

Chapter 1391 Choices Matter

Once Lady Miralix left with her cat Genevieve and the box containing the P-stone, Ves informed his staff of what transpired.

He received a mixed reception.

"Just after you decided to go for the Dragon Cat, you suddenly consider hunting Zeigra again because a lady asked for help?" Gavin asked.

"She didn't seduce me, if that's what you're implying, Benny. The equation is simple. Hunting the Dragon Cat is fairly safe but yields little return. Hunting a Crown Cat is a lot more dangerous, but I won't necessarily get anything better than the previous choice."

"If that is true, why did you reopen the door to hunt for Zeigra?"

"Because Lady Miralix is desperate." Ves grinned. "She needs a skilled mech designer to modify her mechs, and for now her only choice is me. Considering her situation, I don't think she can afford to hold out for another mech designer, not without losing her standing within her noble house."

"So it's a seller's market! You can essentially dictate any price you want as long as it doesn't cross her bottom line!"

Both of them knew what it meant. Because of time and opportunity constraints, Lady Miralix appeared to be in dire need to enhance her mechs!

Ves had tested out her resolve by presenting an unyielding attitude. If she already had some alternatives in mind, then she wouldn't have accommodated him to this extent.

This clued Ves in that Lady Miralix really had no choice but to continue to negotiate with him! Though she maintained her composure as an eminent lady of House Laterna, she'd actually been begging him throughout the entire negotiation!

"Do you really think you can negotiate more concessions out of Lady Miralix, boss? Nobles tend to be very proud. If you go too far, she might retaliate!"

Ves waved away the issue. "I've gotten a good measure of Lady Miralix, and I don't think she's stupid enough to let pride get in the way of completing a life-changing coming-of-age ceremony. This hunt is important to her. There is no way she'll attempt to screw me over while she still requires my earnest cooperation."

His judgement of the woman and his intuition both pointed towards this direction. This made him feel more at ease with playing hardball.

"Still though, Ves. Zeigra is a very dangerous cat. A lot of bodies ended up in his stomach. I can hardly see whether all of the concessions you've managed to secure from Lady Miralix is worth exposing yourself to so much risk!"

"That's why I intend to be unabashed in setting my demands. My cooperation won't come cheap, that you can be assured of." Ves grinned like a shark.

The other people in the room said their piece as well.

Predictably, Nitaa objected the most. "I highly suggest you stick to your original plan, sir. Hunting the Dragon Cat is a safe and secure course of action, as you yourself have described. Why are you throwing all of that out of the window as soon as the noble you wanted to avoid the entire week appealed to your greed?"

"It's all about weighing risk against reward." Ves reiterated. "I'm making a rational decision here! As long as Lady Miralix coughs up enough goodies, then participating in an attempt to hunt Zeigra is no longer a ludicrous choice!"

Both Gavin and Nitaa looked at Ves as if he had lost his mind!

\\"No offense, boss, but that's the stupidest risk assessment that I've ever heard! You're basically pressing the muzzle of a faulty gun against your head while betting that it will misfire when you pull the trigger! Is it really worth it to pull the trigger when the chance of shooting yourself in the head is significant?!\\"

Ves did not see anything wrong with that analogy as long as he added something.

\\"If I get to win a huge prize if I win the bet, then sure I'll pull the trigger!\\"

\\"You!\\"

Gavin palmed his face. \\"Don't you realize how ridiculous you sound?! How many times can you pull the trigger before the gun eventually fires off?! You might win a gamble once or twice, but the chance of lethal discharge can't be staved off forever! It only takes one wrong gamble for you to lose your life!\\"

Ves shook his head. \\"The problem with analogies like the one you're using right now is that they are grossly oversimplified. The chances of encountering a mishap while hunting a Crown Cat is significant, but I can do a lot to stack the odds in my favor. As long as I improve the mechs assigned to the hunt to an impressive degree, then the chance I'll get gobbled up by Zeigra is much lower!\\"

The argument continued to rage between Ves and his staff.

Nitaa and Gavin heavily disagreed with what they saw as a suicidal course of action. Crindon expressed opposition as well, but to a lesser degree.

As for the Ingvars, they surprisingly took the opposite side!

\\"Hunting a Crown Cat is a prestigious accomplishment.\\" Casella declared.

\\"While I'm familiar with Mr. Larkinson's colorful wartime record, his bravery is confined to only a single conflict. Perhaps the citizens of the Bright Republic

have a different opinion, but to foreigners like us, his wartime accomplishments are so impressive that we can't help but doubt they are even real!"

"What does doubting his record during the Bright-Vesia War have to do about hunting Crown Cats?!" Gavin asked in a heated manner.

"To prove that Mr. Larkinson's earlier accomplishments aren't hogwash! A successful hunt on a reputable hunting ground in Felixia conveys a lot of prestige, especially if we can return with a trophy in hand! While it's a shame that Lady Miralix insists on claiming the head, the other parts can still be used to show off the perils that our boss has gone through!"

The perspective of highborn scions differed from that of common-born citizens such as Gavin, Nitaa and Crindon.

Though Ves found many aspects about Imon and Casella Ingvar to be detrimental, this time he saw a lot of value in their upbringing.

"How reputable are hunts?"

"A lot." Casella answered. "To many nobles and high officials, wartime service doesn't rate that high if you're not a mech pilot, because what can you really do in a mech battle? The logistical support you provide in the background is nothing compared to pitching a mech to the forefront of a battle!"

Unspoken here was the tendency for influential and connected people to arrange cushy positions in the rear of the war theater. Ves had encountered plenty of such practices in the Bright Republic!

"So having a hunt under my belt is of greater value than earning merits in war?" Ves asked dubiously.

"Your wartime service is great for impressing commoners, but not from those born in a higher station." Imon stated. "Hunting grounds like the ones that Felixia provide are known for their fairness. Places like these are set up all over human space to provide an equitable competition for every noble and high official to prove their mettle."

It sounded absurd to Ves that high society considered hunting to be more reputable than wartime service!

Casella added another complicating factor. "A big problem with wars is that they happen only intermittently. Some states never even go to war. Back in the Kingdom of the Three Flowers, restless nobles participate in all kinds of high-profile events to prove they are better than their rivals. Hunting is one of the most convenient ways to bolster your reputation and earn some prestige because it is available all-year."

This was the reason why the hunting industry generated a healthy amount of business despite providing little practical contribution to society. It was a rich person's hobby that allowed nobles and other members of high society a way to puff themselves up.

As someone who hadn't been born in a higher station, Ves still had difficulty coming around to this perspective.

"Will it really provide an advantage to me in my relations with others?" He asked with a tinge of doubt.

"It's difficult to explain. Hunting is both a dangerous, life-threatening activity and a form of theater. As long as you've hunted down a formidable creature, you can make endless use of your trophy to impress the uninitiated and earn respect from the initiated. The point about the hunt isn't about challenging or proving yourself. It's about leveraging your achievements to your advantage in your business, political or social life."

"So it's a masquerade, pretty much. The trophies we gain from the hunt are the masks we wear to make us appear more formidable than we really are behind our facades."

"The masks can only be obtained for a price. Only hunts that are reputable and recognized by high society matter." The female Ingvar emphasized.

"Felixia's Asco Continent happens to be recognized by every third-rate state in the star sector. Hunting a famed Crown Cat will earn you kudos not only in the Sentinel Kingdom, but also in the Kingdom of the Three Flowers, the Kinner Tribe and maybe even in your home state!"

"Okay. I think I understand. Let me think about this matter further. Hunting Zeigra is never about earning prestige to me, but I do have to admit that it's a nice bonus. However, my main goal has always been to obtain inspiration for my next design project."

He decided to wait and see what Lady Miralix could drum up in three days that could bring him around to the idea of hunting Zeigra.

While Gavin suggested to him over and over that Ves did not have to accompany Lady Miralix on her hunt after tuning up her mech. Why not do the job, accept the rewards, then go back to planning to hunt the Dragon Cat?

"It's an option." Ves partially became swayed. "I'll judge for myself whether Lady Miralix, her mech pilots and her mechs are strong enough to fare well against a Crown Cat. If I don't think they have a good chance of success, I'll just stay in Kemila while they head into the hunting zone."

He still eyed the additional boost to his reputation and prestige if he personally accompanied the hunting team. While it sounded rather farcical to commoners, Ves knew that this was actually a very valuable opportunity to earn an invisible currency that he always had trouble with recently.

For example, his lack of reputation in high society prevented him from gaining access to the more premier Kinner mercenaries. Notable talents that Ves really wanted to hire such as Commander Oryn Mair flatly refused to engage with him because he was a nobody in their circles!

"Reputation matters!"

According to the Ingvars, hunting a Crown Cat was one of the most prestigious hunts in the sector-wide hunting community. Ves would be able to earn enduring advantages in the Komodo Star Sector and perhaps even beyond if he had a successful hunt under his belt.

At the end of the second day, Ves was just about to retire to his bed when Crindon arrived at his room with a worried expression.

"This is bad, sir!"

"What is it?" Ves looked alert and stopped petting Lucky. "Are we in trouble?"

"I've recently got word that the Rocit Butchers set out this morning to hunt the Dragon Cat! Right now, they're probably halfway, and considering their hunting speed, they'll reach her habitat by the next day!"

"What?!" Ves stood up in shock.

"That's not all! The hunting commander of the Butchers has set out in person this time!"

The leader of the Rocit Butchers was rumored to be a formidable mech pilot and warrior! If he led the hunting team in person, then the Dragon Cat was as good as dead by the end of the next day!

"That's not all! Word on the street is that the Butchers hadn't decided to hunt the Dragon Cat on their own initiative. They accepted a very lucrative mission that's been issued to them the day before yesterday!"

Ves did not have to think long to know who was responsible!

"Damn it! Well played, Lady Miralix!"

Chapter 1392 Sellers Marke

Ves felt like he had egg on his face. At the start of the third day, he glowered constantly as he shoveled his breakfast into his mouth.

Meanwhile, his cat was a ray of sunshine. Sitting contently on the table next to him, Lucky happily munched on his regular portion of exotic minerals like he had no care at all!

The others at the table had been trying to find a way to deal with yesterday's abrupt development.

"There are hundreds of huge cats in the hunting zones." Gavin gently suggested.

"That's true." Ves sighed. "However, finding what I want is not that easy. I was pretty sure that the Dragon Cat possesses what I need. I'll have to perform additional investigations into the other huge cats to find a viable replacement. We might have to move to another hunting city elsewhere on the Asco Continent to find a huge cat that is just as promising as the Dragon Cat."

Ves did not say those words without reason. His gaze met Gavin's eyes in implicit understanding.

Both of them knew who urged the Rocit Butchers to hunt his first choice of game. Lady Miralix must have assigned spies to him or merely accessed the monitoring system of his hotel room in order to find out his interest for the Dragon Cat.

Since his Ves was continually doubting between aiming for the Dragon Cat or Zeigra, Lady Miralix recognized that taking away the former would push him to the latter!

It was the kind of shrewd maneuver that indeed strengthened the noble scion's bargaining power!

However, while Ves inwardly applauded her move, he didn't wish to concede his favorable negotiation position.

Not only that, he also felt affronted that Lady Miralix abused the three-day waiting period to pull off her own shenanigans.

The goodwill he initially extended to her had completely evaporated. How could he cooperate with someone who pulled off such a shady trick?

"Goddamn nobles." He muttered.

He was being a little unfair here. Ves knew that non-nobles could be just as dirty as those who were bestowed with titles. People in power all learned to exploit opportunities in order to climb this far or maintain their current height. Those who failed to keep up would inevitably be pushed down!

Considering the position that Lady Miralix was facing right now, Ves couldn't blame her too much for manipulating the situation in her favor.

A part of him just wanted to leave Kemila and try his luck at another hunting city. While the other huge cats in the vicinity of this failed to arouse his interests, there were so many huge cats elsewhere on the continent that might offer even greater promise.

Right now, both Ves and Gavin deliberately mentioned this option in order to remind Lady Miralix or whoever was monitoring them that Ves still had alternatives! He just had to go through a bit more trouble.

"Sometimes, I feel like it isn't worth it to stick around anymore. Felixia isn't the only planet with huge cats."

Later that day, Ves sent his subordinates out again on another fact-finding mission. In the meantime, he browsed the huge cat database on the planetary network to find alternative candidates to hunt.

