

Mech 1811

Chapter 1811 Family Bonds

The birth of the Golden Cat was the true climax of this founding ceremony!

The successful fusion of so many disparate spiritual elements led to the creation of a spiritual form of life that embodied all of their influences.

The importance of this moment couldn't be overstated. Not only did Ves create his most complex and sophisticated spiritual product to date, the outcome also served to transform the Larkinson Clan into a real entity!

The Golden Cat was much more different than any spiritual product he brought to life in the past!

Unlike Vescas, the Solemn Guardian and Bravo, The Golden Cat did not exist without a root.

Instead, from the moment of its birth, it possessed a strong and intricate tie to the Larkinson Mandate. The Golden Cat was born in its P-stone-infused materials and would continue to reside here unless Ves made other arrangements.

The Golden Cat's nature was strongly tied to the Larkinson line, and so was the Larkinson Mandate. The two not only matched each other perfectly, but also complemented each other's strengths!

Without the Golden Cat, the Larkinson Mandate would largely exist as a symbolic relic. Though it still retained a lot of value in this role, it didn't convey any direct power! Symbolism on its own was just as useless as honor and reputation in a battle or crisis situation!

Without the Larkinson Mandate, the Golden Cat would not be able to bond so much with the members of the clan. The book amplified the ancestral spirit's ties to the Larkinsons while also making sure that she remained loyal to the clan and its tenets!

In short, the book and the spiritual product weren't very remarkable on their own, but became incredibly potent when combined as one. Even now, Ves could see the triumphant Golden Cat establishing and deepening its connections with the imprints in the book!

A spiritual warmth and vibrancy emanated from the object as the Golden Cat soon extended outwards and instinctively explored its many latent connections to Ves, Gloriana, Lucky, Clixie, Jannzi, Tusa and every other member of the Larkinson Clan!

Though Colonel Ark Larkinson soon resumed his interrupted speech, many people in the audience did not pay close attention to his words anymore.

Instead, they began to bask in the odd sensations that buffeted them. The founding ceremony continued to exceed their expectations and bring new surprises. Their connection to the Larkinson Clan constantly deepened, both from their own accord and from the warmth they felt after the Golden Cat actively sought them out!

Ves remained poised even as he drained his hidden P-stones of their accumulated spiritual energy. He rapidly managed to top himself up, returning him to peak condition.

Whether it was enough to rein in the Golden Cat was another matter though. All of the spiritual energy it consumed allowed it to start off strong without even receiving a lot of spiritual feedback!

Even though his latest spiritual product ought to be innocent and naive, Ves did not get this sense from her at all. The Golden Cat acted with care and purpose as she reined in her curiosity and settled for exploring each of her connections to the Larkinsons one by one.

Strangely enough, the Golden Cat's possessed way more ties than the number of Larkinsons who left their marks on the pages of the book.

The Larkinson Mandate may be the heirloom of the Larkinson Clan, but its first part was intricately related to the old Larkinson Family!

This caused the Mandate and by extension the Golden Cat to possess faint but very real ties to the Larkinson Family!

Ves did not expect such a phenomenon to occur, though he didn't exhibit much surprise once he confirmed the existence of these extra connections.

He never desired to isolate the Larkinson Clan from the Larkinson Family.

They had their differences, yes, but just because Ves wanted to stab Ghanso in the guts didn't mean he let his animosity define the clan's relation from the family.

He needed to be bigger than that if he wanted to serve as the patriarch of his clan.

Like many clan members, Ves still possessed many ties to the Larkinsons who decided to stay with the old family. He still wished to remain in touch with his grandfather Benjamin, his uncle Ark, his cousin Melinda and some other relatives.

As Ves carefully inspected the extra connections, he even sensed a small thread that led to Raella Larkinson, who wasn't technically part of the family anymore!

It seemed that Larkinson Mandate possessed the ability to associate itself with any individual who shared the same blood and spirit as the Larkinsons who marked its pages!

The book was like a search dog whose nose had been trained to detect traces similar to the scent that the members of the audience had left behind. As long as there was enough similarity, the book would unquestionably be able to connect with a Larkinson!

As Ves inspected the Mandate further, he made an unexpected discovery.

The book and the Golden Cat not only possessed active ties to the Larkinsons, but also allowed Ves to determine their direction!

Hundreds of firm spiritual ties pointed forwards, fanning out to encompass the entire crowd in the auditorium.

More than a thousand weaker ties extended in an entirely different direction. It didn't take Ves too long to determine that their overall direction pointed towards the Bright Republic!

The properties of these ties were very useful to Ves! If he wanted to, he could potentially use the Larkinson Mandate to follow the direction of the connection and locate a missing Larkinson!

In fact, one of the stronger connections happened to lead to Gloriana!

The exhausted and depleted woman smiled at him when he checked her condition.

"She's a woman, right?"

Ves sheepishly nodded. It appeared that in the process of the spiritual restoration process, he kept her words in mind, causing him to slant the Golden Cat's gender!

Well, whether the Golden Cat was male, female or genderless, it didn't matter in the greater scheme of things. She was still the clan's ancestral spirit, and that was what mattered the most!

Therefore, he was happy to see that the Larkinson Mandate blessed the continued association between the clan and the family.

Although there was no chance for the two sides to come together and merge back into one, they would still continue to be related to each other even as they existed by themselves.

As the Golden Cat continued to spend the first minutes of her existence in studying her ties to his relatives, Ves took advantage of the moment by ascertaining the nature of her existence in the context of his clan.

The impetus to planning the experiment that created the Golden Cat came from the inspiration he derived from Master Huron and Aisling Curver's specialty.

Ever since Ves became exposed to the concept of neural interconnectivity, he always desired to form a spiritual equivalent.

Though messing with someone's spirituality was just as risky as messing with someone's brain, Ves never gave up on this goal no matter how reckless it sounded!

In the worst case scenarios, his experiment might have created a spiritual abomination or a monstrous spiritual network that damaged every Larkinson who bequeathed their marks!

If Ves failed to control these destructive manifestations, then his mistakes might have led to the mental deaths of all of the Larkinsons who entrusted their lives and future to him! Regardless of whether he survived this catastrophe, Ves would definitely become one of the relived villains of the Larkinson Family for killing so many of his relatives!

Despite these morbid risks, Ves nonetheless decided to proceed with the experiment in the confidence that it would succeed.

Even if complications arose, he was certain he could keep the situation under control by borrowing from the power of the F-stone to kill any malignant spiritual manifestations!

Fortunately, the Golden Cat appeared to be exactly as benevolent and friendly towards the Larkinson Clan as he intended. Her strong ties to so many Larkinsons permanently carved her devotion to their bloodline in her spiritual makeup.

Unless an overpowering spiritual entity managed to contaminate her very essence, his youngest spiritual product should always stay loyal to the Larkinsons!

While he was very happy that at least this part of the experiment had gone right, he wasn't sure whether he succeeded in his other objectives.

At the very least, it didn't appear that the connections interacted with each other.

Ves originally envisioned the Larkinson Mandate or the Golden Cat as a router which allowed for the exchange of thoughts, emotions and other data between one Larkinson to another.

In other words, Ves wanted to form an actual spiritual network that functioned just like a communication network, though on an entirely different plane!

As Ves studied the connections and the individual Larkinsons in the audience, it didn't seem like any of that took place.

Ves experimentally tried to transmit a spiritual message to Gloriana using the Mandate as a hub, but the only thing that happened was that the Golden Cat started to turn her attention to her creator.

"Can you relay the spiritual message I sent to Gloriana?" He mentally asked.

Nya? The Golden Cat tilted her adorable head.

Her current incarnation made her appear as an adolescent cat that was almost as large as Lucky.

While she started off more powerful than his other spiritual products, her strength and wisdom did not even come close to matching a formidable spiritual entity such as Qilanxo!

As it was, the Golden Cat mostly functioned as a mascot to the Larkinson Clan. Aside from making the Larkinsons feel warm and connected to their clan identity, she didn't really offer any other uses.

Ves did not let that squander his mood. The Golden Cat was a living ancestral spirit whose life and death was intricately tied to the state of the Larkinson Clan.

When the clan grew and prospered, the Golden Cat would definitely benefit as well!

Even without this feedback, its nature as a living spiritual entity meant that it could grow and develop in ways unique to this type of lifeform.

It was not impossible for the Golden Cat to acquire other abilities in the future that would serve the Larkinson Clan well.

Anything that benefited the clan and increased its cohesion was something to be celebrated!

Therefore, Ves did not feel bummed when he definitely concluded that he failed to establish a spiritual network.

Just because it didn't exist today didn't mean it would never emerge in the future.

If the Golden Cat still didn't facilitate the formation of such a transcendent network in the future, then no harm was done.

He could still attempt the creation of a spiritual network through other means, or he could drop this research direction entirely.

He already had his hands full with other pending priorities. For now, he was much more interested in creating imaginary mechs than forming a spiritual network!

The latter may be useful in increasing the cooperation or coordination between mech pilots, but the former had the potential of empowering his individual mechs to an entirely different height!

Both of them seemed to lead to entirely different directions. Whether Ves sought to increase the strength of a group or an individual, in the end he wanted to find new ways to express his design philosophy and increase the value proposition of his products!

In fact, the Golden Cat formed an intrinsic part of a follow-up experiment.

One of the reasons why he wanted to create the Golden Cat was to employ it as the spiritual component to one of the mechs he intended to design.

Ever since he left the Bright Republic and took some of the Larkinsons away, he wanted to empower his dependents by providing them with a mech that belonged exclusively to his own orbit!

In short, he wanted to design a mech that possessed a glow that only belonged to the Larkinsons and those he approved!

Chapter 1812 Governance Structure

After the birth of the Golden Cat, the founding ceremony wound down. After Colonel Ark Larkinson finished his address to the new Larkinson clansmen and cut off his projection, the separation between the Larkinson Clan and the Larkinson Family became permanent.

This was not an unhappy divorce. Ves could clearly tell that many if not all of the clan members in the crowd were happy, hopeful or eager of their future.

The influence of the Golden Cat mellowed out after the newborn spiritual product grew tired and began to rest within the book.

The Larkinson Mandate still glowed with warmth, protectiveness and familiarity in his hands.

Out of all of the spiritual products he made, only the Golden Cat bore his affection. He intended to create an ancestral spirit that not only watched over the Larkinson Clan, but also himself.

He felt a little less alone now that he sensed the clear spiritual bond to the ancestral spirit.

The other Larkinsons all experienced the same sensation but to a lesser degree due to their decreased spiritual sensitivity. The norms among the Larkinsons would probably not pay conscious attention anymore as they slowly filtered out the bond as background noise.

Perhaps the expert candidates might notice something. Ves observed Jannzi and Tusa carefully and figured that Tusa was considerably more sensitive to the new bond from the way he tried to look around.

As for Jannzi, Qilanxo already claimed her. She probably wouldn't allow the Golden Cat to maintain anything more than a cursory bond. To go further would encroach on her territory!

All in all, the Golden Cat's influence on the clan was very minor for the time being. Except for making the clan members feel more warmth whenever they thought about the clan or their fellow relatives, the ancestral spirit didn't possess the power to do anything more.

Ves did not underestimate this effect, though. Positive feedback, however minor, was a powerful tool to reinforce certain kinds of attitudes or behavior.

If his new clan members experienced warmth whenever they thought well of the clan, then their mentalities would slowly reprogram in a way where they continued to seek the same reward.

Any attitude or conduct that lessened the frequency of rewards would unconsciously signal the Larkinsons that they were heading in the wrong direction, thereby encouraging them to return to the correct path!

This was something that Ves considered crucial to his nascent clan. Despite all of the pomp and circumstance which Ves used to create a lot of strong associations in the minds of his clan members, the Larkinson Clan was not as strong and established as he would like. It was barely better than a typical mercenary corps in terms of cohesion!

Therefore, Ves had to resort to stagecraft, symbolism and outright spiritual manipulation in order to reduce the gap between the Larkinson Clan and the Larkinson Family!

