

Mech 2031

Chapter 2031 Girlfriends and Wives

The Larkinson Family and the Larkinson Clan went along fine for now. Though the two branches of Larkinsons had plenty of disagreements, their upcoming separation led them to cherish their remaining time together.

There was a very big possibility that they would never be able to physically meet again.

Certainly, there were a lot of voices from both sides that called for merging the clan and family back together. Yet those suggestions never made it past the objections from their own ranks.

No matter what, the schism had already happened and the differences cut too deep to even consider the option of reconciliation.

They only converged on Cinach VI in order to resupply and prepare for their journeys ahead.

While Ves was swamped with responsibilities, he made sure to reserve some time every day to talk with the members of the Larkinson Family.

He met Ark a lot more often during this time than the last ten years!

"You were almost always on deployment. It was rare for me to see you outside of family visits during the holidays." Ves remarked as they met in a private room at a restaurant in downtown Torze. "At least now you can set your own schedule."

Ark smiled at him in a generous manner. "The burden of leadership doesn't allow me to take any breaks."

"You haven't even married. At least my dad has got that one over you. Grandpa should have been exorcising you instead of me for lacking a girlfriend!"

The expert pilot's smile turned melancholic. "We expert pilots are different. In many cases, we are consumed by our professions. We are wedded to our calling. It's very hard for us to turn our 'off' switch and go back to normal."

"Plenty of people have made that excuse. Doctors, mech designers, managers... all of them state that they have to sacrifice everything for their careers. And to their credit, I think these kind of people have managed to make it further than if they devoted more time to their personal lives."

"It sounds like you don't agree, Ves."

"What is the meaning of life? Are we solely put into this reality to function as a cog in a machine? I happen to make machines for a living, and I think that there is more to life than just their obvious functions. We are living, sentient existences. We exist to survive, yes, but we are also entitled to our own pleasures."

His uncle sighed. "I don't disagree with you, Ves, but maintaining a healthy work-life balance when the survival of my family is at stake is very difficult, to say the least."

Expert pilots were not infallible. Ves knew that very well. While it wasn't strictly his business to poke into Ark's non-existent love life, Ves felt as if he needed to subject others to the same treatment that he endured!

Ves had Gloriana, so Ark should suffer just as much!

"Grandfather won't be able to hang on forever." Ves whispered, his eyes glinting with calculation. "He looks fine if a bit frail for now, but you and I both know that former mech pilots deteriorate remarkably faster in their waning years. How long can he maintain his lucidity? How long can his cognitive functions remain normal? In five or seven years, it would be too late to delight him. You should look into finding someone to share your life with, not just to ensure the continuity of your line, but also make grandpa happy one more time."

Though Ark knew he was being manipulated by his cheeky nephew, he couldn't quite refute this argument.

While his workload hadn't changed since his days in the Mech Corps, he had much more control over his agenda.

If he truly wanted to date someone, he could definitely find a way to fit it into his schedule.

"I'll think about it. Your grandfather is indeed about to enter a stage of accelerated deterioration. The long years of piloting and the brain damage he endured when he suffered defeat has always plagued him over the years."

This was the fate suffered by many veterans. The Larkinson Family was no stranger to the lingering trauma that wounded veterans brought back from the war.

As they continued to partake in a Sentinel specialty that consisted of some blue potatoes and some exobeast meat, they continued to chat about various topics.

"What are your plans for the immediate future?" Ves asked.

"The Larkinson Family needs a new home. It's vitally important for us to choose the right one. We aren't as averse to serving as your clan, so our greatest priority is to find a new patron who will treat us fairly."

"That is very hard to do. Most powers who are interested in accepting the services of a group like the Larkinson Family are those who are looking out for themselves. It's far too easy to get exploited by them if you put your trust in the wrong person."

"We know, Ves. We're being very careful about our selection this time. Don't think we are clueless or without resources. We are slowly going over possible options in the Yeina Star Cluster. While I have no doubt that there are more attractive opportunities elsewhere, long-distance travel is too risky and dangerous for us. Unlike you, I have no intentions to form an expeditionary fleet."

A fleet that was capable of traversing the galaxy was entirely different from a fleet that was mostly expected to remain in a single star sector!

Due to various reasons, a true interstellar fleet had to possess robust FTL drives that could overcome a higher degree of gravitic disturbance. The FTL drives installed on most affordable third-class ships were actually the knock-off versions of proper models that were much more capable of enduring the rigors of inter-sector travel and higher-energy space!

Right now, neither the Larkinson Clan nor Larkinson Family possessed a fleet that was completely capable of traveling to the more exciting parts of human space.

Certainly, if Ves really wanted to cross over to another star sector, he could travel aboard one of his second-class ships such as his Scarlet Rose or the Barracuda.

However, that also meant he would have to leave the rest of his clan behind! All of those cheap light carriers and transport ships were only built for intra-sector space travel!

To make them suitable for longer distances, Ves needed to find a couple of shipyards that could replace their cheaper FTL drives with better-performing ones!

Right now, the clan was merely exploring the option. Ves did not expect to hear any easy or affordable solutions. There was a very good reason why most third-rate states eschewed the more premium FTL drive models. Many of them actually cost more than the ships they were supposed to be installed!

Of course, Ves had also heard of engineers who were capable of allowing FTL drives to propel starships to places where they had no right to be. A skilled chief engineer with a high degree of proficiency in FTL theory could draw out a lot more potential from an FTL drive.

The only issue was that FTL drives operated within a range of performance parameters that guaranteed a high degree of safety and reliability. Anytime anyone exceeded those parameters, they incurred a risk the FTL transition might go wrong or that they might not end up at the destination they envisioned!

This was why good engineers were priceless. They took calculated risks and often succeeded in what they set out to do because of their high degree of understanding.

In any case, hiring skilled engineers was something the Larkinson Clan was already in the process of doing. While most of their ships didn't have the right FTL drives yet, it was never too early to prepare the appropriate crew!

"How are the finances of the Larkinson Family?"

"We're making do." Ark mildly replied. "We don't need your charity. The 1 percent stake in the LMC is already sufficient for us to make ends meet. We have our own pride, Ves. We'll earn our keep one way or another. For now, we plan to look for reasonable employment opportunities in the Sentinel Kingdom. There is a lot of demand for mercenaries to defend important assets against pirate raids these days. This kind of low-level conflict is suitable for us to get our bearings."

"I'm sure that many employers would pay a fortune for an expert pilot bodyguard." Ves smiled.

"I am aware. I don't relish working too closely with the local aristocracy. The nobles from this state reminds me too much of the nobles from the Vesia Kingdom."

Both of them shared the impression. No matter how well-behaved the nobles appeared in public, every Larkinson knew that there was a darker side to them! If the old family wished to maintain its spotless reputation, then it needed to steer clear of the swamp!

After revealing some of their future plans, it was almost time for them to return to work.

Before they left, Ves realized that he might be able to ask a question that had been nagging him for some time. He didn't dare to voice this question through the galactic net.

"Ark.. about my father.. do you know how he met my mother?"

His uncle suddenly frowned. "What an odd question to ask."

"I don't know that much about my mother." Ves truthfully said. "My childhood memories of her are rather sparse considering that she died too early."

"That.. was a very unfortunate tragedy." Ark conveyed his empathy in his tone. "I think we were all fortunate that your father held up remarkably well after her passing. Ryncol could have shut down from depression and neglected your upbringing, but in fact he did the opposite. It was as if your mother's passing hardly affected his mood."

Ves was lucky to be raised by an attentive and caring dad. "I know. What I want to know is what my mother was truly like when she was alive. While I have my early memories to

go on, I'd like to hear what you thought of her. What was it about her that made my father fall in love with her, and what kind of person was she like?"

Ark began to smile. "I'm not too sure, actually. Your grandpa should know a bit more. You have to be aware of the circumstances of the previous generation. More than twenty years ago, the Bright-Vesia War was exceptionally bloody. Unlike the last time where an early peace treaty concluded the hostilities early, the one that baptized your father and I in blood and fury lasted for years. Pretty much every Larkinson who survived this war returned damaged, some more so than others."

"I always heard that my father had become affected with what he had experienced."

"That's true. Unlike me, your father.. came back a lot more damaged. He took an extended leave after the war in order to process what he had been through. He was rather odd at the time. He traveled a lot. At some point, he returned with your mother by his side. By then, they were very close to marrying."

Ves blinked. It sounded as if his mother worked very quickly!

"What about after they married?" He asked.

"They settled down in Cloudy Curtain. It's close enough to your father's assigned unit that he would be able to return frequently, but remote enough to give him the peace and quiet he always desired after he returned from the war. While your father resumed a portion of his service, your mother took care of you for most of your early years."

"What was my mother like to you?"

Ark hummed for a while. "I don't have the strongest impression of her, to be honest. I didn't get to see her that often. As far as I can recall, Cynthia was a loving mother and a gentle woman."

"Was she a Brighter?"

"Of course." Ark looked confused. "There's no doubt. Her accent and mannerisms are all unmistakably Brighter. You can look up her record if you want, though I'm not sure if they are all intact after the fall of Bentheim."

Ves didn't know what to make of this answer. The mother who raised him might be different from the ghost who had been haunting him from time to time. It could also be that his mother was very good at disguising her true self.

"She was an artist when she was alive, right?"

"Yes." Ark nodded. "In fact, I always appreciated her art. While I'm not well-versed in the art industry, I always thought she had the talent to break into Bentheim's art scene. She

never did, though. Aside from raising you, she mostly performed smaller jobs such as recording weddings or taking school pictures."

"Do you have any artwork of hers?"

"Don't you?"

Ves shook his head. "No. I think my father got rid of her stuff or stored it somewhere else. I don't know."

"Well.. I think your grandfather possesses some gifts and mementos."

"That's great!"

Chapter 2032 The Artist Known as Cynthia

Ves often suspected that he obtained his mech side from his father and his artistic side from his mother.

Later in his life, he learned he probably inherited a lot more from the latter. His high spiritual perception, for example.

Ever since she seemingly came back from the death to steal his possessions and siphon away his energy, Ves had been plagued by questions concerning his mother's background.

While her mother's past wasn't exactly a critical issue to him right now, he hadn't forgotten about it either. Since his grandfather possessed some gifts of hers, Ves might as well take more time off his schedule to study her work.

Was she truly an artist? Ves recalled that in his early days, the System didn't rate his creativity very high.

Admittedly, that was also because Ves didn't engage too much in art those days. He was so obsessed with the technical side of mech design that he didn't fully realize the importance of creativity in his profession.

Only after he absorbed a lot of Creativity Candies did his imagination bloom.

Maybe his mother was the same way, he thought. Maybe she wasn't cut out to be an artist, but augmented herself in a way that allowed her to pass off as one. Did she use the same pills as he did?

Seeing how he himself turned out when he ingested so many candies, it was no wonder his mother came across as eccentric!

The day after Ves issued his request, Gavin entered his office and delivered a package.

"The Larkinson Family sent this over. They told us it came from your grandfather."

"Ah." Ves smiled. "I requested that. Just place it on the table and I'll see to it later. Let's hold our daily briefing first."

Nothing much happened during the past few days. The resupply effort continued and the clan made a lot of headway in selling their valuable scrap scavenged off the battlefield of Kesseling VIII for a princely sum.

Normally, no one would ever dare to purchase scrap that originated from downed CRC mechs, but this was the Sentinel Kingdom! The powerful third-rate state not only needed a lot of high-grade exotics to build more powerful mechs, but also enjoyed the implicit protection of the Fridaymen's mortal enemies!

"The profit we expect to make after selling all of our valuable but difficult-to-work with scrap can give us a month or three of extra time." Gavin finally concluded. "That said, the various expenditures that we are incurring eats up most of the money we've earned. Some of the supplies we are stockpiling are very useful in keeping our ships and mechs running for years, but they don't come cheap in larger quantities."

"Do whatever is necessary." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "It's better to procure too much and not need all of it than the opposite. I've been in too many situations where I was lacking critical resources. Being able to procure most of what we need is a luxury that we should cherish."

"Understood."

"How is the recruitment going?"

"Same as always, boss. Our recruiters are hard-pressed to separate the wheat from the chaff, but the people we are hiring are highly-skilled and talented for their age. Upon your request, we limited the amount of older people we are hiring."

