

# Mech 1941

## *Chapter 1941 Spiritual Sensors*

"Hihihi! You're so adorable, Ves! You're so warm, soft, comfy and cute!"

Gloriana snuggled against Ves' comatose body in her bunny pajamas as she woke up. She kissed her boyfriend's cheek before licking it like an ice cream cone.

Of course, Ves happened to wear a matching set of pajamas, courtesy of his girlfriend!

Several weeks after the nearly-botched operation, Ves was recovering according to schedule.

Though the newly-installed Archimedes Rubal bioimplant still needed to settle in, the gradual process of integration went smoothly without any complications.

Dr. Ranya no longer needed to observe his condition night and day. After guiding the connectors of the implant to connect to the right lobes and sections of the recipient's brain, the rest was just a matter of time.

This allowed Gloriana to take Ves away from the infirmary and put him in her bed in her stateroom aboard the Stellar Chaser.

"Miaow."

"Meow."

Nyaaaa.

No one stopped Ves from being used as a living doll by his girlfriend, not Nitaa, not her Glory Warriors nor their cats!

In fact, two of the three cats snuggled comfortably on Ves' body. Lucky and Clixie practically treated his belly like their nest!

There was just one problem with this situation.

Ves was not unconscious anymore!

Sure, his body may still be as limp as a noodle, but his independent consciousness had transcended his physical state!

With the help of a crude spiritual eye, Ves was able to observe the material realm in an entirely new fashion!

His eye, shaped like a miniature version of an optical sensor of a mech, was capturing the full details of his body being treated like a cuddle toy!

"Really, Gloriana, can't you wait until I'm awake?!"

Of course, Gloriana couldn't hear him at all, though Ves could probably find a way to connect with her and communicate with her through some spiritual means.

He didn't want to, though.

Since no one knew he had regained his 'consciousness', Ves figured he might as well take advantage of his state!

He never thought about it before, but observing reality through his Spirituality was a very good way to spy on other people!

Though he wasn't able to extend his spiritual projections too far away from his body, it was enough to extend it to another room or compartment!

Walls, shields and other technological barriers posed no hindrance to his spiritual projections!

"Well, that's not entirely true."

Ves guessed that the Big Two and other advanced states and organizations definitely developed technology to guard against spiritual intrusions.

The Five Scrolls Compact and anyone adept in spiritual sorcery could probably school him in this field.

Therefore, while his trick was fairly impressive, Ves did not dare to make brazen use of this ability to spy on others!

At the very least, he should make sure to never use it around the MTA and the CFA!

Fortunately, his body was aboard the Stellar Chaser, so Ves did not have to restrain himself.

The Golden Cat, who was comfortably perched inside the Larkinson Mandate, was the only one in the compartment who could view his spiritual manipulation.

Nyaaaa.

"Don't tell anyone, Goldie. I want to see how everyone acts when they think I'm not around. By the way, can you teach me how to perceive sound?"

Nyaa.

Goldie freely showed him the ropes. While Gloriana finally emerged from her bed in order to shower and dress herself up, Ves patiently attempted to construct a 'spiritual ear'.

Since Ves already comprehended some of the fundamentals of the spiritual eye technique, he caught on very quickly.

In particular, once he stopped treating the spiritual ear like a biological organ and started to treat it like a spiritual auditory sensor, he managed to construct a very basic but functional ear.

While he hadn't figured out advanced features like stereo or positional hearing, that could wait for later. Simply being able to interpret sound waves through spiritual means was quite a breakthrough!

"Is this what spiritual engineering is like?" He wondered.

Constructing a spiritual eye and ear was anything but straightforward. Yet it shared many of the same rules and paradigms as traditional engineering.

Ves became more and more interested in whether he could translate more of his mech designer abilities to the spiritual arena.

In fact, this was the entire reason why he decided to go through with implanting the Archimedes Rubal to begin with! While he regretted the fact that he lost patience and decided to undergo the operation while his enemies were waiting to pounce on him, what was done was done.

While Ves did not care that much about the deaths of nameless mech pilots, his heart bled at the loss of more than a dozen valuable clansmen.

The clan only boasted a limited number of mech pilots, and losing even a modest amount of them in battle would affect the Larkinsons for years to come!

"So Rhode Larkinson died as well? A pity."

Though he wasn't as promising as Jannzi, Ves was hopeful that Rhode would become the backbone of the Avatars and the Larkinson Clan one day.

Sadly, his future had been cut off, and Ves bore a substantial portion of the blame.

As Ves succeeded in constructing a spiritual ear, Ves could finally hear what Gloriana said when she was in the vicinity of his dormant body.

She emerged from the bathroom an hour later, all dressed up and ready to lead the clan in Ves' absence.

As Gloriana bent down to plant a kiss on her boyfriend's cheek, Melody calmly reported her itinerary for the day.

"Calabast will be arriving soon to update you on DIVA's progress. After that, you have a virtual meeting with Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson to discuss the upcoming motions up for discussion at the Larkinson Assembly and the Executive Council. In the afternoon, your presence is needed at the workshop to assist in the restoration of the remaining salvageable wrecks."

"Are there any signs of enemies in our next destination?"

"The Barracuda sent to scout ahead reports no sandman or human presence at the star system."

In order to prevent their fleet from diving head-first into an ambush, the Barracuda always flew a few hours ahead of the rest of the ships.

If they wanted to be truly thorough, then the Larkinsons should dispatch even more ships flying further ahead. However, in all of their ship-buying spree, they hadn't procured another corvette.

Soon enough, Calabast entered the stateroom. She had been staying aboard Gloriana's ship for this leg of their lengthy journey. Due to her need to stay in touch with her former employer, she had to borrow the Stellar Chaser's slightly more secure quantum entanglement node.

As Ves observed Calabast's entry, he noted with surprise that his strategic partner was wearing an entirely new uniform!

The spy wore an elegant and fitting black uniform with the symbol of a black cat perched in the middle of a blue hexagon!

Gloriana frowned when Calabast entered. "When are you going to return to your own ship?"

"Who knows. I come and go where I'm needed. Right now, I'm needed here. Besides, I like to keep a closer eye on Ves here. I have to make sure you don't compromise his dignity while I'm away."

"I'm not that bad!" The younger woman protested and gestured to one of the guards standing at the side! "Look! Nitaa has always been around Ves!"

Nitaa didn't bother to voice her opinion. Her only duty was to guard Ves' life and hold the Larkinson Mandate on his behalf. She didn't feel inclined to meddle in other affairs!

The two women eventually got down to business. Both of them sat at her desk as Calabast briefed Gloriana on various matters.

"The Larkinsons are still disgruntled, but for now they are waiting for us to fulfill our promises. There is still a strain of clansmen who have already decided to leave the clan once we rendez-vous with the remnants of the Larkinson Family."

"How are the escaped Larkinsons doing?"

"Ark Larkinson and a number of other senior members of the family have managed to collect almost all of the scattered Larkinsons who escaped on their own or with the help of my agents. They've already hired a mercenary corps to escort them to the Sentinel Kingdom."

Gloriana sighed in relief. "So they chose the Sentinel Kingdom in the end."

"The majority of the Larkinsons finally came around to the fact that there is very little point in trying to reconcile with the Bright Republic and Friday Coalition. So long as Ves remains a threat to their interests, our enemies won't look kindly to his relatives regardless how uninvolved they are. It's not fair to the Larkinson Family, but I agree with Ves that they were stupid to put their faith in the Bright Republic."

The discussion turned to DIVA's upcoming rescue operation.

"We can thank the Tovar Family for facilitating our attempt to rescue the captured Larkinsons." Calabast spoke. "Their allies in the Mech Corps and the government have managed to force Spotlight to gather all of the Larkinson captives in a single location. The last of the prisoners have just been transferred to a secret asteroid base in the Rittersberg Region."

Ves reacted with surprise as he eavesdropped on their conversation. How did Calabast convince DIVA to divert precious resources and manpower to mount a rescue operation? He also didn't expect the Tovars to favor the Larkinsons!

"How are the preparations for the rescue attempt?"

"They're proceeding well. DIVA is already capable of infiltrating the secret base. In fact, they have even managed to insert agents in the guise as prison guards and other critical personnel with the active collusion of the Tovar Family! The agents are just waiting for DIVA's main strike force to arrive at the star system before beginning the operation."

As Calabast described some of DIVA's preparations, Ves realized that the Tovar Family wasn't the only faction within the Bright Republic who offered their support.

A portion of the government and the military had willingly offered their assistance to free the Larkinsons!

They weren't traitors. They harbored no affection to the Hexadric Hegemony.

They simply thought the Larkinsons deserved better for all of the honorable service they provided to the state.

No matter how much the government tried to convince the public otherwise, many Brighters remained disgusted by their dishonorable actions!

Of course, the Tovar Family wasn't among them. Ves knew very well that Senator Tovar continued to hedge their bets.

While their actions probably didn't endear them to the Friday Coalition, the Tovar Family would be able to reap considerable rewards if the Hexers won the Komodo War!

Regardless of the reasons, despite the considerable security surrounding the secret base, DIVA was in a good position to succeed as long as there weren't any Fridaymen in the vicinity!

"What about the Fridaymen?" Gloriana asked.

"We're pretty clear about the CRC's movements. They've already dispatched a small fleet to transport the captives back to the Coalition, but they were delayed by several weeks due to the need to suppress the riots and mass uprisings in the Ylvaine Protectorate."

Ever since the Protectorate turned against Ves, the Ylvainan people believed that the Great Prophet had forsaken them! Nothing could be more clear to them after the Transcendent Messengers, Holy Soldiers and Deliverer mechs lost their glows!

While the leaders of the three leading dynasties tried their best to counter this narrative by arguing that the glows were actually under the control of Ves rather than the prophet, the ardent believers among the population didn't buy it! They had become so accustomed to the reassuring presence of the glows that their absence practically induced withdrawal symptoms among the addicted!

If the Friday Coalition wanted to gain complete control of the region, they had to prevent the Protectorate from collapsing and spreading its chaos to the surrounding states. The CRC had been forced to assist the three leading dynasties in squashing the uprisings!

Ves mentally shook his head as he heard about the situation. The Protectorate had it coming as far as he was concerned!

### *Chapter 1942 Wrong Hypothesis*

Gloriana had a fruitful and informative talk with Calabast.

As Ves kept listening in on their conversation with his spiritual ear, he learned a lot of new developments.

He discovered that the Living Prophet and the True Ylvaine Dynasty offered their assistance to the Larkinsons in their time of need. Now, they comprised the majority of the Larkinson Clan's naval personnel as well as a substantial minority of the Avatars and Sentinels!

He found out that Calabast offered substantial concessions in order to convince DIVA to mount a rescue operation. What annoyed Ves the most was that Calabast was acting smug about it because it would largely be him who would be paying the price!

"You scammer!" Ves shouted impotently at Calabast. "Who's side are you on? When you negotiate a deal on my behalf, you're supposed to stand up for me instead of the Hexers!"

Fortunately, Calabast didn't go too far. From what Ves gleaned from her words, he would just have to cooperate and collaborate with DIVA for certain ventures. He wasn't very sure of the details, but it seemed that Ves would not be able to distance himself from the Hegemony anytime soon!

Though he was rather annoyed that Calabast sold him out to the Hexers, he reluctantly agreed with the tradeoff.

If it was possible to rescue the captured Larkinsons, then Ves was willing to give up much as long as his core interests or the future of the clan wasn't at stake.

He recalled he prepared a very extreme contingency plan in response to any potential misfortune that had befallen the old family, but it seemed that Gloriana and Calabast threw it in the recycler chute.

He felt rather mixed about that. On one hand, the two women clearly opted for the better solution. On the other hand, they readily disregarded his own wishes as if he was a foolish little boy.

"When Ves wakes up, he'll probably be pissed."

Calabast smirked and inspected her manicured nails. "As long as the rescue operation succeeds, he won't complain for long. His family is important to him. He should thank us

for preventing his grandfather, his cousin Melinda and hundreds of other relatives from being used as hostages."

"And I suppose you want him to repay his debt of gratitude to you as well. Don't think I haven't noticed that you've started corresponding with the Living Prophet. The two of you are up to something. What are you plotting?"

"Let's wait until Ves wakes up." The spy remained coy.