As long as he could manage to maintain the illusion of a strong and vibrant Larkinson Clan, his relatives would naturally fit the desired mold. Once they internalized their new identities as clansmen, then Ves did not have to exert so much effort anymore.

At that point, the illusion became real.

Ves wrapped up the ceremony by summarizing the governance structure of the Larkinson Clan.

"Three organs will govern our clan for the time to come. First, the Larkinson Assembly will be the platform where notable clan members can offer proposals to be discussed and voted upon. Any notable clan member, including elders, are eligible to join the Assembly."

The Assembly highly resembled the steering committee of the old Larkinson Family. The details and the overall roles of the two organs different. The Assembly was supposed to be a legislative body with the power to restructure the entire clan as long as enough proposals passed. The downside was that it only held its meetings a couple of times a year.

The clan needed another body to run the affairs of the clan, especially if it grew and expanded in size.

"To govern the day-to-day activities of the Larkinson Clan and enact any new proposals, we have decided to create a smaller Larkinson Executive Council that consists entirely of the most suitable Larkinsons that can lead the clan. Any issues that aren't worth bringing up to the Assembly will be dealt with by the Council. Do note that the Council always governs at the will of the Assembly."

To reinforce this relationship, the Assembly had the power to appoint or dismiss any of the nine members of the Executive Council. An assembly member could not occupy a council seat and vice versa. Aside from the position of patriarch, a concentration of power had to be avoided at all costs.

If something happened that neither the Assembly nor the Council could resolve, then another institution was needed.

"Disputes and violations are inevitable. In order to resolve these issues, the Larkinson Court is formed out of the most esteemed Larkinsons among us to mediate or pass judgement, whichever is necessary. Every high-ranking mech pilot or mech designer will automatically become a member of the Court, though they will only take part in the most severe cases."

The three organs resembled the typical division of power of states, and that was on purpose.

Ves envisioned the Larkinson Clan growing from its modest beginnings to a huge behemoth over time.

The Larkinson Clan was different from the Larkinson Family, which had always controlled its size through various means.

When Ves initially conceived of the Larkinson Clan as a nomadic clan, he studied the governance structures of spaceborn clans.

Each of them had chosen to model themselves as states, because that was who they were. The only difference between a spaceborn clan and a recognized state was that the former didn't hold any fixed territories!

In many other aspects, a spaceborn clan did not differ substantially from a state.

While it was a bit premature to treat the Larkinson Clan as a formal state, the three governing bodies that he and elders put into effect should be able to accommodate the clan from the beginning.

The Larkinson Assembly consisted of fifty members in total.

The Larkinson Executive Council was made up of nine capable council members.

The Larkinson Court only held three permanent judges, but any high-ranking mech pilot and mech designer could also take part if needed.

That left only the most supreme position.

"While many clan members will have a say in the running of the clan, there are certain times when even the Executive Council is inadequate. To lead the clan during a crisis and represent us all to external parties, a position exists which stands on top of the aforementioned organs. As our first Larkinson Clan Patriarch, I pledge to lead the clan to prosperity and better your lives!"

With all of the preparation he did beforehand, Ves received absolutely no rejection from the crowd. They all clapped and approved of the decision, even if many of them weren't exactly aware of what it meant to be a patriarch.

Unlike the Larkinson Family's patriarch, Ves possessed a lot of actual power if he chose to exercise it. He could directly overrule the decisions of the Assembly, Executive Council and the Court without needing to provide any justification.

The clan patriarch also had the right to force the removal of any member of the three organs!

However, a caveat existed which served to restrain the clan patriarch to an extent. This was the compromise that Ves had made with the Larkinson elders over the course of the recent assembly meetings.

The Larkinson Assembly basically had the power to reprimand or vote on the dismissal of the current clan patriarch.

However, the vote threshold for anything concerning the clan patriarch was very high! A proposal relating to Ves or any other patriarch had to gain the support of at least 80 percent of the votes in order to pass!

If a situation arose where Ves wanted to implement a hugely impactful order but met with intense opposition from the rest of the clan, he could still ram it through.

Even if more than 80 percent of the Larkinson Assembly voted to boot him from the office of clan patriarch, Ves would still have his way in this situation!

The price for this was that this would be the last order he could make. A clan patriarch was allowed to act wilfully if the situation was truly desperate, but a leader was not allowed to disregard the will of the entire clan over and over again!

That would lead to tyranny and transform the Larkinson Clan into something too far removed from the intentions of Ves and the initial clan members!

Therefore, if Ves decided one day to make the Larkinson Clan a vassal of the Hexadric Hegemony, his clan would sure as hell fight tooth and nail to stop this action!

Yet Ves would still prevail in the end. Perhaps many clan members would leave after this awful decision, which was another price the clan would pay for his ill-advised order.

In short, Ves wasn't allowed to treat the Larkinson Clan at will as if the three governing bodies didn't exist. He had to respect the will of the Larkinson Clan and make sure that he didn't garner the disgust of an overwhelming majority of the Larkinsons!

Though it sounded as if Ves relinquished a lot of power, he didn't really mind these concessions.

If Ves ran the clan so badly that 80 percent of the assembly members were ready to boot him out of his office, then it was better for everyone involved that he should resign from his position.

There was no way that Ves could effectively run the clan when so many Larkinsons hated his guts.

Rather than let the Larkinsons rebel and try to effect change through violence or intimidation, it was better to offer them a formal means to remove the current clan patriarch.

Besides, Ves already learned from the Bright Republic that there were more ways to maintain control of state than to occupy a formal position.

The founding families seemed to master the art of leading the Bright Republic in the shadows. Though their family members occasionally occupied elected or appointed positions in the government, the Tovars and the Cavendishes exercised an outsized amount of influence in the affairs of the state!

Ves was farsighted enough to know that he wouldn't make the best clan patriarch. He was also aware that there may be situations in the future where it became untenable for him to keep hold of this position.

Rather than alienate his family members and turn himself into a tyrant, he might as well make way for another clan patriarch who enjoyed everyone's support.

With how integral he was in founding the Larkinson Clan, Ves did not believe that he would become irrelevant even after he relinquished the highest seat of power!

Through cultivating relationships and alliances with other notable Larkinsons, Ves could still exert a lot of power without stepping into the open.

By earning the admiration of the younger generation of Larkinsons, Ves would be able to transform himself into a transcendent figure akin to the Larkinson Ancestor whose word must be respected regardless of his lack of office!

This was his true plan to keep the reins of his clan! While all of the other organs were still able to exercise real power, in his eyes they were merely operating at a level far below his vision!

Of course, this was not very relevant for the moment. Every Larkinson clan member fully supported his endeavors. The clan was small enough that factionalism hadn't cropped up yet. There were no major disagreements as most of the Larkinsons who chose to accompany him were already on his side.

That would change, Ves was sure. Once the clan grew in numbers, disagreements became inevitable. When that happened, Ves was sure there would be Larkinsons who wanted to steer the clan in a different direction!

Chapter 1813 Minor Revision

The founding ceremony of the larkinson clan finally came to an end. Every clan member left the auditorium in extremely high spirits. The fantastic ceremony left an unforgettable experience in their minds and spirits.

Their dedication to the newly-founded clan already started off strong! after this eventful evening, none of the larkinsons who resided on kesseling viii regarded themselves as members of the larkinson family anymore.

Each of them already accepted the larkinson clan in their heart. The solemn ritual where they had signed their names and left their marks on the larkinson mandate was an unforgettable experience which mentally transformed every participant!

No matter if they were young or old, norm or potentate, each larkinson carved this ceremony in their very bones!

Ves already noticed the transformation the very next day as he went about his work. The larkinsons working for the lmc, the avatars or the sentinels all held their heads high. The uncertainty that clouded over their heads ever since they hastily left the bright republic had disappeared!

Only certainty and confidence remained! no matter how abruptly their lives had changed, with the larkinson clan backing them up, they no longer feared going astray!

Ves, as the principal person responsible for forming the larkinson clan, gained an immense amount of respect and appreciation from his relatives. no matter where he moved, he always sensed the worship and approval from his fellow larkinsons.

Even the stubborn old dogs grudgingly acknowledged that someone like ves had been vital in invigorating them all! each of them became excited at the thought of how far he could bring the larkinson clan!

As long as he grew the clan as fast as he grew the lmc, then each of them would be able to experience greater glory than they had ever earned back in the original larkinson family!

The day after the founding ceremony, ves mainly held meetings with various members of the clan. The larkinson assembly, executive council and larkinson court all had empty positions which needed to be filled over time!

For now, the clan wasn't big enough to require all of the empty positions to be filled. In fact, ves wasn't entirely sure if all fifty seats of the assembly could even be filled!

In any case, it was fine if the clan took its time to grow. even if the assembly only consisted of twenty members, it could still perform its role as the main deliberative organ of the clan. That was all that mattered.

perhaps the brightest moment of the day was when ves met with the two most prominent members of the larkinson clan aside from himself!

"Jannzi! tusa! please come in and take a seat! I've been looking forward to meeting the two of you for a very long time!"

Ves studied the two expert candidates as they approached his desk.

Despite their slim but athletic body structures, both of them exuded strength and confidence that only the extraordinary possessed.

Even though neither of them managed to take the critical step and trigger apotheosis, both of them were fairly close to doing so! they just needed the right chance and opportunity to transform their lives!

He briefly activated his spiritual vision to brush their spiritual states.

As expected, jannzi's close association with qilanxo shaped her immature force of will into something that was strongly aligned towards protection. There was a lot more to it than that, though, but ves did not have the time to figure out the subtleties in her mind.

Tusa on the other hand was a little rougher, but not that much weaker. ves had not met with tusa in recent times, so this was his first good look at raymond billingsley-larkinson's grandson.

The male expert candidate's force of will was very interesting to ves. It did not lean towards protection or aggression which was the two most common flavors he encountered in expert candidates and expert mechs.

Instead, there was a flighty aspect to his force of will. ves recalled that tusa specialized in piloting aerial light skirmishers, though he was also proficient in their spaceborn equivalent in a pinch.

All of this meant that tusa's force of will centered around speed and mobility. From the way tusa impatiently fidgeted on his seat and repressed the desire to pace around and explore the office, the expert candidate likely possessed an obsession for speed!

What a speed demon! ves definitely knew what kind of mech he had to design for tusa once he broke through to expert pilot!

"Thank you for joining the larkinson clan." ves began. "I know it must strain your conscience to bid farewell to your old mech regiments and depart from the bright republic while the sand war is still going strong."

"The bright republic no longer deserves my appreciation after what it did to you!" tusa impulsively stated. He was a lot less hesitant than raymond, that was for sure! "I don't feel any guilt for leaving the mech corps. with snakes like general cavendish and venerable ghanso, the service has no need of me. They can fight the sandmen on their own, especially since your new deliverer mechs have made their presence felt!"

"I always believed in you, ves." jannzi remarked in a calmer tone. "The difference your deliverers have made has relieved a lot of pressure on the armed forces of our old state. no one in the mech corps is unaware of your contributions. Though a part of me still yearns to fight alongside the apocalypse heralds, I can make a bigger difference to the lives of our family members and the citizens of the bright republic by staying by your side!"

This was the result of all of the success he achieved! both jannzi and tusa acknowledged that ves had done more to protect the bright republic than several expert pilots and mech regiments put together!

In the right circumstances, a key mech design could single-handedly turn the tides of war! this was the greatest honor a mech designer could earn, and ves truly deserved more than what the bright republic had treated him. Allowing the two expert candidates to leave the mech corps without any serious repercussions was just one of the ways the state attempted to make amends.

Though ves wanted to attract more notable larkinsons to the clan, for now only jannzi and tusa took this step. The rest were much more aligned with the neutrals or the traditionalists and could not bear to abandon their existing duties and responsibilities.

Ves was already happy with what he got. He half-expected the mech corps to be stubborn about retaining the two expert candidates, or that the both of them wanted to keep fighting until the sandmen no longer posed a threat.

"Will we be getting new mechs now that we work for you?" tusa impatiently asked. "I had to give up my old service mech. I really miss that machine. none of the mechs here are good enough. no offense, ves, but your desolate soldiers are too slow and low-specced to keep up with my needs!"