This was not due to a desire to discriminate on the elderly. Ves merely wanted to obtain new clan members who he could invest in when they were young and reap the benefits for many decades.

While it wouldn't be possible to hire competent engineers in usual circumstances, the willingness to become a Larkinson clansman was so high in Sentinel that a significant amount of genuine talents came to Cinach VI on their own accord!

Ves knew that these valuable talents usually signed contracts with other scouters and recruiters while they were still working towards their degrees. It was very difficult to seek out a genuine talent that hadn't been locked up by some other company, but now was

different! A lot of those talents were even willing to tear up their previous contracts if they could become a Larkinson clansmen!

"I think we are on track of hiring enough Sentinel ship crew to reduce our dependence on the Ylvainans." Gavin noted with a smile.

"That is good news. As much as the True Believers seem loyal to us, the extra insurance is still nice."

The mass recruitment period was a precious opportunity to address the various problems and shortcomings of their current workforce. The departure of a hundred Larkinsons and thousands of employees who refused to join the clan left a lot of manpower holes that urgently needed to be filled.

"Aside from native Sentinels, a small number of Brighters passed the recruitment tests and are slated to be inducted into the clan as well." Gavin dutifully reported. "I believe some of the names might sound familiar to you. Ever since the Battle of Bentheim, a lot of citizens fled the Bright Republic. A few of them have managed to make it all the way to Sentinel and sought to join our clan when they heard we were recruiting."

"As long as they aren't related to the scum who turned against the Larkinson Family, I will welcome any Brighter. With all of the different cultures mixing in my clan these days, a few more Brighters will help me feel a bit closer to home."

In the future, he would come to regret this statement.

"If you say so, boss. We'll look out for more Brighters in the region."

The daily briefing finally ended. When Ves made sure that Gavin departed his office, he dismissed the rest of his guards barring Nitaa.

His eyes rested on the simple parcel sent by the Larkinson Family. The box was just a bog-standard courier container. Ves experimentally tried to reach out with his spiritual senses but perceived nothing unusual inside.

Ves did not let down his guard. Anything related to his mother was either dangerous or suspect.

That also applied to himself!

He turned to Lucky. "Stay close to me and protect me if anything happens."

"Meow?"

"I'm serious!"

"Meow meow."

"What do you mean? My mother is probably the most dangerous member of my family!"

Lucky directed a mocking look at him. This cheeky cat!

"Who's side are you on?! Don't think I forgot about the previous times you sided with my mother!"

"Meow!"

Lucky rolled around in the air until his back faced Ves. His tail indolently swished as if he stopped paying attention!

Ves grumbled as he turned his attention back to the box. After a bit of hesitation, he finally opened to reveal a small, carved statuette of his mother and father.

"What a lovely piece." He whispered.

There wasn't anything exceptional about the way it had been carved and shaped. He instinctively guessed his mother probably fashioned it from a block of wood sourced from a nearby tree at his childhood home.

The statue looked remarkably life-like and accurate to reality, but he recognized plenty of smaller touches that showcased a distinct art style. If Ves had to describe it, then he would say that his mother had a preference towards realistic art, but spiced it up with exaggerated elements.

In his memory, his father and mother didn't look this handsome and beautiful!

What struck him the most about this statuette was not its appearance, but the design choices that his mother had made. From the material to the pose of the subjects, every choice was deliberate and carried some kind of meaning.

Unfortunately, Ves didn't know his mother's work well enough to analyze what most of her choices meant. He could only entertain himself with unreliable guesses.

After five solid minutes of observation and analysis, Ves had his fill with the mundane aspects of the statuette.

"It's time to find out if it carries anything exceptional."

Ves wasn't sure if his mother imbued anything special to what was supposed to be a casual gift to his grandfather, but he hoped he might be able to uncover something.

Unlike his own spiritually-empowered works, the statuette didn't radiate a glow. Yet the more he observed it with his spiritual senses, the more he thought it hid something unusual.

Ves began to exert more effort in his examinations. He strengthened his spiritual efforts and expended so much energy to seek something unusual.

"Ah!"

Suddenly, his mind flashed brightly! After his senses penetrated the statuette past a certain degree, he abruptly encountered something strange!

Though it was hidden and self-contained, Ves recognized the spiritual residue for what it was! It carried the same 'flavor' as the ghost that he encountered in recent years!

His eyes were filled with shock! "So it's true. She's my mother after all!"

He had obtained near-definite proof that the mother who birthed him and raised him was the same as the ghost who claimed her identity!

Though Ves was paranoid to acknowledge that this might be part of an elaborate ruse, it was too convoluted for him to bother. In this case, he was much more inclined to apply Occam's razor and accept the most obvious explanation!

Now that he finally found something, he eagerly studied the spiritual residue.

It was small in quantity but very high in quality. His mother probably didn't set out to empower the statuette consciously. It was just that she concentrated for hours to make the statuette that she passed on a small amount of spiritual energy during her creation process.

What Ves found peculiar was that the spiritual residue in the statuette didn't seem complete. It lacked a lot of spiritual attributes he expected to find.

That signified to Ves that his mother may have purposefully imbued the statue with her spirituality, but in a highly altered form.

When Ves inspected the attributes, he found that most of them were benign.

"Happiness, family, love, affection..."

All of these traits subtly enhanced the appeal of the statuette to someone like his grandfather.

There was one attribute that possessed a lot more presence than the other presence!

When Ves tried to identify this strong attribute, he couldn't help but be reminded of what he sensed from the previous relic he inspected.

"Motherhood!"

His eyes quickly sharpened as he inspected the depiction of his mother in a carved form. He specifically looked at her belly and realized that it bulged slightly more than usual!

"She was pregnant when she carved this work!" Ves uttered in realization!

That explained the mix of attributes she passed on in the statuette. Though ostensibly the piece was about their couple, in actuality his mother had been channeling her hopes and expectations of motherhood!

A very warm feeling engulfed his mood. Regardless of how his mother turned up these days, back then she was genuinely happy when she carried him in her womb!

"This feeling.. it's so pure and pleasant."

He almost couldn't equate the sensations he was feeling now with the ghostly mother who reintroduced herself into his life. The transition from life to death must have done much to alter her psyche!

As Ves entertained various theories, he suddenly had a stroke of inspiration.

The sense of motherhood he gained from the statue was so pure and and exceptional that it might make for a good ingredient for one of his upcoming mechs!

Having worked on the Hexer mech for months, Ves had always tried to design it in a way to make it with a design spirit derived from the Idol of the Superior Mother.

While such a spiritual product would probably turn out okay with his current abilities, he always felt as if the spiritual residue from the former Hexer relic wasn't enough.

In order to create a spiritual product that was powerful enough to influence the Komodo War, Ves knew he had to add additional ingredients to increase the dimensions of his creations!

Though Ves already planned to borrow some spiritual energy from sources like Qilanxo, adding one that revolved more explicitly around motherhood would be a great addition!

"This is a fantastic idea!" He grinned. "This is the perfect way to elevate my next mech!"

Using his own mother as an ingredient, why didn't he think of it before!?

Chapter 2033 Hippolyta War College

Ever since he obtained the statuette carved by his mother, he felt more at ease with himself. He not only obtained a few important answers to his questions, but also something valuable to add to one of his upcoming mechs!

When he visited the design lab the next day, everyone couldn't help but notice his brightness.

"You seem inordinately happy today." Gloriana remarked as she prepared herself for another mental design session. "Did something good happen between the family and the clan?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm just in a good mood to design our mech today." He replied.

"Well, before we start, you should talk to Maisie Ann and Rennie. My two cute students have learned enough to do well in the Hegemony! I plan to send them off within the month so that they arrive in time to begin the next semester!"

Ves widened his eyes. "They're departing?! Now?"

"Do you want to delay their future?" Gloriana frowned. "I know it's rather abrupt, but a university in the Hegemony has finally accepted our request. This is a lifetime opportunity to them, Ves! It won't be easy to admit them in any other second-class university in the coming years."

He knew she was right. The two female Larkinson seeds deserved to learn how to design mechs in the best possible institutions.

He was just a bit uncomfortable with the idea of carting them off to Hexer schools of all places.

"Which institution agreed to admit the girls?"

"Hippolyta War College. It's a mid-ranked university that is affiliated with our military. A lot of graduates from its programs go on to serve in the Hex Army."

Ves frowned. "I didn't agree to send Maisie and Rennie off to the Hegemony to take part in the Komodo War!"

"You don't have to worry about that." Gloriana crossed her arms and smiled. "Joining the Hex Army is optional to the graduates of the college, and besides, the two girls are foreigners, so they are ineligible anyway."

He calmed down a bit when he heard that. His girlfriend made a lot of sense. Maisie and Rennie would just be regular foreign students in a state that thinks that women are the

superior gender and that boys needed to be taught a lesson. There were a lot of other matters he should be concerned about!

"How long will their program last?" He asked.

A mech design degree could be obtained from as little as four years to as much as eight years. The latter was a rather extreme case, though. It depended heavily on the quality of the institution, the qualifications of the professors, the laws and regulations of the state and the overall degree of development of the state and region.

"It depends on how well they do in their studies." Gloriana answered. "The shortest track is just five years. That is enough to get their foot off the ground but not much more. If they achieve better results, then they can enter a more promising track that will allow them to make a running start in their careers!"

"I see."

The War College adopted a merit and achievement-based approach, then. This sounded good, because the two Larkinson seeds would have a fair chance to prove themselves.

The only downside was that their foundation still paled in comparison to the elite Hexer mech design students whose bodies were probably stuffed with augmentations!

Ves fell into a brief silence. He knew the current state of the two girls. Their learning ability was better than the average person, but not enough to keep up with their second-rate counterparts!

"What about their augmentations? We planned for Dr. Ranya to foist them all with implants and gene mods, right?"

"There's no time, Ves. I'll just have to contact someone at Hippolyta to augment them when they arrive. As long as there are no complications, they should have just enough time to acclimatize themselves with their new improvements before the semester starts."

That sounded a bit iffy. Ves turned his head to look at the two girls. Right now, they looked ecstatic at the thought of attending a Hexer university!

"Give me a moment, Gloriana. I need to read up on what you said."

He turned away from her and pressed his finger against a port from a nearby console. After his implant connected to its systems, he entered the galactic net to read up on some articles.

He gained a very quick overview of the Hexer higher education system.

It turned out that Hippolyta was a fairly respected institution, which reassured him. It also maintained a very competitive atmosphere, which basically meant that the students had to outdo each other in order to gain more resources and attention from their teachers!

"It all starts in the first semester." He muttered.

Those who gained an advantage at the start immediately received more attention. Those who fell behind or were just a few steps slower would not be able to enter the more promising tracks!

Even when the hard-working ones received more focus, the competition didn't end there. They had to increase their efforts and meet higher standards in order to retain the favor of the professors.

Those who failed to endure the pressure or slipped up in their studies would immediately be moved to a lesser track!

"Only Hexers could come up with a sadistic program like this! There is no time for any of the students to relax!"

Gloriana, who observed him from the side while playing with Clixie, smirked at him. "That's exactly what Hippolyta is all about. Its graduates may not be as brilliant or inventive as the mech designers who studied at Kelma University or the Artemis Institute, but they are the best in working under pressure and under less-than-ideal conditions! That makes them a lot more suitable for the military!"

That made sense. The professors at Hippolyta didn't play all these games because they liked to torture the next generation. They sought to challenge and push their students so that they unearthed more of their potential.

In a way, Ves was reminded of the market-based competition system imposed by the Leemar Institution of Technology. The LIT sought to stimulate its students as well by forcing them to apply their newly-learned skills to do all sorts of jobs to the other people in the campus.

Regardless of the structure these universities adopted, the attrition was doubtlessly severe! The amount of dropouts from Leemar was staggering and Hippolyta was almost just as cutthroat! The schools had no use for those who stumbled or failed! There were so many eager students who wanted to study at them that they never ran out of replacements!

As much as Ves found Hippolyta's teaching methods distasteful, he had to admit that the pressure they exerted on their students simulated reality quite well.

Ves would have probably been a lot better off if he successfully managed to pass this kind of rigorous program!