Their morning meeting soon came to an end. As Calabast stood up, she approached the bed where Ves' body continued to slumber. She reached out and squeezed his cheek.

What was it with Hexers and his cheek?! Was he some kind of baby to them whose cheeks were open to abuse?

"Back off!" Gloriana barked. "He's mine!"

"Do I look like a lovesick rival to you?"

Gloriana hissed. Calabast just looked amused.

"Ves is a lucky boy. I don't think he ever has to worry about infidelity."

As Calabast moved away, Gloriana approached the bed and stroked Ves' cheek. "Hehehe. Ves is a sweet boy. He's not the kind of person who's unfaithful to me. His rejection of Aisling's advances already makes that clear!"

She kept stroking his cheek as Calabast shook her head and walked away. Soon enough, Gloriana had to leave as well.

She bent down and licked his cheek one last time before she left!

"See you soon, Ves!"

As his girlfriend picked up Clixie and happily skipped away, the stateroom descended into silence.

Ves attempted to extend his spiritual ear and eye forward, but failed to reach further than the next compartment.

He never took issue with the range in which he could project his spiritual energy in the material realm. He mostly worked on mech designs and objects that were right in front of his face.



Yet now that he was starting to venture into the more advanced applications of spiritual engineering, this range constraint increasingly started to grate on him. How could he stave off his boredom in his current condition when all he could see was a bunch of empty compartments and Nita doing her best impression of a statue?

"Lucky." He concentrated his Spirituality and directed his attention to his lazy cat.  
"Lucky!"

The gem cat lounged comfortably at the foot of his bed. Lucky openly yawned while rolling on his stomach as if he was attempting to scratch his back.

"LUCKY! I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME! I'M AWAKE!"

"Meow?!"

Lucky jumped back onto his feet in alarm!

"My body is asleep but my spirit is awake!"

"Meow meow?"

"I'm not joking and I'm not a figment of your imagination! Now tell me, have you produced any new gems lately?"

"Meow!"

"I don't believe you. Show them to me. And before you ask, I have a way of seeing stuff around my body."

His cat reluctantly phased through the deck and returned a moment later with a pair of new gems.

Through some unknown System shenanigans, Ves was able to observe the two gems with his System sight.

[Bastet's Whisper]

The echoing whisper of a feline patron can be found within this gem. Enhances the acceleration of a tiger mech by 30 percent.

[Whipping Boy]

The fear of a boy towards women is encapsulated within this cursed gem. Increases the dread of a mech by 50 percent to males.

The first gem didn't sound so bad. While it was oddly restricted to tiger mechs, Ves was not a stranger to this mech type.

It had been quite some time since he last designed the Devil Tiger. Ves never gave up his intention to minor in tiger mechs, but so far Ves was too preoccupied with spaceborn mechs to divert his attention to landbound mech types.

Bestial mechs tended to fit the environment. While it wasn't odd to encounter tiger mechs with wings, aerial specialists generally preferred avian mechs due to their superior performance in the air.

It made even less sense to field a quadruped mech in space. More legs only decreased the efficiency of a mech in an environment where walking on solid surfaces wasn't relevant.

Certainly, many battles took place in asteroids, moons and other low-gravity vacuum environments, but tiger mechs were anything but optimal on those battlefields!

Due to his desire to form an expeditionary fleet, Ves still intended to prioritize spaceborn mechs. However, at a certain level, the division between spaceborn mechs and landbound mechs became so fuzzy that tiger mechs started to show up in space again!

"I've already designed a custom tiger mech." Ves mentally murmured. "I should design a mass market tiger mech to round out my experience. This gem can help me build another masterwork mech if my first production attempt is good enough."

He was slightly more hopeful that he would be able to get within reach of the masterwork threshold in his next attempts.

An increase in mech affinity always enabled a mech designer to persistently raise the quality of his work. This effectively meant that masterwork mech designers like Ves entered into a virtuous cycle.

The quality of his mechs increased, so the chance of creating a masterwork increased.

Each successful masterwork mech improved his mech affinity further, thereby raising the quality of his mechs even further!

Though it was a lot harder than it sounded, many Masters managed to repeat this cycle to the point where making masterwork mechs was no longer an exception!

Of course, Ves was far from reaching this point. He had no clue if he could ever take advantage of Bastet's Whisper when he wouldn't have many opportunities to design a tiger mech.

As for the other gem...

Why did its description sound so personal? How the hell did Lucky manage to create this gem?!

Was his hypothesis wrong? Were the attributes of his gem not affected by external stimuli?

Maybe it wasn't just himself who determined the properties of his gems. Perhaps the people around him played a role as well!

"LUUCKKYYY! How the hell did you produce the Whipping Boy?! What's with this name, anyway?!"

"Meow!"

Lucky immediately took back the gems and phased through the bed and deck in order to make himself scarce!

After Ves vented his frustrations, he mentally sighed and blanked out for a few minutes.

With Lucky running off to parts unknown, Ves was growing bored.

"Maybe I should plant my consciousness back into its proper place. There's no telling what kind of harm I'm doing to my body and mind if my spirit remains absent."

He inspected his mind and body carefully. Aside from their abnormally low levels of activity, Ves didn't see anything wrong.

Perhaps he could continue to take advantage of his abnormal state to experiment a bit further.

First, he needed to do something about his limited observation range.

One way to stave off his boredom was to extend his projection distance.

After ten minutes of fumbling and trying to push his spiritual projections further, Ves gave up. His consciousness had become very burdened by his fruitless attempt and he didn't feel he could make any progress.

"Perhaps my projection range is a function of my spiritual strength. I should test this out when my Spirituality grows stronger. Perhaps my range will balloon once I advance to Senior."

Since he couldn't increase his detection range, he tried to do something else. He wanted to see if he could move his consciousness or some kind of sensory node in order to move his omnidirectional projection away from his body.

"It's like building a drone." Ves imagined. "I can just build the spiritual equivalent of a very simple spy drone. It has to be able to see and hear the material realm while also possessing the capability to move semi-autonomously. Furthermore, it has to maintain an active spiritual connection with my Spirituality. Otherwise, how can I receive all of the input?"

This was an interesting exercise to Ves. He soon began to put his engineering knowledge to use and attempted to design a very basic spiritual observation drone.

He failed.

"What?"

It was not that difficult for him to create a spiritual eye. It was no problem for him to conjure up a spiritual ear.

Yet putting them together in a drone-like construction was a step too far!

One of the main issues he faced was his inability to keep track of all of the parts, dimensions and other parameters of the drone!

Its complexity reached a point where Ves could no longer concentrate on keeping every single aspect together!

The Archimedes Rubal was supposed to solve this problem. However, Ves only had access to his consciousness and parts of his dormant mind and Spirituality!

The bioimplant was still in the process of integrating with his brain tissue. Until this process finished, its systems were not allowed to come online!

As a result, Ves could only limit his spiritual manipulations to basic applications.

Though he found it a bummer that he was unable to create a sophisticated spiritual 'machine', he took what he could get and started to pass the time by creating all sorts of simple creations.

Inspired by his ability to reproduce some of the components of a mech with his mind, he created various other useful parts.

He attempted but failed to find a way to replicate his sense of smell and touch.

He succeeded in his attempt to create a life detector.

He managed to create a very simple alarm that would warn him if a spiritual entity was approaching.

He developed slightly more sophisticated spiritual shields that responded to spiritual attacks a bit better. Just like with his other attempts, he did so by borrowing some of the principles related to mechs.

While he failed too many times to count, his rare successes brought some joy in his life. He felt as if he was making constant progress in spiritual engineering.

What used to be a mysterious and unfathomable field to Ves turned out to be a lot less convoluted than he thought!

As long as Ves slowly delved into the rules that governed spiritual creations, he would definitely be able to build an imaginary mech some day!

#### *Chapter 1943 Babbling Gloriana*

When Ves tired out his consciousness with his constant attempts to invent a new spiritual creation, he diverted his attention to the Golden Cat.

The young ancestral spirit was the closest spiritual entity to his comatose body.

Ves wanted to see if he could move his consciousness out of his body. There were several advantages to accomplishing this feat.

First, he wanted to visit other spiritual entities at their own abodes. He wanted to take a peek inside the Larkinson Mandate. He wanted to approach the places where his design spirits resided.

Second, he wanted to gain the ability to move his observation range in the material realm. Being confined in the same place all day was not doing his sanity any good.

Ves had always been an active person! Every moment he was awake, he tried to be as productive as possible.

He was either working on a mech, leading his clan, keeping Gloriana happy or doing something else. Even when he relaxed, he made sure his leisure time was meant to recharge him so that his productivity increased when he went back to work!

In short, Ves was not used to doing nothing.

Perhaps someone else might see this as a good opportunity to take advantage of their semi-detached state to meditate on an entirely different level.

Not Ves. Meditation was a waste of time for him. Even if Patricia told him that meditation and the like were good for mech designers, he didn't want to rest! He wanted to do something!

Unfortunately, his first attempt to move his consciousness out of his mind without the System's assistance ended in disaster!

Like a vampire exposed to the sun, his consciousness endured an unimaginably painful degree of corrosion!

It wasn't so bad when Ves only extended an unimportant spiritual projection outside of his mind, but as soon as his core consciousness stepped out, it was as if he threw himself out of the airlock on a ship travelling in FTL!

Ves returned his consciousness to the protective confines of his mind right away! This was one experiment that Ves would not be repeating anytime soon!

"Is this what mother has to deal with all the time?"

Probably not. Her mother's intangible body seemed to resemble his spiritual projections. Perhaps her outer appearance mainly functioned as a shell for his consciousness so she could withstand the corrosion better.

"Maybe I can try that out?"

Once he enveloped his consciousness with a protective spiritual, he hesitantly ventured out of his body and mind once again.

This time, it worked. The raw corrosive winds and forces no longer crashed against his consciousness.

However, Ves encountered other problems.

The further his consciousness moved from his body, the more his control over his spiritual projections decreased!

In addition, his intuition started to ring alarm bells. There was something very dangerous about moving his consciousness out of his body!

While he wasn't sure what kind of danger was looming over his head, Ves swiftly put his consciousness back into his mind!

His metaphorical heart was pounding! It was as if Ves would definitely die if he didn't listen to his intuition!

"My consciousness is the source of my sentience! It is the most critical component of life that determines my existence!"

In short, losing it was bad!

After Ves calmed down, he realized that he had been acting a bit recklessly. There was both promise and danger in spiritual engineering.

Ves didn't have to think further than Cassandra Breyer and Silent William to know that spirituality was rife with danger.

"Maybe it's time to end this state and get back to normal."

He didn't let his fears get in the way of ending his experimentation, though.

While he wasn't sure when his body was ready to wake up, he had a feeling that it would take some time.

Spending all of that time out cold and completely unaware of everything that was happening in the meantime was a very frightening prospect!

Ves was already beating himself up for gleefully partaking in a Mastery experience while his clan and enterprise were subjected to another existential crisis!

After some time, evening rolled on and Gloriana returned to her stateroom with a tired expression.

"I'm back, Ves! Did you miss me? Of course you did!"

She bent down and kissed his cheek before adding a quick lick.

Ves observed his girlfriend's actions through his spiritual sensors with mild irritation.

What was up with Gloriana and licking his face?! Was she some kind of dog in her previous life!

Of course, Gloriana couldn't hear his silent complaints. She endearingly patted his head before she headed to the bathroom.

Though Ves felt tempted to move his spiritual eye through the bulkhead in order to observe what Gloriana was doing in the bathroom, he quickly scoured this lurid idea from his consciousness!

He was a gentleman, not a creep! He respected Gloriana too much to violate her privacy!

Roughly half an hour later, Gloriana emerged from the bathroom looking fresh while wearing a more casual outfit. She moved back to the bed and jumped on top of it in order to cuddle with his body for a while.

Her body moved all over his chest and other portions of his body.

"You're so strong, hihi!"

More worryingly, she also pressed her face up against his own and started to rub her cheek against his own!

Ves had no doubt that he would both enjoy and be weirded out by her physical intimacy. Unfortunately, since he wasn't in control of his body right now, only the latter applied!

Seeing his girlfriend continue to treat his body in this fashion disturbed him to an incredible degree.

