Old Smokey here has survived for over a decade despite his lack of strength compared to the other huge cats. He's described as a wiley huge cat who prefers to hide and evade a hunt rather than to attack the mechs aiming at his life."

"What are his strengths?" Ves asked.

"The leopard possesses exceptional perception. It's how he evades most hunts before they can find and corner him. It's said his green eyes are so good that they can detect signals and other energy emissions! Since almost every mech emits emissions, the cat can see every mech coming from kilometers away!"

"That sounds impressive, but it's not exactly what I need. Has Old Smokey exhibited any unusual traits at all? Something that gives him an edge in battle?"

"No. The battles he's been through have always been by the skin of his teeth. What the mech pilots who faced him in battle did mention was that Old Smokey had an uncanny ability to identify the weak points of a mech and deliberately target them in order to overcome his opponents."

Not enough. Ves couldn't determine whether Old Smokey utilized spirituality. His intuition told him that Old Smokey lacked that bit of flair that he associated with spirituality. At the very least, the huge white leopard did not show any abilities that surpassed his biological constraints.

"Next, please." He said, conveying his lack of interest towards the white leopard.

The projection switched to a larger, more ferocious-looking huge cat. The exobeast showed only a vague resemblance to cats as its outer surface glistened with yellow-brown scales. Thick whiskers trailed from its face, whereupon five eyes blinked in every forward-looking direction.

"The Dragon Cat as she's called is an exobeast that Felixia imported from the frontier. It is one of the rare exobeasts in Asco that hasn't been subjected to any genetic modification. It's wilder and more unrestrained and has racked up a lot of kills along the way. She's considered one of the more challenging huge cats to hunt because of her fearsome ability to accelerate at an instant and charge straight into a mech, impaling it with the horns on her head!"

Ves already read up on these basic details. "What do the hunters really say about the Dragon Cat?"

"Well, the hunters who claimed to have participated in the failed attempts to take her down say that they felt strange when they faced her in battle. They say that the reasons why many of their hunts failed despite their adequate preparation was because they lost their cool and got caught up in the fight."

That caused Ves to widen his eyes. "Their mood changed?"

She nodded. "Some of the hunters swear that even though they memorized all kinds of tactics and strategies to mitigate the charging attacks of the Dragon Cat, they failed to act according to plan when confronting her. It was as if the analytical part of their brains shut off. Attempts to capture her in a net, to harpoon her into place, to use an ultraheavy shield to blunt her charge and so on all failed because the mech pilots failed to perform their roles as well as they should!"

Ves leaned further and further forward while stroking Lucky's back. "Have the mech pilots who claimed to have hunted the Dragon Cat describe their conditions in greater detail?"

"Well, they're pretty ashamed about it. Lots of mech pilots received blame from their commanders for screwing up the hunt. Whenever they described their difficulties, their superiors rebuked the mech pilots because none of the sensors of the mechs picked up any unusual emissions from the Dragon Cat.

In their eyes, the mech pilots probably quivered because they feared getting impaled by the Dragon Cat's formidable charge!"

"Interesting, interesting." Ves smiled.

Now this was more like it! The hunting teams wouldn't publicize stories like these because they were too shameful! He had already heard that the Dragon Cat acquired a reputation for causing bad luck to any hunters that wanted to hunt her down, but now he finally knew the reason why many hunting teams passed her over despite not being able to match many other huge cats in pure strength.

He ordered the Ingvars to dig up more stories about the Dragon Cat. He wanted to obtain more information in order to substantiate his suspicion that the Dragon Cat may have been playing with spirituality.

"What else is there?" He asked.

"Well, we've managed to question one mech pilot from a large hunting outfit who participated in the hunt against Zeigra, the Mech Cruncher!"

"The Crown Cat!?" Gavin gasped.

"Yes!" Casella and Imon looked very proud to have encountered a mech pilot who faced Zeigra and lived. "While the mech pilots didn't want to open his mouth at first, we managed to persuade him to share some details that haven't been mentioned in any of the public reports."

Like his nickname suggested, Zeigra was a huge cat with a rust-bronze colored coat. The creature started off as yet another experimental test tube cat grown from House Laterna's labs.

When the researchers initially dumped Zeigra into a random hunting zone near Kemila, nobody paid any particular note to the cat due to its lack of size and strength.

As smaller hunting teams attempted to take down what they saw as an easy mark, they inexplicably failed. Zeigra proved to be feistier than comparable young huge cats. Not only that, but he started to grow quickly, as if he had just entered his growth spurt!

More hunts ensued, and more hunters failed. Zeigra quickly shot up in the ranking as he started to master the ambush approach. His ability to remain hidden and camouflage his presence became better and better.

"Every genetically-modified cat on Asco is altered to make it harder to track them by their scent, heat signature and other emissions." Casella noted.

"This is so that tracking them will require actual effort on the part of the hunters. But the mech pilot claims that Zeigra is so hard to find that their hunting team wasted three times the amount of time they thought was necessary to track down the cat!"

As Zeigra continued to defeat more hunting teams, his fur grew increasingly more red! His strength and capabilities also grew in proportion, so much so that the Kemila Hunting Hall eventually confirmed that Zeigra's fighting capabilities had propelled the initially-unimpressive cat to the ranks of the Crown Cats!

Compared to other Crown Cats, Zeigra lacked an obvious killer ability that made him exceptionally difficult to deal with for many hunting teams. However, his overall mix of strength, speed, resilience, stealth, patience and intelligence was enough to break even the most formidable hunting outfit in Kemila!

"Zeigra is a fairly new Crown Cat and still ranks at the bottom of the listing." Casella mentioned. "However, according to the mech pilot we've questioned, the premier hunting outfits in Kemila all know that there's more to her than what is publicly known. There's a belief within the upper end of the hunting community that Zeigra is a metal eater!"

"A metal eater?!"

"Yes! According to this belief, the reason for Zeigra's explosive growth is that it has been munching certain parts from defeated mechs! When hunting teams kept serving their mechs to Zeigra, the cat grew faster and faster. At this point, Zeigra's ranking will probably shoot up even higher when the listing refreshes in a couple of months!"

"Is there more?"

"Yes! Not only is Zeigra capable of growing faster by consuming certain exotics, but there is also a belief that he can induce corrosion among the mechs he battles! Several mechs that faced Zeigra in battle faltered faster than usual, so much so that some mech designers suspect that the Crown Cat caused certain parts of a mech to break down in a suspicious manner!"

#### **Chapter 1386 Corroborating Sources**

When Ves initially picked Kemila as his starting point on the Asco Continent, he looked up on the only Crown Cat within the vicinity.

Zeigra, the Mech Cruncher, earned his name for his penchant of biting entire chunks out of mechs with his abnormally strong and powerful teeth. A lot of mechs that successfully fled from the notoriously bad-tempered cat returned to Kemila with gaping bite marks marring their frames.

Yet the lack of mention of more exceptional abilities painted Zeigra as a huge cat who merely relied on his exceptional physical endowments to defeat his hunters. Ves no longer looked into the rust-colored Crown Cat any further.

However, if the hearsay gathered by Casella and Imon was reliable, then there may be more to Zeigra than met the eye!