When Ves gazed at the two girls he was about to send off to one of the strictest universities of the Hegemony, he began to reconsider one of his rules.

After Carlos, after his traitor of an exobiologist, Ves vowed to refrain from bestowing his Attribute Candies to someone else.

While they always did as promised, there was no way they came without side effects!

Yet.. it wasn't as if other forms of augmentations were devoid of side effects either. Right now, it was very troublesome to fit the two Larkinson seeds with augmentations when they were so close to beginning their studies.

After warring within himself, he eventually gave in to the urgency of the situation.

If he wanted to set up his Larkinson seeds for success, then he needed to stop holding back.

The future of Maisie and Rennie was at stake. As third-raters, they were already significantly behind their Hexer peers. While Ves wanted them to endure some hardships in order to set them up for success, he didn't want them to hit a wall!

He sighed. He stood up from his terminal and approached the group of teenagers. They all fell silent as soon as he approached.

"Patriarch."

"Patriarch."

"Patriarch."

"Patriarch."

He disliked being addressed by this title in the design lab, but they insisted on it. Ves meant far too much to the Larkinsons these days to be referred to on a casual basis!

Ves observed the four closely. He especially took the time to inspect their bonds to the spiritual network.

Just like any other clansmen, their bonds were healthy and hale. There was no sign the Golden Cat disliked them or anything. That meant that Ves could probably trust them to keep a secret.

"Maise, Rennie, since the two of you are about to begin your studies in the Hegemony, I'd like to impart you with some.. gifts. They'll help you keep up with the Hexers, though you still need to maintain a very demanding work ethic in order to excel."

The two girls immediately looked eager at what he was about to give! With his power and wealth, he could bestow them with all kinds of useful gifts that could make their time at Hippolyta easier!

"What about us, patriarch?" Maikel meekly asked.

Ves turned to the two boys and saw that they distinctly felt as if they were being left out.

Since he intended to keep Maikel and Zanthar by his side, the two didn't strictly need his gifts. He could tailor their curriculum to their level and make sure they were challenged but not overstressed.

Yet.. if he bestowed them with the same benefits as the girls, their learning efficiency would likely soar as well. That meant that Ves would have to spend less time to lecture them, which meant that he would have more time left to work on his own projects!

This reason alone was enough for him to change his mind yet again!

"The four of you, please come with me. Let's get you somewhere comfortable. Tell me, do you like candy?"

"Huh? Candy?" Maikel looked confused.

A half hour later, the four Larkinson seeds exited his office with the biggest headache of their lives! They groaned and all dragged their bodies out of the design lab as if they had just completed an arduous exam!

Ves watched them go with a smile. When he directed his System vision at them, they all returned the same results.

[Maikel Larkinson]

Intelligence: 1.6

Creativity: 1.4

Concentration: 1.8

[Zanthar Larkinson]

Intelligence: 1.6

Creativity: 1.4

Concentration: 1.8

[Maisie Ann Larkinson]

Intelligence: 1.6

Creativity: 1.4

Concentration: 1.8

[Rennie Larkinson]

Intelligence: 1.6

Creativity: 1.4

Concentration: 1.8

Though he had to sacrifice some precious DP to procure all of the Attribute Candies from the System, it was worth it in his opinion.

Ves did not go overboard with upgrading their mental attributes this time. He already learned first-hand that too much of a boost would lead to much more severe side effects!

He dialed back on the Intelligence and Creativity Candies in order to make sure the four kids were still sufficiently grounded.

In fact, he already took into account that their Intelligence would likely be boosted in the future when they received their future augmentations. Putting their current score at 1.6 was a nice starting point.

As for Concentration, he was a bit more generous with that because it would help immensely in increasing the efficiency of their studies without making it too effortless.

Besides, Ves suspected that Concentration was one of the critical attributes related to spiritual potential!

"This is a pretty nice experiment." Ves grinned as he stroked his smooth-shaven chin.

Though the four kids were more than just a set of numbers, their cognitive abilities should still be similar enough to allow for comparisons!

In any case, with four different test subjects, Ves could tweak and alter their individual conditions in order to figure out the best way to teach his students!

Chapter 2034 The Lady of Plants

The Larkinsons weren't the only people who made good use of their stay in the Cinach System.

Though the Hexers hadn't attracted any publicity aside from their remarkable identity, they hadn't been sitting idle.

For example, the Glory Battalion surreptitiously borrowed some of the best mech servicing facilities on the planet to restore and repair the mechs that got wrecked during the Battle of Kesseling VIII. They hadn't been able to restore them during the voyage to the Sentinel Kingdom, but it was different now that they had access to proper industrial machines.

The Penitent Sisters hadn't attracted any attention either, but their presence still loomed heavily over the planet. Able to field hundreds of mechs on land and in the air, they were definitely the most powerful non-military force in the star system!

Certainly, the local noble houses could probably defeat them if they pooled all of their household troops. Yet the cost would be ruinous. Not only would they lose thousands of mechs and mech pilots to achieve a pyrrhic victory, but also completely ruin their relationship with the local dominant power in this side of the star sector!

There was no way the nobles would be stupid enough to try anything funny! In fact, if even a single descendant of their uttered such madness, they would instantly be muffled and be taken somewhere very far away where they would never be seen again!

These what-ifs scenarios described the enormous regard the Sentinels attached to the Hexers.

No matter how much the Sentinels tried to take pride in themselves, they couldn't change the inescapable fact that the Komodo Star Sector only had room for two second-rate states.

The resource endowment that often served as the basis of a state's potential was not that remarkable in the territories of the Sentinel Kingdom.

In fact, it wasn't much better off than the Bright Republic and the Vesian Kingdom!

The only difference that allowed the Sentinel Kingdom to develop further than other third-rate states was its access to some of the resource endowments of the Nyxian Gap!

Though infested by pirates, the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association often ventured to the Nyxian Gap and returned with a number of bounties and rare exotics!

These activities may have increased the strength and prosperity of Sentinel over the years, but a true second-rate state like the Hegemony still dwarfed over it to an overwhelming degree!

Within the heart of every Sentinel, they knew they were ultimately subordinate to the Hexers. If their patron state ever won the Komodo War, then the locals knew they were in for a lot of changes in the way they treated their men and women!

A sense of helplessness suffused the Sentinels with regards to this uncertainty. Many of them, especially the men, secretly rooted for the Friday Coalition to win the war!

Yet even if they held such treacherous thoughts, they never dared to voice them out loud.

For their part, the Hexers didn't care what the lesser states thought. There would be plenty of time after they won the Komodo War to reshape the Komodo Star Sector in their image!

Until then, it was best to maintain a light presence and treat the lesser people with at least some cordiality.

It was for this reason that Dr. Ranya didn't insist on entering the marketplace of the local branch of the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association straight away.

Instead, she made a modest request and went through all of the procedures before receiving permission.

As an exobiologist, she studied the wonders of life and biological systems. What delighted people of her profession the most was encountering exotic new lifeforms that had evolved under very rare conditions!

This meant that an anomalous region like the Nyxian Gap always held more attraction to her than a normal ecosystem. Why would she waste her time on something boring when the galaxy was filled with unknowns just waiting to be explored?

To advance her research and achieve unique results, she needed to move beyond the confines of the mundane.

The thought of taking a close look at all of the varied exoplants and rare exotics that the Peacekeepers retrieved from the Nyxian Gap made her incredibly excited!

For this visit, she invited both Gloriana and Brutus to accompany her to the Peacekeeper branch.

Though both of them were considerably busy with their own responsibilities, they nonetheless accepted her offer.

The three Wodins along with a number of bodyguards quickly boarded the Serendipity to travel from Cinach VI to Cinach XII.

Situated much further away from the local sun, Cinach XII was not exactly the hottest planet in the star system.

Still, through clever terraforming, the global climate was still within human tolerance!

As their shuttle was just about to reach the campus of the Peacekeepers, the two female Wodins comfortably chatted while Brutus remained stoically silent.

"It's rare to see you out of your design labs these days."

"Designing mechs isn't easy, Ranya. While one of our projects is easy enough to leave to our assistants, the other mech is considerably harder to pull off. Ves and I still have to exert the utmost of our design capabilities to ensure its performance remains within acceptable bounds!"

"That's the Hexer mech project you were talking about, right?"

Gloriana beamed. "Even though Ves is in charge of the project, I think it holds a lot of potential! While many of his mech ideas sound outlandish, I have to admit that the one we are currently working for truly possesses the potential to swing the war! The only issue is to make our mech gain acceptance by the Hex Army. That's something that will largely depend on whether my boyfriend can make good on his claims about the potential of our mech."

Ranya regarded her cousin with a suspicious look. "Why do I get the feeling that your mech has the potential to spark an upheaval in our state? Look at what Ves has already done. Whether directly or indirectly, his intervention ultimately trashed the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate!"

"He's not that bad, Ranya. The two states you've mentioned got exactly what was coming for them for siding with the Fridaymen! Our state won't make that mistake because we are smarter!"

Ranya nodded in agreement. By now, even she fully recognized the incredible value that Ves could bring. Gloriana did the Hegemony a great service by snatching him away from the influence of the Fridaymen!

As the two continued to chat, Gloriana inquired about her latest research.

"I haven't achieved much results." Ranya admitted with a sigh as she raked her hand through her plant-like green hair. "I spent almost half a year preparing for your boyfriend's stupid implant operation. Not only that, he now expects to prepare over a dozen full augmentation plans for his assistants and his students! That will take forever to complete!"

"Are you angry that you are taking orders from a boy?"

Ranya shook her head. "Not as much. I'm already getting used to the way the galaxy outside of Hegemony space works. It's just infuriating that I'm always expected to complete these errands just because I'm the most qualified exobiologist in the fleet!"

"Well, ever since Ves' pet exobiologist attempted to kill him, we haven't been able to hire a replacement, so you're the only one available."

That was a pretty ugly event. Ranya had been in the same operation room when the betrayal happened, and she had no clue that something like this could occur!

"We need more dedicated geneticists and implant surgeons to take over my workload. While I have managed to pass on some work to the medical specialists of the Glory Battalion, they are mostly trained to treat battlefield injuries and various afflictions, so they're of limited use in procedures that involve improving humans. A lot still rests on my shoulders, and I have a feeling that Ves will want to augment a lot more people aside from his mech designers!"

"Don't worry about that." Gloriana reassured her cousin. "From what Ves has told me, the clan is already in the process of hiring some promising biotech experts. It will take a long time to entrust them with greater responsibilities, but you'll soon be able to get back to your pet projects."

"No offense, but the specialists from the Sentinel Kingdom won't be as good as me. Ves expects his chosen people to receive the same treatment that Hexers enjoy, so I am still expected to play an essential role in the augmentation process."

"I'll discuss the matter with Ves a bit further, but I think it would be hard for us to hire a geneticist and implant surgeon that is up to standard."

"We've arrived, ladies." Brutus suddenly announced.

The shuttle landed in the VIP section in the middle of the campus. The three Wodins emerged from the shuttle and showed no hint of appreciation of the architecture and scenery of the local branch of the Peacekeepers.

A female public relations director from the Peacekeepers personally came up to greet the Hexers.

"Honored guests, on behalf of the Sentinel Peacekeeper Association, we welcome you to our premises. While our humble branch doesn't offer a lot of amenities, we shall do our best to accommodate your needs."

"We're not interested in anything else aside from the goods that you have to offer."

The director already expected this request. "Please allow me to guide you to the trading halls. While our branch doesn't offer the largest selection of Nyxian goods, we have already been authorized to open our internal stores for you. Regular guests aren't allowed to enter our most coveted halls where the Peacekeepers trade between themselves."

When Ves visited the branch during his first visit to Sentinel, he already guessed the Peacekeepers kept the best goods to themselves. Only when the Peacekeepers and the nobles affiliated with them got their pick would the remaining goods be offered to the public.

When Gloriana and Ranya entered the first internal trading hall, their eyes instantly lit up! Gloriana became interested in the weird and unidentified chunks of minerals lying around while Ranya immediately turned her gaze towards the small but very varied collection of exotic plants!

Since this was Ranya's initiative, they visited the plant section first. A lot of the plant organisms retrieved from the Nyxian Gap had already died, but there were plenty of them that were kept alive by storing them in precisely-configured self-contained climate chambers.

