

Mech 2041

Chapter 2041 Juliet Stameross

Before meeting Juliet Stameross, Calabast tried her best to shape his views on the Penitent Sisters.

According to her, the Penitent Sisters were victims and deluded sheep. The true masterminds responsible for committing all of the atrocities were the evil cult leaders who originally devised the doctrine that the phase of damnation represented boys!

Those at the bottom only did as they were told and learned everything the cult passed on. The insular, restrictive upbringing of the Penitent Sisters prevented them from learning any alternative interpretations. Critical thinking was something completely alien to these devoted worshippers!

Ves was well aware of what Calabast tried to do. He didn't buy into her story. Not completely.

At the very least, he refused to equate the Penitent Sisters as victims. Even if it was true that they were deluded and led astray, their continued anger and resentment at his existence made it clear they hadn't really forgotten about their original beliefs!

The hostility oozing from Juliet contained none of the mutual respect that mech designers harbored towards their own kind.

In fact, Juliet should be regarding a young and accomplished Journeyman like Ves with admiration or at least some jealousy!

Yet all Ves sensed from Juliet was a complete disregard of his rank. It was as if his status as a boy was so egregiously awful that it overshadowed everything else about him! In the eyes of a Penitent Sister like her, boys were all the same!

Though Ves felt offended by her lack of respect, a part of him took it as a challenge.

He didn't really care about the rest of the Penitent Sisters, but he couldn't stand the thought of a fellow colleague of his looking down on him despite her inferior qualifications!

The mech industry abided by its own rules! As a fellow professional, Juliet Stameross should have shown more respect to the hierarchy of mech designers!

"Juliet, since you are here, could you please show us around?"

"Very well, sir." Juliet squeezed out of her angry lips. "I'm not a ship officer, so I won't be able to show you around the bridge or the engineering bay. I know my mechs fairly well, though."

"That's fine. I'm not that interested in the ship either." Ves lied. "Please show me the mech workshop first."

They strode towards the mech workshop compartment where all of the more intensive repairs and servicing took place.

When they entered it, Ves immediately noticed that the compartment in question was several times bigger than that of the Scarlet Rose. That made sense as the Surly Cockatrice was a lot larger in order to accommodate forty mechs at a time.

Several crews of female mech technicians crawled all over the partially-disassembled mechs in order to perform some preventative maintenance.

"We're well aware that our mechs are rather old and worn." Juliet explained in a perfunctory tone. "Instead of waiting for the mechs to break down or malfunction in the middle of the battle, we prefer to nip as many problems as possible in the bud. We've been replacing and repairing parts before they reached their limits."

"That is a prudent decision."

"Anything to give my Sisters a chance to survive."

As the head designer of the Penitent Sisters, Juliet must have pushed this decision.

On the surface, Ves recognized that preventative maintenance was the best way to extend the longevity of the mechs of the Penitent Sisters.

Since they were forced to leave the Hegemony, the Sisters didn't have any way of procuring new second-class mechs on their own. They had to depend on either Ves or themselves to keep up their fighting strength.

"The mechs may not seem like much, and their performance isn't on par with the modern new-generation mechs that have rolled out in Hegemony space." Juliet elaborated as they observed the work on the second-class mechs. "Yet they are honest mechs designed by great Hexer mech designers. The machines have served the Hexers before us well, and it falls to us to honor these machines and treat them with the reverence they deserve."

While Ves was very pleased to hear that Juliet and the rest of the Sisters valued their mechs despite their relative age and condition, he was not as pleased with their reasoning.

Her condescending tone directly rubbed the supposed superiority of female mech designers in his face. It was as if there was no doubt that anything proper female Hexer mech designers came up with was leagues better than his own mech designs!

"Meow."

"Yeah, I don't like it either, Lucky." He whispered to his cat.

Though none of the Hexers glared at the mechanical cat that accompanied his owner, Lucky was a boy as well! Even he started to hate the open discrimination exhibited by the Penitent Sisters!

At least with Gloriana, her expression of female supremacy was relatively tame and well-meaning. She had also become more adopt at accommodating him by refraining from

The tour continued. Ves learned a lot how a second-class combat carrier like the Surly Cockatrice serviced her mechs. The tools and capabilities the mech technicians had at their disposal were very impressive, but so were the mechs. Their complexity and difficult construction made it very challenging to keep them in good condition!

The Hexer mech technicians were leagues above the mech technicians that Ves was used to working with. The impressive sight before him reminded Ves that he shouldn't be putting all of his attention on upgrading the mechs and mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan.