Two traits about Zeigra made Ves take a second look at the Crown Cat.

First, Zeigra's supposed ability to grow faster by ingesting and incorporating certain metals or exotics sounded very interesting! While it sounded like a purely physical ability, it reminded him a lot of his own pet!

He looked down at his lounging cat. "Does Zeigra happen to be your cousin or something?"

"Meow!"

"Haha, forget I asked."

The two cats were so completely different that the notion that they were related was ridiculous.

The real reason why Zeigra's assimilation ability attracted his interest was because of the potential value it could add to his Devil Tiger.

His smart metal bestial mech mostly consisted of pure ASMAS and substitute ASMAS. While the former was irreplaceable, the latter could continually be replenished and improved depending on the quality of materials that the Devil Tiger obtained.

If Ves instilled a piece of Zeigra's spirituality as his Devil Tiger's design spirit, then the mech's ability to upgrade itself might become a lot smoother.

Having a design spirit that already understood this process would increase the mech's autonomous operation in this function!

Second, Zeigra's rumored corrosion inducement ability also held a lot of promises. If the Crown Cat genuinely possesses this capability without relying on physical means, then there may be a chance that Zeigra applied a form of spirituality!

Ves made a decision. "Add Zeigra to the list of huge cats that require deeper investigation. I want to hear more stories that haven't circulated on the galactic net. What makes him so powerful? What other abilities does he have



up his sleeve? Try and gather more information and corroborate it with other mech pilots."

Sending out the Ingvars on an intelligence-gathering assignment worked out well this time. As mech pilots, the Ingvars connected easily with other mech pilots. Their privileged upbringing and former noble roots also made it easier for them to mingle with the upper end of the hunting community.

After a bit of discussion, Ves wrapped the meeting up. "Alright, I'm satisfied with the information you've gathered, but it's not enough. All of the pertinent information I've so far consists of rumors. While I'm sure that they have a grain of truth, that's not enough for me to make a solid decision."

He issued instructions for Crindon and the Ingvars to continue what they were doing.

To facilitate their tasks, Ves gave Crindon permission to hack into local networks if he ever found a good opportunity.

"Are you capable of hacking into networks without getting caught?"

"The hacking equipment you've provided me is a lot more up to date compared to the security systems in Kemila." Crindon explained. "That said, many hunting teams have staff on hand that make sure their virtual security is up to date. They can get into big trouble if their data leaks to their rivals."

"Why so?" Ves frowned.

"Because sometimes rival hunting teams sabotage each other."

"What?!"

Crindon offered a mocking smile. "It's one of the unspoken secrets within the hunting community. Some hunting teams are very competitive and constantly brag about their hunts. This has led to very ugly rivalries and vendettas. While the authorities strictly prohibit any mech-to-mech combat and punishes a

hunting team severely if they are caught, shenanigans occasionally take place. It's very difficult to prove, though, but every hunting team is on guard regardless."

"I see."

The only limitation was that the hunting teams couldn't afford to splurge on virtual security. They invested most of their money on procuring and maintaining their mechs. Mech pilots also demanded generous salaries. Other priorities had to make due with a very diminished pot of money.

The Kinner security expert couldn't do much by himself. "Don't expect miracles, sir."

"Just do what you can, but err on the side of caution."

Aside from giving Crindon more room, Ves also provided the Ingvars with a bigger bag of money that they could spend on schmoozing with the local mech pilots.

"If you can, don't confine yourselves to interrogating the mech pilots who work for the premier hunting outfits."

"We'll try." Casella said without too much enthusiasm.

After their first day in Kemila, Ves and his entourage settled down and continued to go on an information gathering spree.

Ves was sure that his attempts to gather more information had spread throughout the hunting community. The hunters didn't mind if he learned some obscure information, but they began asking higher and higher prices.

"We're being exploited." Gavin spoke bluntly at the start of the third day.

"Practically every hunter knows that they can drink top shelf liquor on your tab whenever they are fortunate enough to be approached by the Ingvars."

"I know, Benny. It was only a matter of time." Ves said as he calmly stroked the back of a feral savannah cat. "I'm surprised the hunters caught on quickly."

Currently, they resided in a private courtyard where they just ate lunch. Ves felt it was beneath his dignity to trawl the streets for information on foot. The whole point of expanding his staff was so that he could delegate the tasks that needed to be performed to others!

"I don't know why you insist so much on gathering information through informal channels, boss. All of the information we've received up to now is highly dubious. Who knows which pieces of information are true and which ones the half-drunken mech pilots made up on the spot in order to brag about their experiences?"

Ves smirked as he scratched the savannah cat's chin. Fortunately, he already sent out Lucky on his own snooping mission!

"The key to gathering information is to corroborate it with multiple sources."

"Will that even be possible with our current approach? The hunters can make complete fools of us by sticking to the same story even if its pure fantasy!"

"What I said still applies." Ves calmly replied. "You just have to find a different type of source, preferably one that isn't beholden to the same motives as the original source."

"Is that why you sent out Crindon with orders to try his luck?"

He nodded. "That is one of the means. I still have another means."

"And what is that?"

"Hehe, that's a secret."

In fact, the secret that Ves alluded to happened to be resting right on his lap! He just didn't want to mention it out loud because of the monitoring systems that were surely keeping an eye on the courtyard.

He also opted to wear his organic cat ear attachments again despite his increasing suspicion that they served as organic sound recorders that secretly transmitted its data to House Laterna's specialized receivers.

Being paranoid was okay, but being too obvious about it only engendered further suspicion. Ves already knew that he already merited a lot of attention for being the only Journeyman in Kemila.

The best way to deflect suspicion was to let the monitoring systems see what they wanted to see. By acting as casual and unconcerned as possible, Ves hoped that many people would overlook the aspects he wanted to keep under wraps.

"Maow.." The organic savannah cat turned his head so that Ves could scratch his ears.

"Oh, what an adorable little fellow you are!" Ves grinned as he pampered the feral cat with rubbing and scratches. "Am I your favorite human?"

"Maow..."

"Haha, that's okay. So which humans do you like the most?"

"Maoow... maoow."

"Hehe. What about the huge cats? Which one is the strongest?"

"Maow! Maaaaoow!"

"Mhmm. The biggest cats aren't always the most impressive ones."

To Gavin, Nitaa and anyone observing Ves, they probably thought he was spending his days playing with the feral cats that roamed the streets of Kemila.\

Just like every other part of Felixia, the Asco Continent also featured a lot of cats. Different from the Eron Continent, the cats on Asco weren't the docile, hug-friendly creatures designed to be as harmless as possible.

The cats of the Asco Continent had to hunt for their own food or depend upon the generosity of the humans who had better things to do than feed a lot of cats every day.

Asco's feral cats merely livened up the place a bit, but served no other purpose. House Laterna hadn't made them sentient or turned them into spies.

This sounded odd to Ves at first, but then he realized that the hunting teams were probably a lot sharper than innocent tourists. They firmly kept the roaming feral cats off their compounds for fear that they carried listening devices in their bodies.

Nonetheless, even if the feral street cats weren't allowed to enter the sanctums of the hunting teams, they still witnessed a lot of conversations!