"I understand." ves plainly nodded. "The desolate soldier is a cheaper product meant to accommodate all of the melee and landbound mech specialists who were forced to pilot an entirely different type of mechs than they were used to in order to fight the sandmen. They're not meant to accommodate skilled and exceptional mech pilots such as you. The other mech designs aren't very suitable for you either. I'll address this problem eventually, but for now i'll instruct the avatars to procure a high-specced light skirmisher to tide you over. Is that acceptable?"

Tusa nodded. "Sure. I heard you have a lot of money, though, so make sure melkor buys an expensive one! I don't want to pilot another machine that cut too many corners in the name of cost savings!"

Ves grinned. "if you want to satisfy your craving for speed, you can borrow one of the mechs I've captured from the friday coalition. The fliskin is an exceedingly fast and mobile spaceborn light skirmisher with atmospheric capabilities. I'm sure you'll enjoy taking it out on a spin! you might as well take part in the training program meant to elevate third-class mech pilots into second-class mech pilots!"

"I heard about that mech of yours!" tusa instantly became enthused. "I've watched the footage during my journey to the ylvaine protectorate. I can't wait to get my hands on that mech!"

Though tusa wanted to claim the fliskin for himself, ves rejected this suggestion. Expert candidate or not, the four second-class mechs in his possession were essential to the training program!

Without the experience of piloting actual second-class mechs, the avatars and sentinels were unable to ascertain what they needed to shore up in order to become proficient enough to draw out the potential of these powerful machines!

Ves glanced towards jannzi. "how about you? are your needs being met?"

she nodded. "The shield of samar still suits my purposes. I have no desire to pilot any other mech. It's just..."

"The shield of samar is kind of limiting, right?"

"I don't like to admit it, but there have been times where I wished the shield of samar was a little faster or more resilient."

"That's normal, cousin. You're a mech pilot, and a powerful one at that. At a certain point, you've outgrown the performance of your mech. That has caused you to feel strained and confined. my team and I will work on performing a minor revision to your mech."

At the moment, the aurora titan model did not need to be renewed. ves wanted to wait before he was ready to revisit the mech design and perform a comprehensive upgrade to its design and components.

Since he was already busy with other projects, ves could not afford to waste too much time on this side project.

Because ves had upgraded it with the ardent wish, one of lucky's gems which upgraded its spiritual feedback by 40 percent, it was very important for him to retain the essence of the original mech!

For this reason, he intended to make a quick pass and limit his actions to performing quick but impactful upgrades.

He briefly dredged his memories of the aurora titan design from the depths of his mind and already identified some useful aspects to improve.

"I'm thinking about upgrading its armor system to an entirely new formula which is vastly stronger than the pisaro fpp-22 mark iii. I'll also replace its power reactor with a better one to provide more juice to your mech's luminent orca flight system and polarizing module. while it will be rather costly, I expect the performance of your shield of samar to double or triple, especially with the new armor I have in store!"

Compared to the aurora titan's existing pisaro armor system, the breyer alloy could withstand vastly more damage! against some damage types, the latter could easily resist blows that would have crushed a standard-issue aurora titan!

"will you be able to afford it, ves? I don't want to impose on you too much."

"The lmc has sold over a million mechs since the start of the sand war. Don't worry about our finances. Besides, the investment is worth it. Anything that makes you stronger will also empower our clan!"

"Everything we do is for the clan." she whispered.

"Exactly." Ves nodded.

This was precisely the effect he wanted to evoke when he founded the clan!

After settling the issue of their mechs, ves discussed his other arrangements for the expert candidates.

Both of them might have left the mech corps, but they were still straight-laced and used to discipline. This made the avatars of myth the only suitable home for their abilities.

Not only would the avatars welcome their exceptional skill, it also provided the best growth environment for highly-talented mech pilots!

Ves hoped that commander melkor and the rest of the avatars would be able to stimulate the two expert candidates into taking the critical step.

Only after they advanced to expert pilots would they truly begin their extraordinary careers!

And this time, the mech corps wasn't here to steal his people from his possession!

Chapter 1814 Too Many Issues

After meeting the Larkinson expert candidates, Ves continued to check up on various people.

His orbit had grown so much that he needed to keep tabs on dozens of different people and initiatives.

He had to settle the issue of Silent William. He had to do something with the pirate designers captured by the Battle Criers. He needed to find some way of making Davia Stark move forward from her devastating trauma.

All of these issues required his personal attention due to their sensitive nature. He could not delegate these matters to anyone.

With so many issues on his plate, Ves had no choice but to address them one by one and hoped that nothing burned down in the meantime.

At the same time, he not only had to prepare some new design projects, but also guide the Larkinson Clan as it started to settle all of the questions that emerged as a result of its founding.

Where should the clan reside?

What assets must the clan procure?

What must the clan be working towards?

All of these questions needed to be answered one way or another. Ves involved himself at the start, but soon pulled back once he determined that the clan was on the right track.

The Ylvaine Protectorate might be hosting the Larkinson Clan as well as the headquarters of the Living Mech Corporation, but Ves did not intend to settle down in the state on a permanent basis.

"I think we are in a consensus that we shouldn't increase our entanglement with the Protectorate." Ves explained to the two Larkinsons who attended this meeting. "The Ylvainans have been nice to us, but that does not oblige us to convert to their faith."

He tapped his finger against the embellished surface of the Larkinson Mandate resting on his desk.

Lucky meanwhile curiously tapped the spine of the book with his paw. Ves already forbid his pet from taking a bite out of the book, though it didn't seem necessary.

His pet was actually playing with the Golden Cat. Both of them possessed a fairly substantial bond, and Lucky seemed to be able to sense and interact with the newborn spiritual product!

Was it because they were cats? Whatever the case, Ves was glad that the Golden Cat had someone to spend her time with. Due to the nature of her existence, she was only able to reside within the book. Her only outside interaction aside from observing her immediate surroundings was to explore one of the many spiritual bonds she formed with the members of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves could tell that the Golden Cat was rapidly absorbing quite a lot of information from those bonds. It wouldn't take too much time for the Golden Cat to mature, at least from a mental aspect.

"We've been thinking about buying an ark ship or some other vessel that can house our clan in space." Ovrin Larkinson mentioned. "We'd like to hear your opinion before we explore this proposal any further."

As Benjamin Larkinson's brother and an esteemed elder in his own right, Ovrin was one of the more prestigious elders to join the clan. It didn't take much time for the newly-created Larkinson Assembly to vote Ovrin to the position of speaker.

This essentially made Ovrin the head of the Assembly, and one of the main people Ves needed to call upon if he wanted the Assembly to do something!

It came as a surprise to many that Ovrin decided to leave his comfy retirement and join the clan. Ves half-suspected that his grandfather dispatched Ovrin to the clan in order to keep tabs on its development or guide its evolution in a certain direction!

Even if one of these possibilities were the case, Ves did not mind them. Ulterior motives couldn't be avoided, and Ves believed that everyone's commitment to the Larkinson Clan was strong enough for them to do what was right.

If that didn't turn out to be the case, well.. Ves could always exercise his power as clan patriarch and remove Ovrin from his position as assembly speaker.

"I believe we should wait before procuring any massive ships." Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson spoke. "We number only a couple of clan members for the moment. A single medium-sized passenger vessel is large enough to accommodate us for the moment, though such a ship won't provide us with the facilities we require to develop ourselves."

Ever since his grandson Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson joined the clan, the COO of the LMC had become a lot more energetic. Raymond fully believed in the ventures that Ves and the clan had started.

If Tusa remained committed to the Bright Republic, then the most he could look forward to was to several decades of service. With the uncertainties surrounding both the Sand War and the Komodo War, there were very serious questions whether Tusa was fighting for the right cause.

Instead of sacrificing his talents for a state that never treated the Larkinsons too well, Tusa was much better served by joining the clan, which would definitely invest in his development!

In fact, the Billingsley-Larkinsons were doing extremely well in the clan right now. Due to his important position within the LMC, the eldest of this family branch also became a part of the Larkinson Executive Council!

Though Ves questioned whether Raymond had enough time to run both the LMC and the Larkinson Clan, for the moment the latter didn't actually require that much attention once it got up and running.

There was only so much work to do to govern a clan of several hundred Larkinsons. Perhaps Raymond would be forced to relinquish his council seat if the clan grew by an order of magnitude.

Of course, Raymond was already at an advanced age and growing older every year. This was the main reason why Ves did not mind the concentration of power. He had nothing to fear from someone who would die anyone in a decade or two. No matter what achievements Raymond managed to make, it was out of the question for him to receive life-prolonging treatment.

The best he could do was to pave the way for the rise of his grandson and the rest of his family branch.

"The starship market is too turbulent." Ves noted. "Prices are vastly inflated due to the huge and persistent damage of large-capacity passenger and shipping vessels. Supply has also dropped to a various precarious level as the sandmen have destroyed many ship-producing states and forced everyone else to reserve the remainder of the production to themselves."

In other words, this was the worst time to buy a starship, particularly a subcapital ark ship meant to provide a complete long-term spaceborn living environment for humans.

They were already incredibly expensive due to all of the amenities and protection they offered to their permanent occupants. With prices ballooning by as much as 500 percent, Ves would have to be crazy to order such a vessel at this time!

"Then where does that leave us?" Ovrin asked.

"Raymond is right. We have enough ships to migrate elsewhere if necessary. We can even live on them on an extended basis if we truly don't have another choice. I hope it won't come to that, though. I'm open to procuring an ark ship to provide our clan with a permanent base, but the vessel has to be good enough to take part in a possible expedition to the Red Ocean."

"That.. is even more expensive and difficult to obtain." Raymond frowned. "Second-class ark ships are even more extravagant than the ones that used to be sold in this region. Even with our current finances, we can only fund a small portion of the total cost! This doesn't even go into all of the ships and mechs we have to procure as well in order to protect such a valuable prize. If we parade a fancy ark ship without protection, I'm sure that every pirate gang in the star sector will be climbing over each other to steal her from our hands!"

These were all very grave concerns that only Ves could solve. He pressed one hand against his forehead while keeping his other hand on the reassuring warmth of the Larkinson Mandate.

Touching the book always made him feel less stressed and more reassured with all of the responsibilities he assumed as clan patriarch. The Golden Cat herself trusted Ves with every fiber of her being, which wasn't a surprise since most of her spiritual energy originated from his Spirituality!

Both Ves and Gloriana sacrificed much to create her. While Ves managed to mitigate the cost by exhausting his reserves of excess spiritual energy, his girlfriend was not as well. She had to regenerate her spent spiritual energy the old fashioned way.

Fortunately, she could double her recovery speed by holding frequent prayer sessions. Ves expected her to recover in a month or even more.

"Let's leave aside the issue of ship procurement for next year or later." Ves declared. "The local situation will change drastically by then, so it's no use speculating what we should do so early."

"Makes sense."

"Agreed."

They moved on to discussing another contentious topic.

"A new.. issue has cropped up." Ovrin said. "Our hosts have become increasingly more persistent in joining us or integrating our clan."

Raymond sighed. "The LMC is facing the same issue. The Ylvainans are practically trying to tear down our doors in order to apply to work for our company! I've been suppressing the intake so that only the most essential positions are being filled. However, the addition of so many Ylvainans to the company is already altering the atmosphere."

"This is something unavoidable. I never intended the LMC to be a Brighter firm." Ves explained. "That doesn't mean I want the LMC to become an Ylvainan company, though. I would like it to be more adaptable and diverse. It has to be able to operate in many different settings and states. Otherwise, how can we possibly navigate the sheer diversity we will encounter when we reach the Red ocean?"

Ves envisioned the Red Ocean as a true melting pot of human civilization! The brightest and most ambitious galactic pioneers from all parts of the Milky Way would definitely converge on the dwarf galaxy, and Ves did not wish to be found wanting!

"I understand." Raymond nodded. "I'll make sure that the LMC maintains a conservative recruitment policy that aims to increase diversity instead of the opposite. I'll try and see if we can recruit talents from other states aside from the Protectorate. This will be fairly difficult due to the Sand War raging in the background, but we'll manage somehow."