Even though he hadn't really found anything comparable to the Dragon Cat in promise, he still kept looking in order to make the impression that he was still seriously looking for alternatives.

Later that evening, Lady Miralix finally arrived at his hotel suite.

Both of them took their discussion to a private room. Only their cats accompanied them into the room.

"Meow."

"Miao!"

Unfortunately for his gem cat, the Felixian designer cat still refused to acknowledge his existence!

Ves immediately began the discussion with an accusation. "Nice trick, by the way. Have the Rocit Butchers already managed to slay the Dragon Cat?"

For her part, the noblewoman looked unapologetic.

"I'm not aware. Communication is blocked in the hunting zones. We'll only know for sure when they return."

Ves crossed his arms to indicate his displeasure. "Uh huh. Now, where is my rock?"

"Here." She said, and passed him the box she carried into the room. "I've added some data chips inside that contain all of the condensed data we've gathered on the rock. For the most part, our researchers found hardly anything that suggests that it's an exotic, but we did find some strange, faint energy emissions in one of our most sensitive lab equipment."

That caused Ves to forget about his earlier irritation. "Is it unique?"

She smiled. "Unique enough that we only found one material that emanates the same kind of emission pattern. A single exotic in House Laterna's material vaults happens to share this in common! Take a look for yourself!"

The lady activated her comm and transmitted a virtual document to him. When Ves activated his own comm to read through the summary of the comparison analysis, he noted several surprises.

First, the P-stone that Ves owned largely resembled a grey space rock. The material that House Laterna stored in their vaults was very different. The shiny bronze-green rock resembled a chunk of molten metal. Its mass and density differed substantially from that of the P-rock, yet when put under the same sensitive scanner, the faint energy emissions they detected shared a lot of similarities!

Ves almost widened his eyes. This might be what he was looking for! Though the Barracuda offered a number of high-quality lab equipment, their small size limited them in many ways. The ship's lab also didn't have the space to accommodate enough variety of lab equipment.

It was different for House Laterna! Their expansive research facilities on the Talin Continent offered room for hundreds of different scanners and lab equipment!

He was sure that he'd encounter a lot of hindrances if he tried to borrow a fully-equipped lab. Such facilities were very expensive and normally reserved for existing research projects. Some lab equipment was so scarce and powerful that they featured waiting lists that stretched for months or years!

Only someone as influential as Lady Miralix could bypass all of those waiting lists and insist on subjecting his P-stone through as many examinations as possible!

Regardless of whether he obtained the second P-stone in House Laterna's possession, Ves was already satisfied with his current gains. The energy emission pattern he received could potentially be used to search for other P-stones offered by prospectors and traders elsewhere!

As long as he could confirm that the bronze-green metallic rock interacted with spirituality, then his desire to make wider use of P-stones came one step closer into fruition!

Of course, since Ves was in the middle of an ongoing negotiation, he did his best to suppress his excitement. He calmly set aside the virtual document and kept the box closed.

"Well, what you've given me is a start. It is far from enough to secure my services, though."

She smiled at him as if she knew he was putting on an act. "I'm sure my contribution thus far is still of significant value to you. I have called in a lot of favors to get the labs to prioritize the analysis of your strange rock."

"I hope you have more in store. If I may ask, my lady, why me? Surely I'm not the only Journeyman in Felixia. The Eron Continent attracts a lot of visitors from the entire region."

"I indeed have alternatives." She said simply, but said no more.

Ves suspected that Lady Miralix valued his specialty very highly. Considering his recent two mech designs, he didn't blame her for putting a lot of hopes in his abilities. She wasn't shy about admitting to that fact either, which meant her desperation was really quite considerable!

No matter what promises she made and what concessions she agreed to, as long as she succeeded in hunting a Crown Cat, she could easily make up for it later! With a prestigious Crown Cat under her belt, her future career would likely develop by leaps and bounds.

The two gradually proceeded with the negotiations. Ves maintained a disinterested expression as Lady Miralix continued to dangle various offers in front of her face.

Offers such as providing him with House Laterna's designer cats or other biotech-related goods and services fell flat with him. He simply didn't trust Miralix or her house enough to rely on their products.

Other offers interested him a bit more.

"The Sentinel Kingdom normally imposes a significant amount of trade barriers to any mech manufacturers looking to do business here. I can pull some strings to bestow your LMC with better access to our mech market. You have to know that Sentinel's mech market is very attractive to mech companies. It sets a standard throughout the region, meaning that as long as your mechs do well in Sentinel, the neighboring states will soon follow suit!"

"The LMC is already on a healthy growth trajectory. It is not in dire need to gain access to Sentinel's mech market." Ves calmly replied.

She raised another offer.

"Are you interested in the Nyxian Gap?"

"Everyone who visits the Sentinel Kingdom is interested in the Nyxian Gap. I'm hardly the first person who looked it up on the galactic net. That said, I don't think I'll ever step foot in it. It's far too dangerous for the likes of me to enter this pirate-infested region."

She dangled her next offer in front of his face. "What if I can offer you temporary access to the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association? The Peacekeepers exist to connect every privately-owned outfit under a common banner in order to coordinate our actions against the Nyxian scum. The SPA is sanctioned by the state and enjoys greater rights and privileges than

normal, especially with regards to the Gap. One of the most notable perks is priority access to any spoils the Peacekeepers retrieve from the Gap!"

Ves raised his eyebrow. "So it's a way for me to obtain access to the Nyxian Gap's specialty goods?"

"Yes! In fact, the metallic rock that's stored in our vault is part of a batch of odd minerals and exotics that we've procured from the SPA! If you are looking to obtain additional samples of your so-called P-stone, then accessing the SPA's closed market's is your best bet!"

Now this really sparked his interest. Aside from finding and securing additional samples of P-stone, Ves also wanted to obtain the source for geril spice or at least a bulk shipment of this rare and expensive Nyxian product!

Short of entering the Nyxian Gap, Ves could only trawl the black markets of the Sentinel Kingdom, which was inherently risky. If he could acquire the goods he wanted from a legal channel, then that was great!

Still, Ves restrained his excitement and tried to look as if he still wasn't satisfied. He casually leaned his cheek against his fist. "Is there anything else you can provide in exchange for my services?"

She paused for a moment. Her eyes darted back and forth before she withdrew a jamming device from her suit jacket. As soon as she activated it, she revealed the last concession she was willing to make.

"We also have ties to.. the other side." She whispered. "I can't say anything more about the organization in question right now, but if you want to transact with certain parties in the Nyxian Gap, then I can provide you with a one-time opportunity to make a trade!"

Now this sounded interesting! Ves recognized that this kind of offer would likely be very hard to obtain elsewhere. Since the lady's future career was at

stake, she didn't hesitate to raise something that was probably very taboo in this pirate-hating state!

His interest peaked, so much so that Ves finally relented a bit. "As I've said before, as long as you make it worth my while, I'm willing to lend my abilities to you. It won't be cheap though. All of the offers you've made aren't enough in isolation, especially since the last two are one-time instances. Let's go over your suggestions again."

The two began to hash out an agreement over the course of a few hours.

Chapter 1393 Numerous Concessions

Due to his strong position, Ves held the upper hand during the extensive negotiations.

He continually opened his mouth and demanded an extensive amount of concessions and accommodations.

Lady Miralix tried her best to limit the damage. On some points, she conceded without too much fuss.

She held her ground in other areas, though. In particular, she was loathe to cede any control over her hunting team.

However, Ves continued to insist on reserving the right to issue certain orders, such as holding back an attack or delay killing Zeigra if they ever managed to defeat the Crown Cat in battle.

"Why?" She asked.

"Because I'm not certain if I can obtain what I want from Zeigra. I may require extensive observation up close before I gain a sufficient amount of inspiration. Don't worry, my lady. I won't stop you from killing the Crown Cat and claiming its head as a trophy."

In truth, Ves did aspire for the head as well. It contained the brains of the Crown Cat which definitely housed the creature's spirituality. He could probably do a lot of things he hadn't done before, especially if he continued to climb up the path of life.

Sadly, Lady Miralix would never let go of Zeigra's head. She had to return to her noble house with an impressive trophy in her possession. Without physical proof of her accomplishment, she would only gain half as much prestige from the risky hunt!

Eventually, he did manage to gain the right to influence the proceedings of the hunt. Ves insisted on it as he wasn't sure how he could obtain a spiritual fragment from a Crown Cat as formidable as Zeigra.

He also wasn't sure whether he could harvest a spiritual fragment from the beast when he was dead. Ves developed a guess that he might be able to obtain more than just a fragment if he was present at the moment of its death.

However, this was just a guess. He didn't know for sure, so just to be safe, Ves planned to secure a spiritual fragment before Lady Miralix forced the confrontation.

"If everything goes well, I'll probably need an extra night after we first encounter the Crown Cat." He said.

"Zeigra may decide to go on the attack as soon as he detects our scouts."

"Then by all means, fight."

The negotiations continued. Ves and Lady Miralix grew more comfortable with each other as they hammered out an agreement that left both of them somewhat satisfied.

In summary, the agreement stipulated several demands to both Ves and Lady Miralix.

Ves promised to do his utmost to upgrade the lady's personal mech. He would also spend some time to go over the other mechs of her hunting team and suggest various modifications.

In addition, he would also accompany the hunting trip and continually advise and assist in field maintenance of their mechs. Nothing about this was new to him. Considering the relatively short duration of a hunting trip, Ves did not expect to endure anything like he experienced on the surface of Aeon Corona VII.

In return for these simple services, Lady Miralix made a lot of concessions.

First, she already promised to give him some initiative over the direction of her hunting team. While she remained in full operational control, Ves had the right to issue certain broad instructions as long as they didn't pose a grave threat to the lives of the hunters or the success of the hunting trip.

Second, Lady Miralix surrendered the rest of the carcass into his possession. While Ves wasn't sure what he could get out of the remainder of Zeigra's carcass without its essential head, he didn't rule out anything.

Next, she promised to provide him with access to both the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association and a very prohibited black market organization called the Circle of Mota.

The former didn't require much elaboration. The outfits acting as pirate hunters, bounty hunters and foolhardy prospectors frequently entered the Nyxian Gap and returned with a variety of booty in their cargo holds.

While the Peacekeepers kept most of the good stuff to themselves, they frequently sold spoils they didn't find any use for. This applied to numerous strange exotics uncovered from the ubiquitous asteroid in the Gap.

In fact, much of the exotics for sale at Centerpoint originated from organizations like the Peacekeepers!

Ves had high hopes of accessing their exotics marketplace. He wanted to uncover more treasures like the P-stone. Even if he couldn't get another space rock that possessed the capability to hold and store spiritual energy, perhaps he might be able to find something that repelled spirituality or converted it into another form!

As for gaining access to the more obscure and secretive Circle of Mota, Lady Miralix emphasized its prohibited nature.

"Within the Sentinel Kingdom, it's a serious crime to associate with pirates. I can get in serious trouble if I introduce you to the Circle of Mota. I can only arrange for you to get in touch with them through a middleman."

He grew curious that such a thing was possible at all. "How pervasive is the trade between Sentinels and Nyxian pirates?"

"Not as much as you think. The royal house and many noble houses are very strict about befriending pirates. However, there are still many goods in the possession of the pirates that Sentinel nobles are willing to pay a high price to acquire. The same goes the other way. The Nyxian pirates and dark mercenaries have a very high demand on technologically sophisticated goods and services. The chaotic and undeveloped region of the Nyxian Gap is an awful environment to develop a tech center."

Just like the frontier, the Nyxian Gap suffered an enduring shortage of techs and science adepts. Mech technicians, mech designers, ship spacers, doctors, and other skilled and educated personnel did not grow from trees!

A region required a robust educational system to produce these kinds of people en masse. While virtual education programs and modules offered an alternative, the results often left much to be desired. At the very least, the quantity and quality of graduates who were raised this way was vastly lower than those graduating from formal institutions!

"For this reason, the most convenient and abundant trade goods that Sentinels supply to the Nyxian Gap are slaves." She declared.

The revelation shocked him, though he shouldn't have been surprised. If not for the jammer blocking every form of monitoring in a hotel that was likely under her direct control anyway, she would have never spoken these words aloud!

"How come your noble house is involved with this so-called Circle of Mota?"