The only problem was that getting useful information out of them required a lot of interpretation and guesswork on his part. Cats such as the savannah cat on his lap exhibited the intelligence and attention span of a four-year old kid, which meant that Ves had to question a lot of cats in order to combine many tiny snippets of information into coherent clues.

A few days passed by as Ves kept waiting and gathering more information. Aside from collecting intel from his subordinates and the feral street cats, he also received valuable information from Lucky.

"Meow meow."

\\"Uh huh.\\\"

\\"Meooow.\\\"

\\"Interesting.\\\"

\\"Meow meow meow.\\\"

\\"Do you really think so? Crown Cats do deserve their reputation.\\\"

\\"Meow!\\\"

As Ves retired to his hotel room at the end of the fifth day since arriving at Kemila, he developed a pretty good picture of the local situation. He even learned enough dirty secrets of various hunting teams to rule them out of consideration.

When it came to the huge cats, his alternative intelligence sources weren't of much use. The feral cat community of Kemila mostly heard about them in passing. They never met them in person aside from the few captive huge cats brought to the holding cells.

\\"That was another disappointment.\\\" He sighed.

Only a couple of captive huge cats occupied the underground holding cells. When Ves inspected their spirituality, he sensed nothing different from the average feral cat on the streets.

As far as he was concerned, the huge cats were genetic abominations who relied purely on the strengths programmed into them by House Laterna's genetic researchers.

For this reason, Ves began to doubt whether any genetically-modified cat on Asco possessed any spirituality at all. This potentially included Zeigra, though accidents could always happen.

His mind came back to the Dragon Cat. Of all the huge cats who resided in the hunting zones around Kemila, only the pure exobeast gave him the most hopes of obtaining what he wanted. The abilities she presumably possessed sounded very much like a spiritual phenomenon.

Still, the Dragon Cat's ability to influence the moods of mech pilots and make them lose their cool sounded rather... underwhelming.

If Ves had a choice, he would rather opt for obtaining a spiritual fragment from Zeigra. The Mech Cruncher's affinity to metal, even if exaggerated, fit a lot more with his vision for the Devil Tiger!

Yet the thought of hunting down a famed Crown Cat made him recall Calabast's rebuke. Was the risk really worth the reward?

Ves felt enormously tempted to chase after Zeigra regardless of how poor of an idea it sounded.

"Zeigra is perfect for my Devil Tiger!"

#### **Chapter 1387 Designed By Nature**

Ves felt conflicted. After almost a week of gathering intel, he was beginning to exhaust his sources. Kemila wasn't all that large and there were only so many mech pilots and feral cats he could question.

Most of them already said the same things for a while, which further reinforced his belief that he was wasting his time at this point.

In truth, he recognized that he was merely stalling over his decision. He felt torn between setting his sights on the weaker Dragon Cat or the very formidable Zeigra.

Both of them possessed their own strong points and peculiarities, but the difficulty in getting close to them varied very wildly.

"Hunting a Crown Cat isn't easy at all!" He lamented.

If he set his sights on Zeigra and his rumored metal assimilation and corrosion abilities, then Ves faced a lot of difficult hurdles to hunt down the dangerous cat.

First, he had to hire a strong-enough hunting team willing to take him along for the hunt.

Hardly any established hunting outfit who dared to tackle a Crown Cat would work with a strange foreigner like him. Mech designer or not, Ves was still an outsider in the hunting community.

His choices were very few for that reason. In fact, the only hunting team that he might be able to persuade in hunting down the strong huge cat was the Mark of Caantz!

Just the thought about getting in bed with a bunch of religious nuts who engaged in strange ritualistic hunting ceremonies gave him the creeps!

Right now, evening settled on Kemila. Tomorrow, he decided to take the next step. The only consideration he had to make was which huge cat he should settle upon.

"Should I go for the Dragon Cat or Zeigra?"

The two weren't in the same league.

While the Dragon Cat only exhibited a single vague ability, everything about Zeigra was exceptional. Ves suspected that House Laterna likely wouldn't be able to replicate his abilities if the Crown Cat relied on spirituality to perform his tricks.

In the end, caution won out for once. Hunting a Crown Cat was a very big endeavor that required weeks or even months of preparation. A hunting team didn't decide to go out into the hunting zone to hunt one of the most dangerous huge cats on Felixia in an instant!



He couldn't afford to linger too long in the Sentinel Kingdom. He had a schedule to maintain, and his shortened stay in the Chuko Republic only bought him a couple of extra weeks at most.

Ves recognized that he faced the same kind of difficult choice back when he was shopping for Kinners.

"One choice is adequate but doable. The other choice is great but very difficult. Which one should I choose?"

As a mech designer, he always pursued a high degree of excellence in his work. He really hated working with inferior materials and component designs.

Though Ves was not as compulsive about quality as Gloriana, he still believed he should make the effort to obtain something better if he had the option to do so. This was why he continually hesitated about crossing out Zeigra.

He felt like he was doing himself, his ambitions and the Devil Tiger a disservice if he went for the lesser option!

Ves furiously shook his head. "Damn it! I'm not Gloriana!"

She would probably opt for Zeigra over the Dragon Cat anyway. As long as she could get a hunting team to agree to hunt down the Crown Cat, why shouldn't she make the attempt?

He was different. He did not demand perfection from his mechs. His previous designs reflected a reasonable balance between quality and practicality. While his premium mechs were more expensive than the average mech on the market, he made sure not to go too far.

The question of necessity also came to the fore. Certainly, everything he heard about Zeigra made the Crown Cat highly compatible to his vision for the Devil Tiger.

Combining an adaptable, evolvable smart metal tiger mech with a design spirit from a notorious Crown Cat who shared some of the same abilities sounded like a match made in heaven!

"It's too bad that heaven is too unobtainable." He sighed.

His original purpose for coming to Felixia was to obtain a spiritual fragment of a large cat or tiger-like species. It hardly mattered what kind of fragment he obtained so long as it came from a creature that could adapt to the Devil Tiger's mech frame.

The main reason why Ves focused on gathering rumors about supposed strange abilities associated with the huge cats was because he needed to determine which ones possessed spirituality.

He accomplished that. After almost a week of gathering information, he became certain that both the Dragon Cat and Zeigra both possessed spirituality, and with considerable strength.

Though they weren't Sacred Gods like Qilanxo and Pairixan who could call down lightning storms from the skies or form an impenetrable space barrier, their strength ought to be sufficient for Ves to obtain a decent spiritual fragment.

"It won't be the strongest, but it will probably be good enough to empower my mech."

As for what attributes they carried and what abilities they could bestow to his Devil Tiger, those considerations went beyond the scope of his initial plans.

Certainly his Devil Tiger design might very well exhibit an immense boost in power and survivability if it inherited some of Zeigra's remarkable abilities. It would bring the mech one step closer to achieving the legendary status that Ves had dreamt.

Yet.. could he afford to engage in feature creep?

"I've been so caught up in admiring a Crown Cat that I've inadvertently moved my goalposts!"

That wasn't necessarily a bad thing. His initial imagination before he arrived at Felixia was a little limited. He had no idea what kind of spiritual fragments he could obtain and turn into the Devil Tiger's design spirit.

Now that he blew away the fog and uncovered two different options, the question of choice paralyzed him into indecision.