"What about the clan, Ves? Our numbers are rather low, especially in comparison to the old family. It will take several generations and lots of encouragement for us to grow our numbers to a healthy level. This might be too long considering the speed in which you want to move"

"The Larkinson Clan must primarily be based around our bloodline." Ves pronounced. "I'm not very open to the practice of adopting talents and capable outsiders like other clans. It's more important to maintain cohesion among our clan members than to dilute it by throwing too many outsiders in our midst. I don't want our Larkinson name to become an empty label. It has to mean something, and the best way to ensure that is to ensure that every member of our clan is exceptional!"

Keeping this door closed would hamper the development of the clan in the short term, but lead to a much more stable foundation in the future.

Many of the decisions he made so far would not bear fruit until decades or even centuries later! With his expected lifespan, Ves could afford to take his time and make sure his decisions led to the best possible outcome in the future!

"We still need a lot of manpower to manage our various affairs." Ovrin pressed. "We aren't the Larkinson Family anymore, which is content with retaining its existing status and benefits in an existing state. We are essentially forming our own sovereign group, which means we need to take care of many matters we've ordinarily taken for granted. Hiring regular employees from the local states won't cut it. For some important positions, we need a much greater commitment from our new hires."

"I take it you have a suggestion for that, speaker."

"Let's take a page out of the Larkinson Family's book and reintroduce the practice of hiring retainers!"

Ves looked intrigued at this suggestion.

Chapter 1815 Sowing Seeds

The question of hiring retainers was a fairly sensitive topic due to the risks involved.

Hiring a retainer was not as drastic as adopting an outsider into the clan. It was a step up from hiring a regular employee to tend the gardens of the Friedhold Estate.

Ves, Raymond and Ovrin discussed the matter and came to a quick consensus.

Both of the older Larkinsons did not see anything wrong with hiring retainers to fulfill essential roles such as captaining a starship or maintaining the mechs owned by the clan. It was difficult for the Larkinsons to fulfill these jobs themselves. Had anyone heard of a Larkinson becoming a grease monkey?

While it was possible to rely on regular employees for these functions, it was not very wise to do so in most cases.

A nefarious chief technician could subtly sabotage the mechs under his care.

A ship captain might make the wrong maneuver during a space battle that left a ship vulnerable to the enemy.

A bodyguard might turn his weapon at his own charge after receiving a hefty bribe.

All of these examples and more happened to many people over the course of history. The Larkinson Family wasn't stupid. It knew the importance of cultivating loyal retainers early on and became quite proficient at the practice.

Much of that expertise and know-how transferred to the Larkinson Clan. Ovrin himself was already familiar with the process, having managed it some time himself, so Ves readily handed the responsibility of setting up a retainer training program in his lap.

"The Larkinson Assembly will deliberate on this matter next week." Ovrin promised. As speaker, he had the power to set the assembly's agenda. "We'll have to discuss exactly how the training program should look like, how many essential functions we need to fulfill and how to incentivize the retainers to remain loyal."

Raymond became more attentive after Ovrin mentioned the last point. "Retainers need something to work towards. Some are content in living a stable and steady life under the umbrella of a powerful clan, but others want more. You need to dangle a better carrot in front of their faces."

"What reward are you thinking of?" Ves frowned.

"Offer them to become a clan member."

"I thought I already made my point clear. I don't want to dilute the cohesion of the Larkinson Clan by bringing in outside blood."

"This is different, Ves. A lifelong retainer that has worked his entire lifetime for the clan is more of a Larkinson than some of our brats! A retainer who has earned supreme merit in battle or other emergency situation has done more to the clan than many of our middling descendants! Allowing these impressive and loyal individuals the opportunity to exchange their merits for an entry into the Larkinson Clan will only increase cohesion in the Larkinson Clan because they already embody our values and bonds!"

That.. sounded very compelling. Ves had to admit that Raymond's argument was sound in logic.

"Is that what has taken place in the Larkinson Family? I don't think I've heard of a case where an outsider became a member of the original family without marrying a trueblood Larkinson."

Ovrin nodded. "It's rather obscure, but it has happened over the centuries. The only reason it hasn't happened more often was because the Larkinson Family isn't involved in anything major. There aren't many opportunities for retainers to stand out. I expect our clan to be a lot livelier in comparison. This just makes it even more important to motivate our retainers as much as possible. Give them the opportunity to be adopted into the family, and they will work hard and apply themselves to the best of their ability!"

"I don't know.." Ves hesitated and tapped his finger against the surface of the Larkinson Mandate. "It goes outside of my vision of the Larkinson Clan. However, I do admit that it might be a boon to our clan in the right conditions. I'll approve of it. Make sure not to screw it up. Clan cohesion comes first."

"We'll manage. The old family has centuries of experience in cultivating retainers."

The warmth and happiness emanating from the Larkinson Mandate gave Ves an idea.

"There is one more thing." Ves added. "Any outsider who wants to marry into the clan or any retainer who you deem worthy enough to be adopted into the clan has to pass one crucial test."

"And that is..?"

He flicked the solid surface of the tome. "They must all receive the approval of the Larkinson Mandate."

Both Raymond and Ovrin became confused. "Isn't it just a book? How can you possibly determine..?"

"The Larkinson Mandate is not a simple book." Ves smirked. "Lean forward and touch the book. Try and sense what it contains."

They both did so. Both elders had already gotten used to the glow contained in the book, but now that they touched its cover directly, they probably sensed the curiosity of the Golden Cat!

"What am I feeling..?"

"Something alive." Ves smiled. "Just like my mechs, this book is alive in a certain sense. Don't worry. It's completely devoted to the Larkinson Clan. This is what makes it such a great tool to determine whether an outsider deserves to be adopted by us. If the book doesn't approve, then there's a problem with the individual in question."

"This.. sounds a bit too outlandish for us." Ovrin heavily frowned.

He had much less exposure to the LMC than Raymond, so he wasn't too familiar with the company's emphasis on life and the hidden nature of glows.

"Let's wait until there's an opportunity to put the book to the test." Ves suggested. "I believe in the Larkinson Mandate, but I know it will take hard proof to convince you. There is more to this book than its pages, and I'll show it to you at that time."

"I'll take your word for it, Ves."

Leaving an opening for outsiders to join the Larkinson Clan and turning the Larkinson Mandate into an essential testing device were very impactful decisions!

The true import of their discussion would certainly be felt in the future! If they had made different choices this day, then the Larkinson Clan would have evolved into an entirely different direction in the next decades!

Ves was vaguely aware of all of the precedents and examples he set in the initial days of the Larkinson Clan. He made so many decisions and issued so many instructions that each shaped the character of the clan.

The mantle of responsibility was a heavy burden to bear, but Ves was confident in his judgement and the judgement of the governing bodies. The Larkinson Assembly and the Larkinson Executive Council were already at work, taking over much of the load after Ves set their overall direction.

He had deliberately set up the governance structure of the clan to keep him in charge, but remained as far removed from the day-to-day routine of running it as much as possible.

As a mech designer, he had better things to do than manage his own relatives. This was why he never objected to delegating a lot of power to the governing bodies. They took on his responsibilities as well, which left him free to spend his time on more fruitful pursuits such as designing mechs.

While Ves was more than ready to get back to designing mechs, he still had to handle some other affairs after this meeting.

As Ves waved Ovrin and Raymond goodbye, his next appointments dealt with other personnel matters.

He met with Commander Melkor and Commander Magdalena to discuss the gradual expansion of the Avatars and Sentinels.

He summoned Dr. Lupo to discuss his progress on preparing for the upcoming implantation surgery as well as his progress on his projects.

He called in Davia Stark and ascertained her condition. So far, her mental scars barely healed from before, which frustrated Ves a little. It wasn't as easy as he thought to salvage an expert pilot from a human husk.

Once he dismissed her, Ves leaned over his desk and pressed his fingers against his forehead. All of these meetings were exhausting in a way that was difficult to describe.

All this time, Lucky kept playing with the Golden Cat that resided in his book.

"You're quite a handful, are you?" Ves sighed as he pulled Lucky away from squatting over the Larkinson Mandate like a brooding penguin.

"Meow!"

"Even if you consider her to be your kid, I don't want you to press your bottom against my book!"

"Meow meow."

"I don't want you to influence the Golden Cat with your naughty ways!"

"Meooow!"

Ves threw Lucky over his shoulder, causing him to desperately catch himself in the air!

He picked up the book from his desk and took pleasure in studying his own handicraft.

He was very proud of the culmination of his experiment. The Larkinson Mandate's visual appearance fully conformed to his idea of a clan heirloom. He not only crafted a cover that could last with all of the Breyer alloy and other strong materials, but also embellished its appearance with artful reliefs of mechs and human heroes modeled after the Larkinson expert pilots of the past.

Nailing the appearance was already half the battle. The strong spiritual presence of the Larkinson Mandate did the rest! Even without the Golden Cat, it had already gained a strong innate foundation that corresponded highly to the Larkinsons!

Naturally, the Golden Cat deserved most of his attention. He made sure to interact with her carefully in order to steer her development in the right direction.

"The Larkinson Clan is your home. You're going to watch over our clan members like a guardian angel, won't you?"

The Golden Cat cautiously poked her intangible head over of the medallion on the front cover.

"Nyaaa."

"Oh, you're so cute!" Ves grinned and stroked her head by employing a gentle spiritual projection.

These simple bonding sessions continually reinforced the Golden Cat's already strong affection towards him. Gaining her appreciation was one of the hidden means he devised to retain control over the clan in the event he lost his position as clan patriarch.

In the event he was forced to retreat, Ves could still exert a considerable amount of influence on the Larkinsons by influencing the clan's ancestral spirit!

Out of every Larkinson, only he could do so! No one else aside from Lucky, Clixie and maybe Gloriana could perceive and interact with the Golden Cat. Everyone else simply couldn't tell he was real, including Ovrin and Raymond!

For now, it was not very wise for him to reveal the existence of the Golden Cat. While there were many benefits in doing so, Ves valued his secrecy even more. It was highly unwise to pain the Golden Cat as something more than an application of his glows.

"One day, you'll become known to every Larkinson, Golden Cat. This I swear." He whispered.

He envisioned a time where he no longer had to keep his secrets hidden. He imagined he gained a position of power where he could comfortably reveal his methods and work with his spirits openly.

Though that time was unimaginably distant, Ves couldn't help but dream how glorious it would be to earn recognition for his accomplishments.

The Larkinson Clan, the LMC, the grand expedition and the Golden Cat all formed intricate pieces in his plan to rise to greatness. He invested a humongous amount of time and effort in each of them with the expectation that they would all be able to assist him in overcoming the challenges he would certainly face in the distant future.

"Per angusta ad augusta. I chose this motto for a reason. Nothing comes for free. There is always a price. True reward always requires effort. The greater the reward, the greater the price."

Ves set his sights at a height far beyond what others dared to dream. This meant that Ves would almost certainly have to work harder and make more accomplishments than nearly any other mech designer in history!

He wouldn't be able to reach his destination within a day. He needed to lay the groundwork and set himself up for success as thoroughly as possible, hence all of the effort he put into recent affairs.

The seeds he sowed in this early period in his life would certainly lead to a bountiful harvest when he needed it the most!

Chapter 1816 Beneath Him

After several days of meetings and setting policy, Ves finally tidied up his responsibilities. He could leave most of the other affairs to his underlings. The LMC was in the process of reorganizing itself while the Larkinson Clan finally stood on its own legs.

With Gloriana busy with her own obligations as well as recovering from her spiritual exhaustion, Ves did not feel like embarking on some of his next mech projects. He postponed the start of his Larkinson mech design project for later.

As for upgrading the Shield of Samar, Ves thought that involving Gloriana for what was supposed to be a simple upgrade would be redundant. The only reason why he didn't embark on this project immediately was because he didn't have enough Breyer alloy yet to replace the armor system of Jannzi's personal mech.