She smiled sardonically at him. "Some of our more clandestine biotech products are in high demand. Innocent designer cats like Genevieve here are toys in comparison!"

"Miao!"

"Oh, I didn't mean to disparage you. You're very precious to me, Genevieve!"

As Lady Miralix briefly played with her cat, Ves processed her revelations. If she wasn't so desperate to secure his services, she would have never revealed such a bombshell.

In fact, the risk of revealing House Laterna's relations with the Nyxian pirates was a huge risk in itself. Wasn't she afraid that Ves would tip off the Peacekeepers or something?

Perhaps she already had insurance in place. Perhaps it would take solid proof to back up his accusation. Whatever the case, Ves did not have any intentions of betraying Lady Miralix in the first place, so the point was moot.

What Ves actually saw in the offer was a way for him to connect with the actual power structure Nyxian Gap. Not only would he be able to trade away his Devil Tiger through this contact once he finished its design and production, he might also be able to get some clues about the source of geril spice.

Of course, all of those matters paled in comparison to finding out the whereabouts of his father!

"You've offered a lot to borrow my design abilities." He remarked at the end of this impactful negotiation. "May I ask why you're willing to go this far?"

The lady shrugged. "Because I know it is worth it. You may be a young Journeyman, but studying your record has impressed me very much. Not only are you battle tested and possess a more intimate understanding of the rigors that mechs face in the field, but your products are also extraordinary. If you can elevate my mech to the height of your Transcendent Messenger, then that is a price worth obtaining at great cost!"

Ves was taken aback at her frank enthusiasm. It seemed his prior accomplishments played a huge role in attracting her attention.

Though she didn't initially look like one, it turned out she was actually a huge fan of his work!

"Oh... thank you for the compliment. I have to warn you though that designing a mech like the Transcendent Messenger is a very time and resource-intensive process. I won't be able to bestow the same degree of strength to your mech in the timeframe we are working with. I'm also short on various resources which aren't easy to obtain."

She dismissively flicked her hand. "I am aware it is difficult for you to drum up a miracle on short notice and on an existing mech. Just do the best you can, Mr. Larkinson. Your remuneration depends on the success of our upcoming hunt. As long as we succeed, you will have all the rewards I've promised, so it behooves you to improve our mechs as much as possible!"

That was the critical demand that Lady Miralix imposed during the negotiations. All of her hard work and sacrifices would go to waste if she failed the upcoming hunt!

In order to ensure that Ves would be incentivized to pull out all the stops, she made the hunt's success an essential condition for him to earn all of the rewards!

Ves eventually agreed to it, because he wouldn't be able to obtain all of the valuable concessions otherwise.

He just had to work extra hard in the coming days. Lady Miralix had years to prepare the groundwork for this tradition of her noble house, so her hunting team certainly wouldn't look shabby!

As Lady Miralix finally departed from his hotel suite with Genevieve in her arms, Ves called in Gavin to relay to him the details.

"I hate to ask you again, but is all of that really worth participating in such a dangerous hunt, boss?"

"Benny." Ves directed a flat glare towards Gavin. "I make the decisions here. I've already made up my mind concerning this matter. All of the concessions I can expect to receive upon the successful conclusion of the hunt is more than worth all of this trouble! I won't argue with you any further about this. I've already struck a deal with Lady Miralix so it's not like I can change my mind at this point."

Though he employed Gavin in order to act as a voice of reason, sometimes Ves didn't feel like listening to reason! In the end, he gave in to temptation, trusting Lady Miralix and his own capabilities to stack the deck against Zeigra.

He ignored Gavin's concerns and picked up Lucky, lifting his cat in the air like a baby.

"Meow."

"Who do you think is stronger, you or Zeigra?"

"Meow!"

"Of course you'd say something like that. I don't know if reality will match your expectations." Ves shook his head.

Lucky possessed deadly capabilities, but Ves doubted his ability to hide and deal damage could kill a powerful huge cat in an instant.

Not a single huge cat in Felixia was easy to kill. The ones developed by House Laterna in order to provide a sufficient challenge to mechs were incredibly resistant against damage!

With flesh, hide and even fur resistant to mech-sized weapons, top predators such as Zeigra could probably shrug off his Amastendira's full-powered discharges with ease!

"The best we can do is run away." He told Lucky. "Even then, our stealth probably won't last long enough to outrun a Crown Cat's sense of smell!"

"Meow!"

Chapter 1394 Felixia Catstrikers

The deal he struck with Lady Miralix set everything in stone. Ves no longer considered the lesser huge cats such as the Dragon Cat any longer.

Though neither Ves nor Lady Miralix dared to draft a formal contract that formalized all of the terms, they were very much bound by a common goal this time.

Both were aiming for one of the most deadliest cats on Asco. Zeigra, the Mech Cruncher, may be among the youngest and weakest of Crown Cats that graced the hunting zones. However, his deadliness was not in question!

Ves expressed a lot of interest in the mech Lady Miralix intended to pilot for the hunt. In order to confront an infamous Crown Cat like Zeigra, House Laterna must have accumulated a lot of experience and know-how in this area.

The rulers of Felixia designed Zeigra's genome after all! They possessed an absolute information advantage!

Yet as Lady Miralix brought Ves, their cats and some of their staff to her hunting compound in Kemila, she gave a surprising answer.

"I don't enjoy any advantages of the other mech hunters."

"What?"

"This hunt is a trial." She elaborated as they passed by a training ground where a number of mech pilots exercised their bodies under the local system's sun. "Every son and daughter of House Laterna who graduates as a mech pilot must prove that they haven't been coasting through the mech academies."

"What if they fail? What if they die?"

"Then they deserve to die. Sentinel demands strong soldiers and even stronger leaders. How can I gain the respect of Sentinel's military mech pilots if I cannot defeat them in battle? It is better for my useless self to die rather than disgrace my noble house!"

This sounded absolutely silly to Ves! From her tone, he got the sense that she truly believed in her words! The upbringing she received from House Laterna placed a very huge emphasis on strength, honor and reputation, so much so that those who disgraced their name were better off dead!

"So if I understand you correctly, you don't enjoy any insider knowledge such as an internal research report on Zeigra's genes or such?"

The blond woman shook her head. "Cheating only demeans the very point of the trial. If weaklings who should have died managed to pass this challenge with ease by depending on unfair advantages, they'll only disgrace our noble house in the future! Pirates and other enemies will not be so easy to cheat!"

That made sense, though Ves still thought that House Laterna was taking this way too far.

"How will everyone else know that the hunt is conducted fairly?"

"I'm being monitored by an inspector of the state. The Sentinel Kingdom has rules. Every test a noble house imposes upon its own members has to be a genuine challenge. The royal house serves as the neutral arbiter who judges the validity and authenticity of the trials. Only in this way will passing the trial have meaning!"

To Ves, it sounded as if every noble house engaged in this tradition! He knew that the Sentinels placed a lot of emphasis on strength, but throwing every mech pilot that carries their name into life-and-death trials just after graduating sounded rather extreme!

As far as he knew, not even the Vesia Kingdom engaged in such a man-eating practice!

Hell, something as cutthroat like this would never fly in the Larkinson Family!

..Then again, the Larkinsons never insisted on excellence like the Sentinels. Back home, every Larkinson potentate received focused training from their retired aunts and uncles.

Most Larkinsons ended up a cut above the average mech pilot graduate, but some just didn't have the genetic aptitude, learning ability or talent to grow very far. While these dullards that carried the Larkinson name never enjoyed the renown of their more notable cousins, at least they weren't forced to their deaths!

As a Larkinson, Ves knew that his extended family didn't care too much about the bad apples in their midst. So what if a Larkinson or two turned out to be awful mech pilots? The reputation of the Larkinsons hardly suffered because a lot of other Larkinsons performed well enough to keep their name respected.

For this reason, he really couldn't understand families like the Laternas who placed an undue amount of importance to maintaining their reputation from everyone who carried their name.

Perhaps it made sense to people like Lady Miralix who had been born under high expectations. Yet who else really cared?

The same people who demanded universal excellence from their family were probably the only ones who judged others for making missteps in this aspect.

Ves doubted that the common-born Sentinels seriously cared whether someone like Lady Miralix embarrassed herself in battle or something.

To average people, high society was far too distant from them. Ves only recently emerged from their midst, so he knew how little they knew or cared about the lives of those who lived seemingly pampered lives.

Apparently, he hadn't managed to hide his doubts, because Lady Miralix exhibited a knowing glance.

"You think that trials like the one I am facing are extreme, correct?"

"I can never make sense of you nobles and your games." He admitted.

She chuckled. "Understandable, though don't think I'm as open-minded as the other Sentinel nobles. Felixia attracts visitors from many foreign states, so I don't mind your presumptuousness. Take care not to question the customs of our state. We aristocrats are rooted in the belief that our harsh traditions are the reason why we still deserve to be in charge. Commoners don't understand us because they aren't shouldering the burdens of the Sentinel Kingdom."

"The crown weighs heavily on your head."

"Then I'd better develop a strong neck in order to keep my head aloft!"

As Ves fell into thought, the cats that trailed behind them started to tussle a bit with each other.

Apparently tired of being ignored, Lucky started to paw at Genevieve, who immediately grew angry for allowing a dirty mechanical cat to dirty her immaculate dirty coat!

"Miao!"

"Meow!"

"Miao!"

Genevieve quickly pounced at Lucky in order to show who's boss, and the two cats rolled around the dirt and wrestled against each other!

Nitaa, who followed behind them all, shook her head. "Cats."

In any case, as far as nobles went, Ves developed a good impression of Lady Miralix. Unlike someone like Lord Javier, she didn't insist on corrupting him to her viewpoint. She also acted cordially with him as if he was a fellow friend and noble.

Of course, the main reason Lady Miralix presented an intimate demeanor was because of his own status. A Journeyman not only possessed engineering and design capabilities that surpassed the human norm, they were also regarded as galactic citizens!

As Ves earned these eminent titles through his own merits, feudal states such as the Sentinel Kingdom pretty much regarded him as a noble! This made it easy for Lady Miralix to regard him with respect!

After walking a bit further into the noblewoman's compound, they arrived at the mech stables where a number of mechs stood dormant. Ves studied the mechs with a critical eye.

"I see these mechs are some of the best midrange mechs you can buy from Sentinel's mech market." He spoke.

All of the mechs were worth around forty to forty-five million bright credits if sold in the Bright Republic.

"I've spent several years building up the Felixia Catstrikers." Lady Miralix said proudly. "All of our mech pilots are comrades that I've befriended in the mech academies, so our teamwork and cooperation is already solid. The mechs I've procured have all been selected on the advice of the mech pilots of my house."

Teamwork played a vital role in Asco. The mature huge cats that roamed the hunting zone could easily defeat a single mech in isolation! They were simply too strong and big, as most of them actually weighed more than a heavy mech, but moved much faster to boot!

Relying on pure strength almost never led to a successful hunt. Even the Rocit Butchers, for all their seemingly mindless ferocity, employed simple tactics and formations to make sure that they applied their strengths effectively.

"What do you think of the mechs of my Catstrikers?" She asked, eager to hear the opinion of an expert in the field.

"I think they're very suitable to hunt a formidable beast." He replied as he studied the various mechs by their appearances alone. "While I can't judge their exact parameters, as far as I can see, they are all designed for peak performance. As long as their energy reserves last, they can exert a lot of strength from their frames."

What he didn't mention was that these mechs were very wasteful in terms of durability, longevity and depreciation. These mechs were designed to exert as

much strength as possible to the point of overloading their systems and overstraining their physical components!

At best, they could only participate in three or four arduous hunts before their performance and structural integrity degraded! At that point, it was best to recycle them rather than risk them in battle further!

Nonetheless, the benefit to all of these sacrifices was that the mechs performed significantly better than mechs built to last and endure such as his own products.

Ves designed mechs such as the Blackbeak, the Crystal Lord and the Aurora Titan in the context of the prevailing demand in the Bright Republic. His home state frequently engaged in war, which was very expensive each time it happened.

Mech buyers therefore learned to prioritize mechs designed to survive the rigors of war and last through continuous low-to-medium intensity battles.

For this reason, Ves tweaked the parameters of his mechs to last for years or potentially decades. This approach also complimented his specialty as the X-Factor of his mechs slowly grew and adapted over time.

It was one of his greatest ambitions that his mechs grew in value over time, rather than depreciate in value as they grew more outdated!