"This is the first time I have a choice."

His Crystal Lord's X-Factor was fine despite possessing a very anemic design spirit based around a spiritual remnant.

His Aurora Titan's X-Factor blew everything else out of the water, but how could he possibly obtain another spiritual fragment as wondrous as that of Qilanxo?

His Transcendent Messenger's X-Factor was nearly as strong as that of the Aurora Titan, but Ves made use of the spiritual residue of a very significant human figure.

In each of those cases, choice never came up. Ves just worked with what he had without thinking too much about alternatives.

Ves crossed his arms and thought deeply.

"It's different now. Now that I have more agency in this aspect, I have the option to change my mind."

Even if he already defined many aspects of his Devil Tiger design, he still left a lot of ambiguity. Once he finally obtained a spiritual fragment, he could easily tailor his ongoing work to the properties of the huge cat the fragment belonged to regardless of their quirks.

Regarding their fighting styles, the Devil Tiger was flexible enough to accommodate both.

"It's the mech pilot that really defined the fighting style." He muttered.

"Though if both the mech and mech pilot matches, then the combination will perform much better."

So the choice of what kind of design spirit he adopted mattered. The influence it exerted through the X-Factor meant that the Devil Tiger would perform a little better under different circumstances.

Ves activated his comm and reviewed some of the footage of the Dragon Cat and Zeigra in battle. Which cat fit best with his Devil Tiger if he only looked at their fighting style?

Though both cats fought ferociously in head-on brawls, they each adopted slightly different styles.

The Dragon Cat was a pure exobeast. She lacked most of the genetic programming that the biotech researchers of House Laterna inserted into the genes of their organic products.

"That's not necessarily a bad thing."

The Dragon Cat fought with natural instinct honed over millions of years of constant evolution. Going through the process of survival of the fittest ensured her species was very good at dealing with the threats on her native planet and environment.

In contrast, almost every aspect about Zeigra had been designed. The exobiologists and geneticists who cooked up his species had probably been messing around, but also incorporated many artificial improvements into his genome.

Many of those enhancements likely addressed combat against mechs. One of the biggest reasons why Zeigra had become so infamous was because he recognized the roles of different mechs and tried to avoid their strong points while exploiting their vulnerabilities.

Just like any intelligent huge cat, Zeigra preferred to ambush ranged mechs whenever possible!

This was a lot different from the Dragon Cat, who preferred to take out whatever mech was closer!

"The Dragon Cat thrives on instinct while Zeigra is guided by his programming."

Ves had a feeling that this difference might prove crucial. What if Zeigra's bioprogramming contained hidden instructions?

The possibility that House Laterna's biotech researchers planted all kinds of backdoors and hidden orders into the Crown Cat's genes was very real!

Ves had studied some of the raw data that Lucky retrieved from House Laterna's research outposts in Eron and Asco. While he failed to interpret most of the data, he did get a sense of how much the local researchers interfered with the wildlife on the planet.

"Almost every aspect is under their control." He concluded.

As much as Ves admired Zeigra's abilities and fighting prowess, he preferred to impart his Devil Tiger with a more primal design spirit.

With an X-Factor inclined towards ferocity, instinct and brutality, his Devil Tiger might fare a bit worse on the survival department, but the boost to its aggression reinforced its double-edged nature.

"Maybe going with the lesser choice isn't so bad at all."

While the Dragon Cat had her shortcomings, Ves did not mind them all that much. One of his goals for the Devil Tiger was to design a mech that demanded the utmost from its mech pilot.

So what if his mech drove a mech pilot to death?! The only mech pilots who were going to be piloting his mech anyway would be a bunch of murderous Nyxian pirates!

As a one-off experimental project, the primary purpose of the Devil Tiger was to test his assumptions and confirm or disprove his guesses.

The more extreme he designed the mech, the more pronounced the results it returned!

On top of amplifying the extremes, the rumored ability of the Dragon Cat might prove to be a boon if the Devil Tiger was capable of imitating its powers.

"Will it, though?"

As far as he knew, no Aurora Titan produced by the LMC ever replicated Qilanxo's space barrier.

Could a mech even express the powers of its design spirit in the first place?

"I don't know the answer."

He didn't have any evidence ruling this possibility out, but neither did he possess any proof that his Aurora Titans could summon space barriers either.

"It's an interesting possibility nonetheless." Ves rubbed his chin.

As he thought about this question even further, he suddenly made a very significant realization.

What if.. he could instill his mech designs with design spirits based off other entities.

Entities such as.. mech pilots?

What if he transferred the spirituality of a dead or dying mech pilot and infused it into his mech?

"That's just the start!"

As soon as Ves came up with this notion, countless new ideas emerged from his imagination!

What if he created a dynastic mech where he continually infused the mech with the spiritual fragments of past generations of its mech pilots? How well would the mech perform if piloted by the latest generation of their family line?

What if.. what if he obtained a spiritual fragment or the complete spirituality of an expert pilot and implanted it into his mech design? Would the mech turn into an 'expert mech' that still expressed the power of one even if a regular mech pilot interfaced with the empowered machine?

If Ves somehow managed to make this radical notion into a reality, then he would in essence solve one of the MTA's biggest problems!

He'd be able to ensure the continuity of expert pilots or even ace and god pilots by perpetuating their abilities after their death!

"This.. this is a game changer!"

Ves started to breathe heavily. How could he have overlooked this direction?!

The possibilities were limitless, and so was their potential!

### **Chapter 1388 The Temptation of Imbalance**

What was spiritual energy?

Why did only a tiny proportion of humans develop significant amounts of spiritual energy?

To what extent did spiritual energy affect reality?

Could spiritual energy think for itself?

All of these questions and more plagued Ves for a while. Without answering these questions and more, he really didn't have an answer to the question whether he could empower his mechs with the abilities of other spiritual entities.

Nonetheless, nothing intrinsically ruled out this radical possibility!

An entirely new branch from the path of life opened up in his eyes!

"What should I call this new branch?"

After a bit of thinking, he decided to refer to it as spiritual replication.

"Replication because I can potentially replicate what everyone believes is impossible!"

More ambitious terms came up, but Ves did not wish to get carried away by a new and unproven notion. Despite his immense excitement towards this new direction, Ves deeply tried to restrain himself from getting carried away!

"This isn't the time to explore this direction!"

Just as he swatted aside one attempt at feature creep, now he had to do it again! He could only test so many aspects at the same time. Muddling his design project with additional objectives threatened its failure!

He decided not to develop this direction, for now. He planned to delve into this direction at a later time on a project tailored to put these new range of possibilities to the test!

"Still, the potential of all of the new applications that I can think of is great!"

One idea that continually lingered in his mind was the possibility of creating expert mechs that didn't have to be piloted by expert pilots.

When Ves thought about how expert mechs worked, he knew that the role of the expert pilot was pivotal. Without a human in charge who broke through the



extraordinary threshold, the full potential of an expert mech would never be reached.

The same applied in reverse. An expert pilot would never be able to showcase their full strength without a corresponding expert mech. Ves had witnessed this tragedy in person when the Flagrant Vandals initially kidnapped Venerable Foster at great cost.