The infrastructure around them needed to keep up as well! Third-class mech workshops and third-class mech technicians weren't sufficient in keeping the advanced mechs in adequate condition.

Ves had already heard that the Avatars already started to experience a lot of strain in their attempts to service the new Bright Warriors. This mech model was only a bridge mech, so the problem would definitely become a lot more severe in the future once Ves designed more second-class mechs!

They exited the mech workshop and visited the stables where a lot of mechs were safely stashed. Protective braces and other measures ensured the heavy machines wouldn't tumble down the long hall and squash numerous Penitent Sisters flat if the Surly Cockatrice suffered a heavy attack.

Though Ves had been paying quite a bit of attention to the state of every individual mech, he was more interested in the people around them. He observed and recorded the behavior of every single Penitent Sister he came across.

Whether he would do something with all of these recordings was another thing, but at least he had some materials stored in the vast storage space of his implant.

Currently, Ves paid the most attention to Juliet Stameross. He didn't hide his interest in her, and that made her even more resentful. She hated being stared at by a boy! She probably wished nothing more than to poke his eyes for sullyng her in this manner!

There was a very good reason why Ves maintained his interest in her. While he wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do with the Penitent Sisters, if he ever wanted to convert them, he had to find an opening.

Right now, earning Juliet's seemed like his best bet. Ves always believed he understood other mech designers the best.

"So, Juliet. You've shown me around and described all of the Penitent Sister's mechs to me. You haven't told me anything about yourself, though."

"What do you want to know, sir?" She growled.

"For a start, where did you study?"

"I was.. homeschooled."

"Did a high-ranking mech designer tutor you until you reached the standard of Novice?"

She shook her head. "My teachers arranged me to study at the Artemis Institute. While I disliked my stay there, I learned about mech design. I successfully graduated from Artemis and returned to my comrades right afterwards."

"She disguised her true beliefs while she blended in with the student body of Artemis." Calabast enlightened Ves.

"I see."

This meant that while she was still a cultist, she at least enjoyed some of the best orthodox mech design education of the Hegemony!

The Artemis Institute ranked close to the top of mech design schools of the Evern Matriarchal Dynasty. The Hexers even respected it more than Hippolyta War College!

His respect for Juliet increased, which was rather strange considering that she still absolutely hated his guts.

Regardless of her views, Ves still respected mech designers who loved their profession and worked hard to make great achievements.

It was too bad that Juliet didn't possess any notable spiritual potential as far as he could tell. According to her profile, she was 35 years old, which meant that the chance of waking her spiritual potential became increasingly smaller.

While Ves hadn't researched a lot about this topic, in his opinion, a person's best chance of developing spiritual potential was in their younger years. As long as someone was younger than twenty-five or thirty years old, they always had a chance of opening up their spiritual opportunities!

That didn't color his views on Juliet. A mech designer was a mech designer, and each one dedicated their lives and pursuit towards developing better mechs!

As he continued to quiz Juliet's history and background, he learned there wasn't much else to the woman. Whenever she didn't work, she prayed. Whenever she worked, she prayed regardless, but in a way that didn't hinder her responsibilities.

"My faith is my life." She stated to Ves. "Women are superior and that needs to be acknowledged. We should have been the foremost proponents of women in the Hegemony!"

"Err... okay."

Ves wanted to impress her with his design prowess, but he couldn't figure out any means at the moment. Her bias against boys like him was so strong that he needed to shock her right away!

Any other means he managed to come up with didn't sound impressive enough to change her views on him. That said, he did come up with one idea that might transform her views on him, but it would take some time to enact that plan.

Until then, Ves had to bide his time and do his best to prevent his relations with the Penitent Sisters from worsening.

"I've been wondering." Ves spoke. "What is it you Penitent Sisters are working towards? I get it that your situation is rather awful, but what keeps you going? What are your goals?"

The other mech designer paused and fell silent. Since Juliet refused to talk, Calabast felt the need to answer in her stead.

"The Penitent Sisters want to be proven right."

Ves frowned. "That's impossible."

"I know." Calabast crossed her arms. "They can never have what they want, so I suppose they will have to make do with less. From my analysis, the Penitent Sisters seek acknowledgement and redemption. Though they hate the Hexadric Hegemony, they still consider themselves to be loyal Hexers at heart. It hurt them very badly when our state turned against them and told them that their beliefs were wrong. While they resent this treatment, they still want to regain their honor."

"I see. They're still redeemable, then." Ves concluded.

"As you have already seen, it won't be easy. The Penitent Sisters are strong and proud despite the restrictions foisted upon them. They will never be truly yours so long as they remain the same."