His mechs really started to shine when used for many years! They were even better if their owners slowly upgraded their parts in order to keep up with the latest mech generation!

The mechs used by the Catstrikers adopted a completely opposite approach. They were far from prudent investments for the long term! Ves bet that Lady Miralix would quickly get rid of all of her mechs once the hunt came to a conclusion!

Though her mech loadout made Ves wince due to the sheer amount of waste it represented, Lady Miralix and her wealthy house could easily afford the expenditure!

"If your mechs only exist to hunt down a single Crown Cat, then the selection of these mechs is very optimal." He commented. "As long as you can bear the cost, that is, which you probably do since your house is running a lucrative tourist planet."

"While I can't break the rules, I can still make sure to set myself up in the best possible condition to engage in our coming hunt. None of our mechs surpasses the cost limit. All of them fall just below the ceiling imposed on every hunting mech in the Asco Continent."

"Does the same apply to your own personal mech, my lady?"

She grinned. "That's a given. Why don't you see so for yourself! We've finally arrived at my personal mech! Behold my Kinslayer!"

Calling her mech the Kinslayer seemed apt. Instead of piloting a humanoid mech like the rest of her Catstrikers, Lady Miralix instead opted to pilot a bestial mech!

To be more precise, she piloted a tiger mech!

"This... you're hunting a Crown Cat with a tiger mech?"

"Yes!"

"Isn't that... dangerous?"

She laughed. "I am a Laterna! Cats are intimately bound to our house! Almost every mech pilot that has emerged from our house has chosen to pilot a bestial mech! Many of my ancestors have succeeded in hunting down a Crown Cat while piloting tiger mechs like mine! To become a master of cats,

we must learn how to dominate a cat on their own terms! This is the central belief of our house!\

Ves looked befuddled. House Laterna really took their cat obsession way too far!

Chapter 1395 Hunting Strategy

When Ves studied the predominant tactics employed by mech hunting teams on the Asco Continent, he learned they predominantly adopted persistence hunting against formidable huge cats.

Monstrously strong Crown Cats such as Zeigra couldn't be felled in a single confrontation. The damage they could endure matched or exceeded that of a heavy mech!

These huge cats grew up on a personalized diet of exotics deposited at various places in the hunting zones at regular intervals. For a single huge cat to develop into a fearsome Crown Cat, they needed a lot of specialized minerals and exotics over the course of their growth!

This was very expensive! House Laterna was bleeding money to sustain the hunting activities in Asco.

Nonetheless, the biotech research they engaged in to develop the huge cats eventually paid back for itself. There were many possible applications for fearsome organic products that could equal the strength of mechs.

Crown Cats happened to be their crown jewels, which was very apt considering the immense amount of resources invested into their growth!

Normally, a huge cat as young as Zeigra still required a few more years to grow to his level of strength.

Yet Zeigra smashed everyone's expectations by supplementing his diet by eating chunks out of mechs! His tolerance range for exotics was a lot wider than the researchers who designed his genes expected!

Neither Ves or Lady Miralix dared to underestimate this creature who became worthy to join the ranks of Crown Cats in expert time. If he grew a few years more, it was very much possible that he might one day shoot all the way to the top of the ranking!

Against these formidable Crown Cats that sometimes matched the strength of second-class mechs, hunting teams predominantly adopted strategies meant to tire and bleed the fearsome creatures over time.

"Hunting the weaker huge cats requires less effort on the part of hunting teams." Lady Miralix elaborated as they drew closer to her Kinslayer. "The weaker cats are still strong enough to pose a threat to mechs, but their strength and resilience can always be overcome in a single battle."

"And that's not viable with Crown Cats?"

"No." She shook her head. "Crown Cats are the best of the best. They are much more terrible than a regular huge cat. If my Catstrikers attempt to fell a beast like Zeigra in a single battle, then our mechs will almost certainly break before our prey does! The only way we can conclude our hunt successfully is if we wear it down over multiple rounds!"

"So unlike the lightning strike approach adopted against weaker cats, you're trying to engage Zeigra in a battle of attrition?"

"That is an apt way to describe my plan. fighting against a Crown Cat is a contest which will both sides nibble at each other until one side can't keep up anymore."

"Your mechs don't exactly look suitable for a long slog." Ves remarked.

"That's why we have to make sure we fight ferociously enough to beat Zeigra into a retreat or deter him from pursuing us when we pull back."

"I take it that doesn't always work out the way you want."

Her face took on a grim expression. "It is during these times where most of the casualties fall. Cats are very opportunistic, especially those we genetically modified to become more formidable predators. They expend a lot of energy during fights, and constantly judge whether it is worthwhile for them to persist in the fight or cut their losses and retreat."

"So in other words, a huge cat will choose to retreat as long as it thinks it can't defeat its opposition?"

"On the other side of the coin, they'll continue to press their aggression as long as they think their opposition is weak! This is what we have to avoid at all costs! As long as Zeigra smells weakness, he will continue to exert his energy into killing us, thereby pushing our mechs to their breaking points!"

It sounded simple, but the cost of failure was immense. The Kinslayer and the other mechs of the Felixia Catstrikers were geared towards outputting an overwhelming amount of strength and ferocity in a short amount of time.

Depending on their energy expenditure, after fifteen to thirty minutes had passed, the mechs would quickly run out of steam. Unless they could resupply their spent energy cells during combat, the mechs would not be able to resist the furious ire of a Crown Cat!

"Naturally, the Crown Cats can't afford to fight too long, as their endurance has limits as well." She noted. "However, if they throw all caution to the wind, they will definitely choose to fight to the point of utter exhaustion!"

In order to avoid this awful outcome which was the leading cause for failure in hunting Crown Cats, the Catstrikers had to fight in a way that made them appear stronger than they really were. They had to put up such an intimidating front that the cat they wanted to hunt would eventually choose to back off or let the mechs disengage without continuing the pursuit.

"I can hardly see how this is possible." He admitted. "Crown Cats are the strongest cats on the continent. Surely they're incredibly proud and full of themselves, right?"

"Part of what you said is true, Mr. Larkinson, but don't forget that Zeigra is still a young huge cat. Even if we started ranking him among the Crown Cats, this is merely a human construct. According to the investigations I've conducted on Zeigra, the cat himself still adheres to the behavior pattern of an adolescent of his kind. That means he is a bit more inclined to flee if he thinks he faces a serious threat."

"That's a very bold assumption to make. What if you're wrong?"

"Then the hunt will result in failure." She replied flatly.

While Ves had a lot of misgivings about the risky nature of her hunting strategy, it was the only viable option to tackle one of the deadliest beasts on the continent.

"My respect for hunters who succeeded in killing a Crown Cat has grown. While I don't claim to understand the culture surrounding the hunting community, I can see why these kinds of hunts draw admiration!"

Just because wealthy individuals had a way of earning prestige didn't mean it came easily. The integrity and validity of their accomplishments had to be impeccable to make their accomplishments count.

High society took a very dim view to those who attempted to get by with exaggerated accounts or outright cheating. Letting lazy or cowardly individuals subvert the challenges not only put the hunting tradition into question, they also devalued the accomplishments of genuine hunters!

Since many people who engaged in this tradition happened to be wealthy or powerful individuals, they possessed the means to impose fairness to the

process. Only in this way would huge game hunting continue to be a prestigious activity.

"Will we be followed around by neutral inspectors during the hunt?"

Lady Miralix nodded. "That is a given. The entire process of the hunt will be monitored as well. As soon as we return to Kemila, all of the footage and raw data will be uploaded to a database of the Galactic Hunting Club. Once they analyze the footage and verify their authenticity will the hunt be formally added to my record. Yours as well."

"Galactic Hunting Club?"

This was the first time he heard of such an organization!

"I'm not surprised you haven't heard of the GHC. It's a well-known entity among hunters in the galaxy, but it doesn't advertise its existence to commoners. Its only purpose is to impose a set of common hunting rules throughout the galaxy so that every hunter can compare their hunting achievements to fellow hunters without any confusion."

"Is it a weaker trans-galactic organization like the Mercenary Association?"

"That's a good comparison. The GHC works along the same lines. They are mainly responsible for registering, verifying and cataloguing notable hunting achievements. The inspector that will be accompanying us in our hunt is both an envoy of the royal house and a mid-level official of the Club."

"I see. You said the GHC will record a successful hunt in my record as well?"

She smiled. "As long as you make good on your promises and accompany my Catstrikers into the hunting zone, you are as much of a hunter as I. Just because you don't pilot a mech doesn't make you any less of a huge game hunter in the eyes of the Club!"

That was... a somewhat mixed surprise to Ves. While he indeed wished to pad his record by adding in a notable hunt, he didn't know that it was so formalized.

This was good news to him because if the GHC's influence truly stretched over the galaxy, his hunting achievements would still be relevant even if he moved to a completely different star sector!

"Let's go take a closer look at your Kinslayer. Can I look at its performance specifications as well?"

"Everything is open to you as far as my mech is concerned. Feel free to explore it to your heart's content."

Ves began to study the tiger mech that Lady Miralix intended to defeat a Crown Cat.

Overall, he found many similarities to the humanoid mechs piloted by the rest of her hunting team.

"This is a custom mech, right?" Ves guessed.

"Right. I commissioned a Journeyman to tailor a mech that complies with the limits."

"It's a good design." He appreciatively remarked. "There's hardly any waste in the design. Every aspect of the mech is being utilized. I haven't spotted any fatal weak points either."

Whoever designed the Kinslayer not only knew their way around with bestial mechs, they also exhibited a solid and stable design approach.

While the custom mech might not have a lot of exciting features or gimmicks, its base performance parameters were very high considering the underlying tech and materials.

Ves had the impression that he was studying the work of an older, steadier and more experienced Journeyman.

This was both good and bad for him. It was good because a solid foundation meant that Ves did not have to waste a lot of time to fix flaws that were beneath his notice.

However, a mech that was already pretty good left very little room for improvement. So far, Ves did not see a lot of areas where he could implement clear improvements.

Perhaps he might be able to spot more opportunities to improve the Kinslayer if he upgraded his Mechanics and Metallurgy Skills to Senior. Yet the entire point of his recent actions was to design a mech that fulfilled the upgrade missions for those Skills!!

This meant that Ves would not be able to contribute as much as he hoped. The best he could do was to alter a few design choices into a different direction that strengthened one aspect while weakening another aspect of the mech.

Doing this couldn't really be considered as improvements. At best, they were merely modifications that shifted the specialization of the mech.

Perhaps the only value he could add to the mech was his specialty. While this wasn't the first time he added an X-Factor to an existing mech not of his own design, he lacked a lot of experience in this area.

Perhaps he could remedy that shortcoming this time.

"Alright. I think I know what I am dealing with." He declared. "To be honest, your mech is already a very fine machine. Don't expect me to achieve any substantial jumps in the performance of your mech."

"I've already taken that into account, Mr. Larkinson. Just do your best to turn the Kinslayer into something remarkable. Any advantage, no matter how small, is worth the effort!"

It relieved Ves quite a bit that he was dealing with a sensible client this time. Lady Miralix had a good head on her shoulders, and knew enough about mechs to keep her expectations in check.

"If you don't mind, I'll start with my work."

"Very well. I will be at the office in the center of the compound if you need me. Be sure to spare some attention to the other mechs of my hunting team as well. My entire maintenance crew is standing ready to assist you with the grunt work."

After Miralix and her cat departed the stables, Ves took a good look at the Kinslayer's unfeeling mech frame and wondered how he could breathe life in this machine.

Chapter 1396 Kinslayer

The more he delved into the design of the Kinslayer, the more Ves took note of how its designer applied the principles of tiger mechs.

"This is a bestial mech designed to fight against beasts!"

Quite a number of aspects present in regular bestial mechs would not work out when pitted against an organic monstrosity like a Crown Cat.

A Crown Cat could never be felled by a single ambush! They were also fairly resistant to damage, so no matter how much a tiger mech emphasized offensive power, it would never be enough to defeat these apex predators in a single round!

"Zeigra isn't called a Crown Cat for nothing! He's a veritable king of his hunting zone!"

For this reason, the Kinslayer and the other mechs of the Felixia Catstrikers piled up a substantial amount of armor.

The thick armor plating allowed the mechs to withstand several solid hits from a formidable Crown Cat without instantly losing battle power!