Even though she successfully advanced to expert pilot during the battle, her training mechs simply couldn't keep up with her level of performance!

As a Journeyman, Ves was capable of designing an expert mech. He knew the theory and even studied a few of them up close and in detail. He knew that certain exotics and materials resonated with the force of will of mech pilots, thereby achieving many wondrous abilities that resembled magic!

The key ingredient here was what Ves called force of will! This strengthened and more cohesive form of spiritual energy appeared to be intrinsic to expert pilots and possibly the higher ranks.

No other source of force of will existed except for what resided in the minds of expert pilots!

It was for this crucial reason why the MTA's heavily slanted towards nurturing and protecting expert pilots.

Without their existence, expert mechs and other high-end mechs lost their meaning!

For a very long time, the paradigm that expert mechs had to be paired with expert pilots and vice versa became common sense. Every attempt to replace the expert pilot with an AI or something different failed miserably.

Countless ambitious mech designers wasted their time and effort into achieving one of the holy grails in mech design, which was to make an expert mech work without a corresponding expert pilot!

His heart raced as he thought over the possible firestorm that would erupt in human space once Ves presented the mech industry with proof he'd been able to make this premise into a reality.

The role of expert mechs would forever shift!

If Ves became capable of designing mechs that imitated some of the abilities of the original source of the design spirit, then the mech community's dependence on expert pilots would instantly decrease!

"Expert pilots may even become expendable!"

Naturally, expert pilots still had to be nurtured. Without a continuous influx of raw materials, how would Ves be able to continue empowering his expert mech designs?

In short, what this potential innovation made possible was for regular mech pilots to unleash the power of expert mechs! Ves knew that wealthy mech pilots everywhere in the galaxy would pay a fortune to pilot such a self-powered expert mech!

This was why he called it spiritual replication. He was in effect replicating the power of an expert pilot without requiring the expert pilot's physical presence!

The potential implications frightened him. Making this happen would lead to an even more frenzied demand for his mechs than if he merely bestowed them with life.

An uncountable amount of mech pilots desired to wield the power of an expert pilot! Some of them would doubtlessly do everything possible to secure that power for themselves!

\ "This is a hot potato of epic proportions!\ "

He couldn't overstate the astonishment this potential innovation would provoke from the entirety of human space if they found out about this amazing possibility!

\ "There's more!\ "

If it only worked for expert pilots and expert mechs, then that was already revolutionary enough.

However, what if spiritual replication wasn't confined to expert pilots? What if stronger spiritual entities such as ace pilots and perhaps even god pilots fell within the range of this technique?

\ "This...!\ "

**HE COULD NEVER REVEAL THIS ABILITY TO ANYONE!**

Even now, when he had just theorized it in his mind, he could never leak a word of it to anyone! His hands instantly pressed to his mouth as if he was afraid that he'd unconsciously slipped up as he always did whenever he entered a state of deep thinking!

\ "MMfmww! Mmwwmmw!\ "

Nonetheless, he almost couldn't contain his excitement on this new idea! A strong temptation lured him deeper into the direction of the path of life!

Nonetheless, the mere suggestion of abandoning his current path of balance in favor of embracing the path of life attracted him like a siren call.

Ves shook his head again to rid himself of unreasonable thoughts.

\ "I can't let go of what I am! I can't let go of the goal I want to pursue!\ "

The System described his design philosophy as spiritual man-machine symbiosis for a very good reason!

He believed the full potential of a mech could only be realized by combining man and machine! This was the core premise of mechs as a weapon system!

What did it mean if he fully embraced this direction and tried to make it into fruition?

Mech pilots might prove redundant!

"The existence of high-ranking mech pilots is the pivotal condition which justifies the existence of mechs!"

What if one day Ves became capable of designing mechs that inherently exhibited the powers of an expert mech, ace mech or even god mech?

The machines may not even require a mech pilot at all! Forget putting a regular mech pilot in the control seat, why not get rid of cockpits entirely and convert the mechs into giant autonomous robot fighting machines?

It would be the end of the Age of Mechs and the start of the Age of Bots!

Of course, Ves still had some questions about the supply of expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots, but even then he could think up some alternatives.

For example, the existence of a spiritually powerful exobeast like Qilanxo proved that spirituality was not the exclusive domain of the human race.

Aside from farming high-ranking mech pilots, the newly arisen Bot Trade Association or whatever would probably start breeding remarkable aliens and exobeasts with spiritual potential.

The supply of this critical material acted as a huge bottleneck.

It wasn't so easy to develop an entity with the power of an expert pilot, let alone that of a vaunted god pilot! The MTA had to pull out all the stops over the entirety of human space just to nurture a hundred god pilots!

Supply problems aside, the real reason why Ves felt ambivalent about this direction was because he did not wish to divert from his core ambition.

It was counterproductive to develop a new method that might possibly make mechs extinct!

"Humans should always maintain direct control over their war machines!"

The moment humanity started delegating their security and defense to bots, AIs and other autonomous weapon systems was the moment of their race's decline!

This was the original reason why Ves rejected embracing the path of determinism and the path of life. Both led to outcomes where the role of the human mech pilot was made redundant in different ways.

As someone who proudly considered himself a mech designer, Ves simply couldn't bring the potential deathknell of mechs to life!

Aside from these galactic implications, spiritual replication would also conflict with his design philosophy. The symbiosis aspect would be completely out of whack by empowering mechs at the expense of mech pilots.

Ves knew that if he continued to dedicate himself to designing mechs that spiritually replicated the abilities of high-ranking mech pilots, his design philosophy would gradually warp and mutate away from its current emphasis on symbiosis.

He deeply feared what he might lose in the process.

"Will I even be able to recognize myself?" He asked himself.

Since young, he was a boy who grew up around mechs. He loved mechs and adored them for all his life. He also admired mech pilots of many stripes. From his parents to the rest of the Larkinsons, Ves deeply respected mech pilots.

He even wanted to become one himself when he was young!

"Respect. That's the key word."

Right now, Ves pursued his design philosophy in the belief that the mech community didn't show enough respect to mechs. By infusing them with life, he hoped that one day he might be able to steer the perception of mechs in a positive direction.

Yet if Ves went overboard with improving mechs to the detriment of the role of mech pilots, then he'd simply be reversing the current problematic imbalance with another form of imbalance!

"Balance! What I seek is balance!"

The path of balance that he had always pursued since the start favored both mechs and mech pilots in equal proportion.

Ves already pursued one impossible ambition. Opting to chase after another impossibility would completely consume him and lead him astray from his original goals.

When Ves compared his original ambition with this new possibility, he did not feel as moved when he thought of the latter.

"If I don't have as much passion for it, my chances of turning it into reality is much lower!"

In the worst case, he might end up like Old Man Terrence and the innumerable amount of Journeymen and Seniors who failed to realize their design philosophies over their lifetimes.

Even if Ves believed he was different, it was still unwise to make his advancement even harder to achieve!

Lately, he often thought about Gloriana whenever he faced a situation like this. Should he really be chasing after shinier toys when he was already perfectly content with lesser but serviceable toys?

"I'm not like her." Ves reiterated. "I don't need everything to be perfect. I just need something that works."