The Aurora Titan model was a very big mech! Though it fell short of a true heavy mech, the super-medium space knight was still a brick in space, with most of its mass occupied by its hefty shield and armor coverage!

Upgrading the Shield of Samar's armor system as well as its power reactor and some other minor system would definitely elevate its performance to a level close to a second-class mech!

At the very least, its defensive parameters would definitely meet the standard of a second-class mech like the Paravin!

"It's too bad I can't replace its internals." He sighed. "Not without putting a huge amount of effort in revising its internal architecture."

That went beyond the scope of a minor revision. Ves opted to wait until he was ready to revise the entire design. Depending on his circumstances, he might opt to keep it a third-class mech or elevate into a fully-fledged second-class mech.

The latter was actually a really bad idea. The Aurora Titan was basically a design filled with compromises and bad choices. He didn't set out to design a mech that fell under the super-medium weight class. He was forced to embrace this unusual choice because he was insistent on accommodating a polarizing module in its design!

Much of this reasoning wasn't valid anymore when it came to second-class mechs. The tech and material level was so much higher that a polarizing module only took up the space of a backpack module or even smaller!

It was perfect doable for Ves to design a medium space knight with standard proportions and decent mobility while still exhibiting all of the strengths of the Aurora Titan!

Yet if Ves designed such a mech, would it be a successor or a replacement of the Aurora Titan Mark I?

This was a very important question, because it determined the future of the Shield of Samar. This mech was extremely pivotal not only because it imprinted on Jannzi and developed in a unique direction, but also contained one of Lucky's highly valuable gems!

Ves wasn't sure if he could recover the gem if he dismantled the Shield of Samar, but he had a hunch that it wouldn't be possible.

If that was the case, then Ves had to do his best to keep the Shield of Samar relevant by upgrading its capabilities to keep up with the time!

Perhaps it wasn't the best idea, but Jannzi appeared to be determined to pilot her Shield of Samar for her entire career!

While this kind of behavior wasn't unheard of, it was extremely rare. It was too difficult for a mech pilot to stick to a single mech for the rest of their lives, especially when mechs got destroyed or damaged all of the time!

They were war machines after all. Battle was in their lifeblood!

Therefore, it was in Jannzi and Ves' best interest that he kept the essence of the Aurora Titan design alive when he decided to update it properly in the future.

If Ves had to design a second-class super-medium mech, then he would unflinchingly do so! Even if it made absolutely no sense to the market, as long as he had at least one customer in the form of a current expert candidate and future expert pilot, it was more than worth the effort!

For now though, Ves merely aimed for a quick fix, so he only briefly visited the design lab and delegated much of the grunt work to his two design teams.

"I want both teams to propose how to best replace the armor system and the power reactor of the Aurora Titan with these following components." He announced. "I'll let the both of you work on this separately so we can compare the results at the end. The team who designed the best version will receive a reward from me. Any questions?"

Ves did not intend to push off all of the work to his design teams. Regardless of the results, Ves would go over their choices and override them with his own solutions as needed. This allowed him to invest a lot less time on this project.

He only felt a little guilty about the lack of thoroughness by employing this method. Jannzi wouldn't be able to get the best version of the Shield of Samar, but Ves did not mind too much.

The amazing defensive qualities of the Breyer alloy was enough to mitigate some of the flaws that might result from this decision!

"Relying on superior materials to overcome the shortcomings of a design is the mark of a lazy mech designer." He sighed after he put the Tovar Design Team and the Ylvaine Design Team to work.

Both teams were named by the character of their mech designers. The first team still consisted entirely of young Tovar mech designers, while the second team mainly consisted of Ylvainan mech designers eager to work for Bright Martyr.

The only exception was Mayer Torto. He was clearly an oddball amongst the devout and fanatical Ylvainans. Still, despite his youth and inexperience, Mayer managed to get along with his religious colleagues.

"How are you adjusting to the LMC?" Ves asked when he pulled Mayer aside.

"It's.. strange. I understand the LMC is undergoing a hectic period, but my new job isn't what I've expected."

"This is only temporary." Ves emphasized. "We'll embark on a proper design project soon. I'll be spending a lot more time in the design lab where I can guide and tutor you more extensively. For now, you should look to your colleagues to learn the essentials of working in a design team. They have much to teach."

The Novice Mech Designer understood. As one of the most junior mech designers in the LMC, he shouldn't expect too much at the start.

However, that did not mean that Ves intended to neglect the younger mech designer forever. With his spiritual potential, Mayer had the potential to be great one day!

After packing Mayer off, he decided to venture to the Ion Tracker, the flagship of the Battle Criers.

It was time to meet with the pirate designers the Battle Criers had captured during their months-long deployment.

Several different thoughts passed through his mind as he tried to determine what he should do with his prisoners.

He didn't really have a plan for them. When he initially issued the order to the Battle Criers, he merely treated it as a side priority. Once he met the plagiarizers face-to-face, Ves envisioned taunting them before shooting them in the head in order to satisfy his need for revenge.

Yet now that he became used to bearing the mantle of responsibility, he felt ashamed for ordering their capture in the first place.

He didn't know what he was thinking back then. What did it matter if he captured a couple of pirate designers who had the temerity to rip off his mech designs?

While he felt affronted by their awful attempts at putting a new spin on his work, they were so far below his level that squashing them would only dirty his soles.

It was beneath him. Why should he care about their trivial violations? If Ves could turn back time, he would have told the Battle Criers to stop bothering about this matter.

Too bad it was too late.

"What do you think I should, Lucky? Should I kill off the pirate designers, turn them into test subjects or do something else with the bastards?"

"Meow."

Lucky playfully circled around the Larkinson Mandate that floated after Ves with the help of a custom-built levitation brace.

Due to the tome's extreme importance to the clan, Ves did not wish to let it out of his sight. It was fairly easy for him to build a brace that could clamp on the book and allow it to follow after him. Even though he could have carried the book in his hands, that would have become a little tedious whenever he needed to put it down in order to employ both of his hands.

Nitaa followed after them both. Her suit of combat armor thudded loudly as its weight thudded loudly against the deck.

"If I may make a suggestion, sir, you should get rid of them." She spoke in one of her rare bouts of initiative. "Pirate designers are irredeemable criminals. There is a reason why they have stooped to designing mechs for pirates and other underground scum."

"I know."

Ves actually feared becoming one as well if he ran afoul with the MTA or the CFA. Even now, the possibility continued to loom over his head. He already violated so many of their taboos, and only managed to get away with them because he managed to hide his misdeeds.

There was a risk in associating with pirate designers, that was for sure. However, he could not bring himself to kill them off, at least for now. He intended to make a decision after he met with the prisoners and gained a better idea of their character.

They eventually reached the brig. Though Commander Cinnabar wasn't there to meet him, Ves nonetheless smiled as he greeted a familiar figure.

"Dietrich! How are you doing these days?"

As one of the few non-Kinners in a Kinner mercenary corps, Dietrich stood out with his distinctly different demeanor. Ves carefully inspected his friend and found that his fellow Cloudy Curtainer seemed content with his new lot in life.

"I've managed to fit in with the Battle Criers, though not completely." Dietrich readily said. "They're a good bunch of people, though why they are so dedicated to loyalty is a mystery to me. I like it, though. After the Whalers let me down after my old man died, it's reassuring to serve and fight alongside buddies who I can trust in the heat of the moment."

Ves slapped Dietrich in the back. "That's great to hear. Please lead me to the prisoners. How well-behaved are they?"

"Some of them are more.. feral than than we like. It's like they're not really human when their mood swings in the wrong direction. We've been forced to activate some of the restraint mechanisms of their cells in order to prevent them from bashing the cells and such."

That sounded a bit strange to Ves, but then again the people born in the frontier were never right in the head. He expected better from mech designers who grew up in civilized space, though. He recalled that Ronnie Blast used to come from the Bright Republic according to the intelligence he accessed.

"Here he is. Ronnie Blast." Dietrich smiled and waved his hand. The energy screen in front of them winked out, revealing a bare white cell with nothing but a bed where Ronnie Blast was lying bored out of his skull.

"FINALLY!" The young, blond-haired man instantly perked up. "I WAS GOING CRAZY HERE! THERE'S NOTHING TO DO HERE! CAN YOU PLEASE LET ME GO!? I HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING! WHATEVER YOU THINK I'VE DONE, I'M INNOCENT!"

Ves unconsciously leaned back from the man's screams. Was this Ronnie Blast?!

"Yeah." Dietrich remarked. "Ronnie here is always like this whenever we show up. We have to put some sense in him whenever we want him to act normal."

"YOU!" Ronnie exuberant pointed at Ves! "YOU'RE IN CHARGE, RIGHT?! PLEASE LET ME GO! THERE'S NO REASON FOR YOU TO KEEP ME CAPTIVE! I'M JUST A MECH DESIGNER!"

Ves slowly began to glower. Perhaps Nitaa was right.

Chapter 1817 Scum of the Frontier

Whatever he expected from the infamous Ronnie Blast, it wasn't this. The shouting brat who continued to yell at Ves to free him was different from his expectations.

He imagined a cowardly, craven bottom-feeder who became a pirate designer out of desperation. He believed that Ronnie Blast was a mech designer of poor mental fortitude who would crack the instant he came under pressure.

Instead, he encountered a loudmouth with poor volume control and a penchant for whining.

A lot of whining.

"YOU'RE A MECH DESIGNER, RIGHT?! I CAN TELL THAT FROM YOU! YOU HAVE THAT SMART AIR ABOUT YOU THAT REMINDS ME OF SOME OF MY COLLEAGUES IN THE PAST. WAS IT YOU THAT KIDNAPPED ME? WHY DID YOU EVER PICK ME UP?! I WAS WELL ON MY WAY TO—"

"—SHUT UP!"

When Ronnie Blast shouted, he came across as a blabbermouth.

When Ves shouted, he commanded attention.

There was a drastic difference between the two! Their life experiences, successes and training all shaped them in ways that led to drastically different directions.

No matter how obnoxious Ronnie appeared to be, his mouth instantly shut the moment Ves uttered his words!

It was at this time that Ronnie realized that Ves appeared less than pleased with his conduct. He looked sheepish, but quickly regained his bravado. He thrust out his chest as if he deserved to be treated like an equal!

"Mr. stranger, as a fellow colleague, could you please release me from this cell? I am not a danger to anyone. I'm just a mech designer!"

Ves couldn't help but jerk his mouth when he heard this phrase. He uttered these words so many times that it felt strange when someone threw it back into his face.

Though Ves felt inclined to oblige Ronnie's request, he quickly stamped it down. Though Ronnie came across as a fool, who knew what he was truly capable of? Anyone who uttered the phrase 'I'm just a mech designer' should be highly suspect!

"We'll be keeping you here for the time being." Ves unapologetically declared. "You are Ronnie Blast, a pirate designer of ill repute."

"WHAT?! THAT'S UNCALLED FOR! I WAS DRIVEN FROM CIVILIZED SPACE FOR SOMETHING I DIDN'T DO! IT WASN'T MY CHOICE TO GO PIRATE!"

Ves wanted to palm his face. He also wanted to activate the sound modulator in the cell in order to make Ronnie's shouting less grating on his ears.

"Don't lie to me, 'Ronnie'. I know this is not your real name, and I know you aren't native to the Faris Star Region."

"Why did you capture me?!" Ronnie demanded. "I've never done anything to you or any other mech designer for that matter! I always kept to myself while I was trying to survive in the frontier!"

"Did you, now?" Ves huffed and leaned his shoulder against the cell wall. "Does your Blue Paradisio design ring a bell?"

The pirate designer frowned. "Ehh.. you mean my spaceborn laser rifleman mech design?"

"YOUR design?!" Ves glared. "Do you have the temerity to claim that your poor excuse of a rip off is your original work?!"

"You.. I know who you are!" A light bulb finally lit up in his empty head. "You're Ves Larkison!"

Ves grinned. "I'm the original designer of the Crystal Lord, among other mechs."