However, the key phrase here was 'several'! Due to the limits with regard to the cost and quality of every mech deployed for hunting, the armor systems of the Kinslayer and the humanoid mechs of the Catstrikers really couldn't endure that much damage!

Normally, if the armor of the mechs proved insufficient, then they often relied on mobility to evade damage.

However, due to the substantial amount of armor weighing down the mechs, their mobility was firmly below average!

"These mechs can't possibly outrun a Crown Cat!"

At first glance, this common configuration made little sense to Ves. The Catstrikers had no confidence that any of their mechs could withstand a lot of blows from Zeigra. Not even the two knight mechs of the hunting team looked like they were geared to block Zeigra's attacks for long.

Ves could read the underlying approach of the Catstrikers from the configuration of the armor of their mechs. They treated the beginning of a hunt as the moment where their mechs were still in peak condition.

Throughout the process of hunt whereby multiple rounds would ensue between the hunting team and Zeigra, the condition of the mechs quickly degraded.

"The Catstrikers are deliberately sacrificing the durability of their mechs in exchange for weakening Zeigra and sapping his strength!"

Turning the hunt into a contest of attrition meant that Lady Miralix and her hunting team would have to manage the condition of her mechs carefully. That was going to be a very big challenge as the rounds they fought against Zeigra had to be as ferocious and aggressive as possible in order to deter the cat from persisting too long in a round!

If Zeigra smelled any notable weakness from the mechs who attacked him, the ruthless cat would surely press on with his assault in order to get rid of his attackers once and for all!

If the Catstrikers wanted to avoid this outcome, they had to use their mechs boldly and without reserve. They needed to accept that their mechs would get more and more trashed after each round with the Crown Cat.

Of course, if everything went right, then the sacrifices the Catstrikers made would be worth it. A battle of attrition was a race to make an opponent tire themselves out and lose battle effectiveness first!

Though Ves found this hunting strategy to be rather iffy on many points, the huge game hunters on Felixia utilized this approach for decades.

As Ves studied the mech in greater detail, he left Gavin and the rest of his staff to perform other errands on his behalf. Some of the arrangements he made with Lady Miralix required some preparation on his end.

For example, as part of her payment, she withdrew some valuable materials from House Laterna's warehouses that Ves anticipated he would need to fabricate the finished version of the Devil Tiger. Shipping them to one of the supply ships of the Battle Criers and ordering additional materials to round out his requirements took time.

While Gavin took care of these logistical matters, Ves also sent Crindon and the Ingvars onto other fact-finding missions.

He wanted the Ingvars to carefully sound out any information about the Peacekeepers. A lot of mech pilots in Kemila used to serve in one of the outfits aligned with the anti-piracy organization, or had friends or relatives who fought under their banner.

Mech pilots like Imon and Casella should find it relatively easy to connect with these people.

As for Crindon, Ves tasked him with the much more sensitive mission of gathering information about the secretive and highly prohibited Circle of Mota.

He trusted his Kinner security expert and spy to investigate the Circle discreetly, which was very hard to do on a planet like Felixia where practically every corner was being monitored.

Still, Crindon confidently expressed his ability to circumvent these means, so Ves didn't worry too much. The Kinner he bought had more than proven his competence.

He turned his attention back to the Kinslayer. As a tiger mech, Ves gained a lot of interest in its configuration and overall structure.

From a battle mechatronics perspective, the Kinslayer excelled in short-duration brawls. The tiger mech could take a lot of hits due to its thick armor and well-protected internal parts.

Its offensive power was considerable as its limbs were strengthened and could exert a lot of force. Its claws were sharp and made of high-quality compressed alloys that added significantly to the cost of the mech.

One interesting attribute about the claws was that they were designed to be disposable. If a claw ever broke or grew too dull to slice through exobeast hide, the mech could eject the spent claws and slot in replacements.

This could even take place in the middle of battle!

"This is quite a good solution to the problem of spent claws." He muttered.

When humanoid mechs broke their weapons, they could easily discard them and pick up replacements. This was a bit harder to do for bestial mechs which came with integrated weapon systems, so this little claw-replacement mechanism aimed to solve one of the weaknesses of the mech type.

Aside from the claws, the tiger mech also featured a ferocious feline head with very strong jaws and teeth.

According to Lady Miralix, the Kinslayer's primary armament was its claws. In normal circumstances, the mech should not employ its teeth until the hunt came to a close.

The Kinslayer's crushing bite was its finishing move. When used at the right moment against Zeigra, the Crown Cat hopefully lost enough blood and energy to fail when he attempted to shake off the bite.

However, if Lady Miralix misjudged the moment, the Kinslayer's head would definitely sustain massive damage as Zeigra vigorously shook off the bite digging into his hide!

In addition to its strong and potentially fatal bite, the tiger mech also incorporated the customary weapon system in the throat. A powerful but very short-ranged heat projector insured the Kinslayer would surely melt, burn and vaporize anything caught in its jaws!

"This mech is all about the bite. As long as it can bite onto Zeigra and keep hold, this heat projector will slowly be able to finish off the Crown Cat!"

From this, it became clear that Lady Miralix intended to refrain from entering the fray until the final round. At that point, the other Catstrikers hopefully pushed Zeigra to the brink of his endurance.

The approach made a lot of sense to Ves, though the price was pretty serious!

\\"Her lackeys will have to face the brunt of Zeigra's fury!\"

If the hunt lasted for four rounds, then the noblewoman's subordinates had to risk their lives and their mechs in the first three rounds without the support of the Kinslayer.

The first round was particularly dangerous to the humanoid mechs of the Catstrikers, as they were tasked with trying to consume Zeigra's strength when the Crown Cat was in his best condition!

\\"The first round is key!\" He realized. \\"If the mech pilots hired by Lady Miralix don't have enough resolve, then Zeigra might decide to persist!\"

The hunt would be doomed from the start if this happened! At best, Lady Miralix would deploy her Kinslayer ahead of schedule and hope that her unplanned addition was enough to repel the Crown Cat's offensive.

However, the price of doing so would certainly be big as the Kinslayer would be hard to repair in the field once it accumulated serious battle damage!

\\"The big problem is that the Kinslayer isn't a mech built to last!\"

None of the mechs of the Catstrikers excelled in durability and longevity. Sure, they piled up a lot of armor, but the hunting team merely intended to use them as disposable buffers over the course of the hunt.

For the first couple of rounds, Ves had to make sure the humanoid mechs lasted long enough. As long as they succeeded in tiring Zeigra out, then it didn't matter if they weren't in fighting shape anymore once the final round began.

That would be the moment when the Kinslayer stepped forward. Perhaps Lady Miralix might even opt to duel the injured and tired Zeigra by herself!

Ves grimaced at the thought. \\"That's a needlessly perilous decision.\"

These kinds of 'heroic', one-on-one duels looked great in footage. It didn't matter if Lady Miralix sent out her subordinates as sacrificial lambs to weaken the Crown Cat beforehand. People who saw the footage would automatically assume that Miralix herself had brought Zeigra to the brink!

Such duels therefore allowed Lady Miralix to harvest the most gains out of hunting Zeigra.

Showing off a trophy alone wasn't enough to convey the fearsomeness of a Crown Cat to her fellow members of high society.

By providing footage of her impressive stand against Zeigra, she'd be able to show off her battle prowess in the best possible light!

However, the problem that Ves had with this course of action was that this was a decision that optimized vanity, not success. By forcing her teammates to surround the Crown Cat but refrain from attacking, she would have to face whatever might that Zeigra still retained during the final round!

"In short, the Kinslayer has to be capable enough to duel an exhausted but very desperate Crown Cat!"

Ves could not imagine what kind of state Zeigra would end up at that moment. Even he did not dare to assume that a weakened and wounded Crown Cat would be weaker than a fully-intact tiger mech.

All of these uncertainties and guesswork frustrated Ves as he found it difficult to anticipate how he should adjust the mechs of the Catstrikers.

"In any case, the humanoid mechs need to be tweaked in a way that will improve their odds of lasting for multiple rounds." He judged.

As for the Kinslayer, its current configuration should already be sufficient. It was designed to output its full strength for a single round of combat and Ves believed this was probably the most optimal approach.

\\"It's better to confront a cornered beast with one pristine mech and eleven damaged mechs than twelve damaged mechs!\"

On this point, Ves happened to agree with the strategy adopted by Lady Miralix. However, this also left him with very little to do with regards to the Kinslayer's design.

As a work designed by a fellow Journeyman, Ves was reluctant to mess with its solid foundation.

However, if Ves changed too little, then Lady Miralix might suspect that Ves was dragging his feet and only went through the motions!

He frowned. How could he turn the Kinslayer into a mech that seemed as if it had undergone some serious work?

As Ves started to plan his upcoming modification plan for the Kinslayer, Gavin paid a sudden visit to him at the compound.

\\"Ves!\"

\\"What is it, Benny?\"

\\"There's news! The Rocit Butchers have returned!\"

\\"What?! That fast?!\"

\\"Yeah! What's more is that they've succeeded! They killed the Dragon Cat!\"

That caused Ves to sit down. Inwardly, he hoped that the Butchers would fail to kill the Dragon Cat or at least capture her alive, but the Butchers weren't known for their restraint.

\\"I see. Thank you for informing me. I'll get back to work.\"

\\"You're not getting it, boss!\" Gavin shook his head. \\"The reason why I went out and informed you is because the Butchers have temporarily stored the remains in a cooling chamber in the city! Didn't you want to study the Dragon

Cat? This is your chance! Even if the huge cat is dead, you can still take a good look!\

Ves widened his eyes. \That's a great idea!\

Chapter 1397 Mutilated Flesh

Since Ves had a deal with Lady Miralix, he decided to leverage her status and ask her for a favor.

As a scion of House Laterna, it only took a few calls for her to grant Ves permission to visit the cooling chamber which stored the frozen remains of the Dragon Cat.

By the time Ves arrived at the Kemila Hunting Hall with Lucky and Nitaa as his company, Benedict Vinzler greeted him yet again.

\Mr. Larkinson! I did not expect to see you so soon!\

As soon as the two shook hands, they began to board a waiting aircar. As the vehicle headed to the entrance of the underground holding cell complex, the relations manager began to explain the allowances they made.

\We first requested the Rocit Butchers for permission to allow a guest to observe the remains.\

\Since we're on our way to the facility, I take it they granted permission?\

Vinzler smiled. \Every member of the Butchers, from their commander to their mech technicians, is out partying in the city right now. They're always incredibly exuberant after every hunt. I believe they are still drinking their faces stupid even now!\

That made it easy for the hunting hall to request a favor from them. Perhaps to them it wasn't a big deal that someone wanted to see the results of their hunt up close.

\In what condition is the carcass?\

"It's partially complete, though it doesn't look pretty. The Butchers already carved out some portions to cook and consume the meat immediately after they slew the Dragon Cat. They believe the meat tastes the sweetest just after successfully taking down a beast."

"Is the head still present?" Ves pressed.

This was a very important question to him! The presence of the head and the brains of the Dragon Cat was pivotal!

"No. The head is the most valuable part to hunters. Even the Butchers value them. They've already removed the head and sent it to the taxidermists in order to treat it and turn it into a hunting trophy."

What a shame! Ves expected that something like this would happen seeing that hunters placed a huge value on heads. Still, he lamented the loss of opportunity to see the head of a freshly-slain beast in person!

From what Ves observed of the hunting trophies mounted in the Kemila Hunting Hall, preserved heads retained nothing of their original spirituality, if they even had one at all. He guessed that spirituality only lingered for a limited amount of time upon the death of a spiritually potent entity.

"What is your interest in the Dragon Cat, if I might ask? It is not every day that a visitor demands to see the carcass of a huge cat."

"I've made a deal with Lady Miralix to tune up her mechs in preparation for the upcoming hunt." Ves replied as he came up with an excuse on the fly.

"I'd like to study the remains of a huge cat up close both to help me optimise the design of her personal mech and to get a better idea what kind of opponent she's about to face."

Vinzler nodded in understanding. "I see. One point I'd like to note is that the Dragon Cat is an unadulterated product of nature. She's a pure exobeast, and a very alien one compared to the organic products of House Laterna. Her

physiology and body structure is vastly different from that of a genetically-designed Crown Cat such as Zeigra. Aside from that, the Dragon Cat is also smaller and weaker, so do not think that Zeigra is as easy to defeat."