With great reluctance, Ves decided that he would merely explore this potential direction. He did not plan to invest serious time, effort and resources into exploiting spiritual replication to the fullest.

For example, with regards to his current design project, Ves would have to see whether it was possible for his Devil Tiger to inherit some of the Dragon Cat's emotion manipulation powers.

"However, if it can't be done, then whatever. My mech design doesn't revolve around these esoteric abilities!"

He suspected that spiritual replication required more than just a fragment from a formidable spiritual entity. He might have to harvest the complete spiritual consciousness of the Dragon Cat in order to imbue his Devil Tiger with her abilities!

"Doing that will kill the exobeast." He murmured.

After all, if Ves robbed a living being of all of their spirituality, their body no longer held the spark of life! They'd be as useless as clones!

#### **Chapter 1389 Insistent Visitor**

No one in Kemila knew what kind of drastic, galaxy-overturning ideas that Ves had formed yesterday night.

If it was up to him, nobody would ever find out. Not even Lucky, who curled up on his lap, knew what kind of radical theories Ves cooked up in his mind!

"Meowww..."

"You've already had enough to eat! Don't complain!" Ves berated his cat as he munched on a croissant.

As Ves and the rest of his group aside from Nitaa enjoyed their breakfast, he began to announce the decisions he made yesterday.

"Starting today, please suspend all investigations. I'm satisfied with the information we've gathered up to now. It's time to begin with the next step."

That caused everyone to feel relieved. Crindon and the Ingvars felt they had been making less and less gains lately.

"Which huge cat have you decided upon?" Gavin asked.

"The Dragon Cat." Ves declared. "Out of all the notable huge cats in the hunting zone, she's one of the few pure exobeasts that hasn't been subjected to genetic modification and programming. She's a genuine product of nature that isn't bound to the biases and preconceptions of House Laterna's biotech researchers."

"Is that important?"

"Yes." Ves nodded. "If I ever want to design a bestial mech, then it's best to derive my inspiration from works of nature rather than works of man. Going straight to the source, as it were. Don't get me wrong, though. Most artificial creations can be superior to naturally-evolved exobeasts. It's just that for my purposes, I think I'll obtain better gains from observing a more primal creature."

This was just an excuse to obscure the real reasons he decided to pick the Dragon Cat over Zeigra.

Nonetheless, Imon frowned a bit. "We collected a lot of hearsay about Zeigra, all of which painted an impressive picture. Why didn't you settle for him, Mr. Larkinson?"

Ves crossed his arms. "I don't owe you an explanation, but if you must know, there are too many practical problems involved with hunting a Crown Cat. Not



only will we have to secure the cooperation of a very strong hunting outfit, we'll also be wracked with numerous delays as the hunting attempt requires an exceptional amount of preparation. Even then, the hunt is unlikely to succeed! The chance of death is too large to justify the attempt. It's not worth gambling my life just to obtain a good impression of Zeigra."

That shut everyone up. Nitaa and Gavin looked inordinately pleased at his sensible decision. Neither wanted to see Ves throw himself against one of the deadliest cats on the Asco Continent!

"Which hunting team do you want to approach to help you hunt down the Dragon Cat?" Gavin probed.

"I don't need the Dragon Cat to die." Ves held up his hand. "For my purposes, just spending some time with the creature is sufficient. Nevertheless, depending on the actual situation, I might change my mind. I don't know what I'll need until I actually actually see her in the flesh."

His main goal for visiting Felixia was to harvest a spiritual fragment of an enormous cat-like creature. Ves already knew that spiritual fragments retained their qualities regardless of the life or death of their sources.

"As for the team..." Ves continued. "The Mark of Caantz is out. They're overqualified to hunt this kind of game. I'm not sure whether the Cadence Stalkers are suitable, though. They'll require weeks of preparation and even then the actual hunting trip will last a while due to their trap-based hunting style."

"So you've decided to go with the Rocit Butchers?"

"They're my first choice, yes."

That caused some consternation to a few people. The Ingvars in particular looked disgusted.

"The Butchers are literally brutes!" Imon protested. "Their existence besmirches the honor of our profession! At the very least, the Battle Criers are brave warriors. The Butchers only care for killing and eating their own prey!"

The former noble referred to their penchant for eating the meat of their kills. Cooking and eating the flesh of the formidable huge cats that roamed the hunting zones was a big activity that united the otherwise rowdy Butcher mech pilots.

That, and the strength of their commander ensured that none of their mech pilots fell out of line.

Ves directed a calm expression towards Imon. "Again, I'm making the decisions here. While I recognize your opinions, I haven't heard anything that convinces me to opt for another outfit."

Just as Ves wanted to move on with issuing new instructions to his staff, the doorbell to his hotel suite rang.

A couple of people frowned. No one should be looking to approach him at this time.

"Benny, please answer the door."

As Gavin rose up and walked to the front door, he came face-to-face with a very well-dressed woman.

The newcomer ignored the assistant and tried to look further. "Mr. Larkinson, I know you are present. You are a very hard man to schedule an appointment with. Well, no more delays. Let us talk."

Ves looked towards Crindon who made a very urgent hand sign.

"That's Lady Miralix of House Laterna, the third daughter of Countess Katherina!" The Kinner spy furiously whispered.

His face soured. Ves had kept his head down as much as possible in the past week in order to avoid political entanglement. If there was anything he knew about nobles, it was that any interaction drew the ire of someone!

Still, now that she came up to his hotel suite in person, he could hardly refuse her direct request for a meeting. Ves was confident he could fob off a messenger or an envoy, but refusing a noble lady on the very planet her noble house ruled over was practically suicide!

He waved his hand. "I'll meet her in the front room. Please make sure we aren't disturbed while I have my chat with the lady."

As the lady entered the suite, Ves greeted her with a mild smile. He tried his best to keep his irritation out of his expression, though it didn't take a genius to figure out that he was less than enthusiastic about meeting a Sentinel noble.

"Lady Miralix." He greeted gently as he shook her hand. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your abrupt visit?"

As he withdrew his hand, he noted that her palm exerted strength and stability. Those were the hands of a warrior!

Her appearance and clothing further reinforced her martial upbringing. Her gold-frilled military-esque uniform showed off hints of her athletic stature. Her blond hair had been cut to a bobcut, which prevented it from getting caught or stuck if she wore an interfacing helmet.

She offered a sharp smile back. "It is not every day that Kemila is graced with a Journeyman such as you. This city and the rest of Felixia doesn't have much to offer to mech designers of your height. It is a rare opportunity for me to meet with a capable mech designer on my homeground. I do hope you won't mind my presumptuousness."

"It is of no concern, my lady."

While Ves and Lady Miralix continued with their facetious greeting, Lucky padded warily towards the noblewoman's pet.

As a scion of House Laterna, how could she not possess her own cat?

The feline that accompanied Miralix looked exquisite. The cat oozed elegance as her purple-black fur accentuated her slender, sinuous form. The genetically-modified cat sat on her butt with her head turned upwards as if nothing in the room was worth her attention!

"Meow?"

"Miao."

"Meow!"

"Miao!"

Lucky did not make much headway into engaging the purple-black cat in a conversation!

"That's a remarkable cat you have there." Ves diverted. "She's very proud of herself as well."