Was it too much to ask to leave his body alone while he was recovering from his surgery?

Had she been licking his face ever since they first started to sleep in the same bed?

Would Gloriana mind it if he reciprocated her actions?

His spiritual eye turned towards Nitaa.

"Come on! Aren't you my bodyguard?! There's a crime happening right in front of your eyes! Don't you think there's something wrong with that?"

Just like Lucky, Clixie and the Golden Cat, Nitaa did not see Gloriana as a threat at all! Even if his girlfriend was being a bit too liberal with her touches, it was all harmless in their eyes!

"Goddammit!"

Ves finally gained a reprieve after thirty minutes. Gloriana seemed to have gotten her fill of Ves for now and gently embraced his comatose body while leaning her head against his chest.

"Oh Ves. I miss you so much. I hope you wake up soon. According to my cousin, your brain should recover to the point where you can wake in another week. I hope I can talk to you again, because I really don't know if I can keep everything together in your absence!"

She started to vent some of her private complaints to his body, unaware that Ves was able to listen in with the help of his spiritual ear.

"Calabast is hiding something huge from me. It's so obvious that she's cooking something up with James." She frowned. "What do those two even have in common? They're completely different!"



He agreed. Calabast was a secularist and James was a delusional cult leader. There shouldn't be any reason for them to collaborate with each other!

"She even rolled her spy network and her Swordmaidens into a new organization called the Black Cats. Why is this necessary? Is she trying to emerge out of the shadows? I liked her better when she wasn't around. You're mine!"

Did Gloriana even have to worry about this? Ves was truly committed to her! He would never betray her affection!

"Ever since she got in touch with DIVA, she's become a lot more circumspect. I have a feeling she's not as unattached to the intelligence agency as she claims to be. There is something very fishy about her associations!"

That sounded rather concerning to Ves. While Gloriana always disliked Calabast, if she started to become concerned, then he would do well to heed her judgement!

Ves was absent for too long. So much had happened while he was out that he feared he wouldn't be able to recognize his new surroundings. The Larkinsons Clan, the LMC, the Avatars, the Sentinels, the Glory Battalion, the Black Cats and the various states had all been undergoing changes while he was merrily pretending to be the God of Dwarves in the past!

The payoff was worth it, though. As long as no one found his buried treasure, Ves would be able to complete one of the System's Supply Missions as soon as he reached the Smiling Samuel Star Sector!

While it would take a lot of time to travel across multiple star clusters, it didn't matter as long as Ves had no intentions of returning to his home star sector!

He had already adjusted his medium-term plans in order to account for this detour.

As a mech designer, he always liked to explore and experience something novel.

While there was plenty for him to discover in his current star sector, it was ultimately just a small corner of human space.

The galactic center was the pinnacle of human civilization.

The Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy was humanity's next great frontier.

His Mastery experiences fueled his wanderlust. Experiencing different star sectors, different lives and different facets of human civilization fueled his desire to explore them in his own body!

While Ves dreamt of exploration, Gloriana continued to babble as if she was alone.

"My mother doesn't like it when Ranya, Brutus and I are on our own. I've rejected every offer to bolster our group even further with other Wodins."

What a good girlfriend! Ves wanted to pat Gloriana's head for honoring his request! The last thing he wanted to see was slowly turning the Larkinson Clan into Hexers!

Gloriana snarled ferociously at an invisible enemy. "It's already bad enough that I have to fend off Calabast. I'll never allow any other competitor to come close to you! I'm the only woman you need, Ves! All of those women from the Hegemony can just stay put in my home state!"

Okay, he misjudged her. Ves wanted to rub his ears. Did she really refuse any further help from her state because she wanted to keep him for herself?

Who did she think he was, a skirt chaser?

His name was Ves Larkinson, not Vincent Ricklin!

"The sandmen have begun their inexorable advance. As everyone suspected, they formed a giant sand planet which has slowly been moving towards the Bentheim System. The MTA's Compliance Department is fully prepared to finish off the sandmen once and for all. I don't think the Sand War will last much longer, though that doesn't mean this region returns to peace. The CRC's movements make it clear that the Friday Coalition doesn't want the lesser states to act as bystanders in the Komodo War."

This.. sounded very concerning. Ves was always afraid that the feud between the Fridaymen and the Hexers would spill over into the rest of the star sector.

"According to my mother, the frontlines have all ground down into stalemates. If this situation continues, the war won't end anytime soon. This means that trade and a stable supply of goods and resources becomes even more important. Even if the lesser states are rather scattered and poor, they can all fuel the Coalition or Hegemony's war industries by a noticeable margin, and that doesn't even account for inter-sector trade! It's not a good sign to either side if the third-rate states become vital to their survival."

Ves did not want to see this either. A quick and decisive war would have been better for everyone. At least most of the bloodshed could be avoided this way as the most prominent losers fled the star sector.

"Oh yeah, the Friday Coalition even became desperate enough to recruit any available expert pilot from a lesser state. According to Calabast, Ghanso Larkinson has just acquired Coalition citizenship in exchange for wearing the uniform of the CRC!"

WHAT?!

## *Chapter 1944 The Selfless Larkinson*

A uniformed figure appeared in front of an energy screen and peered into the cell.

A woman wearing a standard prisoner's outfit quietly brooded on the single bunk. She took no notice of the other figure's arrival.

"Melinda." Ghanso spoke as he adjusted the collar of his new Coalition Reserve Corps uniform. "Have you reconsidered your choice?"

Though the smart clothing automatically adjusted to his physique, he wasn't used to such technology. A part of him missed the stiffer uniform of the Mech Corps.

The former captain of the Bentheim Planetary Guard resolutely ignored her cousin.

"I know you're close to Ves, but he's the main reason our family split up and went astray. Why do you continue to support him? Even if you're a woman, you should know that the second-rate state that is backing him is poisonous to our star sector! If we follow Ves in siding with these man-haters, half of our family will lose its value!"

The captive finally couldn't remain silent.

"So much for your loyalty and principles. You refused to choose family over the orders of your state. Now, you've turned your back on that very state in order to wear the uniform of the same service that has Larkinson blood on its hands!"

An ugly expression appeared on Ghanso's face. "I admit that the Friday Coalition may have been rather.. heavy-handed in their attempts to hinder Ves. However, it was his fault to begin with that turned the Fridaymen against our family. He's a Larkinson. Family or clan, he should know that his decision to side with the Hexadric Hegemony would definitely drag in every other Larkinson over to the other side! As a family that has always served in lockstep with the Bright Republic, turning our back against the patron of our state has endangered us all!"

"And that makes your betrayal right? Dozens of Larkinsons died in the Kesseling System! Most of those Larkinsons used to be your fellow cousins, uncles or aunts! I still remember their faces and their stories! Now, we never have a chance to hear their voices again because the service whose blood-stained uniform you wear decided to paint all of us Larkinsons with the same stripe!"

Though Ghanso clenched his fists, he forcibly calmed himself down. He was no longer a part of the Mech Corps. He represented a greater service now. The Friday Coalition was much more immense and its rules were a bit more strict and formal.

In fact, the only reason why he gained the chance to talk to his captive relatives was because the Bright Republic wanted him to convert more Larkinsons to their side.

"Don't you think I know that?" Ghanso responded with a difficult expression. "What happened previously was a consequence of getting involved in a war we had no business of getting involved in. A Larkinson dragged us into a conflict against the Friday Coalition with his selfishness. Another Larkinson is needed to right his wrongs, and I'm the only one important enough who is willing to step up and make the most selfless decision of my life."

He bent his head.

"You're right, Melinda. I broke my oath and betrayed my loyalty to my home state. I broke the tradition of the Larkinsons and offered my loyalties to a stronger state. I carry this guilt for the rest of my life, but I accept this consequence because I am working to redeem the Larkinson Family in the eyes of the Friday Coalition!"

"The Fridaymen don't care about our family!" Melinda scowled. "They're using you, isn't that obvious? They just want to turn Larkinson against Larkinson and fracture our clan and family even further! Once your utility is used up, the CRC will probably put you aside like garbage!"

"The Friday Coalition is the future of the Komodo Star Sector! Resisting its will is meaningless. Whether I owe my loyalty to the Bright Republic or the Friday Coalition is moot. They're effectively the same! The Coalition Reserve Corps may seem heartless to you, but that is because it hasn't appreciated our value yet. Once we demonstrate that we can be of use, our family will probably receive favored treatment."

She didn't believe in his words. She continued to express her disgust at Ghanso and the Friday Coalition.

"All the logic in the galaxy can't change the fact that you have sided with the killers of our family. Since when did Larkinsons develop the habit of waving the white flag? What you have done is no less than surrender!"

Neither Larkinson managed to persuade the other.

Ghanso was convinced his actions would save and redeem the Larkinson Family.

Melinda detested the Friday Coalition for killing her relatives.

Their differences were too great. Ghanso finally realized that persuading Melinda to join his side was fruitless for the time being.

"I wear this uniform to save our family." The expert pilot emphatically stated while he patted the brand-new emblems on his chest. "You may hate me all you want, but I still love each and every relative."

"Except Ves."

The CRC officer immediately snarled. "I should have crushed his neck while we first took him captive. If not for him, the CRC would have never attacked the Larkinsons in the Kesseling System! It's all his fault! He is a devil and a merchant of death! He has no morals and doesn't hesitate to advance the interests of the tyrannical Hexers in order to further his ends!"

Melinda threw a disapproving glance at her cousin. "Those are not the words of someone with honor. You are not a Larkinson. Not anymore. The moment you sold out your own relative, you've already gone astray. I should have joined Ves when he offered me a place in the clan. I wouldn't suffer the indignity of hearing your empty rationalizations."

Ghanso shook his head and turned away from the cell. "As I've said, I don't blame any Larkinson for thinking ill of me. I never expected to gain any gratitude from my relatives, though a part of me hoped that at least some Larkinsons are able to appreciate the sacrifices I have made. It appears my hopes are in vain."

"Go away."

"I will. A Fridayman fleet will soon arrive to take you and your fellow Larkinsons away. The CRC has promised me that they will make sure that you'll be treated with respect while you're being confined in Coalition space. You can sit out the war while I will do my best to redeem the family."

With that, Ghanso turned around and departed the cell block.

A number of other Larkinsons resolutely ignored Ghanso as he passed by on the other side of the energy screens.

He tried to persuade them as well, but all of them responded similar to Melinda. His less farsighted relatives all couldn't get over the fact that the CRC attacked the Larkinson Clan.

"This is war." He whispered.

Every war generated casualties. The Larkinson Clan picked a side and suffered the consequences of their decision.

"For all their talk about valuing family above all, none of them are willing to make the right choice."

He felt more and more detached from the rest of the family. Ever since Ves corrupted and split up the family, hardly any Larkinson was willing to talk to him anymore. He had become a pariah to his relatives.

It hurt. Ghanso always considered himself to be a proud and honorable Larkinson. He believed in his heritage and tried his best to continue the efforts of his predecessors.

Therefore, even if every Larkinson hated him, even if the family wanted to kick him out of the family, he would still do his best to fight on the family's behalf!

People like Melinda were wrong. He did not betray the family. He loved it more than any other Larkinson. Every choice he made in his life was for the good of the Larkinsons, and he didn't intend to abandon this life mission anytime soon!

Eventually, Ghanso reached the end of the corridor. A pair of female prison guards nodded curtly at him as they performed a routine security check on him before allowing him to proceed.

Even the citizens of the Bright Republic turned against him. All they saw was Ghanso shooting down mechs piloted by Larkinsons. They felt betrayed when he discarded the uniform of the Mech Corps for the uniform of the CRC.

It didn't matter. The young expert pilot possessed a much stronger determination to do the right thing than everyone else!

"Maybe this is what Ves feels like sometimes." He murmured. "To ignore everyone's opinions and go your own way is a heavy burden. Sometimes, the crowd is right. Sometimes, the crowd is wrong."

Naturally, Ghanso believed he was in the right and Ves was in the wrong.

If Ves was allowed to go his way, the Friday Coalition would only develop an even deeper animosity against the Larkinsons!

His will to prove his value to the Fridaymen and undo the damage to the Larkinson Family grew even stronger!

Eventually, Ghanso left the base and boarded a frigate. As much as he wanted to stay and keep his fellow Larkinsons company, his new employers were not very patient.