"This.. is THIS WHY YOU NABBED ME OFF MY SHIP?! WHY ME? THERE SHOULD BE COUNTLESS OTHERS WHO BORROWED FROM YOUR WORK! I'M JUST A RANDOM MECH DESIGNER!"

"You're different! You not only ripped off my design, but also sold your mechs to a pirate gang that almost killed me! If I hadn't managed to deter them, then I might have suffered the indignity of getting killed by an exceedingly bad imitation of one of my own designs! That is a true indignity that has continued to haunt me in my nightmares!"

Ves really wanted to punch Ronnie in the face. He could do it, but he felt that would just sully him further.

He calmed himself and tried to find some way to see some benefit in keeping Ronnie under his thumb.

"YOU SHOULD FEEL HONORED FOR MAKING ME USE YOUR DESIGN AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION! YOUR DESIGN WAS SO GOOD AT THE TIME THAT I SIMPLY COULDN'T RESIST ADAPTING IT TO SPACE! EVEN THOUGH I SLIPPED UP HERE AND THERE, MY BLUE PARADISIO WAS STILL A FUNCTIONAL MECH!"

Ves grimaced even deeper. This dimwit was making it harder and harder for Ves to find any redeeming quality in him. There was no way he wanted to endure this buffoon any longer than necessary.

His plan to form a so-called 'Redeemer Design Team' made out of pirate designers who deserve a second chance fell through.

At the very least, Ronnie emphatically did not deserve a second chance!

As the pirate designer continued to shout, Ves drew out a long-neglected pistol from his belt holster.

The Peaceful Repose was a mastercrafted weapon, which was one of the main reasons why it had been so expensive.

However, its inherent tech and material levels were fairly low. While this was more than enough for a typical customer from a third-rate state, Ves was starting to encounter more formidable threats.

He needed something better. He took one good look at the Peaceful Repose before passing it on to Dietrich.

"This is for you. I've outgrown this weapon. I'll key it to your life signals and send you its custom ammunition later. I'll also hand you the Sparous Vize as well. It's a good suit of armor if you want to don something light."

Dietrich blinked as he held the unusually decorated ballistic pistol. "Really? This gun looks expensive! I don't want to mooch off you, Ves."

Ves grinned. "Relax. I'm anything but short of money these days, and I already have something better."

Nitaa already wore something better, fortunately. Ever since he reached the Kesseling System, the Scarlet Rose and all of her contents belonged to him. The Hexers hadn't taken anything away, which also included all of the gear that Ves managed to salvage!

Right now, Nitaa opted to wear a modified suit of heavy combat armor salvaged from the Scarlet Rose. Her main armament consisted of one of the impressive triple-type heavy assault rifles.

Crindon went over their software and security suites and cleaned up as many loopholes as he could find with the help of Calabast's hacking software and documentation.

Only Ves felt a bit incomplete as he hadn't managed to procure a proper suit of combat armor that suited him the most.

At least he already covered his firepower needs. He drew out a smaller pistol from a hidden holster in his business suit and pointed it straight at Ronnie Blast's forehead!

"W-WAIT A MINUTE! DON'T SHOOT! I-I-I-I CAN WORK FOR YOU, MR. LARKINSON! I HAVE LOTS OF CONTACTS IN THE DRAGON ALLIANCE!"

Ves sneered. With his fame and reputation, he could recruit fantastic young mech designers who were ten times smarter than this blathering punk. As for his supposed contacts, who cared about the Dragon Alliance these days? The sandmen completely devastated the Faris Star Region! No matter how powerful the pirate alliance used to be, the infamous Dragons of Void has become nothing but a pack of better-equipped refugees!"

A loud sparking noise cracked the cell as a bright beam instantly blasted Ronnie's entire head apart!

A headless corpse dropped onto the disarrayed bed. The smell of searing flesh only wafted in the cell for a second before the ventilation system quickly refreshed the foul odor.

"I can't say I blame you." Dietrich shrugged. "This guy has been grating on us all for months. We would have beaten him harder but we figured you wouldn't want to meet him when he's half-dead."

"Well, I hope the other pirate designers aren't as bad." Ves spoke as he holstered his small laser pistol.

He visited the adjacent cells in turn to see whether the pirate designers were worth salvaging.

Disappointingly, two of the pirate designers proved to be animals in human skin.

"I dislike your face. It's too dishonest." The Alloy Sculptor's silky smooth voice uttered as his head tilted in fascination. "Please return my tools for me so that I can rearrange your facial features. Your eyes must go and your nose must become pointed to reflect your many lies."

Yeah, Ves quickly blasted the maniac's head with a deadly laser beam after that. There was no way he would entertain a crazy mech designer who reminded him uncomfortably of the Skull Architect!

The Hand of Sin was worse.

"AUHHHH!" The genetically modified abomination struggled against the gravitic bonds that kept him pressed against his bed! "I WOO TAE U LIM FOR LIM! NO UN EVA CROS TA HAN O SIN!"

"Did you guys even pick up the right person?" Ves furrowed his brows. "He looks like a footsoldier instead of a mech designer."

"We checked the details a dozen times." Dietrich helplessly said. "He truly is a mech designer. Apparently, when he's not angry or in a battle, he can be quite.. 'eloquent', according to the intel. It's just that his reckless application of gene mod templates turned him into.. this. Whenever he's agitated, he'll continue to be like this for hours."

The man who became known as the Hand of Sin was a brute with mottled, cratered grey skin. His arms were uneven. One of them possessed normal proportions, but the other one was as thick as several legs!

The man continued to scream unintelligibly in the direction of Ves as if he wanted to do nothing more than to crush his captors with his oversized arm!

"Well, I've seen and heard enough." Ves spoke. "The frontier must be truly desperate if a defective product like him has managed to sell some mechs."

Ves did not even wish to sully his dignity by shooting the genetic freak. He waved his hand to Nitaa, who brought her heavy assault rifle to bear on the immobilized Hand of Sin.

A few weapon discharges later, nothing was left of this infamous mech designer aside from steaming piles of charred flesh.

There were only two more mech designers left. Ves hoped to meet someone within an acceptable range of normality for once.

Meeting someone like Mayra was ideal, but he could settle for someone like Ketis. Ves would be happy as long as the pirate designer possessed enough self-awareness to understand they needed to behave.

If someone failed to recognize the reality of their situation, then they were too stupid or insane to be worth keeping alive!

Was it too much to ask for a useful pirate designer? Did Ves set his expectations too high?

"I really hope the next one is better." He muttered.

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. Merrill is the best-behaved captive we have so far. She hasn't given us any flack in the months we kept her captive."

When they entered the next cell, Merrill turned her gaze from the romance drama projected by the cell. She instantly waved her hand to flick it off and composed herself as best as possible.

"Good day, Dietrich."

"Good day, Merrill. This is Ves Larkinson, my boss. He's the one who decides your fate, so I suggest you be on your best behavior."

From the amenities in the cell, Merrill evidently behaved so well that she earned some rewards to make her stay more comfortable.

That and the spontaneous advice from Dietrich made Ves think that Merrill was truly different from the wastes of space he met before.

"So.. what makes you a pirate designer?"

"Didn't you read my record, sir?" Merrill smiled impishly at Ves.

He found it curious that the captive did not act meekly nor brashly. Instead, she adopted a comfortable and confident demeanor as if she was his friend rather than a captive.

He had to admit that it had an effect on him. After dealing with the likes of Ronnie Blast, the Alloy Sculptor and the Hand of Sin, it was surprisingly refreshing to deal with someone who conformed to his expectations of a mech designer.

It also helped that she was a woman.

"I've only skimmed the barest of details, which didn't tell me anything. Is any of it even true?"

"Good question." Merrill's smile turned devious.

Chapter 1818 Merrill Truman

"I must say, compared to the other pirate designers my men have captured, you are remarkably well-behaved."

Merill Truman offered Ves a modest smile. "I never intended to become a pirate. I was forced into this life."

She had given him a very plain story of her background. According to her words, she was born and raised in the Roppo Principality.

After graduating from a good mech design university from the Principality, she attracted the attention of a Senior who mentored her. Over the course of her duties, she went on some sort of assignment that brought her close to the frontier where her entire life upended.

"A gang of ruffians ambushed our ship. Our escorts were too weak and stood no chance, so they ran." Merrill growled. "After that, the pirates took possession of our passenger ship as well as everyone inside."

"It seems you didn't suffer too much in their care."

"I'm a mech designer." She shrugged. "No matter how stupid pirates can be, they recognize the value of a properly-educated mech designer. I managed to impress the pirate captain with my.. wit and intelligence."

"What happened after that?"

"I got put to use. A mech designer is useful in many ways. By the time I gained a measure of status within the loose pirate community, I already developed a reputation for myself. Even if I found a way to get rid of the pirates who 'protect', it was too late for me to go back. They deliberately tarnished my reputation and tainted my name to cut off any possibility of going back to civilized space."

"How horrendous." Ves replied mildly. "Those pirates truly deserve death."

She grinned. "They did. The sandman destroyed half of their mechs. Your Battle Criers did the rest after they limped their way into civilized space."

That left Ves with Merrill, a seemingly well-behaved mech designer who was resourceful enough to survive in the frontier after falling in the hands of space scum.

Ves had no doubt that Merrill left out plenty of details in her story. The fact that a mech designer with so little bargaining power managed to survive and thrive in the brutal frontier was very exceptional!

This was especially so because Merrill was a woman!

The frontier was not kind to women. Civilization had gone backwards in this lawless region, and men dominated the Faris Star Region. The Hexadric Hegemony possessed

absolutely no influence here, and all-female outfits like the Swordmaidens were the exception rather than the rule.

All of these adverse conditions made Ves regard Merrill in a different light. Since Ves was short on capable subordinate mech designers, he could not bear to throw away a talent regardless of how much dirt she accumulated.

Of course, Ves did not forget to maintain his basic vigilance. Anyone who managed to navigate the perils of the frontier ought to be suspect.

When Ves studied Merrill's calm appearance, he finally found out the reason why he sensed a familiar vibe from her. She gave off the sense of someone with tight control over her emotions, just like Patricia!

This was quite remarkable, as Ves hadn't met too many rational mech designers!

His interest in Merrill increased even further after Ves ascertained that she possessed spiritual potential.

In general, only those with definite spiritual potential were able to adopt the methods of a rational mech designer. There were definitely some shenanigans involved with regulating their spiritualities and spiritual energy reserves.

Though Ves wasn't able to inspect Merrill's spiritual state in greater detail due to its diminutive and underdeveloped nature, it should definitely be weaker than a mech designer of her level ought to possess!

It seemed that Ves would not have to blast her head with his laser pistol. As long as she was useful to him, he did not mind offering her a second chance.

He still had some questions, though.

"One of the reasons the Battle Criers sought you out is because you designed an unauthorized variant of my design." He spoke, deliberately revealing some of his displeasure. "One of my biggest pet peeves is someone stealing my work without paying the price."

"My apologies, Mr. Larkinson." Merrill lowered her head in apology. "It is not as if there is a mechanism for pirate designers to purchase licenses under their name. I didn't possess the capital or the right currency to pay you either. Pirating other people's work is extremely widespread in the frontier."

Ves waved his hand. "It's no big deal to me anymore. I understand the position you were in. Tell me about your work instead. You designed a variant of my Blackbeak, yes?"

She nodded and became a bit more engaged when the topic turned to her work. "That is correct. I had need to design a rugged and robust knight mech, and browsed the galactic net for decent works. Your Blackbeak popped up by chance. While it was a premium mech, it fully met my needs with its strong internal structure and decent balance. In order to make it suitable to the frontier, I modified it by downgrading its armor system and other materials in order to develop the Greybeak, a variant that is much easier to produce in the frontier."

"How did the market react?"

"I didn't sell many Greybeaks, if that is what you are wondering, but I did okay. The Greybeak fulfilled the role I intended it to fulfill. It might be a lot worse off in terms of damage resistance, but it functioned well enough on rugged, untamed planets. I've also applied my specialty to it to increase its burst power and mechanical strength. It can deliver quite a punch in the right conditions."