He could tell, because the arrogant organic cat continued to rebuff Lucky's attempts!

Lady Miralix smiled indulgently at her cat. "Genevieve is a proud designer cat of our house. She is one of our house's most exclusive products. If you want a cat like her, it's not impossible for me to supply you with one that matches your specifications."

"No thanks. As you can see, I already have a perfectly serviceable cat."

"Your pet is very interesting. My men have done some research to trace his model, but we haven't identified the producer."

"I've been upgrading Lucky over the years. He's very different from how he started out at the beginning."

After chatting a bit about their cats, Lady Miralix finally cut to the chase.

"I'm sure there is much to talk about, but I didn't come here for a social call."

"I'm not open to business." Ves calmly but firmly replied. "I'm already preoccupied with my own concerns."

The lady smiled. "I've heard. You have been sending your lackeys into the city in order to gather intelligence. Are you interested in hunting for Zeigra?"

Ves shook his head. "No. Felixia's Crown Cats deserve their formidable reputations. I have no intention of getting anywhere close to them. Zeigra is a very impressive specimen, but I am only courageous enough of admiring him from afar."

This was not what the lady wanted to hear, obviously. Miralax sat down on one of the couches in the hotel suite, prompting Ves to follow suit.

"I think it's best if I start this off by describing my own situation. You see, Mr. Larkinson, I am a mech pilot. As a member of House Laterna, I've been subjected to high expectations for all of my life. I trained and polished my mech piloting skills as much as possible in order to meet our house's high standards. No mech pilot of House Laterna must ever exhibit any shortcomings! Weakness is very much frowned upon in the Sentinel Kingdom's high society."

That sounded very similar to what took place in the Vesia Kingdom.

"Sentinel is a very strong state. I'm not surprised to hear that the nobility is expected to set an example."

"Ah, so you understand. Good. Now, before it is time for me to lead a detachment of household mech troops, I am expected to complete a

mandatory challenge. Every mech pilot of House Laterna is expected to pass this challenge shortly after graduating from the mech academy.\

\\"Mandatory?\"

\\"Yes.\" She nodded seriously. \\"We either pass this test, or die trying. You're an intelligent man, Mr. Larkinson. I think you can guess the nature of the challenge that I have to complete.\"

Ves already had an inkling of what Lady Miralix alluded to. \\"You are tasked with hunting Zeigra?\"

The noblewoman shook her head. \\"Not Zeigra specifically. I can choose to hunt any Crown Cat in Asco. I am not allowed to depart Felixia while I haven't completed this challenge. If I choose not to go on a hunt, I will be stuck on this planet for the remainder of my life!\"

That probably sounded fine to some people, but not to an ambitious-looking woman such as Lady Miralix. Ves could see it in her eyes. She possessed the same gaze as those in the piloting profession who aimed higher!

\\"Why Zeigra, then?\"

\\"Zeigra is the twentieth-ranked Crown Cat on the listing. While I'm aware he's a fast grower, for now he is not as tricky or deadly as the higher-ranked Crown Cats.\"

So Lady Miralix merely targeted Zeigra because he was the least formidable Crown Cat. That did not detract any bit from the sheer amount of risk surrounding this incredibly deadly huge cat!

\\"I would think that hunting a Crown Cat poses little difficulty to an eminent person such as you. After all, you are part of the ruling house of this planet, correct?\"

"It is not as simple as that." She shook her head. "There are rules that every hunter has to abide by. I am no exception to this. Otherwise, how can we maintain our moral superiority when we restrict other hunters from bringing in more firepower? There are limits to the quality and quantity of mechs I can assign to my hunting team."

"Even if that's the case, I'm sure your hunting team is more than up to the challenge."

Lady Miralix smiled sadly. "I wish I shared your optimism, Mr. Larkinson. I am not so confident about my chances. House Laterna does not tolerate weakness. The rules will not be bent for me just because of my lineage. The remains of plenty of Laternas have ended up in the stomachs of Crown Cats over the years!"

That caused Ves to widen his eyes. That was really ruthless of the house! No wonder Lady Miralix treated this challenge so gravely!

#### Chapter 1390 Lady Miralix Laterna

Really, what is it with these nobles and their habit of placing insanely high expectations on themselves?

Hardly any mech pilot was cut out to hunt a Crown Cat!

Even elite mech pilots might falter and lose their lives when they hunted these dreaded huge cats!

Nonetheless, Ves knew that the Sentinel Kingdom exhibited a high degree of militarism. Their emphasis on military prowess matched that of the Vesia Kingdom despite never being embroiled in as many wars.

It was all due to Sentinel's proximity to the Nyxian Gap! By necessity, the nobles who wielded a considerable amount of power in the Kingdom had to prove they were strong enough to protect the common folk from the depravity of Nyxian pirates.

House Laterna, despite its emphasis on tourism, research and specialty trade, had to demonstrate their chops as well!

In these circumstances, being born a noble to one of Sentinel's noble houses was not a fortunate birth. As soon as the doctors identified her as a potentate when she reached ten years old, her house looked upon Lady Miralix as a vehicle to uphold the reputation of her house!

When it came to touchy matters like this, noble houses could be quite ruthless. Even if she was the third daughter of Countess Katherina Laterna, Lady Miralix still had to prove her chops as an eminent noble and mech pilot of her house!

Having dealt with several nobles from different states, Ves no longer found someone like Lady Miralix exceptional. When he thought about it, nobles were essentially privileged people who were born in their position.

They were no different from the average commoners they looked down upon. Nobles faced many of the same concerns as regular people, but on a higher level.

Ves held no sympathy for Lady Miralix's circumstances.

If her words were correct, then if she balked at the challenge, she could still live out the rest of her life while remaining comfortably stuck on Felixia.

He hardly doubted that House Laterna would mistreat her too much or make her life miserable. She would merely have to live with the label of a coward plastered to her forehead.

Unfortunately.. if there was one thing mech pilots hated, it was being branded as a coward!

Indeed, Lady Miralix took no notice of his hints of rejection and continued to press on with her persuasion attempt.



"Mr. Larkinson. I need your assistance. If you put your abilities as a mech designer at my disposal, I will stand a much better chance of succeeding in my hunt for Zeigra."

"My lady, I've already said that I'm not interested."

"I am willing to remunerate you very generously for your services."

Ves shook his head. "I am not interested in what you have to offer. Besides, I'm sure you and your hunting team are already piloting the best mechs that are allowed to step into the hunting zones. I hardly see how your machines can accommodate any more augmentations without exceeding the upper bounds of what is allowed."

The authorities treated hunting as an honorable profession in Asco. If rich, young scions such as Lady Miralix could field mechs that cost as much as a light carrier each, then what was the worth of such a hunt?

Anyone bringing a cannon to swat a mosquito wouldn't be able to earn any prestige out of a successful hunt!

As expected, she confirmed his guess. "That is true. I have acquired and outfitted my hunting team with the best mechs and other accessories that are allowable. Unfortunately, Felixia does not house any mech manufacturing operations. The mechs I've procured are all standard products sold by well-regarded mech companies, but haven't undergone any modifications."