He needed to prove his value sooner rather than later.

As he settled in his room aboard the frigate, he soon received a comm call.

Another young woman appeared into view. Unlike Melinda, the woman exuded far more class and confidence.

This time, Ghanso bowed his head. "Lady Curver. It is a pleasure to talk to you again."

The projection of Aisling smiled. "You don't need to be so formal to me. It doesn't matter if you come from a lesser state. As a talented expert pilot, you'll be able to master second-class mechs in no time. It is an honor to be a part of the development of your first Fridayman expert mech. Please rest assured that you are in good hands. Master Huron possesses extensive experience in designing expert mechs, and he will definitely take into account your transition to second-class mechs."

Her words reassured Ghanso. "Thank you, Curver. How long will it take before I can pilot my new mech?"

"Your project doesn't have the highest priority, but it won't take too long to design an expert mech according to the specifications provided by the CRC. While we won't be providing you with the best, you'll definitely be satisfied with what we have to offer."

Ghanso briefly furrowed his brows. "From what I've heard, Master Huron is a specialist in neural interconnectivity. I..."

"You're wondering why our specialty is relevant to an expert mech that is often employed alone, right?"

"Yes."

"You're not the first expert pilot who has asked that question." She smirked. "Suffice to say, you won't be deploying into battle alone. One of Master Huron's more creative applications of his specialty is the development of the asymmetric neural network."

"What does that mean?"

"In our terms, an asymmetric neural network features one master and thirty-nine slaves. The CRC will provide a company of rifleman mechs whose mech pilots will take part in a neural network centered around your mind. You'll be at the head of your own neural network and be able to direct and influence the decisions and thinking patterns of your subordinates!"

Ghanso widened his eyes! This sounded insane!

"Is this tested?"

"It's an ongoing development." Aisling dismissively waves her hand. "Don't worry. Master Huron is one of the great pioneers of this field. He has spent an enormous amount of effort to make it viable."

"What of the mech pilots who will follow my direction? From my understanding, neural interconnectivity works best when the mech pilots are closely aligned to each other."



"There is a bit more leeway when it comes to asymmetric neural networks." Aisling reassured him with a smile. "It would have been best if you succeeded in persuading your fellow Larkinson mech pilots to join your cause, but that's okay. It would have taken too much time to retrain them all into capable second-class mech pilots. The CRC will just have to supply like-minded mech pilots from its own ranks!"

The expert pilot began to look concerned.

#### *Chapter 1945 It's Personal*

"I'm baaaaack, honey! Did you miss me? I sure did, hihihi!"

After yet another long day of meetings and technical problem solving, Gloriana entered her stateroom on the Stellar Chaser with giddiness that belied her exhaustion!

No matter how many difficulties she encountered throughout her day, returning to Ves always cheered her up! Like a sleeping prince, Ves was just begging for a kiss!

Gloriana cheerfully approached the bed and bent down to place a chaste kiss on his lips. She sniffed his face and took in his fresh and slightly-moist smell.

The caretaker bots must have freshened his body up, causing his skin to glow in the light as far as she was concerned!

Sometimes, she liked to cuddle with Ves when he hadn't undergone his period cleaning cycle for a while.

However, she liked variety as well. It kept each cuddling session from growing stale.

"Miaow."

In the meantime, Clixie hopped on top of Gloriana's desk and bumped her nose against Lucky's flank.

"Meow."

Lucky yawned and nuzzled his nose into Clixie's furry neck.

While the cats started playing, Gloriana left for the bathroom and emerged some time later looking just as fresh as her boyfriend.

Her elegant, recently-dried hair trailed straight down her head and embraced her smiling face like an elegant curtain.

She hopped onto the bed and started to press herself up against her sleeping boyfriend. She kissed his cheek and started to trail her finger on his chest.



"I miss you, Ves. How long will you remain comatose? I really hope that implant of yours finishes its integration process soon. I only have our old memories to remind me of what it's like to be your lover. I miss our collaboration projects!"

As Gloriana began to blabber, she faced Ves' delectable cheek with an adoring gaze.

She couldn't resist her urges any longer!

She just had to lick Ves' cheek!

"Hihihi!"

She stretched out her tongue and stretched her head forward.

Just as the tip of her tongue was about to touch her boyfriend's jaw, a pair of fingers suddenly snapped it, preventing Gloriana from starting her lick!

"Bwu?"

A pair of eyes opened and turned towards Gloriana. "How long have you been licking my face?"

"Ues?"

"What is it with my cheek?! It's not enough for you to kiss it or caress it with your fingers. Why do you have to lick it?! Do you think you're Clixie or something?!"

"Miaow?" The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat looked up from the desk as Ves mentioned her name.

"Uu 'aste ood!"

"What kind of an excuse is that?!"

"Ueees!"

Bonk! Bonk! Bonk!

Ves bonked her three times on the head before letting go of her tongue.

Gloriana drew back her head with mocked aggrievedness.

"Don't bump my head!"

He smiled and rubbed her head instead. "Is that better?"

"Oh Ves..."

After sharing a proper kiss, Gloriana no longer hid her happiness.

"You're awake! I've waited so long for you to recover. It's strange you woke up ahead of schedule, though. Ranya was sure it would take at least four more days for you to regain consciousness!"

He shrugged. "I'm weird like that."

"How are you feeling, Ves? Do you feel the implant expanding your mind?"

"Uh, no? I do feel a lot more sluggish in my thinking, but I haven't noticed any of the effects you've described. Has the integration process finished?"

"Ah, I remember. Ranya told me that your implant is probably on standby mode. This is the final step of the integration process. You'll need to head to the infirmary and undergo one more checkup. Ranya has to make absolutely sure your implant has settled in properly in your head before we turn it on. The first activation of a cranial implant is always a doozy. The transition in the way you think and the way you process your memory will change completely. Adapting to the changes requires even more time."

Ves nodded. "A part of me is afraid. Another part of me looks forward to what I can do. This will be the last time I think in this fashion."

He would probably diverge even further from humanity after this change.

They soon turned to more serious topics. "How much time has passed?"

"Almost a month."

"What happened while I was out?"

"A lot..."

Though Ves already knew most of what had occurred due to his eavesdropping, he pretended to be ignorant and earnestly listened as Gloriana described all of the developments since his surgery.

Gloriana did not waste any time and immediately informed him of the most critical developments!

The CRC's surprise attack on the Larkinson Clan, the mass arrests of the members of the Larkinson Family, the escaped Larkinsons making their way to the Sentinel Kingdom and the possible rescue attempt by DIVA all came as a 'shock' to Ves!

"These Fridaymen have gone too far!"

Ves did not need to pretend very much to express his indignation against the Fridaymen's actions.

He had been repressing his anger for days. Now that he managed to wake up, he could finally vent his frustrations to someone other than Goldie!

"I know." Gloriana nodded her head like a chick. "Those Fridaymen always pretend to be better than us, but deep down they are hypocritical, sanctimonious fools who will do anything to advance their interests."

Didn't that apply to everyone?

"Regardless, it's one thing if the Friday Coalition targeted my clan. That is something that I hadn't done enough to protect against. It's another matter when the Fridaymen targeted the old family! We're clearly not affiliated with the Larkinsons in the Bright Republic, yet the CRC decided to paint us all with a single brush anyway!"

Ves truly felt a bit helpless. No matter what he did, the old family would always be vulnerable to retaliation.

Enemies who weren't able to get at him directly could easily direct their ire against the Larkinson Family!

It would have been great if Ves could absorb the members of the old family into his clan. Once the Larkinsons got back together, he no longer had to worry about protecting a group of far-flung Larkinsons that would continue to grow more distant as Ves moved away.

Yet Ves already knew that the members of the old family were too stubborn and set in their ways to join his clan.

"I recall leaving behind a contingency plan that calls for abandoning the captured Larkinsons." He spoke to Gloriana while he embraced her with an arm. "It was a bad solution to a difficult problem. I don't blame you for ditching it for something better. If there is a good chance of rescuing my relatives without risking the lives of other Larkinsons, then I'm fully behind this alternative. It's just.. I'm worried about DIVA. If Calabast is representative of this organization, then I'm very concerned about what they demand from us in exchange for your services!"

Nothing came for free! There was always a price, and people like Calabast embodied this principle!"

"You should ask Calabast for the details." She replied. "It's not light, though. Calabast and I had to offer a lot of concessions on your behalf in order to satisfy DIVA's appetite."

"What do they want from me? I hope you didn't promise anything ludicrous."

"Don't worry, Ves. It's just a lot of favors. Once you've finished scratching DIVA's back, we'll be even with them. That's a good deal considering you'll be freeing a lot of Larkinsons."

"Not all?"

"Well, there's one Larkinson who bucked the trend..."

Once she told him about Ghanso, Ves gritted his teeth.

"This fool of an expert pilot just won't go away! What is he even doing?!"

"From what our intelligence has gleaned, the Friday Coalition is already looking to absorb some of the expert pilots of the lesser states. Venerable Ghanso isn't the only expert pilot to defect to the Friday Coalition. It's part of a broad initiative to break the stalemate by strengthening their top-level mech forces."

This was new. Ves looked genuinely surprised. "That doesn't sound very common. A lot of expert pilots are very dedicated to their home states."

"There are some expert pilots like Ghanso who aren't as inflexible. As long as the Friday Coalition can recruit twenty percent of the expert pilots of its client states, then the frontlines will not remain stagnant for too long!"

It didn't take much effort to see that his girlfriend was genuinely concerned for her home state.

"You're afraid?"

"The Hegemony is attempting to do the same, but we are one step behind. We didn't anticipate the Coalition would move to take advantage of the lesser states so soon!"

Ves believed that the Hexers were about to get schooled by the Fridaymen in this regard.

The Fridaymen might be divided to the point where they didn't possess a unified culture, this also happened to be their strength!

Their culture was friendly and open to diversity. While the Fridaymen didn't respond too well to religion, they were quite lax towards every other culture.

In contrast, the Hexers were openly known as man-haters. The female supremacists didn't endear themselves to the Komodo Star Sector at all!

With their discriminatory practices, the Hexers would probably encounter a much less enthusiastic reception among the mech pilots of their client states!

Even if states like the Sentinel Kingdom gave up some of their expert pilots, the only reason they acquiesced was because they were too far away from the Friday Coalition to beg for help!

Though Gloriana probably knew this outcome as well, she didn't look too concerned.

"The Hegemony will find a way. If necessary, we'll resort to quality instead of quantity." She grinned. "Maybe we can help in this regard. One of the favors you need to fulfill is to work together with DIVA to design a mech that encapsulates the advantages of your design philosophy, but is made suitable for Hexer mech pilots!"

Ves immediately frowned. "I thought you Hexers hated the thought of piloting a mech designed by a boy."

"That is still true, but there are many ways to go around it. Now that we've become masterwork mech designers, some of the rules that restrict from participating in the Hegemony mech market don't apply anymore."

It sounded like this mission was a lot more significant than designing a punishment mech for the Penitent Sisters!

In truth, Ves did not reject this development. In fact, he embraced it because it was the best way to take revenge on the Friday Coalition!

Since they killed his relatives, Ves had become truly angry at this enemy state. He no longer wanted to leave the Komodo Star Sector while leaving behind loose ends.

The Coalition Reserve Corps made it personal!

Gloriana didn't know much more about the details, or if they did, she foisted the job of explaining the situation to Calabast.

Ves knew that his girlfriend could be rather shrewd. He suspected that Ves wouldn't like what Calabast would have to say!

"Before I talk to Calabast, could you tell me what DIVA is like?"

"DIVA is arguably the Hegemony's most flamboyant intelligence agency." She answered. "In fact, to call it an intelligence agency is something of a misnomer. While they definitely do spy work, they're mostly known for their daring operations. A lot of women from the Hegemony admire the agents of DIVA for their strength and their exciting lives."

"That sounds as if they're the protagonists of an action drama."

Gloriana chuckled. "It's all true, though, at least I think so. You know Calabast pretty decently, right? Does she look like a woman who can take care of herself?"

"Ah. Well, if you put it that way, then DIVA does sound formidable. What is their involvement in the Komodo War?"