"We only follow your orders because we have to, boy." Juliet hissed, thereby affirming Calabast's statement.

Hexers always gave him a headache. Ves had enough of the Penitent Sisters for one day. He had seen enough to expand his judgement and form some ideas on how to engage them. Yet before he could do so, he needed to make some preparations.

One way or another, the Penitent Sisters would kneel in front him! He could never tolerate an uncontrolled force in his midst!

During the shuttle ride back to the surface of Cinach VI, Ves continued to immerse himself in his delusions.

Calabast observed him with an incredulous expression. She turned to Lucky who was floating in the air.

"Is Ves always like this?"

"Meow!"

Chapter 2042 Old Comrades

A few days after his visit to the Surly Cockatrice, Ves received a very unexpected surprise.

A new group of Brighters arrived in the Cinach System. This time, they consisted of some very familiar comrades!

As soon as Ves heard the news, he immediately rearranged his schedule so that he would be ready to greet the new arrivals when they reached Cinach VI.

Soon enough, three war-scarred combat carriers and a small number of logistical ships arrived in orbit.

Ves re-read their names and studied their appearances as if to confirm they matched the ones in his past!

The Princely Jackal. The Shield of Hispania. The Gorgon's Gaze. All three of them were very familiar to Ves. He even spent a lot of time on one of them during his time in the Mech Corps!

The three vessels didn't immediately descend on the surface. Instead, the Princely Jackal dispatched just a single shuttle and a modest escort of mechs towards the temporary base of the Larkinson Clan.

After some time, the shuttle alongside some familiar looking mechs emerged at the landing zone designated for their arrival.

"So they still make use of Inheritors and Hellcats." Ves muttered as his eyes clouded with nostalgia.

The Inheritor light skirmisher mech was the mainstay of the Flagrant Vandals. It was cheap, disposable but formidable in its own right. Ves still admired its design even as he criticized its lack of investment.

The Hellcat hybrid knight was a much more impressive spaceborn mech. Though it exhibited a lot of strain as it got closer to the gravity well of the planet, it was still a relatively powerful mech. One of the machines cost at least ten times as much as an Inheritor!

Both mechs hadn't been updated in years, which clued Ves in that the Flagrant Vandals never found a replacement for Professor Velten. The sole Senior who kept the mech regiment's exclusive mech designs up to date had already passed on, with no one left to continue her legacy.

Ves quietly mourned her passing as the shuttle finally touched the ground.

Before the shuttle doors even opened up, one of the Hellcats showed some activity first! Its mech pilot practically hopped out of the cockpit and used a rappel to descend to the ground as fast as possible!

"Ves! Nice to see you again!"

"Captain Orfan."

Rosa Orfan looked a bit haunted, but tried to put up a cheerful front. The Flagrant Vandals obviously hadn't left the Bright Republic under their own accord. As a former soldier of the Mech Corps, such a decision obviously troubled her at night.

With strong, exuberant steps, the mech captain rushed up to Ves, ignored his bodyguards, and swept him in a hug!

"Hahaha, I missed having you around all day! You were by far the most interesting mech designers to serve with the Vandals for a very long time!"

Ves didn't recall her being so friendly towards him. Perhaps the long time of separation caused her to color her memories of him. In any case, he could clearly sense that she was an expert candidate of notable strength, so he tried his best to play along!

"I'm glad to see you alive and well after that mess at Bentheim. Did you..."

Her face dropped. "The 'Battle of Bentheim' as everyone called it was a disaster from beginning to end. No one knew what the sandmen were truly like. It was like they suckered us in the biggest trap of their making. Even the MTA couldn't stop the sand storm."

Neither of them liked to spoil the mood, so they quickly turned to another topic.

"How is your progression?" Ves curiously asked. "The way you advanced to expert candidate was very unusual. Commander Dise, who experienced the same bonding ceremony with Qilanxo as you, has been stuck in a bottleneck for a while."

"I know." She said. "I kept in touch with her. I'm in a similar position as her. If I ever manage to find a way to get over the hurdle, she'll be quick to follow suit!"

In his spiritual vision, Ves observed a similar conflict between her aggressive tendencies and her imparted spiritual strength.

When Dise and Orfan both became the chosen beast riders of Qilanxo, they developed a symbiotic bond with each other. Of course, due to the disparity in strength between the sacred god and the human mech pilots, this bond was far from perfect.

Before they could speak any further, Commander Dise just arrived!

She immediately locked stares with the former officer of the Mech Corps. Despite their radically different backgrounds, there was only kinship in their expressions!

"We are finally reunited with each other." Dise spoke.