Ves had briefly studied the design of the Greybeak beforehand and noted several unusual modifications that he suspected to be part of her specialty. They were very interesting modifications and additions that increased the force exertion of a mech at the cost of accelerating its wear and tear.

"What is your specialty? Is it related to the musculature system?"

"Not exactly, though I won't fault you for making that guess. My actual specialty is imbalance. It's.. a more abstract design philosophy that is related to introducing deliberate imbalances in a design in order to generate temporary mechanical advantages that can be employed to increase a mech's mobility or empower its blows."

Merrill possessed a Class I design philosophy, the same as Gloriana. Class I design philosophies usually centered around abstract principles and often encompassed an entire mech.

They were very challenging to develop due to this reason. Ves respected Merrill for pursuing such a different research direction, though he wasn't quite aware how well she could balance her difficult ambition with her rational approach towards mech design.

After Patricia enlightened him on rational mech designers, Ves always assumed that they opted to specialize in an easy design philosophy in order to facilitate their advancement.

Considering their penchant in mastering other people's design philosophies, their own efforts didn't matter. As long as they advanced to Master, they could fully embrace the methods and best practices of their peers!

So the fact that Merrill chose a design philosophy that sounded vague as hell did not match up with his impression of her as a rational mech designer!

Ves silently rubbed his chin. Maybe he made the wrong assumption.

Rational and passionate mech designers existed on the extreme end of a spectrum. There was plenty of room in between. Ves guessed that Merrill was only slightly leaning in the direction of a rational mech designer.

In any case, Ves made a decision. Her Greybeak design wasn't half-bad. It was a far cry from the travesty designed by Ronnie Blast.

"Would you like a second chance?"

Merrill looked at him with hopeful expectation. "You do not mind my background?"

"You have potential. You're wasted as a pirate designer. While I can't promise you freedom, I can give you an opportunity to redeem yourself. As for the matter of your identity, that is no problem at all. With the Komodo Star Sector in disarray, it is trivially easy to forge a new identity for you. No one is inclined to inspect peoples credentials during this crisis period."

Ves turned to Dietrich and passed on some instructions. The Battle Criers ought to be able to settle this matter by themselves. There was no need for Ves to arrange this matter in person.

"Work with Crindon to check Merrill's background as well. As long as he approves, I'll allow Merrill to work for the LMC on a provisional basis."

"We'll do our best!" Dietrich said and threw him a sloppy salute.

The two left the cell and visited the final captive.

Compared to Merrill, Timothy Moriarty was a lot less interesting. He possessed a similar background to Merrill but wasn't nearly as remarkable as a mech designer.

Ves did not say anything else to Timothy after he asked his questions. Instead, he left his cell without announcing his verdict.

"What do you think about Timothy?" Dietrich asked.

"He's too dull. Just like Merrill, he's just a mech designer who was unlucky enough to get captured. Unlike Merrill, he's barely an Apprentice who failed to adjust as well to the frontier. I don't need someone useless like him in my employ."

"Does that mean.."

"No." Ves shook his head. "I only killed the other mech designers because they are either animals or a disgrace to our profession. Removing them from existence is a boon

to the mech community. That's not the case here. Timothy managed to maintain his sanity after ending up in the frontier, and that's ultimately good. Just send him to the border of the Ylvaine Protectorate and dump him in a random star system. He can make his own way from there."

Killing Ronnie Blast, the Alloy Sculptor and the Hand of Sin left a very foul taste in his mouth. He wanted to end this round of visits on a better note, so he decided to free Timothy Moriarty back into the wild.

After that, Ves and Dietrich along with their escorts walked back to the shuttle bay. Along the way, Ves told Dietrich what he intended to do with the Battle Criers.

"The Avatars of Myth and the Living Sentinels both have very defined purposes in my force lineup. They're too straight-laced to perform certain assignments, though. They are also meant to stay close to my orbit. This is why I'm developing the Battle Criers into an outfit that can perform missions that will take them far away. You will all need to learn how to take care of yourselves in situations where help is very far away. Does that sound to your liking?"

"I like it." Dietrich smiled. "Staying on guard every day is boring as hell, and I don't think I'm cut out to be an Avatar. As I've said, I like hanging out with the Kinners. They're the only people around who I can trust with my life!"

"Since you seem to be getting along well with the Battle Criers, I'll let you stay here despite the fact that you're not a Kinner. As long as you continue to prove your loyalty and your capabilities, I won't have cause to remove you. Understand?"

"Aye. No need to warn me, Ves. I know the score. I used to help run the Whalers with my father, remember? I know a thing or two about bossing around people."

Ves did not take Dietrich's words too seriously. After all, for Dietrich to have lost the Whalers due to internal rebellion was a very poor indicator of his leadership capabilities!

As Ves, Lucky and Nitaa were about to step into the shuttle, Dietrich passed one final message.

"Thank you for giving Merrill a chance. She really deserves better. I'll tell her to do her best to be of service to you. She would have been a great person if she didn't end up in the hands of pirates."

His words caused Ves to smirk. "Are you interested in her? Is Raella not enough for you anymore?"

Dietrich winced. "Please don't mention Raella. We.. already moved on. Last I heard, she's doing quite well for herself."

"I see. Well, hold your horses for now. I want Crindon to clear Merrill first before I allow her to work for the LMC. Until then, she stays in the brig."

"I get it. I'll wait for the good news, then."

Chapter 1819 First Bath

After dealing with the pirate designers captured by the Battle Criers, Ves returned to his headquarters and resumed his duties.

It took several more days to wrap up his appointments and put his organizations on the right track.

He directed some attention to the Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans, which had lost its hospitals and most of its doctors. Only a few were willing to accept Director Clinton Larkinson's offer to accompany what had now become the Larkinson Clan.

"We need these doctors." Clinton stated. "I'd like your permission to offer them to become our retainers."

Ves idly rested the Larkinson Mandate on his lap while Lucky was dozing on its surface for whatever reason.

"You don't need to ask me for permission."

"The Larkinson Assembly is still discussing the details of our clan's retainership program. It will take too much time to hammer out a consensus, and I can't afford to wait that long. Some of the doctors haven't been adjusting well to life in the Ylvaine Protectorate. If I don't offer them something solid, they're bound to leave. I don't want to lose these doctors, especially since they have proven to possess the right heart and motivation to work for the Foundation."

Ves couldn't be bothered to evaluate the doctors in person. If Director Clinton said they were alright, then that was already good enough.

"Fine. I'll give you permission to do so. Just remember that as their guarantor you're also responsible for their good behavior."

"I'll keep the docs, nurses and other personnel in line. We have our own doctors now. As long as I seek a couple more specialists, we don't have to depend on our hosts states to deal with any medical emergencies!"

After departing from Cloudy Curtain, the Foundation turned into a homeless charity. While it lost much of its doctors and personnel, it still retained all of its medical

equipment and other sophisticated hardware. As long as Clinton managed to attract new doctors, the Foundation could get back on track.

To adjust to the new situation, Clinton proposed to base the Foundation on a ship and operate from there. This way, the clan would be able to receive advanced medical treatment regardless of where they traveled!

Ves approved Clinton's proposal. The expeditionary fleet he intended to build would certainly require a robust health service that could take care of many patients and treat many different ills.

After meeting with Director Clinton, Ves quickly wrapped up his remaining meetings and finally cleared his agenda.

"Is there nothing else that requires my attention, Benny?"

"Well, there's always something that could use your attention." His assistant dutifully responded as he glanced at his data pad. "If you ask me, though, you already did enough. For now, you can trust Mr. Raymond to run the LMC, Speaker Ovrin to run the Larkinson Assembly, Commander Melkor to lead the Avatars and so on. They don't require any further direction as far as I know."

"Good!" Ves let out a deep breath. "Then I can finally return to designing mechs!"

"There is one thing though..."

"Spit it out."

"The Ylvainans want to meet with you and discuss certain proposals regarding your.. integration in the Ylvaine Protectorate."

Ves grimaced. "I already made my stance clear. I oppose greater entanglement with the Ylvainans. No offense, but the LMC and our Larkinson Clan will never become Ylvainans."

"The Ylvainans know that, but they're not giving up. They really want the Bright Martyr to stay here on a permanent basis."

"Urgh. They're acting as clingy as my girlfriend."

"How do you wish to respond?"

"Just refuse their requests. I've already met with Madame Cecily Curin and the other representatives of the government. I made my opinions very clear back then. There shouldn't be any need to meet with them again if I'm just going to regurgitate the exact same answers."

There might be trouble if he continued to rebuff the Ylvainans, but Ves did not expect them to push too hard. He was the Bright Martyr, after all, and his mech designs had practically saved the Protectorate.

The three leading dynasties all respected him and knew better than to mess with him. The Ylvainan people would eat them alive if they did anything towards a Martyred Follower that supposedly received the Great Prophet's blessing!

After dealing with these matters, Ves left the headquarters and returned to the Austen Estate where he enjoyed supper with Gloriana and kept her company for the rest of the evening.

As they sat on a bench in the back garden of the estate grounds, they both watched the darkening skies and the local star dipping below the horizon.

The Larkinson Mandate rested next to Ves, attracting the attention of both Clixie and Lucky.

"Miaow!"

"Meow meow."

"Miaow."

Nyaaa?

Ves watched on with interest as Clixie attempted to groom the Golden Cat, only for her tongue and head to pass right through!

"Miaooooow!"

"They're so cute." Gloriana smiled at their antics. "It's so strange. I can definitely feel a connection to the proto-god you've made. This.. Golden Cat of yours is much more to my liking than your other proto-gods. You should make all of your proto-gods female next time!"

"I'll keep that in mind." Ves vaguely replied, having no intentions to abide by this request. "How are you, by the way? Are you still able to remain productive in your exhausted state?"

"You don't have to worry about me. I took your advice in stride and tried to find a way to cope with this state. While I don't feel inspired, it hasn't affected my other capabilities. As long as I don't have to do anything too imaginative, I can still solve lots of problems."

Since Gloriana said she was okay, Ves dropped the matter. It was actually genuine good for Gloriana to undergo these situations from time to time. Ves believed that she would definitely be able to elevate her mental toughness through these ordeals.

This was important because mental fortitude was very important in performing draining spiritual techniques. The improved method that Gloriana utilized before was too crude and inefficient, causing her to endure an excessive amount of strain due to her lack of control.

"How is your brother and your cousin faring here?"

"They're fine." Gloriana replied. "They're not glad to be here, but you don't have to worry about them leaving. Ranya at least has plenty of work to do. According to her, your physique is making her life a lot harder."

"What about your brother? I can't imagine that the Hegemony will let an expert pilot like him roam around outside the Hegemony."

"Brutus is more than willing to protect me, but he can only stay with us for so long. Once he's recalled, I'd like for us to accompany him back to Hegemony space. Would you like to visit my home state? I can introduce you to my mother and my relatives!"

Ves coughed. "AHEM, let's not be so hasty. Before we manage to complete your mother's challenge, I think it's best for me to keep some distance. Who knows what an awful impression I'll make when I meet her in person? It's better to reconsider this matter after I have a chance to leave a better impression."

"I.. guess you're right." Gloriana nodded thoughtfully. "My mother rarely changes her mind. I don't know how she'll react to a boy like you in your current state. Before we design and build a suitable masterwork mech, you're not much different from anyone else who hails from a lesser state."

He objected to her evaluation. "I'm already standing out a lot from my peers! None of the other Journeymen I know of has managed to swing the Sand War with their mech designs! It took an entire team of Seniors to introduce the Dawnbreaker line and steal some of my thunder!"

"Hehe.. I know that, Ves. That doesn't mean the others know. Our Wodin Dynasty doesn't have a tradition of raising mech designers, it doesn't really understand the nuances of mech design, especially at the higher levels."

"You'd think they would take the advice of someone knowledgeable in this field.. such as you."

She shrugged. "I'm not enough."

They paused for a moment and enjoyed each other's body warmth. Gloriana's lavender scent continued to tickle Ves' nose, causing him to bask in her presence.

In the meantime, the three cats each attempted to interact with each other, to mixed results. All of them existed in different forms and phases!

"Meow!"