"I'm aware. I'll be sure to take that into account."

"You've already visited these holding cells before, though. Haven't the captive cats you've observed before satisfied you enough?"

"Yeah, but that is when they were still alive and too dangerous to let me approach. I'd like to take a really close look, if you know what I mean."

The manager shrugged, not quite comprehending what Ves wanted out of this visit.

That was fine. Mech designers tended to be weird, and to reinforce that impression, Ves intentionally wore his cat ear attachments on his head again.

Once the aircar deposited them in the underground holding facility, Vinzler led Ves and his company all the way to the floor which held the cooling chambers.

After a brief inspection, they walked through a small side door placed next to the huge mech-sized vault door.

A chill briefly splashed across their faces, but a background system quickly became active which warded the humans from the cold.

"Here she is! The Dragon Cat, or at least what the Butchers have left unattended! Impressive, is she not? I can still imagine the majesty this exobeast conveyed when she was at the prime of her life!"

Ves indeed admired the Dragon Cat by quite a bit. Its lizard-like traits reminded him of the hexapod kings of Groening IV.

Of course, the Dragon Cat still resembled cats in many ways, otherwise she wouldn't have been brought to Felixia in the first place.

"It's a pity though.." Ves disappointedly said. "The Butchers have really went to town on the Dragon Cat."

The carcass... it looked awful. The footage of the Dragon Cat portrayed her as a majestic giant exobeast. Now... the headless carcass displayed a multitude of ugly cuts and bruises. Many of her scales got lost during the fight or got cut right through by the giant blades and axes wielded by the Butcher mechs.

Huge chunks of flesh had been ripped out of the carcass as well, either due to the brutality of the battle or because the Butchers wanted to organize a huge barbecue.

Whether the Dragon Cat's flesh was even edible to humans or not, Ves had no idea! Since the members of the Rocit Butchers hadn't started dropping dead yet, then it was probably okay.

"Can I have a moment alone?" Ves asked. "I'd like to study the carcass in peace. The quiet will allow me to think like a mech designer."

"Certainly, Mr. Larkinson. I do have to warn you that you aren't allowed to touch the carcass or remove any tissue, fluids, bones or any material. The contents in this vault completely belongs to the Butchers. If you provoke their ire, I don't think your status as a Journeyman will save you from their butcher blades."

Ves smiled. "I know my limits."

As Vinzler left the cooling chamber, Ves turned and picked up Lucky. His dull white bone-metallic shell felt cool to his hands.

"Are you cold, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"Well, I hope you can stay warm, because we're about to get a very close look at the carcass."

"Meow.."

Ves turned to Nitaa. "You can follow me around, but don't disturb me in my contemplation. I don't want anyone to interrupt me while I'm studying the carcass, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." His tall bodyguard stoically replied. "If I might say, the carcass may be emanating bacteria and other toxic particulate matter. You never know with exobeasts."

"I'll be fine. My body can take a few alien germs."

Though Nitaa looked incredibly dubious at his claim, Ves actually held back. He could probably drink a glass of raw sewage and still be able to digest the contents on account of his numerous body upgrades!

As Ves carelessly stepped forward, he began to unfold his spiritual senses. He immediately picked up Nitaa's latent spiritual power, but sensed none from the frozen mass of flesh before his sights.

This.. was incredibly disappointing. Though the remains of the once-mighty Dragon Cat definitely impressed him up close, the fact that he sensed no spirituality in its flesh at all was a huge letdown.

Had he misjudged the Dragon Cat? Was she really just a big, dumb exobeast with the spirituality of a nutrient pack?

He refused to believe the Dragon Cat's carcass was devoid of spirituality. He strongly suspected that she possessed more than a trace amount of spirituality when she was alive, and her body should still have motes of it left if only through diffusion.

"If only the Dragon Cat's head is still here." He sighed.

What he saw right now simply consisted of a giant, mutilated pile of flesh. The stench emanating from it was dreadful, and Nitaa firmly kept her helmet closed in order to maintain an airtight seal within her armor.

Not Ves. He wanted to douse himself in the Dragon Cat's scent. The huge chunks of frozen blood and flesh didn't scare him at all. What he wanted was to immerse himself in the once-proud exobeast and see whether he could find a thread that might lead him to a remnant of the Dragon Cat's spirituality.

He had no idea what happened with the spirituality of a powerful entity after they died. He long theorized that they would partially linger in the material realm for a while before shifting completely to the imaginary realm.

Right now, he guessed that enough time had passed for the unbound spirituality of the Dragon Cat to have moved on to the imaginary realm.

From what he could tell, the weaker spiritual remnants would quickly be obliterated by the corrosion in this strange and not-quite-real plane of existence.

The stronger ones such as the spiritual remnant of the crystal builder might be able to endure for longer, but even then most of their traits and strength would be worn away by the constant corrosive spiritual winds that flowed throughout this realm.

"All I need is a trail! A thread! Something that can lead me to the source!" He whispered to himself.

Nitaa had no idea what her employer was looking for. Lucky knew more than her, but even he lacked the spiritual sensitivity of his owner!

It was only when Ves strayed closer to the long and broken torso that he finally paused.

It was as if his heart skipped a beat.

"Do you sense that, Lucky?"

"Meow?"

While Lucky expressed his confusion, Ves closed his eyes and concentrated fully on his spiritual senses. He was sure he picked up something unusual! He tried to remember the direction of the disturbance, and slowly began to shuffle his feet.

"There! I'm getting closer!"

An echo of something.. was present in the vicinity. Like a cat smelling a juicy fish, Ves slowly neared the source of the increasingly alluring presence.

"Mr. Larkinson!" Nitaa called and gently placed her armored hand on his shoulder. "Careful now! You were about to bump into the carcass!"

Though a flash of irritation struck his mind, he nonetheless opened his eyes to see he was looking straight into the cut sides of the Dragon Cat's ribcage!

"Ah, sorry. I lost myself for a moment there."

He didn't step forward but neither did he move back. Instead, he reengaged his spiritual senses and tried to penetrate them deeply into the carcass.

At this distance, the strange presence had become a lot more clear to him. Like a lighthouse in the distance, Ves unerringly approached the distant light, which subsequently became more clear to him. Now that he locked in a solid direction, he accelerated his approach!

As he continued to stretch his spiritual senses further, he finally realized what he had found.

"If I'm guessing right, this is the heart of the Dragon Cat!"

Due to convergent evolution, much of the Dragon Cat's physiology resembled that of terrestrial beasts. Ves knew from his studies that the exobeast possessed a heart that circulated its blood throughout its body.

From the coordinates of the spiritual echo he sensed, Ves was pretty certain that it sat right in the location of the Dragon Cat's heart!

"The heart is the key!"

As a critical life-sustaining organ, the heart played a pivotal role to many species throughout the galaxy! Ves was not surprised to find out that the Dragon Cat's heart still exhibited some latent spirituality.

Much of the blood that circulated through the brains also returned to the heart! Along with the vital nature of the heart, it was pretty much the second-most important organ in the Dragon Cat's body!

Still... now that he detected this.. echo, what could he do with it? From what he could sense, the echo was merely an imprint of something that used to be present. Right now, neither the heart or the rest of the carcass seemed to contain any active motes of spirituality!

"It's all gone!"

Ves stared at the mountain of frozen flesh right before his face with a determined expression. While the echo was only a shadow of what used to be present, it was still a critical find.

"It's a trail! As long as I follow it, I can close in on the source!"

Although it was just a theory, Ves felt it was worth a try!

Chapter 1398 Spiritual Salvage

Sometimes, spirituality left an echo behind. Ves likened it to a space where a spiritual energy dwelled for so long that its sudden absence left a gaping hole and some lingering ripple effects.

The echo he sensed within the Dragon Cat's heart was like the start of a thread that led off far away and into the imaginary realm.

This was what he sought!

As long as he found a trail, he might be able to find her remnant spirituality!

What happened after an entity with spiritual potential died?

He was about to find out!

He ignored Lucky and Nitaa. He ignored the chill and the stench of dead flesh and blood. He simply closed his eyes and extended his Spirituality in a tentacle that slowly crawled its way towards the site of the echo.

Once his Spirituality reached that point, he began to explore the indentation that the Dragon Cat's spiritual energy left behind.

What he found was largely a void that was difficult to describe. Though Ves figured he might learn something useful if his Spirituality dwelled here for a while, he suspected he was on a time limit.

The more he dawdled, the more the spiritual remnant of the Dragon Cat degraded!

He had to find its location in the imaginary realm right away!

After a bit of vague exploration, he finally found a tunnel, for lack of a better world. Ves sent his Spirituality through the tunnel, fearless of what might lay ahead. If worse came to worst, he could just cut off the spiritual energy he invested through the portal.

Fortunately, he encountered no imaginary space beasts or spiritual eldritch horrors or the like. As his Spirituality entered a plane that did not exist in reality, he instantly felt he entered familiar turf.

The imaginary realm's corrosive winds caressed his tendril of spirituality, attempting to wear it out and break it down into ownership spiritual energy that would add their strength to the wind!

Fortunately, the quality of his Spirituality easily held against the docile winds. As long as he didn't encounter a spiritual hurricane or something, he could easily persist for a long while.

Now where was the spiritual remnant he sought for? He found nothing in the immediate vicinity of his emergence point in the spiritual realm.

"Damn it.. don't tell me it's gone with the wind?"

The way the imaginary realm worked was kind of fuzzy to Ves. Still, if the spiritual wind acted like regular wind, then it might have whisked away the spiritual remnant!

"How does anchoring even work in this kind of place?"

He didn't know, and right now he didn't care. All he wanted was to find the drifting spiritual remnant before the chaotic turbulence in the wind threw it far off course!

"Follow the wind!"

Out of every direction the spiritual remnant could have drifted, following the overall direction of the wind was his best bet. Right now, the wind blew into one broad direction, and Ves started to coast on it before accelerating even further.

He had to outrun the wind if he wanted to catch up to the spiritual remnant!

A lot of time passed. To be honest, Ves lost all track of time as he continued to stand and close his eyes right next to the humongous carcass of the Dragon Cat.

Lucky grew bored and played with bits and pieces of the carcass while Nitaa vigilantly remained on guard.

Even if absolutely nothing happened, she never grew bored or complacent!

As for Ves, his travels through the spiritual realm was an unimaginably uneventful journey. Much of the spiritual realm was empty, giving him the illusion that he wasn't progressing at all!

All around, a white-like fog extended in each direction. Carried by the wind, the spiritually corrosive fog blew aimlessly from one point in the imaginary realm to another point.

Despite the incredible dullness and the lack of progress, Ves persisted in his search. He could last for days or even weeks if he had to, though he couldn't afford to waste too much time in this cooling chamber.

He still had a job to do! Lady Miralix expected him to soup up her Kinslayer and the mechs of her subordinates, and quickly at that! Ves also had to hurry up considering that he was on a fairly short timetable.

Nonetheless, the tranquility of the imaginary realm lulled him into a very serene mood. With all the happenings going on in the material realm, he enjoyed this period of quiet as an escape from both his worries and responsibilities.

Of course, the paranoid part of his mind did its best to keep Ves from becoming too immersed in this idyllic imaginary environment.

"I can't fall asleep! Who knows when or if I'll wake up!"

He tried to pepper himself up occasionally in order to keep his mind on his primary task. Yet as an indeterminate time went by, Ves started to doubt whether he was still on course to find the missing spiritual remnant.

If he had a better impression of its flavor, then Ves would have probably been able to hone in on it through some other method. An echo was not enough for him to sample the flavor of the Dragon Cat's spirituality.

"I don't even know if I can identify it if I get close."

He could only continue with the gamble he had made and hope the wind hadn't changed direction too much.

Fortunately, his persistence eventually yielded a result, as he started to sense a vague spiritual presence in a different direction than he thought.

He immediately woke from his state of half-focus and began to hone in on the direction of what he sensed.

The emanation in the distance grew stronger, causing him to become encouraged.

He found something!

Time passed, and before he knew it, his spiritual presence in the imaginary realm had reached the side of what appeared to be a very chaotic cloud of spiritual energy!

"This!"

Ves had a very strong feeling that he had found his goal!

Yet despite succeeding in tracking down the errant spiritual remnant, he had yet to rejoice.

That was because there was a very big problem with what he found!