"It's mostly secret, so I don't know. If I had to make a guess, then I think that DIVA is definitely responsible for monitoring and sabotaging the Fridaymen as they move to take greater control over the lesser states. The agents of DIVA do much more than that, though."

Perhaps Ves might have an opportunity to take revenge against the CRC...

#### *Chapter 1946 Partial Digitization*

After Ves woke up, he wasn't in a hurry to get back into the saddle.

He knew he had to make a lot of important decisions soon, so he needed to make sure he was in the best state possible to tackle all of the problems that came up during his month-long absence.

Though Gloriana wasn't always the best source of information, Ves patiently questioned to her throughout the evening in order to gain a complete picture of their ongoing situation.

Currently, the LMC, the Larkinson Clan and his other organizations successfully evacuated the Kesseling System.

Along the way, their large fleet encountered little hindrance. The CRC didn't seem to have any pursuit forces in place that could intercept their flight.

The Ylvaine Protectorate, which could have stopped their escape by mobilizing its entire military, descended into anarchy.

Betraying the Bright Martyr and the loss of Ylvaine's glow immediately roiled the Protectorate as a huge majority of citizens rose up against their leaders!

The three leading dynasties not only lost the support of the common people, but also many of its own members!

With all of the unrest taking place, no one was in a position to prevent the Larkinson Clan from leaving Protectorate space and crossing over into the region of space that was ravaged by the sandmen!

Hearing that the fleet was crossing through the ruined border states worried him a bit. Even though he agreed with the logic of this decision, he wasn't sure whether they would bump into the sandmen along the way!

"You don't have to be concerned, Ves." Gloriana said as she settled into the bed for the night. "We've been passing through the former territory of the Coman Federation while encountering nothing but sanded ruins and greedy scavenging fleets. You should be more concerned about humans than aliens, because some of those scavengers were likely thinking about raiding our fleet!"

"Are they that threatening?"

"Not really." She shrugged. "We may have taken a beating at Kesseling VIII, but that mainly applies to our landbound contingent. We've repaired and bolstered our spaceborn assets to the point where hardly any scavengers or pirates dare to get close to us when we translate back into realspace!"

That sounded about right.

"Where are we heading to next?"

"We're not sure yet. Right now, we're continuing our flight from Coalition-aligned space. Brutus wants to take a detour to the Vindmar Republic while most Larkinsons just want to reach the Sentinel Kingdom as fast as possible in order to obtain some much-needed respite. They're not happy with remaining stuck on a vessel for months on end."

This was a very considerable problem to Ves. How could he ever embark on his grand expedition if his own clan preferred to go back to life on land?

"I understand. I'll consider this matter later when I talk to the Council and the Assembly."

They eventually grew tired and fell asleep. Both of them slept while enjoying each other's company.

The next morning, they woke up in each other's embrace. After a bit of cuddling, they went through their morning routine and enjoyed a much sober-looking breakfast.

"I'm sorry, Ves." She told him. "After your exobiologist's betrayal, we don't have anyone who can prepare ingredients as well as him. Once we reach the Sentinel Kingdom, I intend to remedy this problem. For now, my guards are taking extra care to scan our meals."

Ves waved his hand. "It's okay. I'm not a picky eater. It's a shame about Dr. Guernica though. Did you ever get to the bottom of the reason why he betrayed us? He had a promising future under my employ."

"We're not sure. The Friday Coalition has many ways to incentivize someone to turn traitor. It doesn't happen a lot in the Hegemony, but there are always Hexers who are greedy enough to betray the Hegemony for money and status."

"If it happened once, it can happen again."

"I agree. Cabalast is already addressing this issue."

This was yet another topic on the agenda. Ves certainly had a lot to talk about with Calabast, but first he wanted to complete the Archimedes Rubal's integration process!

With the implant boosting some of his cognitive functions, he hoped he would be better equipped to navigate his problems.

Once they finished breakfast, the pair left the dining room and headed to the infirmary.

"Good morning, Ranya."

The exobiologist threw a resentful look at Ves. "It's about time you woke up. Gloriana insisted that I stay aboard the Stellar Chaser in order to be on call if you ever suffer a problem. Now that you're up and walking, I can finally go back to my ship and resume my personal research projects."

"Hey wait a minute! Don't forget to activate my implant!"

"Oh. Yes. That. Let me see. Go ahead and enter that machine. We'll need to perform a complete scan of your body."

This was a familiar if time-consuming process to Ves. It took hours before Ranya gathered the data she needed. She spent a bit more time inspecting his condition before she was ready to issue her verdict.

"Your body hasn't atrophied at all while you remained dormant." She told him. "Your alien organs and the CFA's gene optimization treatments have done much in ensuring that your physical state remains in peak condition."

Ves didn't feel any worse despite lying dead in bed for a moment. "Sounds great. What about my brain?"

She smiled. "While the Archimedes Rubal took its time to integrate with your brain tissue due to the complications that arose during the surgery, it has settled in without any meaningful issues. In fact, your brain is taking onto the implant a lot better than I expected. I don't think you'll have a very long adaptation process. It must be the gene optimization treatments. Almost every fleeter possesses a cranial implant."



It also helped that the Archimedes Rubal was originally a CFA implant. It would make sense that the CFA would tailor the gene expression of its spacers to increase their compatibility with its implants.

After a long and somewhat technical discussion, Ranya finally got to the point. "While I can't rule out the possibility that something might go wrong, there aren't any glaring risks. The only issue I'm concerned about is whether the alien part of you develops an adverse reaction to your implant."

So far, this problem hadn't arisen, so the likelihood that this would happen was very small. Ranya was only mentioning the possibility in order to do her due diligence.

"Let's start."

"If you're sure."

Gloriana quietly stood by Ves' side as she held Clixie in her arms. She hugged her cat in worry as if she was afraid that something might go wrong.

Lucky on the other hand appeared much less concerned. He floated alongside his body as he laid in a diagnostic machine.

"Meow."

"Thank you too for your concern. How is your constipation, by the way?"

"Meow!"

Ves ignored his cat as Ranya pressed a device against the side of his head.

"This only works a single time. Once the implant turns online, it's active for good barring any accidents. Cranial implants aren't mechs that are only brought online when necessary. The Archimedes Rubal will become a permanent part of your central nervous system. You can think of it like updating your brain. After it goes online, it's not a separate entity anymore. It's a part of your brain in the same way as the temporal lobe that's responsible for storing your memories is part of a greater whole."

"You don't have to explain any further. I'm a mech designer. I make complex war machines for a living. I understand the analogy."

"Unlike mechs, you can't disassemble your brain, and it's at least a thousand times more difficult to repair any brain-related injuries."

If brains were so easy to repair, then a lot more mech pilots wouldn't have been forced to retire.

The greater implications of her words was that it wasn't easy to replace his current implant with another model.

If he ever encountered a better implant made by the MTA or something, Ves could only let it pass. Only the top implant surgeons in the galaxy could remove the Archimedes Rubal without inflicting lots of damage to his original cognition. Those kinds of super experts only offered their services to the upper echelon of the Big Two and the first-rate superstates!

"Do it." He told her. "I've already made my choice. The Archimedes Rubal may not be the best implant in the galaxy, but it is exactly what I need to facilitate my work. I'm already the most successful Journeyman Mech Designer in the entire star sector without relying on a cranial implant! I don't think I actually need an implant to reach Master, but it will definitely help make it easier!"

Once Ves gave his consent in writing for legal reasons, Ranya finally activated the implant.

A small signal passed through the device she pressed against his head. The signal traveled through his skull and brain tissue until it reached a receptor extended from a veiled and armored tube.

The receptor tingled a bit as it received the signal. Immediately after it passed on the signal, the main body of the implant absorbed the receptor tissue!

The Archimedes Rubal came online in full for the very first time.

Ves only felt a subliminal area in the back of his mind when it was on standby. Now that it activated its functions and made it available to him, he froze as his mind seemed to expand in a very strange fashion!

The experience was indescribable. It was as if his mind gained add-ons that inexplicably increased his cognitive functions beyond his wildest means!

Eating all of those Intelligence Candies long ago had already improved his cognitive functions to the human limit and beyond. Yet the candies improved his thinking ability in a broad and comprehensive manner.

The Archimedes Rubal was different. It ignored many parts of his mind and instead improved a certain number of discrete functions.

First, his memory expanded A LOT. Even though the Archimedes Rubal was smaller than his temporal lobe, with the latest technology humanity had at its disposal just three centuries ago, even the shabbiest memory implants could easily store a billion times more data than the human mind!

Suffice to say, a CFA implant that specialized in data storage would not be running out of storage space anytime soon!

As Ves glanced at Lucky's floating body, he had a feeling he could reproduce his entire physical makeup to an incredible degree just by relying on his memories!

"How frightening!"

As he continued to observe his cat, he also noticed something else.

He had a feeling he could form a data connection with his own cat!

It wasn't just his cat. He gained an entirely new sense of electronic connections. There were tons of devices around him which he could patch in if he possessed the right permissions. He could form a silent connection with his comm, his girlfriend's comm, the medical machines and many, many other devices!

Of course, there was a risk that a hacker might abuse this connection, but Ves instinctively found out he could retract the connectivity of his implant when he didn't need it. In addition, the implant already came with a ludicrous amount of safeguards and its security suite was fully up to date.

Related to his ability to establish electronic connections was the partial digitization of his thoughts!

He no longer had any difficulty in performing complicated mathematical equations. He didn't have to input a formula in his comm anymore. He could get the answer directly from his mind!

"How formidable!"

Aside from this, he also gained the ability to read and process many types of digital data without requiring any electronic tools!

Ves experimented by uploading some design files from his comm to his implant.

The Archimedes Rubal stored the files without a problem!

Not only that, but Ves could even 'open' the files in his mind and observe the design schematics as if he turned into a processor!

This was one of the most useful functions of his implant! With the partial digitization of his mind, his efficiency in designing mechs would probably skyrocket!

"This.. this is fantastic! Now I know what it feels like to have an implant like you, Gloriana!"

## *Chapter 1947 Machine Organ*

It took hours for Ves to get the hang of some of the functions he could perform.

By far, the partial digitization of his cognitive functions boosted certain capabilities through the roof!

The most powerful of which was his memory. It was as if he upgraded a very old and outdated comm with the most powerful data chip for sale in the galaxy!

He could record nearly any piece of data flowing through his neurons if he wanted to. The possibilities were endless.

He could record his own brain waves and analyze it later to see if his thoughts were being tampered with from an outside influence.

He could record any book by flipping through its pages for just a fraction of a second.

He could turn himself into a surveillance sensor and record everything that happened around him before uploading it to a server which processed the data for anything suspicious.

That last ability was possible due to the way the Archimedes Rubal was both an organ and a machine. It was a bioimplant, which meant that it was built using organic materials but functioned like a machine.

This meant that while he was able to interface it with his brain, he could also use it as a bridge to connect to various electronic systems!

He didn't translate the contents of his mind into a terminal or his comm by dictating his words manually. He could just upload it directly in a matter of milliseconds!

The amount of time he saved with this adaptation alone was immense!

It also explained how Gloriana could keep up her prodigious rate of learning.

She had always been faster and more precise at work as well. Now that he had an implant of his own, Ves found out that it wasn't necessarily natural. Much of her strength relied on augmentation.

Of course, the implants didn't make the mech designer. Ves fully recognized that much of Gloriana's success came from her passion, her diligence, her persistence and her diligence.

Yet it was undeniable that she wouldn't have risen up to become a Journeyman so soon without her excellent Erestal-015 implant.

Their two implants also differed a lot from each other.

In general, while Gloriana's implant didn't come with a ludicrous amount of data storage capacity, it had been designed from the ground up to facilitate mech designers in their work.

It came with all kinds of handy features such as inbuilt mech modelling and various sophisticated algorithms that assisted in performing calculations and projections.

The central focus of the Erestal-015 was to improve a mech designer's judgement. Among other functions, it allowed Gloriana to look at a design and know exactly what was wrong with it and how to improve it with the least required effort.

Ves did not possess these proprietary features. The Archimedes Rubal was an implant designed for the CFA, and it was originally an outdated one to boot, so why should it share any relations to mechs?

The implant used to revolve around data storage, but Dr. Ranya and the late Dr. Guernica had both attached various add-ons to the implant in order to expand its utility.