Lucky finally had the bright idea of turning himself intangible. Once he did so, he actually managed to touch the Golden Cat's spiritual body!

"Meow meow meow!"

He immediately grew excited and pounced on the Golden Cat, much to her distress! Lucky soon gave the juvenile spiritual entity her very first bath!

Nyaaaa! Nyaaaa! Nyaaaaa!

"Miaooow."

Clixie practically begged Lucky to teach her how to turn intangible, but it was not to be. The circumstances where the mechanical cat gained this ability couldn't be replicated!

"You wanted to use the Golden Cat you made to design a mech exclusive to the Larkinsons, right?" Gloriana spoke up again. "What have you come with so far?"

"I've developed some ideas." Ves carefully replied as he organized his recent deliberations. "The mech I wanted to design has to serve several different purposes. First, it has to remain relevant for at least a couple of years. I don't want to spend all of this time designing a mech that will grow redundant just a year later."

"Understandable."

"Second, I want it to play a useful role in my attempt to elevate the Avatars, Battle Criers, Sentinel and other Larkinsons into second-class mech pilots. I think I can make the transition easier if I design a mech that straddles the line between the two classes. A two-and-a-half-class mech, as it were. It will basically have some of the capabilities of a second-class mech without the accompanying complexity."

"How will you do that?"

"I have some ideas."

Breyer alloy played an essential role in that. Ves wasn't ready to reveal this, though.

"What else do you have?"

"The third priority is to design something that can suit most of my mech pilots. I've recently ordered Benny to perform a survey, and he listed out all of the piloting specialties my warriors possess. They run the gamut, but most of them specialize in either light mechs, swordsman mechs, knight mechs or rifleman mechs."

"There are huge differences in their underlying designs. You'd have to design at least three mechs to cover most of the bases."

"I can't afford to waste too much time on this project." Ves stated. "I only want to spend two or three months at most on this project before I move on. That's not enough to design an entire suite of mechs for my mech pilots, so I decided to take a different approach."

Gloriana was smart enough to guess his solution. "You're designing a modular mech platform? That's.. bold."

She didn't sound too enthused by the idea, and for good reason. A modular mech platform was basically a mech designed to accommodate different roles from the ground up. It did so by incorporating a certain degree of modularity in their designs.

This enabled customers to swap the loadouts of the mech in the field. For example, to convert a knight mech into a rifleman mech, the arms as well as the weapon had to be changed.

Though this sounded incredibly useful, in practice a modular mech platform consisted of a huge amount of compromises!

What it gained in versatility, it lost in many performance aspects! The core structure of the mech had to accommodate way too many roles, which prevented it from excelling in any single area!

This stood in stark contrast to specialized mechs, who weren't nearly as good in adopting different loadouts and fighting methods.

For Ves to state that he would take three months at most to design a fully-featured modular mech platform sounded crazy!

A modular mech platform design was an incredibly burdensome investment that didn't always pay off.

An ordinary mech designer took at least a year to design such a formidable project! What gave Ves the confidence he could complete it in three months?

Chapter 1820 Desolate Gloriana

A modular mech platform was the catch-all term for mechs designed to accommodate multiple roles.

Unlike the multipurpose mechs common in first-class mech designs, modular mech platforms weren't designed to fulfill multiple roles at the same time.

Instead, they consisted of a very broad and adaptable base which could be outfitted in several different ways.

Need a ranged mech? Then slap some precision arms to the torso, add some targeting systems to the internals, and equip the resulting mech with a rifle.

Need a knight mech? Rip off the gear previously added onto the platform and instead add some heavier arms as well as extra layers of armor. Add a sword and shield and voila, a knight mech!

Such versatility was very useful to outfits and forces that expected to face a variety of threats. The ability to convert a lot of mechs to a different mech type was incredibly valuable to some customers!

Some of the more famous modular mech platforms were able to turn into at least a dozen different mech types! From light skirmishers to artillery mechs, as long as the design was good enough, the choices were limitless!

Naturally, the tradeoffs were also significant.

There were many flaws associated with modular mech platforms that limited their popularity.

The most important one was that modular mech platforms couldn't match the performance of a specialized mech.

A force that fielded a company of specialized mechs would always beat an equivalent force of modular mech platforms! The gap in performance was simply too noticeable!

Unless the force that fielded the specialized mechs possessed obvious vulnerabilities, it would always be able to leverage its superior performance to overcome a more versatile adversary!

The second flaw associated with modular mech platforms was that they were incredibly difficult to design well. The greater the amount of loadouts, the more the design had to accommodate different demands.

This not only increased the workload, but also the difficulty of completing the design!

Most mech designers had no good reason to embark on such an ambitious project. They could just invest their time in designing a bunch of mechs with clear purposes.

It simply wasn't worth it for most mech designers to waste their time on modular mech platforms!

The third flaw associated with these kinds of weapon platforms was that the mech pilots didn't like them either. Since a modular mech platform had to accommodate several different roles, it wouldn't excel in any of them, meaning that the mech pilot had to exert a lot more effort to reach the same level of performance as before!

According to mech pilots, modular mech platforms tended to be clunky, making it difficult to perform advanced movements or reacting quickly enough to changing circumstances. The mechs also tended to feature very large weak points as a result of opening up the possibility to detach and replace components in the field.

Gloriana knew all of these faults. Even in second-class mech design, her colleagues rarely embarked on something so quixotic.

"Ah, I think I'll be able to succeed as long as I limit the scope of my project." Ves smiled at her in reassurance. "Modular mech platforms may have gotten a bad rap, but that is because most of their designers were too ambitious for their own good. They bit more than they could chew and suffered the consequences of their overconfidence."

"You don't sound so different from those fools right now." Gloriana poked her finger against his chest in accusation. "How can you possibly complete such a vast mech design project in three months?"

"I'm not designing this for the mech market, Gloriana. I don't have to conform to the demands of consumers. Do you know what this means? I can set any design goal I want! Ordinarily, a modular mech platform has to accommodate a lot of possible loadouts, but that just complicates the overall design. Right now, I don't think I need to design for so many roles. I'll only limit the design to three or four roles at most, which is much more manageable."

Things got complicated if Ves attempted to accommodate more than half-a-dozen roles in a single mech platform. By cutting this number in half, the platform would not be burdened too much!

"This.. can work." She said after contemplating her argument. "It's still very difficult to accommodate a ranged mech and a melee mech onto a single platform, though."

"I'm already aware of that. I've already designed a hero mech and some hybrid mechs. I'm more than familiar with the tradeoffs. This has actually given me the confidence to embark on this project. I know what I'm dealing with and I'm confident in both of our skills."

"What about the lowered performance?"

"This won't be a problem either as long as I throw enough resources and money at the problem. I've.. recently came across a source of highly valuable exotics. I also have a lot of money at my disposal. It's no problem for us to overcome this downside by relying on the superior attributes of expensive materials."

"This... you're usually not like this, Ves." His girlfriend frowned. "Usually, you always emphasize the need to be more frugal and efficient in our designs. This is a departure from your normal design direction."

Ves shrugged. "I guess I'm becoming more of a second-class mech designer. It's still a fairly bad idea to adopt this approach if I intend to design a commercial mech, but I'm not competing with anyone this time. Since I'm designing a mech for myself and my forces, I can accept a bad deal as long as I can fulfill my other goals!"

"What are they?"

He patted the book their two cats were preoccupied with. "The Golden Cat needs some exercise. As the Larkinson Clan's ancestral spirit, she needs to be able to exercise her power and responsibilities more directly than lazing around in her book all the time. Giving her the ability of a design spirit will allow her to bond deeper with the mech pilots of our clan and take on more of their traits."

This was very important to the development of the Golden Cat and the Larkinson Clan. Both of them were intertwined, and using the medium of mechs to increase their dependence to each other ensured that neither of them drifted apart!

"I see how that can be important. The Golden Cat will watch over your clan for a very long time. You don't have to resort to a modular mech platform to achieve this goal, though. You can just design a single mech type to fulfill this purpose for now and design other other mech types later on to expand the available choice."

Ves shook his head. "It's too slow. I'm only designing this mech to strengthen my clan and mech troops. It's not worth it for me to spend time on multiple designs when one broad project will do. We only have a limited amount of years left before we begin our grand expedition. By that time, I hope to convert most of our potentates into second-class mech pilots by offering them a training mech that can facilitate their training!"

She recalled the priority he mentioned earlier. "I see. Your goal is to design a training mech. The reason why you want to give a third-class mech some second-class capabilities is so you can give all of your mech pilots a taste of what it is like to pilot an actual second-class mech. This will narrow the gap and make it easier for them to gain the needed proficiency to pilot more advanced mechs."

"That's right. This is why it doesn't matter if my mech is more costly and less efficient than my other work. They still have to be effective in battle and exceed the performance of our existing mechs, of course, but my primary intention for designing a modular mech platform is to offer most of our mech pilots a bridge to second-class mech design!"

She accepted his decision after she heard his reasoning. His decision was quite logical and not as burdensome as she thought. As long as Ves limited the scope of this project and possessed enough money and resources to produce such expensive mechs, then it was actually viable!

"You care a lot about cultivating second-class pilots from your own people." She remarked. "Don't you think you're being a bit too excessive, though? The amount of time, money and resources you invest in elevating the quality your own people is out of proportion. If you want, I can hook you up with some Hexers who can be persuaded to work for us as long as we offer them enough incentives!"

Ves grimaced. "I'm not too keen on hiring Hexers, especially since your culture will clash with ours. I don't want our Larkinson Clan to depend on others to defend itself. If we follow your suggestion, we'll just be creating a lesser version of the Glory Battalion. Despite being founded in your name, you're not actually in control over it! I'm trying to remedy this problem! We can't depend on your mother or the Wodins forever!"

His stance caught her aback. She studied him carefully with remarkably clear eyes.

He was not facing Gloriana in her prime at this time. Instead, he was facing a tired but more perceptive and rational version of her. Now that she became accustomed to her spiritual exhaustion, she had become quite sharp in some ways!

"You.. never intend to go to Hegemony, are you? You're afraid. You're afraid of my culture and my people."

"I..." Ves silently cursed himself. He never wanted to clue her in on this! "Can you blame me? I'm a man. Not a boy. How do you think I would feel if I entered a state where I'm forever being marginalized and belittled?"

"We had a plan!"

"That's not good enough, Gloriana! I agree to gain your mother's approval because that is what you desire, but I have needs as well! No matter what I do, it's impossible for me to feel at ease in the Hexadric Hegemony. I feel more at ease in the Ylvaine Protectorate than your home state! Doesn't that tell you something?!"

Gloriana looked upset. "You've never been to the Hegemony. You don't know how good it is to be a Hexer."

"Hexer culture and beliefs don't mesh well with me at all! The same goes for my clan! Unlike your people, we Larkinsons highly value our men! It would be a severe dereliction of duty for me as clan patriarch if I follow your suggestion and move everyone to Hegemony!"

She almost couldn't believe it. She always assumed she would end her extended excursion to the lesser states and return to the Hegemony with her boyfriend in tow. She had dreamt up many different scenarios where she introduced Ves to her mother and the rest of the Wodin Dynasty and helped him integrate into Hegemony society.

To hear that Ves emphatically did not wish to become a Hexer or even visit her home state was a very big blow to her! If her emotions weren't so muted, she would have thrown a fit or done something worse!

As it was, Gloriana slowly separated from Ves and lowered her head. She looked incredibly desolate right now.

It was as if she found Ves in bed with another woman!

"Ves..."

"Gloriana..."

"I don't want to talk to you right now." She hissed and shoved him away. "You can go fantasize about your next mech design project on your own! I really can't believe you right now. How can you possibly hate Hexers? They're my people, Ves."

"I love you, but I don't love your people." Ves admitted. He decided to come clean. "Don't try and integrate me into your society. It won't work. I'm not a boy to be bullied around by every woman in your state. My clan won't accept such treatment either! If you can let go of your delusion of turning me into a Hexer, we can make our relationship work. If you can't, then I'm sorry!"

A crack had formed in their relationship!