Though she was only at the start of her career, Ranya could already imagine the possibilities when she studied the brief details of the items on offer.

From space-faring purple vines that extracted nutrients from asteroid to leafy black trees that absorbed energy from radiation, the diversity of exoplants on offer already dazzled her! Only the Exobiology Department of Kelma University dwarfed the current selection, but she never received permission to work with those valuable samples.

Right now, that wasn't the case! Every product obtained by the Peacekeepers was for sale! As long as she paid enough hex credits, she could get any exoplant she wanted!

Her breath started to heave as she tried to pick out the plants that would be useful to her ambitious research. She had never even seen some of the plants at her alma mater!

"Don't go overboard." Gloriana warned. "Right now, our financial situation isn't as healthy as it used to be. I'll only allow you to purchase a few valuable goods."

"Aw. Can't you give me some slack, cousin?"

Gloriana shook her head. "The clan still needs most of the money to pay all of its bills. I won't allow you to spend our money frivolously either. You need to explain to me what you want to do with the plants you want to buy. Your purchase has to benefit the clan in some way."

Ranya's face soured. "That's ridiculous! I am still at the beginning stages of my career! I have to perform a lot of basic and fundamental research before I can delve into the finer applications of my work! It can take years before I develop a useful plant-based augmentation!"

"Who holds the purse? Me." Gloriana smirked. "Remember who you work for. If you don't like it, you are welcome to walk away and start your own business!"

"It's fine." Ranya grumbled.

Chapter 2035 Students of Ves

While Gloriana had taken a day off to go on an excursion to Cinach XII, Ves expected to enjoy a day without his girlfriend breathing down his neck.

Metaphorically, of course.

He spent some time seeing Maisie and Rennie off. They cried when they said goodbye to their parents before boarding a shuttle that would take them into orbit.

Ves had already reserved passage on a series of passenger liners that would slowly take them to Hippolyta War College where they would arrive in time to start the next semester.

When Maikel and Zanthar saw their female cousins depart, their expressions grew mixed.

None of the four knew who would become the best after they reunited again.

In a way, the girls exerted a considerable amount of pressure to the boys, ahem, adolescent men that remained.

Even though there were more reputable schools in the Hegemony, the graduates of Hippolyta were never weak! As the mainstays of the Hex Army, its alumni had earned a reputation for competence under pressure!

"I think the Hippolyta War College is a much better choice for them than the so-called better schools." Ves deliberately said to the conflicted two young men. "Kelma University is considered to be one of the premier universities and the Artemis Institute isn't that far off. However, they mainly produce mech designers like Gloriana. They're excellent when they are able to exercise their craft in the comfort of their well-guarded

labs and workshops, but they're a lot more frail once they get caught up in the middle of a battlefield."

Zanthar frowned. "We're mech designers, patriarch. Aren't we supposed to be as far away from the fighting as possible."

"Technically you're right, but don't forget who we are. We are Larkinsons. We never take the easiest option. While it doesn't seem apparent to you now, a mech designer can gain much when they are closer to the action than many of our colleagues are comfortable with! My experiences during the latest Bright-Vesia War has defined me as a mech designer, and I hope you'll be able to grow through various crises as well! Since you accepted my tutelage, you should be prepared to learn how to work with mechs in a much more hands-on fashion than normal!"

The two young men paled. They had an inkling that Ves had a lot of challenges in store for them! Just studying his public record was enough to know that Ves survived all manner of dangers through his career!

"Can't we.. learn how to design mechs the normal way?" Maikel squeaked.

Ves gently shook his head. "The normal way is too boring. I don't want to turn you into a pair of boring and uninspiring mech designers. I want my students to excel! As your teacher, it is my responsibility to unearth all of the potential that you contain in your bodies! The candies I fed you should have already laid the right foundation. Don't think that your expanded learning capacities is enough to breeze past my training. I know exactly what you are capable of, and I won't hesitate to push you to the utmost!"

The two Larkinsons looked at Ves with despair! They already had a taste of his exacting demands and didn't relish more!

"We can't keep up!" One of them whined.

Ves straightforwardly bonked both of the Larkinsons in the head.

"No more of that! Don't complain. Do you think the girls who have just left will have it any easier? Hippolyta will push them to the extreme! As long as they can keep up, they'll return half a decade later as completely different Larkinsons! Now tell yourself. Will you let Maise and Rennie trample all over you with their Hexer-acquired heels, or will you act like a man and stand up to their oppression?"

"Do you mean the same way you 'stand up' to Miss Gloriana?"

Slap!

"Ouch!"

"No more talk like that from the two of you! While you are slated to receive additional augmentations, that doesn't mean you are on vacation. As far as I'm concerned, your study program has already started!"

Ves grinned and pointed his thumb at a Bright Warrior that stood dormant in the corner of the rented base.

"See that mech there? I want you to go take it to a workshop and disassemble it down to its individual nuts and bolts. Then I want you to put it all together in exactly the same condition!"

"What does that have to do with mech design, patriarch?!"

"Call me teacher." Ves crossed his arms. "And it has everything to do with mech design. How can you possibly visualize your own mech designs to a high degree of accuracy if you have rarely if ever touched the components of a mech with your own hands? My assistant mech designers have already done the same and their work has become considerably more grounded to reality as a result!"

The two students still looked daunted at this request!

"We can't! We don't know how to work all of the tools!"

"You should put your new smarts to good use. Read the manuals. Ask the mech technicians to guide you. Figure it out through trial and error. However you do it, I expect you to flawlessly disassemble and reassemble the Bright Warrior by the end of the week!"

"That's too short! We'll never be able to restore the mech to mint condition!"

Ves glowered at them. "All I hear are excuses. Do you think reality will take it easy on you? One day, you'll probably be asked to perform something similar in only a single day! If you take any longer, some of the lives of your comrades might be forfeit!"

It took a while to get his point across. While he had handed over a daunting task to the prospective mech designers, Ves didn't expect them to succeed in the first place. Without even completing their first year of mech design studies, there was no way they could pick up a wrench and dissect a mech without damaging something! It was even less likelier for them to put it back together without causing a major mishap!

In order to make sure his two students didn't trigger an accident that got themselves killed, he called for a chief technician to supervise their efforts.

"Don't tell them anything except how to use the tools and machines at their disposal." He told the grizzled chief. "Just let them monkey around and realize slowly how out of

depth they are and how much effort is required to service a mech, let alone design them from scratch."

The chief technician wearing the yellow-and-white uniform of the Avatars looked concerned. "I'm not so sure I can keep them safe, sir. These kids look like they never held a multitool in their life."

"I don't think it's that bad, but you're mostly right. Just pull them away if they look like they are about to screw up pretty big."

"What about the mech? It's a shame to ruin a good Bright Warrior."

"It's a tough mech. It can take some dents. I should know, since I designed it in the first place. At most, the more fragile internal components need to be repaired, but that is just a few days of work for your crew."

After passing on this instruction, he turned around and left the grounds.

There was a very good reason why he started Maikel and Zanthar's study program by getting their hands dirty on an advanced mech.

With their upgraded Intelligence and Concentration scores, there shouldn't be any problem with their theoretical studies. Any decent mech designer could pour a lot of knowledge down the throats of students who were this smart!

The true challenge laid in shaping their principles, their work ethic, their mentality and their perspective towards mech design.

These were his true concerns as his teacher! Normally, a proper university utilized excellent teachers and various institutional tools to shape these intangible properties.

Those means weren't available right now, so Ves had to make up for their absence with his own methods.

His intent in throwing challenges to Maikel and Zanthar was to find out if they were suited to follow in his direction. His ultimate goal in teaching them was to see if they were capable of designing mechs with spiritual properties!

He didn't expect them to perform spiritual engineering. They lacked the spiritual perception that was central to his own design philosophy.

What Ves wanted to find out was if it was possible that they could still excel in some sort of specialty that applied spirituality in a more deliberate and conscious manner!

To do so, Ves needed them to appreciate mechs in a different manner from the industry standard. Hopefully, they would come to see mechs as living entities or at least machines with greater potential!

Speaking about guiding the next generation, his only student so far had also decided to return.

Ketis looked changed. She looked uncomfortable in her blue-and-white LMC uniform that every mech designer wore. Her familiar CFA-grade sword hovered quietly behind her back in its floating scabbard.

"Meow!"

Lucky seemed ecstatic to meet her again! He jumped from Ves' shoulders and landed in her warm grasp!

"I missed you too, Lucky! Oh, you look better than ever! Did Ves feed you well?"

"Meow!"

"Did you have a good time with Raella?" Ves gently asked.

"I did." Ketis smiled without any inkling of discomfort. "I really enjoyed my time with her. She's very fun to be with and she has helped me sort out my life. I know what I want to do, now. I want to design mechs! The Swordmaidens need mechs designed by someone who understands them, and I'm the only one who can do that!"

Ves was very glad to hear her conviction. He knew that her feelings had turned into a mess when she decided to go to Bentheim, but it seemed that her experiences during the Sand War and the flight from persecution did much to temper her conviction!

Since the Swordmaidens were now part of the Black Cats, there was no reason for Ketis to stay away from the LMC and Ves anymore.

"While I appreciate your enthusiasm, you should still contribute to our current projects. No one in the LMC works for free. Are you prepared to join a design team?"

She nodded. "I can do that. I work best with melee mechs, though."

"It's fine. You're not the only mech designer with an unusual restriction. You'll just be working on the parts that every mech have in common if you have to work on a ranged mech."

While Ketis played with Lucky, Ves began to quiz her in order to understand her current progress.

As one of his unfortunate test subjects who received enough candies to elevate her Intelligence and Concentration to 2.0, she had turned into a frighteningly voracious devourer of knowledge!

Ves looked surprised when he realized that Ketis had already reached and even surpassed the standard of an Apprentice! In certain fields such as metallurgy and mechanics, she had already reached the level of a Journeyman!

The only issue was that she didn't really have a single completed mech design to her name.

"I do have a lot of projects in an advanced stage, but..."

"Your study progress has already surpassed the level of your work, right?" Ves guessed.

She nodded. "I feel ashamed whenever I look at one of my old works. Every day, I learn something new that could have been applied to one of my works."

"You know that isn't good, right? Mech designers progress by practicing their craft. I always impressed upon you that accumulating book knowledge without ever putting it to use is no good!"

"I know, but.. I was never this smart before." She explained herself. "What took years for me to learn only takes a few weeks now! It's addicting!"

Ves groaned and palmed his face. That sounded just like him a few years ago!

His eyes sharpened as he gazed towards his first student. It looked like he needed to give her some extra guidance!

Her eyes suddenly brightened as she gently threw Lucky into the air. "Oh, there's also something else! While I haven't made much progress on my designs, I think I fleshed my design philosophy a bit! I even learned a cool trick! Watch this!"

She put her hand into her uniform pocket and retrieved a standard butter knife. Its edge was sharp enough to cut through meat, but not much more.

While Ves tried to figure out if there was something special about the knife, she retrieved a small bar of steel from her other pocket and threw it into the air.

Swish!

With a masterful one-handed sword stroke, Ketis chopped the butter knife through the metal bar!

Instead of colliding against the bar, the knife instead cut through it as if it was a cake!

The two separated pieces clattered to the ground while Ketis grinned at her mentor.

"Did you see! I finally developed my own superpower!"

Ves looked slack jawed!

"..What?"

Chapter 2036 Uneven Progress

When Ketis showed off her 'superpower', Ves quickly guided her to an empty office in the base.

What she had just shown off was not something she should reveal so casually!

"Since when were you able to perform this trick?" Ves asked.

"Just a month ago!" She grinned! "During the flight to Sentinel, there wasn't any work for me aboard the ship I was on. Aside from studying and polishing my swordsmanship, I didn't have anything else to do, so I began to see if I could develop my own superpower!"

"Superpowers don't exist, at least not in the way you think." Ves frowned.

Ketis tilted her head. "Didn't I just show off something that no one else could do?"

"That's not a superpower! That's just a side effect!" Ves insisted. "Could you demonstrate it for me again? I didn't pay enough attention the first time. I need to confirm something."

"Okay, but my power can't cut through anything." She warned as he pulled out another steel bar.

It seemed that she had already come prepared.