It now came with a fairly robust processor that was useful in all kinds of calculations. While it wasn't as suited for mech design as the Erestal-015, it was more than enough to suit his day-to-day purposes.

Ves acted like a kid in a nutrient pack store. He curiously explored each and every function and already formed a general strategy in how to make effective use of his new addition.

"I should take advantage of this implant to boost my learning."

There were plenty of textbooks in his library that he wanted to read. Before, he never had the time, but now, he could just upload them wholesale to his Archimedes Rubal and learn from them whenever he was idle!

Aside from that, Ves also wanted to make some headway into designing imaginary mechs.

His previous experimentations with spiritual creation already showed him the limits on relying on his intrinsic memory capacity. As an independent consciousness, Ves could only memorize as much as his ordinary brain allowed, which wasn't very much when he tried to create anything more complex than a rudimentary spiritual eye.

Yet now that he possessed the Archimedes Rubal, he could upload trillions of highly-detailed mech designs into it and be able to recall the full details with just a momentary thought!

When Ves proceeded to do so with his own mech designs, he began to call up the Bright Warrior design in his mind.

Different from before, his impression of the schematics wasn't limited to the broad strokes. He was able to recall the dimensions and other properties of millions of components at the same time!

"How powerful!" Ves gasped.

Gloriana smiled happily at him. "It's great, isn't it? Now, you don't have to rely on me all the time to optimize our mechs! You should be able to do it as well. We can also share our solutions and proposals to each other without even having to talk!"

She demonstrated this by establishing a simple data connection.

It was as if they linked their comms together. Gloriana transferred some files. Ves opened them up in his mind and saw that it was just an unfinished mech concept that she hadn't fully explored.

If it was before, then Gloriana would have needed to take at least ten minutes to explain her concept.

It was different now! Gloriana did not just transfer over her design schematics, but also a bit of her thoughts and reasoning in digital form!

This was something that transcended simple data exchange. It wouldn't have been possible for Gloriana to explain her perspective so accurately and intimately if not for the partial digitization of her mind!

Ves widened his eyes. "This is incredible!"

The one flaw with this method was that her thoughts did not convey her emotion and other intangible properties. Ves would have preferred to hear her thought process through words because she would be able to convey her passion with the inflections of her voice.

While not perfect in any means, it was still useful in many situations, especially if they were in a hurry to finish their work!

All in all, the various possibilities opened up by his bioimplant definitely brightened his day. Though he regretted the problems that followed after he underwent his surgery, he still regarded this boost as an extremely important augmentation!

After Ves was finally tired of playing around with his new toy, he left the infirmary in order to start addressing the huge pile of issues that had been building up in the last month.

"You should talk to Calabast first before you meet with the Larkinsons or anything else." Gloriana suggested as she was cradling Clixie as if she was a baby. "She told me that she has some very impactful suggestions in mind, some of which might change your working relationship with her. I don't like her, but she did save you from getting your brain scrambled, so I'll tolerate her presence. She better not sink her claws in you, though!"

Ves smiled and leaned forward to exchange a brief kiss. "I love you, Gloriana. Even though the galaxy is surrounded by treacherous bastards, I'm not one of them! I have always been faithful to you. I don't trust many people, but I trust you. I can't say the same for Calabast."

That reassured her. As someone familiar with Ves as her, Gloriana knew that her boyfriend valued trust very much.

"You're right." She patted his shoulder. "I should extend my trust to you as well. You won't be having affairs behind my back, right?"

Her nails suddenly started digging in through the fabric of his suit!

"RIGHT?!"

"Miaow!"

"Haha, of course! I'm not a womanizer, Gloriana!"

"Good."

They separated from each other. While Gloriana addressed her own affairs, Ves entered the compartment set aside for Calabast.

He entered what appeared to be an improvised command center of some sorts. Ves had never seen her with any of her subordinates aside from Commander Dise.

This time, she had an entire team of men and women manning various consoles. They were analyzing footage, writing analyses and modelling the outcomes of various actions.

What struck Ves the most was how they each wore a standard black uniform with subtle grey patterns.

Though the uniform's appearance looked simple, the fabric and cuts looked rather stylish in an understated fashion.

Each uniform also featured a distinctive badge that looked almost completely black to the less discerning eye. It featured a black cat with bright yellow eyes perched in front of a dark blue sea of stars!

"Ves." Calabast greeted him from the opposite side of the compartment. "I see you have noticed my new Black Cats. Do you like our new look?"

Calabast wore the new uniform of the Black Cats the best, of course. She enjoyed one more round of CFA gene optimization treatments over him and doubtlessly resorted to other technological means to enhance her appearance like other women.

However, unlike most women, Calabast not only worked on her appearance, but also her demeanor.

Ves always felt a little repressed in her presence. Calabast exuded a sense of competence and superiority that reminded him of his mother.

Now that he gained a cranial implant, this sense of discomfort became a bit more obvious to him. Due to the partial digitization of his mind, he found out that an alarmingly large proportion of thoughts revolved around fear, doubt and worry ever since he entered the compartment!

He shook his head and tried to distract himself from his negative thoughts.

"The uniform is too plain and monotone. I like how you or your uniform designers spruced it up with a bit of grey, but it's still a bit too basic. Even your badge exhibits so little contrast it's hard to make out that it depicts a cat at all. From a design standpoint, the uniform succeeds in bonding everyone who wears it, but fails in making your club stand out from other organizations."

"That's the point, Ves. We aren't meant to draw attention. It's okay if our existence is known, but we should never stand out from the background."

As Calabast talked, Ves tried to probe her with his implant in order to see if he could glean any more information from her. As his implant began to process his observation data, a spike of dizziness suddenly interrupted his attempt!

"Ouch!"

The spy chuckled. "Did you just try to probe me with your implant?"

"What the hell? What did you do?"

"I just performed a simple anti-surveillance countermeasure. Here's some advice to you, Ves. Don't go around scanning and probing everyone with your shiny new



augmentation. People with means have many ways to block, mislead or outright counterattack any attempt to probe them beyond the surface."

Ves looked disturbed. "I see."

"Don't look so glum. You can still use this function on regular people who aren't as guarded, and you can still take secret images of me in order to keep you satisfied when you are by yourself."

He didn't even deign to respond to this statement.

"Is there anything else I should be aware about?"

"Just stick to the general precautions. Your implant already comes with a very powerful security suite, courtesy of Dr. Ranya and myself, but you should always exercise prudent behavior. In particular, you should never open up your implant to outside signals unless you have no other choice. Try to rely on solid contact and wired connections to transfer data."

"How do I do that?"

"Your implant makes it possible to receive data through touch when enabled. Just touch a port in a comm or a terminal to enable secure data transfer. You can also touch Gloriana's finger or press your forehead against hers if you want to exchange data."

All of this sounded very useful to him. Wireless transmissions had their place, but Ves should try to stick to more secure connections as much as possible.

"I didn't come here to talk about my implant."

"I know." She jerked her head to a different compartment. "Let's head to my office so we can discuss the future."

As they filed into the office, Nitaa and Lucky followed inside as well. Calabast glanced at them with an unwelcome expression.

"I'd like to hold this discussion in private."

Ves shrugged. "Nitaa is loyal to a fault and Lucky is a cat. Whatever secrets you want to share with me are safe."

"Very well. Don't blame me if they can't keep their secrets. The people around you aren't as reliable as you think."

"Does that apply to you as well?"

Calabast smiled ruefully. "Even me. This is part of what I want to discuss with you today. A lot has happened in the last month and it's clear you will have to make some changes in direction."

"Let's hear it, then."

#### *Chapter 1948 In Decline*

Lucky lazily dozed off on Ves' lap. The cat had already inspected the entire interior and was disappointed when he found nothing of interest. Calabast was too careful to leave any traces behind.

As Ves stroked his cat's metallic back, he faced Calabast with a guarded expression.

His girlfriend had already made it clear that Calabast had been very busy in the last month.

"What's up with the Black Cats?"

She smiled as she sat on the other side of her desk. "Let's address that later. To understand my Black Cats, we should first address the situation facing the Larkinson Clan."

"I'm about to meet with Raymond and the other Larkinson leaders later."

"Then it's even more important to talk about your clan with me, because they are going to spring a very unpleasant surprise on you. A lot of Larkinsons are having second thoughts about your leadership, Ves. The Battle of Kesseling VIII may have granted them a victory, but they never asked for this fight to begin with. It's inevitable that you'll be suffering the repercussions of your past decisions and actions."

"I never asked to be targeted by the Friday Coalition!" Ves protested. "Why are they even attacking me to begin with? I'm just one of the countless mech designers in this star sector!"

"That's a lie and you know it." Calabast verbally stomped. "You were never an average mech designer, and your latest exploits only increased your threat level. What you did to the sandmen could easily be done to the Fridaymen as well. When any analyst from the Coalition studies your work and the impact you've made to the Sand War, it's not that difficult to extrapolate your past exploits to the Komodo War."

"You're telling me that I'm a threat to the Friday Coalition. I don't even care about the Komodo War!"

"They don't know that, Ves! To them, your girlfriend is a Hexer and you are becoming increasingly more valued by the Wodin Dynasty. To them, it seems that there is a very

realistic possibility that you will lend your strength to their war effort. Even if your work is not as strong as the Fridaymen fear, they can't rule out the possibility that you can achieve more."

"They're afraid."

"That's right. They're not only afraid, but they're also strong. That is a deadly combination. It means that the Friday Coalition isn't willing to wait and see what you'll do. They want to nip this potential problem in the bud, so they aren't showing any scruples in trying to neutralize you as a threat! Whether it's killing you, kidnapping you or blackmailing you, one way or another the Friday Coalition doesn't want you to do anything that will strengthen the Hegemony!"

Anger welled within Ves. His repressed animosity towards the Coalition flared up yet again!

"Is that why they kidnapped the members of the Larkinson Family in the Bright Republic?"

She nodded. "It's a dirty move, and one that has led to a lot of indignation in the Bright Republic, but the Fridaymen doesn't care. The Bright Republic is their client state in their perspective and leveraging the Larkinson Family to influence you is fair game."

"Those bastards!"

"Look. It's too late to mend fences with the Friday Coalition. The moment it designated you as a threat to their interests, they won't sit still and let you act with impunity, especially when you are within reach."

His decision to remain in the Ylvaine Protectorate proved to be a mistake. Ves didn't expect the Friday Coalition to be so shameless and force the religious state to defect to the other side!

A storm raged across his face. "The Fridaymen have made a very big mistake. Touching me is one thing. Touching my relatives is another thing! I didn't want to pick a fight with them, but now that they've killed my clansmen and kidnapped some of my distant relatives, I'm not going to let their actions go unanswered!"

Calabast observed Ves carefully before smirking in satisfaction. This was exactly the response she wanted to see!

"I can help you with taking revenge, Ves. Before we discuss that, let's get back to the clan. There's no simple way to put it. A number of Larkinson clansmen have already decided to leave the clan. They want to join the growing group of exiles from the old family who have managed to escape the Bright Republic's persecution."

Ves paused for a moment. He couldn't say this news came as a surprise to him. He still reacted with surprise, though.

"How many?"

"We've been doing our best to stem the bleeding, but.. The number of trueblood clansmen who want to leave will probably amount to two-hundred Larkinsons."

"That's around a fourth of our clan." Ves flatly said.

"After accounting for the casualties, the proportion is slightly bigger. What is more painful is that many of those Larkinsons consist of valuable mech pilots, administrators, mech instructors and other highly-skilled personnel. They serve as valuable pillars in your various organizations. Their absence will be deeply felt."

Ves gritted his teeth. "Many of them have signed the Larkinson Mandate. They made an oath. Now they want to leave just when we suffer our first setback?"

"It's the remnants of the Larkinson Family that is partially luring them away. The old family that is fleeing the Bright Republic has reached out to the clan and offered them a place in their company. The exiles are being led by Venerable Ark Larkinson. You should know how much pull he has over the rest of your relatives."

Ah. That explained much. Given a choice between following a young and trouble-prone mech designer like Ves and a pillar of the family like Ark, a lot of Larkinsons probably yearned for the more stable choice.