"A good mech designed by a knowledgeable mech designer and sold by a reputable mech company is mostly great as it is." Ves spoke. "Altering a mech from its original parameters can do more harm than good. They are complete packages put into a way that optimizes the synergy between all of their parts. It is far from true that modification will always ensure better performance. The base model would have already reflected these changes from the start if that is the case."

His argument didn't take hold. Lady Miralix continued to smirk at him. "My advisers have said the same. Modification can always go wrong. But that isn't the complete story. You've withheld a crucial detail, Mr. Larkinson. A skilled mech designer, say a Journeyman, can tailor a mech much better to a mech pilot while avoiding many of the pitfalls that cause many lesser mech designers to stumble."

"You hold a very high opinion of my design abilities, my lady. I'm just a Journeyman, and barely one at that. Do you see how young I am? I can hardly match the efforts of more seasoned Journeymen with dozens of mech designs under their belt!"

"That's not what I think." Miralix retorted. "When I studied your mech designs, I became wholly impressed with the great quality of your work! Many mech pilots swear by the products of your LMC! What impresses me in particular is your specialty. They say you are able to impart all of your mechs with an indescribable quality that doesn't entail any hardware improvements!"

Ves grimaced. "I excel in improving the ergonomics of my mechs. The impact that it brings to the performance of the mech pilot is vastly overstated. Essentially, I aim to increase the comfort of mech pilots and reduce the irritations they face when they pilot their mechs. It is not the panacea that you think it is. Your mech will not magically perform twenty percent better just because I tinkered with it for a while."

The two stared at each other as a brief moment of silence fell in the empty room. Neither Miralax or Ves brought their bodyguards into the room, but they were certainly close at hand.

Meanwhile, Lucky failed to gain Genevieve's acknowledgement. The arrogant purple feline continued to sit by Lady Miralix's side as a watchful guardian cat!

"Lucky, stop bothering Lady Miralix's cat!"

"Meow!"

The noblewoman took a closer look at Lucky. Ves recognized that she was starting to grow more intrigued at his pet. His lively behavior and exceptional quality probably provoked a lot of questions in the mind of someone who lived with cats for all of her life!

It wouldn't be good for him if she started to ask difficult questions about the origins of his cat!

For this reason, he quickly spoke up again.

"Lady Miralix, I'm sorry to say you won't find what you are looking for in me. Not every Journeyman is the same, and my specialty lies mostly in improving comfort rather than battle performance. While the two are interconnected, I hardly think it will matter when you are facing a life-and-death battle against a Crown Cat."

"You haven't even heard what I am willing to offer yet, Mr. Larkinson." Lady Miralix dropped her smile and adopted a serious expression. "While my standing within House Laterna is nothing remarkable, my mother is still a countess of the Sentinel Kingdom. There is much I can offer if you so desire."

"Not interested." Ves shook his head.

The woman proceeded onwards as if they were still negotiating!

"Hear me out, Mr. Larkinson. First, whatever you want from a huge cat, I will give it to you. The only spoils I require is Zeigra's head so that I'll be able to return in triumph with a trophy in my hands. All the other parts of the carcass is yours to do as you wish."

He shrugged. "Do I look like a Rocit Butcher? I have no use for the meat, bones and fur of a huge cat."

"That is just the start that I can offer." She leaned in. "I can arrange for you to undergo genetic enhancements. You can permanently walk around with sharpened cat ears if you'd like. Whatever bio modifications you need, our researchers will do their best to fulfill them all."

After Dr. Jutland messed with his body long ago, Ves swore he would never let anyone he didn't trust mess with his body again!

"No thanks. I'm already at my capacity in terms of genetic and biological enhancements."

"I can trade numerous high-quality designer cats. A cat like Genevieve here is one of our prized organic products. You have family, do you not? How about you gift your relatives with a wonderful companion that has been genetically modified to be intelligent, to provide comfort and to guard their lives in case they fall into danger."

Ves felt tempted, but only for a moment. While he rated House Laterna's designer cats very highly, they were not worth the trouble of political entanglement!

Even if he merely souped up her mech but declined to participate in her hunt, he would still be taking sides! Her enemies might possibly wish to deal with him before he could aid Lady Miralix any further!

She could see that Ves still withheld interest, so she began to pile on more offers. "I can provide you with access to services provided by the Sentinel Kingdom that are closed to outsiders. Closed markets, society clubs, black markets and other areas that offer exclusive goods and services to nobles will open their doors to you. In fact, if you urgently require something, you don't have to go through the middlemen. Just ask me directly and I'll see if I can satisfy your request."

The value of insider access that she offered sounded quite considerable. From his own experiences with the Clifford Society, he knew that these exclusive clubs and circles sold some really great goodies.

Yet right now, Ves couldn't think of anything he wanted to obtain he couldn't get from the open market. He already reserved a lot of parts to upgrade the Barracuda and he also ordered a shipment for the key materials to build an ultracompact battery through a black market contact.

With most of his critical demands met, Ves truly did not have any pressing need to ask for expanded access in a state he would be leaving fairly soon.

Certainly, while Ves did require a spiritual fragment from a powerful huge cat, he already made plans to acquire one himself. There was no way he would ask Lady Miralix to hand-deliver him something she shouldn't even be familiar with, let alone procure on his behalf!

However... Ves did think of one particular object he wanted more of. The problem had been hanging back in his mind for a while now.

He sent a command from his comm. Nitaa entered the room soon after while carrying a box.

"There's one area in which you can help me." He began. "Stored inside the box my bodyguard is carrying is an unidentified exotic which I call the P-stone."

Lady Miralix curiously accepted the box from Nitaa and opened it up. "Is this truly an exotic?"

"While it looks like an ordinary space rock, I can assure you it is very much an exotic." Ves smiled. "Let's make a deal. I'll provide you with what little documentation I have. I'll let you borrow my P-stone for.. let's say three days. I would like you to analyze the P-stone at the most advanced materials study

lab you can access. At the end of this period, I want you to return as much data as possible from your lab equipment.\

\ "This rock has a lot of meaning to you.\ " She concluded.

Ves placed a lot of trust in Miralix. If he lost the P-stone, he would suffer a pretty major setback.

However, it wasn't in her interest to screw him over this issue. What the noble scion sought from Ves could only be obtained voluntarily. If she made any attempts to coerce him into cooperation, who knew what kind of hidden danger he would leave behind in her mech?

Ves could literally think up of at least ten-thousand different ways to sabotage a mech without making it too obvious! As long as a Senior didn't inspect the modifications he made to a mech, there was no way Lady Miralix could be sure her mech was fine!

From the start, Ves recognized that he essentially had Lady Miralix over a barrel. Having the upper hand in a negotiation meant he could issue almost any request, trusting that the woman would do her best to fulfill his needs!

As expected, Lady Miralix grasped this crucial opening that opened the door to deeper cooperation. \ "I will do what you ask, Mr. Larkinson. Will you agree to working on my mech if I do what you ask?\ "

\ "It's a start.\ " Ves replied and casually leaned back as if everything was under his control. \ "If you can obtain additional samples of P-stone, let's just say that I am open to your demand. If not... well, regardless of how the subsequent negotiations proceed, I want your promise that you will return my P-stone as well as the full lab data.\ "

Lady Miralix instantly agreed.