This time, she placed the small metal bar on a table. When she raised the hand holding her butter knife, Ves keenly studied her with his spiritual vision.

Just as he suspected, through some method, Ketis somehow drew out a considerable portion of her spiritual potential and coated it around the edge of the butter knife!

As soon as her cutting implement was fully enveloped by her spiritual energy, she chopped it down!

Ves paid very careful attention to the metal bar. It parted in half when it met the spiritually-enhanced blade.

It was as if Ketis wasn't a human, but an expert mech that employed true resonance to enhance the sharpness of its blade!

Yet that was impossible. Ketis was not an expert mech, and her application of spirituality diverged significantly from true resonance!

Clunk!

The blade she used to chop the bar continued to cut through the surface of the metal table until it suddenly something that was too hard to continue!

The spirituality surrounding the blade had completely exhausted itself. This must be the limit that Ketis was talking about.

"What are the rules governing your superpower?" Ves probed without shame.

Fortunately, Ketis trusted Ves enough to reveal the details of her newly-developed ability without reserve. "I call it Imbue Sharpness. I can impart an edge on any blade I hold. However, when I tried it out with my greatsword, I quickly learned that the cutting power rapidly dilutes over a longer edge. That's why I can only show off this power with a butter knife. Anything larger quickly causes the additional sharpness to grow weaker."

These rules were easy to understand to Ves, especially since he had seen her ability at work with his spiritual vision.

Right now, her spiritual potential is still within the range of an Apprentice, which wasn't all that much. Perhaps she might be able to empower an actual sword once she advanced to Journeyman, but until then the energy she was able to draw from her mind remained limited.

"What about the duration of this ability?" Ves asked.

"The sharpening effect only lasts as long as I keep concentrating. It's easy to interrupt the effect if I get distracted. Furthermore, my blade can only cut through normal objects. A piece of steel like this bar is still doable, but as soon as I try to cut into the armor of a mech, my sharpness effect instantly runs out! I don't have the strength to cut through harder materials as of yet, but I'll surely do better in the future!"

Everything followed a rule. The energy she was able to channel in her ability could only last for so long. Cutting the small, hand-sized steel bar was no challenge at all, but as soon as her blade cut through the table underneath, her imparted energy rapidly depleted itself because the table was made of a more durable alloy!

After a bit more elaboration, Ves fully understood the gist of her ability.

"It's not a superpower." Ves corrected her. "It's a side effect of your design philosophy."

"Isn't that the same thing?" Ketis frowned in confusion. "I worked really hard to develop my understanding of sharpness! This superpower is the culmination of all of my efforts in the past few months!"

Ves felt like he was talking to Gloriana. Ketis was so convinced that her own framework was right that she simply refused to accept alternative explanations!

"Mech designers." He muttered. "We're just as stubborn as expert pilots."

"What was that, Ves?"

"Oh, nothing. I need to study you a bit. Could you sit down so that I can look into your head? I need to observe something."

"Okay."

Though she was wondering what he was doing, she still sat down so that her head was within his reach.

He placed his hands on her head and tried to peer inside her mind with his spiritual senses.

"Ouch!"

He immediately encountered her mental defenses! It was as if he bumped into a wall of blades!

"Could you relax a bit, Ketis? Just imagine as if you are opening yourself up to me. I want to sense something in you, but to do that, you need to trust me. Can you do that?"

"Uhm.. okay."

Though she began to harbor some doubts, she still followed his instruction, though with some difficulty.

Once her mind cleared up enough for Ves to peek in her mind, he only observed long enough to understand her progress.

Just as he suspected, her nascent design philosophy was incredibly pure!

Not only that, but it had developed to an advanced state! This was not the design philosophy of a Novice or an inexperienced Apprentice. This degree of development

was more typical to those who were within reach of advancing to Journeyman! Not even Miles Tovar was this far ahead!

"You have progressed enormously!" Ves gasped. "What did you do in the past year?"

"I already told you. I studied like a demon, I designed a couple of incomplete mechs and I spent months servicing the mechs that belonged to Raella's unit."

All of that sounded simple, but that made her accomplishment all the more remarkable!

For a long time, Ves always thought that Ketis held a lot of promise, but it would take a lot of time for her to exhibit her value.

Yet now, despite not having finished a single mech design, she was already within range to advance to Journeyman!

"This is crazy! This is impossible!"

Compared to an Apprentice, Ketis possessed a lot of theoretical and hands-on experience with mechs. She overpowered in these areas.

Yet just like Ves in the past, she didn't possess enough design experience! The number one purpose of a mech designer was to design mechs. There was no way that Ketis should have been able to progress her design philosophy that quickly without spending enough time on her core activity.

As Ves continued to gaze at Ketis in confusion, he tried to figure out why she bucked the trend.

Her spiritual attributes might hold some clues. He had already studied them and found out that her mentality was remarkably more pure than the average mech designer!

Whereas people like Ves possessed a lot of emotions and other junk in his mind, Ketis was almost as strong-willed and single-minded as an elite mech pilot! Her Swordmaiden training shaped her personality in a way that caused her to obsessively dedicate herself in any pursuit related to swords and swordsmanship!

This tendency along with her extremely-pronounced Concentration score likely caused her to unconsciously excite and channel her spiritual potential until she succeeded in creating her own 'superpower'!

Ves realized that Ketis had somehow turned a misunderstanding into truth. Through crooked means and mistaken assumptions, she exerted her concentration in a manner that should have resulted in nothing but actually managed to warp her spiritual potential into a completely unprecedented application!

Not only that, but her constant mental efforts also honed her mentality and purified her spiritual attributes! The amount of effort she put into her inadvertent spiritual manipulation should be the actual reason why her design philosophy progressed so quickly despite her lack of design experience.

She managed to deepen her perspective and understanding of sharpness through an alternate method!

The implications of these realizations were very profound, though difficult to put to use. All Ves knew was that Ketis suddenly possessed a lot more promise in his eyes!

In fact, she might currently be the mech designer under his employ that was closest to advancing to Journeyman!

His plans for her changed considerably!

"I see you're wearing the uniform of the LMC. Have you joined the clan?"

She nodded. "The Swordmaidens have all pledged to become Larkinsons. How could I not follow suit? I'm still not used to it, though. For a long time, I was a daughter of the frontier. It's hard to shake off my roots. I still consider myself to be both."

"That's okay."

He didn't need to ask whether she became a Larkinson. He could already see that she possessed an active bond to the Golden Cat.

Knowing that Ketis took her oaths seriously like any other Swordmaiden, Ves was completely assured of her loyalty to him and the clan. There was no way she would do anything to betray the Larkinsons!

This made him feel much more reassured about his intention to facilitate her growth. Even without his help, she probably would have found a way to advance on her own, but with his ability to judge her state, he could probably speed it up by a couple of years!

"From now on, I'll be setting your tasks in person. My first order is to cease your studies. You already know more than most Apprentices. There is no need for you to waste anymore time in reading books at your stage."

"Hey!"

Ves crossed his arms. "I'm serious! Too much study without putting all of your knowledge into practice is bad for you! Haven't you realized that already when you never finished your mech designs? In fact, that will be your focus for the next couple of months. I want you to transfer all of your design files to me so that I can study your work. I will then instruct you to finish every single design you started."

Ketis looked scandalized!

"I can't! They're outdated! Most of them are lastgen mechs even!"

"I know you're embarrassed of your old work, but you need to finish what you started. These incomplete projects will always hang over your head as long as you leave them incomplete!"

"B-B-But they're too bad!"

"You won't embarrass yourself." Ves spoke in a softer tone. "I won't judge your work as long as they are earnest expressions of your passion. Everyone has to start somewhere. I would feel ashamed of my earliest work as well, but that doesn't mean I feel proud of what I managed to accomplish at the time."

What Ketis truly needed was to develop the appropriate mindset towards her project. Starting new projects but abandoning them halfway was a bad habit that could easily lead to a lifelong pattern of half-hearted effort.

This could not take root in his first student!

What Ketis needed to learn was that not every project had to be perfect. It was fine to make some compromises in order to meet a deadline or finish her work quickly. Expediency was just a factor of their profession as thoroughness.

Besides, once Ketis had some completed mech designs under her belt, Ves believed that her design philosophy would progress a lot closer to the eventual formation of her design seed!

When Ves finished passing on his instructions to her, she departed the office to perform her new tasks.

Ves looked back at the parted pieces of metal and hummed. He looked around the office and noted that it probably belonged to a chief technician.

He rummaged through a few drawers until he finally found a small knife designed to cut miscellaneous objects.

While it was sharper than a butter knife, it still wasn't capable of cutting through a metal bar.

"This is good enough."

He held the knife in a firm grip and raised it above his head. He concentrated his mind and tried to emulate the same trick that Ketis pulled off.

After some time, he managed to form a spiritual projection that wrapped around the blade in the same fashion that Ketis had managed to do. While there were a couple of differences, it was close enough to suit his purposes.

He took a few deep breaths as he shifted his eyes to one of the halves of the metal bar. While it was smaller than the original object, it was still large enough to use as target practice.

"Cut!"

He swung the blade down, only to meet immediate resistance!

Clank!

Despite his enhanced strength, the knife only dug a shallow groove before spinning away from his grasp!

"Damn."

It didn't work!

"My domain and attributes are too different. I can't replicate her superpower." He glumly concluded.

Chapter 2037 Journeyman Candidates

The return of Ketis to the design teams was met with considerable fanfare. Despite her Swordmaiden pedigree and unusually athletic and half-alien appearance, she had already proved her design prowess to the other assistant mech designers!

Ketis knew she was good. Developing her own 'superpower' infused her with an immeasurable amount of confidence, and the greatsword floating behind her back only emphasized her strength even further!

This was a mech designer who could fight! This was the mech designer groomed by both Ves and the Swordmaidens!

No one made the mistake of looking down on her due to her irregular background!

The most peculiar reaction came from the two boys, ahem, adolescent men. Both Maikel and Zanthar gazed at Ketis with admiration and hero worship. They seemed to think they would become just as strong and competent as Ketis once they received Ves' personal tutoring!

Oh, how naive. A mech designer like Ketis was one of a kind. Besides, Ves had a very different trajectory in mind for the two Larkinson seeds!

Perhaps the only other peculiar reaction that Ves picked up was that of Merrill O'Brian-Larkinson. Due to her former pirate adventures, she knew what pirates were really like.

As a mech designer who was highly inclined towards rationalism, Ves never really knew what Merrill was really thinking. At the very least, she shouldn't be plotting anything bad considering that she successfully gained the Golden Cat's approval.

When they finished the meet and greet, Ves made some announcements.

"Right now, there are two mech designers among us who have made a lot of progress recently. After evaluating Ketis and Miles, I believe that they are within reach of reaching their critical moments. In order to facilitate their progress, I have decided to pull them out of the design teams to guide them on an individual basis. They will spend most of their time designing their own mechs."

The man and woman in question stepped aside. Already they received admiring glances from the remaining assistants.

Everyone here knew that the two might very well become the next Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan! The collective design prowess of the LMC would practically double at that time, thereby turning into a truly formidable mech company at the sector level!

After handing out the daily assignments for the design teams, Ves and Gloriana both pulled Ketis and Miles aside.

"Both of you are very promising, but that does not mean that you are already set to become a Journeyman." Ves warned. "There are plenty of Apprentices who stalled despite continuing to design lots of mechs. The only guarantee I can give you is that as long as you maintain your passion, your chances of advancing will be considerable. Don't lose heart. Don't lose your motivation. Keep chasing after your ambition and don't hesitate to design something radical. Dare to design!"

"Dare to design!" The two younger mech designers echoed with fervent eyes!

Ves grinned. He was becoming better and better at motivating people.

That said, nothing was set in stone. Though his spiritual vision already revealed that their nascent design philosophies had stimulated their spiritual potential, he had seen plenty of people in the same condition. Not all of them managed to realize their potential.

The main issue was that Ves wasn't sure what conditions they needed to meet in order to trigger the formation of their design seeds. All he could do was to encourage them to design a lot of mechs, hoping that this stupid but proven method of exercising their craft would help them break through the extraordinary threshold!