"The departure of some of your clansmen can't be avoided. They don't have the stomach to live a life of excitement and danger. They just want to lead a steady life with their families. I think the attitude you took in one of your contingency plans is right. It's better to let go of these fair-weather opportunists go. Their loyalty and commitment to the clan simply isn't sufficient enough to entrust them with heavy responsibilities."

She was right. Ves fully agreed with her. The main reason he was upset was because he considered this to be another form of betrayal.

It was one thing to refuse his offer to join the clan. Melinda, Ark, Benjamin and many other relatives declined his invitation.

Yet hundreds of Larkinsons signed up with the clan. The Larkinson Mandate contained the names of every founding member. Ves now faced the unenviable prospect of striking the names of the leavers from the most important relic of his clan!

"If they want to leave so badly, then let them walk." Ves eventually came around and accepted this outcome. "Where will they go?"

"Right now, both us and the escaped members of the old family are fleeing to the Sentinel Kingdom. From there, the old family will probably go their own way. Ark Larkinson and his followers have already made it clear that they don't intend to join our clan. Many of them blame you for ruining their lives. Others don't want to subject themselves to your leadership. Whatever their reasons, unless you put your Devil Tongue charm to work, I doubt you can absorb these Larkinsons into your clan."

"I don't want them anyway." Ves shook his head. "If their loyalty is so hard to gain, then they're not a good fit for our clan. What about the clansmen who remain? How committed are they?"

"You still have many supporters among the Larkinsons, Ves, so you don't have to worry too much on this front. While they're pained by the losses, they are a bit more understanding about the dangers they must face in order to thrive. It helps that we offer a lot of rewards that the Larkinson Family can't match."

Ves crossed his arms. "Risk is accompanied with reward. Asking my Larkinsons to fight and brave death is not possible unless I give them something to fight for. Evidently, I haven't offered enough to retain 200 clansmen."

"Their impending departure is going to sting, Ves. Aside from leaving lots of holes in your hierarchy, the morale of the clan will also sink. That's not a very good development for a family organization that hasn't existed for long. The foundation of the clan is too weak. One more setback might bring it to the brink of collapse."

He knew that Calabast wasn't exaggerating. While he hadn't talked with any Larkinsons yet, he could imagine how the Battle of Kesseling VIII inflicted a huge blow to their confidence.

"How bad is the problem?"

"Right now, the news isn't so good. After fleeing the Bright Republic, your clansmen have to flee again. Confidence has already sunk to a precipitous level. I believe that Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson and the other senior Larkinson elders will want to discuss how to turn it around."

"Won't the impending rescue attempt by your 'allies' ease their worries?"

"We haven't disclosed the news of DIVA's rescue operation to anyone else except a few of those elders, Ves. Secrecy is paramount. The good news is that we don't have to stay quiet for much longer. While DIVA hasn't informed me when they will start the operation, they have to do it soon before the CRC arrives to take the hostages back to the Coalition."

Ves hoped that he could restore some trust from the remaining members of his clan. At the very least, showing that he wasn't about to abandon his relatives would show that he still cared.

What worried him the most after this setback was that his clan would continue to diminish in numbers. The Battle of Kesseling VIII was not going to be the last scuffle where his clansmen sacrificed their lives. Continuous battles and other dangerous incidents would keep chipping away at his clan, especially if they happened frequently!

He needed to reverse this trend, because if he kept going at this pace, his clan might collapse before a single generation had passed!

Calabast seemed to read him like a book. "I know what you are concerned about. I've been thinking about this issue as well. With the life you lead and the ambitions you hold, conflict can never be ruled out. It takes an immense effort to earn passage to the Red Ocean, and it takes even more effort to thrive in that ruthless environment."

"Am I being unfair to my clan?"

"I don't think so." She replied. "Many clans and families have taken the risks. The founders of the Bright Republic, the various partners of the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony all used to be similar to the Larkinson Clan. They weren't satisfied with the status quo and decided to brave many dangers in order to chase after fortune. What's important for you to realize is that you have more supporters than just your relatives. That's something I wanted to address today."

"What do you mean?" Ves looked at Calabast with suspicion.

He had a feeling that she had something very important to say.

"Your Larkinson Clan is about to diminish in numbers. It seems to me that your clan could use some fresh blood. Now, you just happen to have a lot of followers who are just as loyal if not more than your own clansmen. They don't have to share a blood or family relation with you in order to fight and die on your behalf. I've been talking about this with the Living Prophet. He agrees with me that the way you run your current groups is too disjointed. After a fruitful discussion, we came up with a proposal that will not only solve some of your problems, but also lead to a much clearer direction!"

Ves wasn't stupid. Talking about the decline of the clan and mentioning the loyalty of his non-family subordinates were both related!

"Don't tell me you want to induct my workers into my clan!?"

The grin on Calabast's face was an answer in itself!

"How many?" He hesitantly asked.

"Everyone."

This was a radical proposal! Just under ten-thousand mech pilots, ship crew, support personnel, managers and various other employees made up his current fleet!

While Ves had to admit that all of those people made a lot of contributions, if he turned them into Larkinsons, the clan would become a completely different group! The Larkinson Clan he envisioned would be no more once his trueblood relatives became a minority!

*Chapter 1949 Worthy Larkinsons*

Expand the Larkinson Clan!

Invite thousands of employees and retainers to take up the Larkinson name!

If his grandfather Benjamin and his uncle Ark heard this suggestion, they would probably accuse him of ruining their heritage!

This was not within his plans!

In his dreams, he wanted to grow the Larkinson Clan organically. Over several generations, the children and grandchildren of the current clansmen would solve its number shortage and transform it into a stable entity!

Yet Ves had to admit that if past events were anything to go by, the amount of Larkinsons born might not exceed the amount of Larkinsons who died or left.

While he was confident he could navigate this problem on his own terms, what Calabast proposed was nothing less than using a mech to swat a fly!

Expanding the ranks of the Larkinson Clan by adopting a couple of meritorious retainers was within an acceptable tolerance.

It wouldn't be much different from welcoming outsiders who had married into the clan. The main bloodline of the Larkinson heritage would still remain vigorous as it flowed through their children.

Yet if the clan suddenly invited more than ten times the number of trueblood clansmen to become its members, it would not be easy for Ves and other original Larkinsons to remain in control!

What was most egregious about this suggestion was that the introduction of so many newcomers risk diluting or outright destroying the Larkinson heritage!

"This is unacceptable! I refuse!"



"Are you that insecure about the strength of your clan?" Calabast retorted. "You have the Larkinson Mandate, right? You've built a very strong culture and you have made a lot of strides in earning people's loyalty. The True Believers under the lead of James aren't Brighters or Larkinsons. Yet they have forsaken their own state and fought alongside the Larkinsons against a force led by second-class mechs. They may be Ylvainans, but they exemplified the very same traits that define a Larkinson!"

He had to admit that she was true, but her conclusion was absurd! Turning Ylvainans into Larkinsons sounded wrong! They were cultists who were more liable to listen to James than him! They were deeply religious and believed in all kinds of superstition. Those were traits that he would very much want to keep out of his clan!

"The True Believers aren't the only ones who want to become a Larkinson." Calabast continued. "I want in as well. The reason I formed the Black Cats is because I want my subordinates and I to be recognized as a part of your clan. Though I haven't always succeeded in protecting you against every threat, I have contributed considerably to your safety and the safety of your clan."

Ves looked aghast at Calabast. It was already bad enough that she was a fly that continued to buzz around his orbit all the time. To turn her into a Larkinson was unthinkable!

"Are you serious? You're a Hexer! Why do you want to become a Larkinson?! That doesn't make any sense!"

She steadily looked at him in the eyes. "I'm not joking, Ves. Not this time. I have thought a lot about this issue and I have shared many ideas with James. Allowing us and everyone else who is working for you to join the Larkinson Clan will benefit everyone involved. It's a win-win-win arrangement."

"There are drawbacks as well." Ves retorted. "For example, our clan risks losing its identity! Everything that has the potential to make it great will be drowned by all of the values introduced by the newcomers!"

"You're exaggerating the problem, kid. Didn't I tell you to trust in the foundation that you have built? Everyone who has decided to stick with you such as Calsie and Gavinn are fully committed to your ventures. Brave mech pilots like Joshua King have confronted the mechs of the Coalition Reserve Corps directly. They are just a sample of the thousands of fighters and workers who have abandoned their old lives to follow you to the Red Ocean and beyond. Hardly any of them will refuse the offer to join the clan because becoming a Larkinson is one of their greatest honors!"

Ves vigorously shook his head! "This is still a step too far! We already have a process in place to motivate them to work hard! The most hard-working employees are eligible to become retainers, and the ones who proceed to perform meritorious services are



considered for adoption by the clan. What will it mean for the clan when becoming a Larkinson stops becoming rare? Our name and reputation will turn into a commodity!"

"You're exaggerating again, Ves." She said. "Let me show you the people you fear will destroy the Larkinson Clan from within."

She activated a projection that provided Ves with snapshots of the people of his fleet.

He saw Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon hold a conference meeting with every captain. She not only displayed a high degree of professionalism and leadership, but she made sure that the outcome of the meeting benefited the Larkinsons.

He witnessed Joshua guiding a number of new recruits through some challenging battle simulations, many of which were based on the Battle of Kesseling VIII. Joshua not only taught them how to pilot the Bright Warrior, but also reminded him what the Avatars of Myth stood for and who they were obligated to protect with their lives.

He witnessed Gavin quietly working alongside Raymond and the other leaders of the LMC to keep the sprawling mech company together. The recent hostilities with the Friday Coalition caused many of its client states to suppress the LMC's business activities.

Sales dropped and local bank accounts were seized in every state aligned to the Friday Coalition. This resulted in a considerable setback to the LMC and forced everyone who worked at the roving headquarters to do their best to preserve as much assets as possible!

He saw a crowd of Ylvainan spacers praying earnestly in front of a statue of the Great Prophet erected in a spare room aboard one of the new carriers. After they said their prayers, they returned to their stations and diligently kept the ship in peak condition.

He witnessed even more Ylvainans among the Living Sentinels. Though they were a rather recent addition, the mech pilots and support personnel tried their best to mingle with the old guard, with mixed results.

Though they were rather weird to the Brighters, they were very earnest and truly wanted to become a part of the Living Sentinels. They embraced its culture and its ideals with hardly any resistance. In many ways, they succeeded in blending their old beliefs with new values.

The final two clips were a bit more dramatic than the others.

The next projection that came forth was a snippet of footage of two allied forces coming to the rescue of the Avatars, Sentinels and Glory Battalion beleaguered by the landbound forces of the CRC!

The Swordmaidens fought valiantly and lost a considerable amount of mech pilots in order to ground and neutralize the CRC's powerful knight mech!

The Kronon mech pilots who defected from the Protectorate died by droves as they fearlessly threw their mechs against an elite CRC squad!

Despite the horrendous tech and quality disparity, neither the Swordmaidens nor the Kronons flinched from the odds despite the fact that it wasn't strictly their fight!

The last clip was obviously stolen from a station-wide monitoring system. Its impact on Ves surpassed that of the previous footage!

He recognized the small and distant figures of Raella and Ketis escaping a Bentheim space station under the lead of someone he didn't recognize.

"She is one of my agents." Calabast helpfully pointed out. "Without placing her in the vicinity of your cousin and your student, they would have never escaped the government's manhunt."

Ves observed all of the footage and did not deny that she succeeded in driving her point.

There were people who didn't share the Larkinson name who earnestly worked on behalf of himself and the clan. While he wasn't comfortable with adding so many new faces to the Larkinson Clan, he wasn't as conflicted about it as before.

"Okay. The people in the footage are truly suitable to become Larkinsons. However, the Larkinson Clan is supposed to represent something unique."

"The new additions will introduce some changes that can't be stopped. However, your precious Larkinson heritage, values and principles will still retain their primacy. Everyone who is working for you wants to become closer to you. If they didn't like the Larkinsons, they wouldn't have chosen to work for us in the first place."

"What is the point of all of this?" Ves asked. There had to be something more to this proposal than expanding the Larkinson Clan. "Why should we take such a huge leap and transform the Larkinson Clan into an entirely different beast?"