"It's degraded to an awful state! It's deteriorating further even now!"

The spiritual remnant's size led Ves to believe it hadn't been very strong when it used to be whole and healthy. It's heavily-damaged and bleeding state

weakened the Dragon Cat's spirituality even further, putting it close to the brink of complete deconstruction!

Ves couldn't think that much at this moment. If he wanted to salvage anything out of the Dragon's Cat spirituality, then he had to act quickly! The more he dawdled, the more the corrosive spiritual wind submerged the former exobeast's precious spiritual energy!

"What should I do? How can I maximize his gains?"

In ordinary circumstances, Ves would opt to carve out a small chunk of spiritual energy out of a greater entity. In previous cases, he succeeded in doing so to a couple of unalert expert pilots.

He could do so here as well. In fact, it was probably even easier because the heavily-damaged spiritual remnant didn't show signs of conscious guidance. That, and the holes and tears riddled throughout the spiritual remnant made it extraordinary easy for him to swoop in and grab a bunch of alien spiritual energy.

Yet.. why go for just a small fragment of a small entity when he could grab the whole thing instead?

Was it viable for him to gulp the entire spiritual remnant with a single bite?

Ves had the impression that he was a snake trying to swallow a mouse. It would probably strain him a bit if he attempted such, but it wouldn't break his limits. The spiritual remnant was already so weak that it might be viable for him to grab the whole thing!

"Let's do it! What could go wrong?"

He acted on his impulse and his intuition and boldly tried to grab the weakened spiritual remnant.

While the remnant exhibited a pronounced lack of conscious resistance, parts of it still tried to fight against the foreign spiritual energy.

As someone who broke through the extraordinary threshold and grew substantially in Spirituality ever since, Ves managed to exert enough strength to keep it under control.

It was working!

As his Spirituality tried to take a firm and all-encompassing grip over the spiritual remnant, the corrosive spiritual wind from the imaginary realm stopped battering the weakening entity.

In exchange, the increased surface area of his own spiritual energy caused him to receive a lot more battering from the imaginary environment!

He had to leave the imaginary realm as soon as possible! Even now, his stretched Spirituality was losing grip on his prize! It was as if the imaginary realm really didn't want anyone to make off with one of its prizes!

"Return! I have to return!"

A lot of aspects about the imaginary realm still confused him, but he was pretty sure he didn't have to go all the way back to the hole he initially emerged from. In fact, leaving the imaginary realm with his prize turned out to be as easy as concentrating on the idea.

One moment, his consciousness stretched all the way to the imaginary realm.

In the next moment, his consciousness returned to his mind, but this time he brought back a guest!

Ves opened his eyes and gasped. "Wow! Is it really so easy?"

The only reason why he encountered less hindrances than he expected was due to the awful state of his spiritual salvage.

Even now, in a cavity within his mind, the spiritual remnant looked more dead than alive!

The sight of this sad cloud of barely-coherent spiritual energy made him feel.. disappointed.

Was this what hours worth of exploration in the imaginary realm yielded? Was this the extent of what remained of the Dragon Cat?

Not only had the spiritual winds of the imaginary realm ravaged the remnant, Ves also had the feeling that even in its intact state, it was still incomplete. He suspected that some of its spiritual energy must have lingered in the head of the Dragon Cat, though he wasn't quite sure of this guess!

"There's too many things I don't know!"

He could leave those mysteries for later. Right now, Ves wanted to inspect the state of his salvaged spiritual remnant in greater detail in order to see whether it could be used in one of his ongoing projects.

His attention fully returned to the material realm. He glanced at Nitaa and gestured with his arms. "I'm done here. Let's go back to the compound housing the Catstrikers."

He picked up Lucky who was chewing on a scale of the Dragon Cat and left the cooling chamber.

Soon enough, he boarded an aircar and began to inspect the new entity in his mind during the short flight.

As he inspected the spiritual remnant in greater detail, he managed to make several notable observations.

First, the spiritual remnant was more than a fragment, but less than a fully-functional entity.

In fact, unlike living spiritual entities, the remnant he retrieved was as lively as his cat ear attachments. Aside from some instinctive reactions, it exhibited no consciousness at all!

Did he retrieve the spiritual equivalent of a mutilated carcass from the graveyard of the imaginary realm?

He cursed a bit. "Damnit! What use is this barely-coherent collection of junk!"

As he inspected the spiritual remnant in greater detail, he realized that it was missing far too much of its former existence. Instead of retrieving a 'complete' spiritual carcass, he felt as if he only retrieved a forelimb, a rear limb, a chewed-up torso and perhaps part of the Dragon Cat's tail!

This was not a good foundation for an image! Such a mangled and incomplete spiritual remnant was worse than a spiritual fragment because the latter at least enjoyed conscious guidance from its source!

"What can I even do with a bunch of incomplete salvage?" He muttered and pressed his face against his palms.

Chapter 1399 Spiritual Invasion

As Ves returned to Lady Miralix's compound, he sought out a break room in the mech workshop and began to think about a way to deal with his spiritual salvage.

Its damaged and incomplete state likely rendered it useless in its current state. Trying to instill it into a mech or mech design as a design spirit would probably lead to chaotic and erratic behavior.

Ves predicted that if he idiotically tried to infuse it in the Kinslayer for example, the incoherent instincts and impulses of the spiritual remnant would probably make the mech go out of control at times! At the very least, Lady Miralix might be forced to work against her own mech in the middle of a battle, which was the exact opposite of what he wanted to happen!

In order to shape the X-Factor of a mech into something beneficial, the design spirit had to be alive.

An incomplete collection of spiritual body parts that missed the spiritual equivalent of the head and brains was not what he considered alive.

"Can the dead be brought back alive?"

Perhaps not when it came to biological forms of life, but weirder things had happened with spirituality.

For example, back in the Ylvaine Protectorate, the spiritual fragment he refined out of a miniscule portion of Prophet Ylvaine's spiritual remnant started out weak and as clever as a newborn baby.

Yet as time continued to pass, the spiritual fragment started to grow. Its liveliness grew more active and its intelligent consciousness started to become increasingly sophisticated.

Now that so much time had passed, Ves scarcely dared to imagine how far the spiritual fragment developed, especially now that it housed a fantastic mech design!

This precious experience with spiritual remnants gave Ves some ideas on how to make use of his spiritual salvage.

"First, I need to find a purpose for it. Which project fits it better?"

Right now, Ves involved himself in two different projects. The existing Kinslayer mech and his unfinished Devil Tiger designs were both based on the tiger mech archetype.

This meant that the Dragon Cat's spirituality could be applied to both of them if he wished.

After a bit of thinking, he decided to apply his gains to Kinslayer. As the more immediate project, Ves could quickly make use of his spiritual salvage before

it deteriorated further. Though Ves had taken it out of the imaginary realm and its corrosive winds, that did not mean the remains stopped deteriorating!

Its condition was so awful that Ves didn't trust its integrity to hold up for long.

Its instability also made it unviable for Ves to use it as a design spirit right away. He needed to do something about the damage before he could take the next step.

Aside from its deteriorating state, the other reason why Ves declined to apply the spiritual remnant to his Devil Tiger design was because too much had been lost.

"It's not worthy enough to be applied to my own designs."

Ves cared less about the Kinslayer than his Devil Tiger design. The latter was his own work, while the former was just a mech he agreed to modify. His emotional investment in the Kinslayer was so low that he regarded it as a good platform to do some experiments!

"Let's see if I can put my salvage to use on this mech!"

Though the consequences were fairly awful if Ves failed to make effective use of the spiritual remnant, Ves didn't care right now. He couldn't wait to play around with what he obtained!

As Ves thought of ways to convert the spiritual remnant into something usable, he began to look at it from a salvager's perspective.

Salvagers made their living searching through trash belts in space or on forgotten battlefields on the grounds.

Mech wrecks were still worth quite a lot of money!

Most outfits knew that too and tried to retrieve the fallen wrecks as much as possible, but sometimes this wasn't viable. Salvagers swooped in to obtain the lesser value wrecks.

Sometimes, all they managed to pick up was a bunch of loose parts separated from the frame of a broken mech!

Even so, salvaging incomplete wrecks and disparate parts was still worth it. The savvier salvagers even found ways to repair the damage and piece the parts back together onto a working mech frame!

Of course, the quality of those restored mechs left much to be desired. If the salvagers were unable to obtain or reproduce all of the original parts of a mech, their resident mech designers usually designed the missing parts on the fly.

This led to the creation of mechs made out of a mix of salvaged and freshly-fabricated parts.

"Some of them are real abominations!"

This was how most frankenstein mechs came to be. The salvagers completely perverted the original designs and the intentions behind them in their quest to cobble together mechs on the cheap!

As much as Ves hated the practice, he had to admit it was an efficient use of trash. Right now, Ves contemplated doing something similar to the spiritual remnant of the Dragon Cat.

"So what if it's incomplete? I'll just fill up its holes with something else!"

Of course, that 'something else' had to be something substantial and compatible.

To be honest, Ves was dealing with something completely new here. He didn't have the guidance of Qilanxo's spiritual fragment or any existing example to draw upon. The risk of messing up was quite significant!

Solving this problem fell into the domain of the path of life. If he wanted to come up with a viable way to turn his salvage into something useful, he had to delve deeper into the mysteries and potential of life.

Right now, the answer he came up with substituting the missing spiritual parts with other parts.

Nonetheless, it wasn't as simple as obtaining a random chunk of spiritual energy and throwing it at the hole-ridden spiritual remnant of the Dragon Cat.

That sounded as idiotic as trying to plug the gaps of a damaged mech by pouring water into its holes!

If he wanted to turn his salvage into something useful, he had to encourage a transformation, something which didn't happen normally.

Usually, spiritual energy with different attributes and imprints repelled or clashed against each other. Rarely would they merge or meld together into a greater whole.

As Ves thought about how he could overcome this problem, he came up with three important points.

First, the spiritual remnant was rather weak. Weaker than his own Spirituality. Combined with its lack of consciousness and liveliness made it extraordinarily malleable to manipulation.

Second, since Ves intended to use it on the Kinslayer in order to give its X-Factor a big boost, why not make use of the spirituality of its mech pilot while he was at it? Perhaps something surprising might happen if he tried to blend the spirituality of Lady Miralix with the Dragon Cat's spiritual remnant.

"The only problem is.. Lady Miralix doesn't have what I need!"

Just like most mech pilots in the galaxy, Lady Miralix may have the genetic aptitude to become a mech pilot, but she lacked the spiritual potential to break through the extraordinary threshold!

Ves did not understand much about spiritual potential. He didn't know whether it was something that a tiny proportion of humanity was born with it, or if certain lucky people developed it after undergoing an unusual event in their lives that caused their minds to produce significant amounts of spiritual energy.

Even if the latter was possible, Ves did not know how to spark this process.

Still... what if he tried something?

"Hehe.."

He grinned as he started to come up with a radical experiment. He made a lot of assumptions as he tried to come up with a way to make the spiritual remnant more compatible with Lady Miralix.

What if he inserted the spiritual remnant in Lady Miralix's mind?

Ves had a feeling that dumping the spiritual remnant in her mind was a very bad idea! Since their attributes were fundamentally different, there was no way her mind would be able to accommodate something alien!

"However, storing it there isn't the point."

Her mind may be almost devoid of spiritual energy, but it was still suffused with her presence.

Her mind contained all of her thoughts and emotions. Most of it was intangible to Ves as they possessed neither a material or spiritual presence. They existed in another undefined plane that Ves couldn't manipulate for the time being.

However, Ves guessed that those thoughts and emotions wouldn't sit still if he shoved a foreign spiritual remnant into Lady Miralix's mind!

"This is going to be a very delicate process!"

There were so many ways this could go wrong!

Yet despite the risks, Ves still wanted to go through with this experiment!

The plan he came up with sounded pretty crazy, even to him! Yet he also believed it had a chance of working!

"Even if there's a lot of side effects, it's worth a try!"

The possibilities he came up with intrigued him to such an extent that he threw caution to the wind. He just had to try it out!

"Hehehehe!" He rubbed his hands in excitement. "I've never done this before, but let's see how it goes!"

Ves began to tamper some of his glee in order to focus his mind. He began to undergo another spiritual excursion. As soon as he sensed he shifted over in the realm he had just explored a short while ago, he carefully explored his surroundings.