In his mind, Ves already considered Ketis and Miles to be Journeyman candidates. This wasn't a common term in the mech industry because unlike expert candidates, highly-advanced Apprentices didn't generate any resonance.

Perhaps Masters possessed an intuitive ability to detect promising mech designers, but there was no technological equivalent to the reliable resonance meter!

Miles raised his hand. "I have a question, teacher. If... if we ever succeed in our advancement, what will be our role in the LMC?"

That was a very important question. Ves still wanted to make use of their distinctive specialties, but he couldn't treat them as his obedient slaves anymore.

Journeyman deserved better. As mech designers who were capable of imparting extraordinary power to their work, their value was countless times greater than an Apprentice!

If mech companies could choose between employing a million Apprentices or a single Journeyman, they would always choose the latter without any hesitation!

This was because the Apprentices were ultimately constrained by the technical limitations of the natural laws. Only Journeymen and higher were capable of designing mechs that clearly outperformed the mechs designed by AIs!

Even though both of the Journeyman candidates had pledged their loyalty to the Larkinson Clan, that did not mean that Ves could mistreat or exploit them at will.

As the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, he owed it to the two mech designers to continue to foster their growth. In exchange, they would pay back everything that Ves and the clan invested in them by contributing back to the clan!

The real question was how much autonomy he should give them. As Journeymen, it was important for them to design their own mechs. Yet Ves feared that the qualities of their products wouldn't match the profile expected of LMC mechs.

The key qualities that every LMC-branded product had in common was their glows and their high compatibility with their target audience!

So far, Ves had mainly collaborated with Gloriana, who mostly followed his lead in most projects.

He couldn't continue this pattern. Hogging all of the pivotal design choices would only deprive his other collaborators with an opportunity to exercise their creativity.

"In the future, we'll change the way we manage our mech design projects." Ves eventually promised. "Every Journeyman should have the opportunity to design the

mechs of their dreams. With more Journeymen, we can also increase the amount of projects we are working on at the same time. Don't forget that we are already recruiting a lot of assistant mech designers as well. We'll be holding some trials soon to decide the most suitable additions to our design teams."

This might possibly be the biggest wave of recruitment for some time. Ves intended to expand his Design Department considerably in order to increase the pace of development at his mech company.

The time where he would only be pumping out one or two mech designs per cycle would soon be over!

Ves already resigned himself to taking on a more supervisory role in less important projects.

Strictly speaking, he only needed to be involved just enough to imbue the upcoming mech designs with glows.

Of course, he shouldn't take it too far and lean back all the time. He still planned to involve himself more extensively in more important projects.

One thing was for sure, though. Ves had to manage his time well! There was way too much work and far too little time to devote equal attention to everything! He needed to set priorities and compromise on a lot of lesser matters if he wanted to make sure the LMC remained as productive as possible!

Ves gazed deeply at the expressions shown by Ketis and Miles.

Though both of them clearly knew that Ves and Gloriana would always maintain their primacy in the Design Department, they didn't show any signs of challenging this power dynamic.

Good. As much as Ves was willing to delegate more responsibilities to any new Journeyman, he was determined to stay on top! The LMC was still his mech company as far as he was concerned, and it should always operate in a way that facilitated his own development!

"There is a bit of a peculiarity in the mechs you prefer to design, right?" He continued. "Ketis, you still intend to specialize in swordsman mechs, right?"

"Any mech that wields a bladed weapon will do." She clarified. "My main goal is to design the best mechs for the Swordmaidens. To be honest, I don't feel any passion when I design other mechs."

That sounded fairly limiting to Ves, but at least it was better than before. While Ketis still preferred to design swordsman mechs, she could also design a knight mech if necessary!

"I'll need your help in improving the offensive capabilities of our Hexer mech project. While it isn't very strong at beating other mechs, it at least needs to hold its ground."

"Alright." Ketis nodded.

Ves turned to Miles. "As for you, our mech company hasn't produced any aerial mechs so far, but I hope we can change that. If you do well, I'll put you in charge of any mech that falls within your specialty."

"Thank you, teacher."

"Don't thank me yet. We'll revisit this topic again when you succeed in your advancement."

He only revealed some of his future plans in order to give them hope and motivate them further. As long as they heard that they would be able to lead their own design projects, they would work extra hard to shed their status as Apprentices!

Strictly speaking, Ketis possessed a lot more potential than Miles. She was considerably younger than Miles and had a good chance of becoming a Journeyman before she reached thirty years old!

As for the former Tovar family member, his extensive experience and systematic upbringing meant that his chances of advancing should be higher. However, Ves didn't expect Miles to make a lot of progress quickly because his design philosophy was a lot more muddled!

Ketis and Miles were fundamentally different people.

The former not only enjoyed an unorthodox upbringing, but also pursued her passion to the extreme! Her Swordmaiden habits along with Ves' teachings all fueled her obsessiveness to a level where she even brute-forced her way into developing her own superpower!

As for the latter, Miles was the typical example of an elite mech designer who studied at an excellent school such as Ansel or the DCTI.

Though both universities existed no more since the sandmen swept through Bentheim, the reputation and pedigree that Miles enjoyed was not something that should be discounted!

The only problem was that his systematic learning trajectory was a bit deficient in terms of daring and rule-breaking. Miles still respected the natural laws too much to imagine bending them in order to design the mechs of his dreams.

Ves needed to find a way to foster his passion and encourage him to refine his nascent design philosophy further.

"Gloriana and I will be reviewing your private designs before advising you on how to proceed. Both of you need to temper your developing design philosophies by applying the principles and ideals that you have theorized in your mind. Remember, a mech designer is not strictly a researcher! A mech designer is a product maker! Making mechs is the best way for us to improve!"

Fires burned in their eyes as they agreed with this statement.

The two candidates weren't resigned to remain in the category of low-ranking mech designers any longer! Witnessing the success and achievements of Ves and Gloriana fueled their desire to catch up to their idols!

Gloriana smiled in satisfaction. "I concur with my boyfriend. The LMC and the Larkinson Clan stands to become something greater when you ascend to our level. There are a lot more mechs we can design with your assistance! The key is to work together and pool our talents so that we can achieve the greatest level of synergy possible."

Currently, the Larkinson Clan mainly depended on Ves to remain prominent. This was rather precarious as his sudden absence would instantly cause the clan to lose its relevance!

Both expert pilots and Journeymen were vital to the Larkinsons. Only when they began to produce both in abundance would their clan gain recognition as an independent power!

The future of the Larkinson Clan did not solely rest on Ves' shoulders anymore. While he would still play the most dominant role, he did not have to carry the burden on his own anymore!

Chapter 2038 Fear Machine

A month after reaching Cinach, the Larkinson Clan continued to expand and consolidate its strength.

The Clan of the Golden Cat became more and more formidable during this time! The quantity and quality of ships, mechs and manpower constantly improved with each passing day!

The only downside was the increased strain to the clan's financial health. Much more cash flowed out of its coffers than the other way around!

The pressure this worsening trend exerted on Ves increased. It became more important than ever to generate new revenue sources for the clan!

Right now, Ves could only rest his hopes on his upcoming striker mech project. Though it was merely a third-class mech design, it had the potential to become a very big seller!

As the project progressed rapidly during the last few weeks, the mech came close to reaching its prototype testing phase.

While Ves did not involve himself too closely in its design process, he spent a considerable amount of time and effort on preparing its spiritual foundation.

He already decided to imbue the design with Zeigra's spiritual fragment, but it needed a considerable amount of treatment before the striker mech's glow became menacing enough to achieve its intended effect.

Ves wanted his flamethrower-wielding mech to be able to scare away enemy mech pilots with its glow alone!

"This is the solution to the capacity problem!" He concluded.

He spent way too much time in trying to resolve this critical shortcoming. His striker mech boasted a decent amount of armor and a considerable punch, but its endurance and longevity on the battlefield never reached a satisfactory standard!

Ves had already tried and failed to come up with an alternate configuration to its humanoid mech shape. At its current budget and tech level, there weren't any good solutions to the fundamental problem that his striker mech risked running out of propellant a bit too quickly.

"However, my mech doesn't necessarily have to burn its opponents to a crisp in order to complete its mission."

He expressly designed his mech to act as a deterrent to massed attacks. While it would be best for his mechs to destroy any enemies entering its reach, scaring them away was the next-best outcome!

There were multiple ways to fulfill this second objective. Previously, Ves focused most of his design efforts in integrating and optimizing the cooperation between the mech frame and the 34F Enison Spreader flamethrower model.

"The simplest way to deter incoming enemies is to throw a lot of firepower in their direction."

With the Enison Spreader as the central focus, Ves designed everything else about the mech around the weapon. He even planned out its glow to compliment the fear factor of putting up a wall of flames!

It was only later on that his perspective started to shift.

The glow for the mech needed to play more than just a complimentary role. It had to be able to become frightening enough to deter approaching enemies even if the mech wasn't engaging in active area denial!

When Gloriana heard his reasoning, she didn't look convinced.

"I understand what you are getting at, Ves." She began. "As much as I have faith in your glows, your proto-gods aren't strong enough to carry a battle by themselves. Not at their current level of development. We always designed this mech with the assumption that the glow and the flamethrower would work in unison to achieve the effect we want. By themselves, neither of them are as effective as we would like."

A suppressive glow mainly affected the mentality of the opposing mech pilot. However, there were so many variables which affected the success rate of relying on a glow to fulfill one of the mech's objectives.

Against an outfit with overwhelming numbers or excellent training, it was hard for a glow to affect their morale and composure! The confidence that mech pilots gained in their material advantages vastly outweighed any vague mental influences!

Still, Ves didn't give up on his dream. "I think it should still be possible to rely on psychological pressure alone to keep enemies at a distance. I just have to spice up the spiritual composition of our mech design. Zeigra alone can't do it alone."

The former Crown Cat turned spiritual entity was truly a strong and frightening being. Whether he was dead or alive, his notable spiritual prowess which emerged as a coincidence was something that Ves had already made use of in the Kinslayer and Prideful Soldier designs!

However, it was exactly because of his familiarity with Zeigra's glow that Ves held little confidence in the huge cat.

Properly speaking, Zeigra excelled in devouring and corrosion. When he used to be alive, the Crown Cat was notorious for degrading the integrity of enemy mechs and consuming the opponents he downed!

The intimidation factor he possessed was mainly a side effect of his desire to prey on others. The cat constantly regarded everyone and everything else as its food!

Though this was very disconcerting, Zeigra would much rather maul and munch on its prey than scaring it to death!

"I'm running out of time." He whispered to himself. "Soon, we'll test out the prototypes and optimize the design even further. I can't introduce major changes while the project has reached an advanced stage."

He began to run through his options. Which design spirit or spiritual entity could he choose from to turn his striker mech into a fear machine?

Only one possibility remained.

"I need to visit the Scarlet Rose's vault." He told Gloriana.

"Can I come with you?" She asked.

"No. I don't need your help."

He took Lucky and departed the design lab.

For the past month, more than half of the clan was working and living on solid ground. To many Larkinsons, the return to normality that living on a terrestrial planet provided was very essential in restoring their mental states!

Even Ves, who was determined to make his fleet his home, still wasn't used to spending so many months in space!

"Meow."

"Just one more month to go before we are ready to depart. We'll be saying goodbye to the Larkinson Family at that time."

"Meow?"

"I don't know, Lucky. It depends on the opportunities I can find. I'm still on the lookout for lucrative missions that can earn me lots of credits, but most of them are only suitable for teams."

He had been dropping into the Rim Exchange every other day. Each time his Apollo Radiant avatar entered the Merit Hall, he gained numerous offers, each of which he ignored.

He didn't want to split his mission rewards!

Unfortunately, the missions suitable for individuals rewarded far too little merits in proportion to the risk and time commitment they demanded.

Sure, earning 2 million merits after completing a single mission sounded nice.

What was not so nice was that he would have to venture at least two years into the interior of the Nyxian Gap before spending another two years to exit the region!

Ves began to lose hope of finding a suitable mission. The Rim Guardians may be generous, but they weren't running a charity! Its merit rewards never came easily, especially to Journeymen whose capabilities were limited compared to Masters!

"I'd have to be a Master myself in order to become eligible for the most lucrative missions!"

He even thought up the crazy notion of impersonating a Master before instantly stamping it out!