Calabast spread her hands. "The divisions within your organizations can't be sustained. Not in the long-term. If you manage to form your expeditionary fleet and set out for the Red Ocean, everyone who takes part in the expedition will share all of the wealth and woe of your clan. In the lawless, frontier environment of the new dwarf galaxy, do you think they can just resign and work for another employer on the fly? Those workers are all bound to you and your clan, and you need to recognize that. Even I gave up a promising career at DIVA to become your partner!"

He sneered at her. "You're a leech, Calabast. You recognized my potential and decided you would rather suck my blood than the Hegemony's blood."

"Hahaha!" She chuckled with amusement. "What a nice analogy. If you think about it, everyone is a leech. Your fellow Larkinsons are all leeches who you've managed to lure by offering them the prospect of feeding off your blood. All of those Avatars, Sentinels, Swordmaidens and Kronons who died at the Battle of Kesseling VIII are leeches as well. They fought for something greater than themselves, not because they are good samaritans, but because they believe in you or the Larkinson Clan."

The way Calabast turned around his argument left him rather stumped. Even his new Archimedes Rubal implant was not enough to gain the upper hand in their discussion!

"Why do you want to become a Larkinson?" He asked. "I never imagined you would want to become a part of our humble family."

"I'm quite charmed with you Larkinsons, actually. I held a different stance in the past, but the more I interact with the clan, the more I'm impressed with what you are all trying to build. While I value my independence, humans are communal creatures. Even I want to be part of something greater. Your Larkinson Clan can fill this need for me. I'm being very serious when I say I want to become a Larkinson. The Ylvainans think the same way, and so do most of your workers."

Though a part of Ves felt flattered that so many people desire to become a Larkinson, he feared he might open Pandora's box if he accepted her suggestion!

The change was simply too radical for Ves to accept right now!

"I can't make a decision right now. This proposal is far too big to be decided on the spot. Besides, the Executive Council and the Larkinson Assembly will have to agree as well. I doubt they are open-minded enough to embrace your proposal."

"Perhaps they might surprise you." She grinned. "In any case, soon enough we'll make our voices heard. We don't mean to apply pressure to your clan, but we intend to prove that joining it will benefit everyone involved."

The scary thing was that Ves fully believed her words. "I'm not going to help you advocate your case. I'll let the clan decide first before I issue my own judgement. Just take note that I can veto any decision as long as less than eighty percent of the Larkinson Assembly is in favor, so don't try to sneak anything under my nose."

"It's for the best, Ves. The Larkinson Clan will need to become a larger, stronger and more cohesive entity to survive the challenges to come. All of the organizations won't be as disjointed anymore once you roll them under a single and common banner."

Would this new entity be stronger than his original vision for his clan? Probably.

Would he like it? Ves wasn't sure!

### *Chapter 1950 Market Access*

Calabast sure gave Ves plenty to think about.

After he finally left her office, he continued to walk in a daze.

Her proposal completely knocked his expectations out of the water! He never anticipated that she wanted to become a Larkinson!

Not only that, but Ves simply couldn't conceive of a Larkinson Clan that was ten times more numerous than today!

Yet.. as he thought back on the footage that Calabast displayed, he had to admit that the employees who followed him and the clan through thick and thin deserved to be recognized.

"They left the Bright Republic or the Ylvaine Protectorate in order to take part in my venture."

Not only did they bid farewell to their familiar and steady lives, they also willingly accepted the risks associated with following an adventurous mech designer like Ves. Even in battle, his mech pilots fought as bravely as the soldiers of the Mech Corps!

He agreed with Calabast. The earnest efforts shown by the likes of Joshua and the Swordmaidens proved they were comrades that he could trust.

Yet did that mean they would make for good Larkinsons?

The fundamental problem with Calabast's proposal was that the groups eligible for absorption already possessed their own distinct cultures.

Ves had no problem accepting a Brighter like Joshua King into the Larkinson Clan. Aside from his blood and different upbringing, he shared many values with the Larkinsons.

Yet what about the Ylvainans?

The Larkinsons were secular and refused to engage in superstition.

The Ylvainans were uniformly believers in the Ylvainan Faith.

That was already bad enough. The problem was that Ves was dealing with the True Ylvaine Dynasty! The True Believers were so fanatical that they were considered too extreme by the Protectorate!

Merging these cultists, because that was pretty much what they were, with his sober and secularist Larkinson relatives was a disaster in the making!

The numbers disparity just made it worse. With just a few hundred trueblood Larkinson clansmen, how could they ever insist on keeping religion out of the clan when they were being outnumbered by thousands of Ylvainans?

It was not realistic!

The only way the Larkinsons would be able to maintain the lead was if the Larkinson Clan adopted some sort of caste system.

The rules would have to be set up in a way to empower a minority by taking it from the majority.

"Calabast hinted at this solution." Ves recalled.

She stated that outsiders who wanted to join the clan would definitely seek to conform to the Larkinsons.

However, that did not preclude the possibility that the Ylvainans and Swordmaidens wanted to impose their own values onto the clan.

"This is why additional rules are needed."

Ves did not wish to dilute the current identity of the Larkinson Clan. The emphasis on fellowship, bravery, duty and ambition needed to be preserved in order to foster a strong and thriving family organization.

That said, inserting some diversity within the clan was not necessarily an adverse development!

Even if Ves insisted on keeping the clan pure, as long as it grew to thousands or tens of thousands trueblood members, some factions would eventually emerge and grow more distinctive.

He had seen it plenty of times in other family organizations. The three leading dynasties of the Ylvaine Protectorate were perhaps the most extreme examples.

The Kronons, Curtains and Poxcos adopted so many outsiders into their dynasties that their trueblood members were heavily outnumbered.

Yet most of these honored individuals still dominated the upper ranks of their respective dynasties. They also continued to dictate the overall trends of their respective dynasties.

If the Larkinson Clan turned into something similar to the Kronon Dynasty, would Ves and the Larkinsons be better off, or would they be subsumed by the tyranny of the masses?

Ves couldn't answer this question straight away. His gut feeling told him that opening the door to outside members would either lead to greatness or to ruin!

There was no road in between! Success and failure hinged on how the clan managed the integration of all of those outsiders!

While Ves liked to gamble every now and then, this was a massive risk! He was so afraid of ruining his clan that he quivered before this choice!

"It's not just my life at risk." He whispered. "All of my other relatives are at risks as well! A part of the storied Larkinson heritage might end because of a wrong decision!"

He dazed out so much that he almost didn't realize he reached a conference room. Gavin was waiting for him inside.

"Hey boss!" His assistant cheerily greeted him for the first time in a month!  
"Congratulations for waking up! None of us were really sure how soon you would wake."

Ves snapped out of his thoughts. "Heh. You wouldn't be the Benny I know if you aren't so eager to serve. I hope you didn't run off and sign up with the Friday Coalition while I was gone!"

"I would never! My communications are constantly checked! I think he's even peeking at me while I'm in the bathroom!"

"As he should." Ves nodded in satisfaction. "It's when people are doing their business in the bathroom when they are most prone to acting sneaky."

Gavin did not laugh at his joke.

"Bathroom business aside, there are a lot of developments you need to catch up upon. Both the LMC and the Larkinson Clan urgently require your direction."

"I've heard a bit of what is going on from others. Let's begin with something easier. How is the LMC faring?"

"The company is losing market access and partners as we speak." Gavin didn't mince any words. "In the past thirty days, our sales and market coverage has dropped by over sixty percent, and it's continuing to decline every day! Every single state that is aligned with the Friday Coalition has made both official and unofficial moves to suppress our business activities and end our sales channels."

Ves grimaced. Though he didn't care too much about the Komodo Star Sector, he had plans for the income his company had been raking in. To lose all of that money would certainly hinder his medium-term plans!

"What about the company itself?"

"Well, your previous decision to cut the company off from the Bright Republic turned out to be very prudent. When we adopted a virtual headquarters model, our company has fallen under a different jurisdiction."

"Now that I've become an associate of the Rim Guardians, my company doesn't have to rely on the backing of any state."

Even though Ves hadn't exchanged anything on the Rim Exchange, the Rim Guardians did offer some basic services to its associates.

The actual legalities regarding the LMC's charter was a bit complicated, but in a nutshell the company basically paid its taxes to the MTA rather than the Bright Republic of the Ylvaine Protectorate.

Ves did contemplate incorporating the LMC in the Hexadric Hegemony, but he quickly rejected this option.

In order to obtain a charter from the Hegemony, the LMC would have to abide by all of its laws! This meant that Ves would have to fire or demote most of his male workforce while handing over an unreasonable amount of power to women!

In fact, Ves wouldn't even be able to continue to hold a majority stake in his company in some cases!

He was quite happy with the current arrangement. Incorporating the LMC at the MTA not only prevented his company from falling into the hands of the Friday Coalition, it also ensured that every actor would continue to respect the LMC's ownership rights!

"For now, the Friday Coalition hasn't touched the shares in the possession of the Ylvaine Protectorate and the Bright Republic." Gavin continued. "The CRC has already touched upon the limits of how much meddling they can get away with in the lesser states. I think those shares are definitely up for grabs at some point in the future, but for now they aren't very important. It's not like the Friday Coalition can do anything with those shares except earning a trivial amount of dividends."

Even with all of the shuffling that occurred in the past few months, Ves still owned 59 percent of the LMC's outstanding shares.



This was not necessarily sufficient for him to maintain control of his company. After all, he himself once browbeat the Bright Republic in forcing the original Larkinson Family to give up most of their shares!

Yet because the LMC now conducted business under the auspices of the MTA, there was nothing a state could do to force his shares from his hands!

Of course, the MTA did not shelter the LMC for free.

Gavin sighed. "Our upcoming taxes will bleed our cash reserves immensely. The MTA's standard corporate tax rate is 38 percent, and unlike other states the Association doesn't offer many deductions!"

The MTA was one of the greediest organizations in the galaxy. In Ves' eyes, they were consummate profiteers. They were just being smart about it by exercising patience and pursuing long-term prosperity over short-term gains.

There was no way the MTA would be like certain other states, where they were so beholden to corporations that they offered enough loopholes to drive an entire battleship through them! There was no way the LMC could take advantage of creative accounting to reduce their tax bill to just 750 hex credits or something.

As Gavin finished describing the all of the suppression the LMC endured in every Coalition-aligned state, Ves noticed something missing.

"I understand that we can no longer sell our products on these markets, but what about our existing customer base? Are they still allowed to use our mechs?"

His assistant chuckled. "Our customers are quite adamant about using our products. The Desolate Soldier alone provides an immense amount of value in many situations, and the Peaceful Soldier is particularly important to the Bright Republic now that the sandmen have launched their final offensive."

Ves didn't care at all about his former state. It could die in a ditch as far as he was concerned.

"So what does that mean to the LMC?"

"We're no longer making any money in those states, but our brand will continue to remain strong. That might not sound very relevant at first, but the glows of our products are so useful that their growing scarcity will likely turn them into cult classics."

"That doesn't sound very useful considering most of those customers won't be able to buy our mechs anymore." Ves pointed out.



"I don't think so, boss. I think the buzz generated from our deprived customer base will definitely affect our other customers! When there is constant talk on the galactic net or elsewhere of how our former customers miss our products, that will increase the value and desirability of our mechs for sale in the Sentinel Kingdom and every other state where we maintain an active sales channel!"

The boost in sales in Hegemony-aligned states partially took the edge off losing market access to so many Coalition-aligned states, but only partially.

However, the damage done by the Friday Coalition was very considerable.

"I think the LMC has lost a lot of direction." Gavin spoke frankly. "It's been months since you have last added the Deliverer to the catalog, and this mech model has completely lost its relevance. The Desolate Soldier is pretty much the only product propping up our company for the moment, but that is not enough to restore confidence after we have suffered all of these setbacks. You need to do something big in order to remind everyone that the LMC is still alive."

Ves recognized the implied criticism in his assistant's words. Lately, he had been so distracted by other priorities that he risked losing what made his company great.

He spent years building up its distinctive brand, its reputation for quality, its illustrious mech catalog and its unique company culture. He could not allow these accumulations to degrade until they rotted away!

"I suppose it's time for me to design a new commercial mech." He sighed. "It will have to be a product that invigorates the LMC and strengthen its market presence in Hegemony-aligned states."

The question was, what kind of mech should he design?