Right now, he wanted to find Lady Miralix's spiritual presence in this strange void.

"This is going to take some effort." He muttered. "It's worse than finding a needle in a haystack!"

People who crossed the extraordinary threshold such as expert pilots and Journeyman Mech Designers occupied a very strong presence in the imaginary realm. They maintained outposts or fortifications that were strong enough to repel intruders and defend their spiritual energy against the corrosive winds that flowed throughout this intangible plane of existence.

What about normal people? What about those who didn't even exhibit a sliver of spiritual potential?

Ves initially believed they were completely cut off from the imaginary realm, but now he began to doubt that conclusion. His insight into the imaginary realm led him to suspect that all forms of life possessed a presence in this place.

They were just too weak for him to take note.

Ves began the boring process of exploring the seemingly empty surroundings from his emergence point. Though the corrosive wind was seemingly the only thing that occupied his surroundings, he refused to believe that normal people left no trace at all in this realm.

"Lady Miralix should be in her office, so she's physically close."

That usually meant that her spiritual presence ought to be close as well in the imaginary realm. Ves cast his senses in an expanding sphere around his emergence point until he finally found a tiny pinprick that faintly tasted like Lady Miralix to his spiritual senses!

"This is the place!"

Though the hole in the imaginary realm looked extraordinarily tiny, size didn't always matter when it came to the imaginary realm.

Ves extended a tiny portion of his spiritual projection and compressed it as much as possible.

Though its strength was nothing to speak of, Ves managed to squeeze it small enough to barely fit through the tiny opening.

As expected, his semi-detached spiritual projection entered into the mindscape of Lady Miralix!

"However.. as expected, something weird is going on."

His spiritual projection didn't exist in the same phase as Lady Miralix's mind! This meant that his spiritual projection could fly right out of her mind without bumping into anything, because they were completely unable to touch each other!

However, as Ves scrutinized the condition of his spiritual projection further, he found that this wasn't entirely the case. His Spirituality was so potent that it exerted some kind of force around it that resembled gravity in its working.

The thoughts and emotions that flowed through Lady Miralix's mind bent around his presence!

"Good! So there's some interaction after all!"

With a bit of finicking with his own thoughts, he managed to pull the Dragon Cat's spiritual remnant from his mind and deposit it at the site of his spiritual projection.

He managed to dump the remnant straight into Lady Miralix's mind!

Same as his own piece of Spirituality, Lady Miralix's mind barely reacted to the introduction of the spiritual remnant of an exobeast.

Both of them also existed in a different phase!

"Damn it, what is going on?"

Chapter 1400 Spiritual Frankenstein

The odd occurrences he witnessed so far led him to develop a theory about spirituality.

It existed in different phases.

For now, he tentatively identified a 'weak' phase and a 'strong' phase.

The weak phase consisted of spirituality belonging to entities below the extraordinary threshold.

The strong phase consisted of spirituality from spiritually-powerful entities such as Ves, Qilanxo and every other high-ranking mech pilot and mech designer.

Both of them existed alongside each other but hardly affected each other directly.

"Is this a form of protection for weaker existences?"

Spiritual entities with negligible amounts of spiritual energy were so weak that they'd be crushed in an instant if a monstrously powerful entity like Qilanxo strolled along.

In fact, human space would have been ruled by high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers by now if this was the case! Against the tyranny of strong spirituality, ordinary people stood no chance!

"The MTA would have beaten the CFA long ago if that happened!"

After all, as far as Ves knew, the CFA didn't actively develop spirituality or psionic power as they regarded it. The MTA, which poured a huge amount of effort into nurturing and developing psionic power, possessed an absolute advantage in this aspect!

Still, a scenario like this hadn't taken place, which meant that weak spirituality inherently enjoyed protection against strong spirituality.

Right now, this condition posed a lot of hindrances to his plan, but not to the point of making it impossible.

Dumping the Dragon Cat's spiritual remnant into Lady Miralix's mind hadn't yielded any dramatic effects.

Yet as Ves studied the changes closely, he saw that the thoughts and emotions of Lady Miralix distorted even further around the spiritual remnant.

Ves believed that this was a favorable development.

"Even as they are being warped, they're also starting to adjust!"

It was like dropping a heating element into a glass of water. While the water didn't turn into wine or anything, it did begin to grow warmer.

Something similar was taking place around both his own spiritual projection and around the Dragon Cat's spiritual remnant.

The thought energy swirling in the mind of Lady Miralix started to familiarize and grow a little more comfortable with the alien emanations of the intruders.

What did this mean? It meant that as long as this process continued for a while, Lady Miralix wouldn't feel uneasy if she piloted a mech that incorporated the spiritual remnant as its design spirit!

"This is an important observation!"

The new phenomenon he witnessed compelled him to name the process and add it into his growing handbook of spirituality.

He decided to call it spiritual alignment.

In truth, he first wanted to call it spiritual contamination, but that implied the process was harmful.

Then, he came up with spiritual indoctrination, but again the phrase implied that Ves was doing something malicious to Lady Miralix.

"I have good intentions!"

In order to make him feel better about what he was doing, he eventually came up with a sufficiently neutral and accurate description.

He settled for calling the ongoing process as spiritual alignment because he believed that Lady Miralix's weak spirituality was indirectly becoming more aligned to both his own and the Dragon Cat's spiritual remnant.

What results this phenomenon might yield, Ves had no idea. He was doing so many new things that he hardly became sure of anything.

"Well, since I'm already this deep, I should at least complete my experiment."

With regards to the incomplete and fractured spiritual remnant, he decided to restore it by reconstructing it in a smaller, more condensed fragment.

To put it simply, he gave up on trying to turn the remnant back into its former state. Instead, he decided to make the most efficient use of his salvage by shrinking it and refining it into a more coherent fragment.

Of course, even if he did so, the remnant still lacked the spark of life.

"The biggest problem with my plan is that I don't have another source!"

If he obtained another spiritual fragment, it might be possible for him to blend the two or use one of them as raw material to fix the other one.

However, since he lacked a spiritual fragment, he could only turn to the only available source within reach.

Himself!

Of course, as he was aware of the many downsides of expending his spiritual energy, he did not intend to exhaust a piece of his Spirituality.

"Fortunately, I've accumulated a small reservoir!"

Earlier, Ves obtained the box that stored his P-stone from Nitaa. Right now, he grabbed hold of it and opened the box.

The dull, grey space rock glowed slightly in his senses. Since he obtained it, he made a habit out of injecting portions of his excess spiritual energy into the P-stone.

At this time, the P-stone accumulated a modest but respectable amount of spare spiritual energy.

"Drawing from this reservoir won't affect my strength!"

He stopped dawdling around and began to extract the excess spiritual energy from the P-stone.

Considering the relative strength of the spiritual remnant, he only drew out a small portion. If it turned out that he needed more, he could always go back and scoop up another portion.

"Still, this is probably enough to act as the glue for the transformation I have in mind."

He siphoned the excess spiritual energy into Lady Miralix's mind and brought it close to the spiritual remnant.

As expected, the two didn't react with each other, as they consisted of vastly different attributes. A mech designer and a cat-like lizard exobeast didn't necessarily go together, after all.

"Since a reaction isn't taking place, I'll have to be more proactive!"

What Ves did next was the equivalent of breaking apart a mech! He put his spiritual might to use by smashing the Dragon Cat's spiritual remnant.

Considering that it was already in a rather poor and broken state, it only took a moderate amount of effort to break it up!

However, a problem quickly started to emerge!

With the spiritual remnant broken up into multiple smaller remnants, their overall integrity started to degrade more rapidly! Some of the byproducts even started shifting to a weaker phase and interact much more strongly with Lady Miralix's mind!

"Damn, I have to be fast!"

Ves couldn't afford to think or plan! He just had to trust his judgement and the assumptions he had made and go into action!

What he did next was completely new territory to him. Facing a completely unfamiliar process, Ves defaulted to his mech designer's instincts.

"Something that is broken can be put back anew!"

He began to treat the broken and incomplete pieces of the Dragon Cat's spiritual remnant as salvaged parts. Just like how a mech designer working for a salvage operation tried to cobble together a functioning mech out of existing parts, Ves tried to do the same.

Of course, the lack of 'raw materials' meant he wouldn't be able to restore the spiritual remnant to its former glory. He could only cobble together a lesser spiritual fragment which condensed and concentrated what the remnant hadn't lost into what Ves hoped would be a new living spiritual entity.

It was similar to what he did before when he refined Prophet Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

As he continued to piece together the Dragon Cat's spiritual parts, he didn't feel as if he created a new form of life.

"As expected." He muttered. "Once the spark is gone, it can't be restored."

The spark of life was an intrinsic property of spiritual entities. Without it, spiritual energy was merely a resource. Only when it was infused with the spark of life did it possess an active consciousness and awareness of its own existence!

Having anticipated this problem, Ves didn't panic. Instead, he directed his excess spiritual energy into the shifting cloud that represented his work in progress.

The two types of spiritual energies didn't merge with each other, but Ves wasn't discouraged. He simply continued to apply his excess spiritual energy in the gaps of the reforming spiritual fragment.

"Just like how mechs are made of different materials, energy can coexist as well!"

As long as they didn't repel or detest each other, they could exist alongside each other!

Of course, what Ves sought was something more than placing the two types of energy side by side. He wanted to form a mutually-beneficial bond between the two divergent energies!

The Dragon Cat's spiritual energy served as the 'mech'. It provided the base and the platform of the forming spiritual fragment.

His excess spiritual energy served as the 'mech pilot'. It added the vital spark of life and everything that ensued from the presence of life!

Combined, Ves hoped he could form a connection and establish a form of symbiosis!

The idea was completely radical and came out of nowhere! However, as the ongoing restoration process continued, Ves had a sense that it might actually succeed!

The spiritual abomination that he attempted to create would be an entirely new spiritual existence! In a very warped perspective, Ves even had the illusion that he was creating a new child!

An offspring between the Dragon Cat and himself!

The resulting spiritual entity represented neither an exobeast or a human. It represented aspects of both, blended in a spiritual equivalent of a frankenstein mech!

"Hahahahaha! More! I want more!"

The spiritual restoration process gradually formed something new, all within the space of someone else's mind!

This was an important detail! By performing this process in the mind of Lady Miralix, he was in essence treating the mental space as his mech workshop!

Bits and pieces of her mind continued to curve around the spiritual abomination that continued to transform into a stabler and more potent form.

All of this took place in Lady Miralix's mind! This meant that as soon as the process finished, she'd already be familiar with the new spiritual entity and vice versa!

An uncertain amount of time began to pass as Ves fully invested his attention to directing and shaping the transformation process. Frankly, he had no idea what he was doing, but as he continued to push and prod his excess spiritual energy around, it began to 'react' when it attached to certain places.

The integration process slowly proceeded as Ves found more and more configurations that worked through sheer trial and error.

When Ves felt he put the final piece of the puzzle in its place, a very profound step in the process took place.

The bond was being formed!

A radiant strength welled from the abomination. Ves lost connection to his excess spiritual energy as it began to integrate with the Dragon Cat's remnant spiritual energy on a deeper level.

Along with this rise in strength came fluctuations that Ves had tried to create from the start!

"It's.. it's alive!"

An immense sense of pride and satisfaction welled from his mind as he witnessed the birth of a new spiritual entity!

Formed by combining a salvaged spiritual remnant with his own excess spiritual energy, the resulting spiritual fragment was a completely new and unique existence!

Part mech designer, part exobeast and formed within the chamber of Lady Miralix's mind, Ves expected this new spiritual fragment to be exceptionally suitable when put to use in a mech like the Kinslayer!

"I did it! I created something new! Out of so little, I managed to create something wondrous! Hahahahaha!"

As Ves burst out in laughter while spouting nonsensical statements, Lucky and Nita looked at him as if he completely went out of control!

What the hell was he dreaming about?!

Ves paid no mind to how his observers regarded him right now! He exulted in the success of his latest spiritual innovations! He fully indulged in the many possibilities that the path of life had to offer!

Spiritual invasion, spiritual alignment and spiritual restoration was only the start of what this promising direction had to offer!

As he proudly observed his newborn spiritual fragment make sense of its new existence, Ves realized a very pivotal insight.

The path of life was all about creation!

"Life from death! The creation of something new from the remains of something old! That is the circle of life!"