"It will never work! The MTA and the Rim Guardians can never be fooled so easily!"

Yet aside from this insane stunt, how else could he gain access to the most lucrative missions?

"Maybe.. I can suck up to one of the high-ranking associates of the Rim Guardians."

This meant he needed to find a patron within the Rim Exchange, which wasn't easy. Journeymen were very limited in the perspective of Masters! There was no way that Ves could earn enough recognition to obtain more than a miniscule share of every mission he completed with a patron!

Still, out of all of the available options, this hail mary option was the realistic one out of the bunch. Ves just needed to find a receptive Master and trade something of value.

"For example.. I can offer to impart my glows to their mechs."

One of the more profound but neglected advantages of his specialty was its lack of conflict with nearly every other design philosophy!

Unless another mech designer specialized in something that worked directly with spirituality, then Ves was very confident he could blend his specialty in the works of other mech designers!

No matter how weird their products turned out to be, Ves could always add some value to them by infusing them with a spiritual foundation or imbuing them with a living design spirit!

His eyes burned a bit brighter. This was actually a viable option!

His enthusiasm quickly died down, though.

"I just have to prove my value to Masters."

That was not easy. Masters had access to an enormous talent pool. A huge amount of mech designers wished to work for them. They were practically spoiled when it came to adding complimentary specialties to their design teams!

Still, Ves believed his glows had reached a level where they could significantly improve the effectiveness of any mech!

His existing mech designs should already be sufficient to prove his worth, but Ves feared that it would take more to attract the attention of Masters.

"They don't necessarily care about third-class mechs." He muttered. "While my striker mech design will undoubtedly be able to raise a lot of eyebrows if I succeed, it will be my Hexer mech which will truly put me on the map!"

The landbound support knight mech was a bit further off from completion. Its complexity still perplexed Ves and Gloriana on a regular basis.

Still, its promise in terms of impact was greater than that of his striker mech! Not only would it be his first proper second-class mech design, his Hexer mech had the potential to capture the attention of the entire star sector if it succeeded in making a difference in the huge and pivotal Komodo War!

If that ever happened, Ves would finally have the capital to negotiate with Masters!

After a short trip, he reached the location in the base where his crew parked the mobile supply frigate.

He entered the former Fridayman vessel and passed through numerous security checkpoints until he reached her vault.

As usual, Ves left all of his bodyguards behind barring Nitaa. The bodyguard immediately frowned upon entering.

The air within the vault was rather unsettling.

"Meow!"

Even Lucky showed signs of vigilance!

"Oh, damnit!"

Ves cursed under his breath as he strode to a certain area of the vault. He opened a secure storage section and pulled out the Ancient Sarcophagus that was the source of the unsettling feeling!

Right now, the alien coffin looked a lot more active than his last visit to the vault!

"Nyxie!"

The ancient alien spiritual entity was roiling with fury! His potent spiritual energy was colliding against the bonds of his ancient prison. He wanted to escape!

"Oh no you don't!"

Ves only intended to harvest a small spiritual mote from Nyxie in order to enhance the intimidation factor of his striker mech.

Right now, he couldn't afford to act with restraint. Nyxie had restored some strength and was using it to erode his prison even further! A minor cut wasn't enough to suppress the dangerous spiritual entity!

"I need my F-stone!"

Fortunately, he stored all of the necessary tools in the same vault. He retrieved his B-stone lockbox and put it over his head in order to shield his mind. He also made sure to reinforce the basic spiritual shield he projected around his mind.

After that, he retrieved his F-stone, drew out some of its offensive charge, and cut out a decent-sized spiritual fragment from Nyxie!

Having done this multiple times, Ves proficiently wounded the ancient alien tyrant without exposing himself to any counterattacks!

Soon, the furious Nyxie subsided as he lost too much strength all of a sudden. The Ancient Sarcophagus no longer appeared active as its bonds finally managed to contain the weakened outburst of its prisoner.

While Ves had managed to succeed this time, he didn't look happy.

"What if I didn't come? Would Nyxie have been able to succeed in breaking out his prison?"

That would have been a catastrophe to Ves and the clan!

Chapter 2039 Surrogate Shopping

Ves studied the only F-stone in his possession and sighed. The exotic's offensive charge diminished every time he drew on it. While its ability to enhance the offensive power of his spiritual projections was invaluable, he would eventually run out of it if he couldn't find another F-stone!

It wasn't as if he tried. He already instructed Calabast to discreetly search for more spiritually-reactive materials.

He had some hopes of gaining more P-stones, F-stones and B-stones during his stay in Cinach. After all, he obtained much of his initial samples from the local branch of the Peacekeepers and the mysterious Circle of Mota!

Yet even after a month had passed, the Black Cats still hadn't brought any goodies.

Had Ves cleaned out decades worth of accumulating of spiritually-reactive materials in his previous visit?

Were others buying them up as soon as they entered the market?

Whatever the case, Ves couldn't rely on replacement for his current F-stone. He had to operate on the assumption that he could only rely on his current sample.

All the while, Nyxie was restoring his strength. Each time he woke up a bit more, he seemed to be able to leverage more and more strength!

Ves felt as if he was on a time limit. Cutting pieces of him to use as ingredients was unsustainable.

If Ves failed to grow strong enough to negate his reliance on his F-stone, he would eventually lose his ability to defeat the formidable entity!

Fortunately, the problem wasn't acute at this moment. He still possessed plenty of charge to cut Nyxie down to size a dozen or so times. Before he reached this point, he could always grow stronger or find some other way to limit the restoration of the tyrannical spiritual entity.

"Did he grow stronger due to receiving spiritual feedback?"

This issue concerned him a lot. The spiritual products derived from Nyxie's spiritual fragments had the potential of feeding spiritual energy back to their 'parents', but Ves made sure to block this interaction.

Ves took the time to inspect and inquire Bravo and the Solemn Guardian. Neither of them had broken his rule as far as he was aware of. In their current state, they weren't capable of withholding information from him. They were being completely truthful!

"Did he get something from Silent William?"

He couldn't help but recall the spiritual surgery he performed on the Urbesh clansman. While the operation succeeded in turning him into an expert candidate, it also generated plenty of side effects!

Right now, Ves didn't have access to William. He pretty much disappeared after Ves sent him back to the Rim Guardians. It would probably take some time for Silent William to return to the Urbesh Clan in the Vicious Mountain Star Sector.

"Maybe I should pay a visit to him if I ever pass through Vicious Mountain." He hummed.

He wrapped up his session in the vault and stowed away all of the materials. He made sure to store Nyxie's spiritual fragment inside a P-stone before locking it inside his B-stone lockbox.

"If there is any material I need the most, it's the B-stone." He concluded. "As long as I have enough blocking material, I can surround the coffin with an even greater cage!"

He could also use B-stone for other purposes like crafting more lockboxes and building a spiritually-impervious suit of armor!

"Meow."

Ves glared at his cat. "No! This is not your food! I have too few spiritually-reactive exotics for you to treat them like your personal snacks!"

"Meow!"

His cat angrily turned around. Lucky still remembered the unique flavor of a P-stone!

Though Lucky eventually produced the Accumulation of Spirit gem that played an invaluable role in turning the Quint into a masterwork mech, Ves couldn't afford to sustain this consumption.

While he currently held seventeen P-stones, each of which contained a spiritual fragment or some of his spare spiritual energy, that might be all he had to work with for the foreseeable time!

The worst possibility that Ves had to take into account that he wouldn't be able to find any more spiritually-reactive exotics, especially if he traveled to a different star sector or galaxy! The current materials he managed to obtain might be exclusive to the Komodo Star Sector or the Nyxian Gap!

While Ves didn't believe that spiritually-reactive exotics only showed up in a single region, who knew what other letters he had to use to describe newer materials with different effects.

"Maybe I need to make another anonymous stop to the Circle of Mota." He muttered.

"I would advise against that, sir." Nitaa suddenly spoke up. It was rare for her to take the initiative to react to him! "The last time we visited the Circle of Mota in this star system, we encountered a suspect agent from the cult. You even speculated that the Circle might be one of its fronts."

That was right. The last time he visited its black market, they randomly encountered someone with the same kind of enhanced nose as his bodyguard!

He frowned. The most suitable way to avoid exposing his special nature to the Five Scrolls Compact was to send a surrogate to do his illicit shopping.

The problem was that no one else could do what he could do and detect the spiritual reactivity of the exotics for sale!

"Meow!"

As if he knew what he was thinking, Lucky returned to his side and attracted his attention.

"You? Hah! You'll probably buy the yummiest exotics for sale if I let you be in charge! No way!"

"Meow meow meow!"

Ves supposed his cat was right. Aside from him, Lucky should also be able to detect the exotics he wanted. If nothing else, his cat had already learned the distinctive properties of P-stones, F-stones and B-stones, so he should be able to pick out any of these three materials in any market!

"Hmmm.."

Maybe sending out a surrogate would work after all. As long as he sent someone trustworthy and take along Lucky in disguise, they might be able to shop at the most promising venue.

Of course, that was assuming the Circle of Mota still remained active in this star system. For all he knew they had already packed their bags and left the star system.

In fact, even finding them was an issue because he lacked someone like Lady Miralix of House Laterna to vouch for him and introduce him to one of the Circle's black markets!

That said, he still possessed the contact information for Finlay, but thinking about the mysterious noble contact instantly soured his mood.

"That bastard lied to me! My doom crawlers are only supposed to be used against pirates!"

He mistakenly thought that their low-gravity configuration prevented them to be used on standard planets in civilized space.

Evidently, he was wrong. The faction that stood behind Finlay probably harbored greater plans for the local region than throwing a couple of pirate organizations in chaos! Their conspiracy even encompassed the Sentinel Kingdom!

To Ves, these conspiracies were all child's play to him. No matter which group of nobles came out on top with their power plays, eventually the Fridaymen or Hexers would come and sweep their entire order!

"Their sights are set too low. They can't look beyond their local region!" He muttered.

What happened in the rest of the star sector affected the Sentinel Kingdom. What happened in the star cluster affected the star sector, and so on. From the moment the MTA announced the invasion of the Red Ocean, every single corner of human space shifted in a different direction!

"Let's go, Lucky. We're done here."

Later that day, he requested a meeting with Calabast. He first passed on his request to dispatch someone to shop for spiritually-reactive exotics with Lucky's help.

She looked dubiously at his pet.

Lucky was currently preoccupied with munching on some scrap that used to belong to a CRC mech. Ves had to placate his hungry cat in some way, and ordinary exotics didn't work!

"He's rather eye-catching, you know. It will be difficult to prevent people from associating him with you. After all, there are countless recordings and images of you and your distinctive-looking mechanical pet on the galactic net."

Ves smirked. "Don't underestimate Lucky's ability to hide. He's quite difficult to detect when he wants to hide! I bet he can even sneak up on you without alerting you! Who do you think is responsible for the theft at Kesseling VIII years ago?"

"That harebrained scheme of yours almost got you killed, remember?" Calabast scowled.

In the end, she acquiesced to his demand. She promised to find the Circle of Mota's marketplace and dispatch an operative paired with Lucky to scour it for spiritually-reactive exotics.

There were a couple of problems, though. Aside from lacking the contacts that could introduce them to the Circle of Mota, they were also short on the most essential resource of all, money!

"What's our budget?" She asked bluntly.

Ves winced. "Not that much. While I can give you more, it will be difficult to hide so much cash moving around. I also need to maintain a sufficient reserve to sustain my current fleet."

"I know." She said. "I've been supervising the Penitent Sisters on your behalf for a while. It's immediately obvious that they are proving to be a greater burden on your upkeep than all of your other assets put together. When are you going to solve the money problem?"

"I'm working on it! You don't have to hound me as if you are a mother trying to make me do my homework! If you have been keeping an eye on my activities, then you should know that my commercial striker mech design is weeks away from completion. If it's as promising as I think it is, the LMC will soon obtain another cash cow besides the Desolate Soldier! That should solve our immediate liquidity concerns."

The spy looked skeptical. "I don't know, Ves. While I don't know mechs as much as you, I understand the way societies and economies are run. Right now, the market for striker mechs isn't booming, especially spaceborn ones."

That was because the market for spaceborn striker mechs was highly correlated to major wars.

While the Komodo Star Sector was engulfed by the growing ripples of the Komodo War, that was mainly a struggle between two superior powers. The surrounding third-rate states had nothing to do with the fighting up to now! Aside from some rare incidents, the lesser states mostly stood aside and tried their best to catch as little attention as possible!

"I think that will change soon enough." Ves ominously predicted. "If hostilities ever break out between numerous third-rate states, the scale and frequency of battles will skyrocket! The demand for an area-denial mech that can hold off an entire group of mechs will become more relevant than ever! Besides, even if that's not the case, I think the inherent value of my next product is enough to turn it into a bestseller!"

Though Calabast still remained skeptical, it didn't matter. If demand for his product wasn't sufficient, then he planned to generate it! There was no way a mech as useful as his striker mech should remain obscure!

They eventually moved on to another topic.

"How are the Penitent Sisters?"

"Keeping them in line is tiring me out." Calabast glowered at Ves. "Sorting out their many issues is becoming increasingly more difficult. The Penitent Sisters aren't people who are content with sitting around and doing nothing. They expected to themselves at the Fridaymen, not rot away in the periphery of the star sector. You should really talk to Commander Chancy and come to some sort of according with the Sisters."

He looked confused. "Why didn't you do it yourself?"

"They have quite the grudge against normal Hexers like me." Calabast crossed her arms. "The Hegemony single-handedly crushed their cult and forced them to make unpalatable oaths. While I'm not exactly a representative of the Hegemony, to them I'm still an enemy."

"I'm a man, though. Shouldn't that even be a greater obstacle to gaining their cooperation."

"Not necessarily." Calabast shook her head. "While their original ideology did call for killing you and every other male in human space, they have already sworn to disavow it. While a lot of hatred still exist, the Sisters will never break their oaths to teach you a lesson. As long as they realize that there is no point in antagonizing you, I expect they'll cooperate. Just talk to them, Ves."

His expression turned flat. He didn't relish the idea of talking to the most extreme man-haters the Hegemony had ever produced! He had already met them once before and his impressions were anything but positive!

Chapter 2040 Led Astray

The striker mech project came one step closer to completion. After Ves and Gloriana temporarily halted their work on the Hexer mech project in order to hasten the progress of their commercial mech design, it finally reached the testing and iteration phase!

As usual, Ves left the fabrication and testing of the prototypes over to his design teams. He was already fairly confident that the testing shouldn't generate many surprises. The mech was a fairly simple third-class mech whose primary armament was a relatively low-tech flamethrower.

Perhaps some fiddly parameters might deviate such as the distribution of heat or the efficiency of the Enison Spreader, but those were minor issues that just needed some optimization to mitigate.

The smooth progress of this project made Ves appreciate the value of his design teams. While they didn't consist of brilliant mech designers like Gloriana and himself, their

competence was more than enough to design adequate mechs that had the potential to be a success on the market!

As long as someone better provided direction and lent their distinctive specialties to a mech design, most of the hard work could easily be performed by Apprentices who knew what they were doing!

He looked forward to expanding the LMC's Design Department. Once he had double or triple the amount of design teams, his productivity would doubtlessly soar despite not putting more hours in his work!

Finishing his principal work in the primary design phase of the striker mech project gave Ves enough time to address some other priorities.

For example, Ves scheduled a visit to the flagship of the Penitent Sisters. Calabast was insistent that he should involve himself more thoroughly in their affairs!

This was why he was currently sitting in a shuttle that was ascending into orbit. The Penitent Sisters were parked in high orbit and well away from any other ships and space stations.

No one wanted to stray too close to these powerful madwomen!

Aside from Lucky and his bodyguards, Calabast was also present.

"I'm here to make sure you don't do anything that causes the Penitent Sisters to break their oaths and chop off your head."

Ves glared at his partner. "I'm not that bad!"

"Tell that to the Friday Coalition."

"It was their fault for kidnapping me and provoking me at every turn!"

"While the Penitent Sisters have been told to behave themselves, I'm not sure they can hold themselves in. You don't take well to provocations sometimes."

"I'm just a mech designer." Ves helplessly grumbled.

As they snarkily bantered, the shuttle soon reached the hangar bay of the most central vessel in the Penitent Sister fleet.

Aside from her name, the Surly Cockatrice looked impressive. She started off as a Hexer combat carrier built for mercenaries. After several decades of service, the mercenary corps in question put it on the second-hand market before the Temple of Hexism finally bought her to be used as the flagship of the Penitent Sisters.

As a punishment unit, the Penitent Sisters didn't get to have the best. That said, there was no point in giving them cheap third-rate trash either. The six-hundred mech pilots and thousands of support personnel were all highly-trained soldiers and professionals!

If not for their extreme ideology, they would have served as a powerful weapon for the Hegemony!

While the matriarchs in charge of the Hegemony liked to be in control, they were fairly practical when it came to efficiency. Wasting valuable resources was not in their habit. Otherwise, they wouldn't have allowed boys to pilot mechs and serve in the Hex Army, if only in a diminished capacity.

Eventually, they stepped out of the shuttle. The bodyguards accompanying them became a little more alert due to the obvious hostility their arrival attracted.

The mech technicians and mech pilots lingering in the hangar bay glared at Ves with such animosity that he would have already been killed if their eyes held power!

"What a cheerful greeting." Ves dryly remarked. "They haven't even prepared a greeting party for us. I can already tell I'll have a jolly time on this ship."

The interior of the Surly Cockatrice was typically Hexer. In this star sector, only the Hegemony built ships with hexagon-shaped corridors and objects.

In addition, it also became clear that the Temple of Hexism had a hand in renovating the combat carrier as there were several altars and religious iconography based on the orthodox interpretation of hexism.

All in all, the interior of the Surly Cockatrice looked as if Gloriana would feel right at home if not for one major flaw.

As Ves looked around, there was no way he could escape the ubiquitous ♂ symbol!

Not a single Penitent Sister could avoid this iconic male symbol unless they closed their eyes! While the symbol didn't flood the ship, it was damn near everywhere!

Calabast carefully observed Ves as he took in the extreme lengths the Temple of Hexism had gone to humiliate the Penitent Sisters!

"The Penitent Sisters used to serve in a martial order to a cult." She explained. "They are both soldiers and devout worshippers, and that makes for a very strong combination. Matters of pride, belief and conviction are very important to the Sisters. The Temple of Hexism knows this and deliberately shaped their punishment in a way that crushes their dignity."

"Is that why the women here are so angry all the time?" Ves asked while hugging Lucky.

He needed some comfort to shield him from the near-universal hostility on this Hexer ship!

"Even with the indignity of seeing the symbol of Mars on a daily basis, the Sisters still would have taken offence at your presence. While they have disavowed their extreme beliefs, old habits die hard."

Without anyone to greet them, they eventually decided to stride forward. They passed a number of old but very powerful second-class mechs.

Ves had already studied the models in detail in his free time. Most of the mechs consisted of last-gen castoffs that the Temple of Hexism probably snapped from the second-hand market with hardly any concern for coordination or logistical burdens. The sheer variety of models meant that the Penitent Sisters had to buy a lot of different materials and spare parts to keep their mechs running, and all of that cost money which Ves was responsible for paying!

He grimaced even further as he counted the sheer variety of mechs in this single hangar bay. If the Penitent Sisters used just six or less mech models throughout their entire mech roster, then Ves would probably be able to slash their annual upkeep by half!

"What are you thinking about?" Calabast asked.

"I'm thinking that I need to push forward my plans to replace the mechs of the Penitent Sisters with my own design as soon as possible. I think I'll design the mechs with an eye towards uniformity and ease of maintenance. While I'm grateful to have the power of the Penitent Sisters at my disposal, I'm less enthused about the burden to my bank accounts."

The spy smirked. "Power doesn't come cheap. I'm glad you realize this lesson, kid."

"Couldn't you ask DIVA or the Hegemony to take the burden of their upkeep off my hands?" Ves whined. "The cost of maintaining the Penitent Sisters is probably a drop in the bucket for the likes of them! Why do I need to pay for all of this stuff?!"

"You're asking for too much. You're already lucky you get to enjoy the services of the Penitent Sisters in the first place. You need to show that you deserve this privilege. If you can't even pay their bills, then you're too useless!"

"Don't Hexers believe all boys are useless?"

Calabast glanced at Ves with a dour expression. "Your stereotyping Hexers too much. We are not caricatures, Ves. We still recognize the complexity of life and reality."

He doubted that statement, but there was no need to poke Calabast further.

They briefly halted when they neared a group of Penitent Sisters kneeling devotedly to a six-sided altar installed in an alcove built in the bulkheads. The altar rotated slowly along its axis in order to give the Sisters an opportunity to worship all six phases of existence in a single prayer session.

"While the Sisters deviated from orthodoxy, they are still devoted to hexism." Calabast whispered. "From their youth, they lived a life of training and religious worship. They didn't get to enjoy a normal life like regular Hexers. Their entire lives are centered around their professions and their beliefs."

This pattern reminded Ves of the Kronons of the Ylvaine Dynasty. Their elites too eschewed mundane pleasures in order to increase their dedication to their service.

Ves found it rather distasteful. Duty and devotion both compliment each other, but demanded a lot of sacrifices. Holy Warriors completely dedicated themselves to their faith, leaving precious little room to live a well-rounded life.

That was something that the original Larkinson Family always eschewed. They put a lot of emphasis on living a balanced life and starting your own families. While devotion was a good way to resist the cruelty and horror of war, the Larkinsons believed it was better to rely on the joys of life!

Ves inspected the kneeling Sisters carefully. They didn't stir or interrupt their prayer session in order to scowl at Ves. Their sincerity and devotion was so apparent that he didn't even need to employ his spiritual senses to glean more clues!

"Their faith is strong." Calabast whispered. "It is unfortunate their cult leaders led them astray. They could have become well-meaning Hexers, but..."

"Now your state pretty much treats them like damaged goods." Ves concluded.

"Yes." She didn't shy away from the truth. "Do you know what the cult they belonged to used to do to boys?"

"I take it I won't like the answer."

"I'll spare you most of the gruesome details, but you shouldn't think that the Penitent Sisters are innocent either. Their cult leaders came up with many rituals to reinforce the evils of boys. They used to sacrifice their lives in order to bathe altars like this in their blood!"

"What?!"

Ves was so startled that he disturbed quite a few Sisters from their prayers. Their fury was hot enough to scorn him if they held any power, but too bad they were under strict orders to do nothing towards their new 'master'!

"It's only the priests and cult leaders who engaged in these sordid crimes." Calabast pulled him away. "The Penitent Sisters are largely followers. It is not completely their fault they came to believe in a warped interpretation of hexism. If you lead them well enough, they can become something more than damaged goods to us. This is why it's important for you to visit the Sisters and show that you care."

He coughed. "It's hard to care about the fate about those who like to murder innocent boys."

While he didn't know why Calabast wanted him to value these Sisters, he stuck by his decision to make his own judgement.

So far, Ves didn't see anything that was particularly to his liking. To him, the Sisters were only useful as a stopgap until the Larkinson Clan transitioned into a proper second-class entity.

Once the Avatars and Sentinels fully transitioned their mech rosters to higher-classed machines, the Larkinson Clan no longer required the protection of the Sisters.

If they were still around, Ves would find some way to make them extinct. There was no need for him to entertain the presence of dangerous, supposedly-reformed cultists!

"Mr. Larkinson." An acid female tone sounded from the other side of the corridor.

"Miss Juliet Stameross." Ves greeted back with an impassive face. "Where is Commander Chancy?"

The young-ish head designer of the Penitent Sisters shook her head. "She's indisposed. I've been sent to accompany you in her stead. I hope you can understand our difficulties."

Calabast snorted. "Commander Chancy is provoking you, Ves. Show the Sisters who's in charge. Whatever the Penitent Commander is doing shouldn't be as important as meeting their new master!"

Ves raised his hand to stop Calabast's grandstanding. "Enough of that. These power plays are stupid and immature. I won't forget Commander Chancy's slight, but I won't bother with making a fuss out of something so unimportant either. I prefer to talk to mech designers anyway. At least we can speak the same language."

"You are no kin of mine, boy." Juliet hissed.

What a pleasant mech designer.