"Yeah." Orfan said. "Now that we're back together, I don't regret leaving the Bright Republic as much."

The pair merrily walked away in order to celebrate their reunion elsewhere.

As for the shuttle, another familiar face finally showed up. Still wearing his uniform, Major Verle calmly stepped up to Ves with a smile.

"Thank you for accepting us, Mr. Larkinson. We weren't sure whether you were willing to host a bunch of deserters like us. We went through a lot of twists and turns until we reached this star system."

Ves smiled back and shook the other man's hand. "It is no issue. You took care of me while I was serving with the Vandals. Now it's my turn to shelter you and the Vandals. Let's head inside where we can talk."

They exchanged some light stories as they slowly walked to one of the office buildings. After entering a small conference room, Major Verle sat down opposite to Ves and laid down the score.

"There are many reasons for our decisions to depart the Bright Republic." He began. "First, the Bright Republic's future is very much in doubt. While the Friday Coalition forced the Ylvaine Protectorate and the Vesia Kingdom to subsidize its reconstruction, their influence is already being felt. Even if they didn't find some excuse to break up and annex the territories of our Republic, they would have certainly become the de-facto rulers of the occupied regions!"

"That's not necessarily a reason to leave, major. The mission of the Mech Corps has always been to protect the state and its citizens. Perhaps you can't perform the former, but you can still perform the latter."

Major Verle sighed and shook his head. "Our Vandals are pariahs under the new order. The infamy we garnered during the previous Bright-Vesia War and our inconvenient association with another pariah like you has made us the target of a lot of retaliation. Both the Protectorate and the Kingdom have a bone to pick with us, Ves. On top of that, our secret affiliation with Flashlight has also become a liability?"

"How so?"

"Unlike Spotlight, Flashlight has always been on the side of you and the Tovars. We didn't join the manhunt on your relatives. In fact, we hindered and obstructed Spotlight and the other pursuers as best as possible. This has landed Flashlight in hot waters in the post-Sand War reality. The current administration of the Bright Republic doesn't appreciate Flashlight at all! There is even talk of abolishing the spy agency!"

"Ah. I see now why you are so eager to leave."

Major Verle used to be part of the Firestarters, which was a division under Flashlight. He would be the first person to get in trouble due to the hats he wore!

"Both Flashlight and the Vandals have already left the Bright Republic in droves. We understand our home state better than others and we realize that its future as an independent state has likely come to an end. Certain pro-Fridayman factions have come into power and they are very eager to enact punitive measures against those who oppose their views. For this reason, we Vandals have quickly decided to pick up our families and definitely depart the Republic."

Obviously, they didn't receive permission for all of their actions. The Vandals didn't only desert, but also stole valuable assets of the Mech Corps in the process! The three combat carriers they currently owned didn't come cheap!

"The number of Vandals that arrived in this star system is a lot less than I expected." Ves noted. "From what I recall, your mech regiment used to be a lot larger."

"We lost most of our strength during the disaster at Bentheim." Verle ruefully smiled. "Of the survivors, a part of our group decided to seek shelter from you, while another portion split off to build a new life elsewhere. That's why we're only left with three intact combat carriers. At least look on the bright side. All of us who stuck around up until now are pretty enthusiastic about working under you! Many of our fellow Vandals still remember all you have done for us! Each of us are already convinced of your leadership."

Though Ves understood that the moods and loyalties of the Vandals were probably a lot more complex than the mech major described, he still believed in his statement.

It was rather strange to meet Major Verle in the capacity of someone who stood above him rather than the other way around.

In the past, Ves always looked up to the seasoned mech officer. In fact, he purposefully copied some of Verle's leadership style and made it his own! The intangible debt he owed to his former superior was considerable!

Yet the unexpected arrival of the Flagrant Vandals also inconvenienced him a lot. Ves already took in an abundant amount of stray groups. He really didn't know whether it was a good idea to accommodate one more, particularly one that already possessed their own strong identity!

Ves looked at Verle and decided to lay out his concerns in the open. The mech major deserved to hear the full score.

"Our Larkinson Clan is pretty full, in a sense. While I would be glad to welcome you into our ranks, friendship and past camaraderie alone is not enough. If you want us to take in your Vandals, then you will need to make a number of concessions."

Verle nodded in understanding. "We don't expect you to take us in out of charity. The ones who are left with us are more receptive to accommodations than others."

"I'm glad you understand." Ves smiled. "Let me list out my basic demands. First, while I'm willing to give your Vandals a blanket invitation to join the clan, they will still need to go through some inspections. I don't want any spies or troublemakers to disrupt our harmony."

"How strict are the inspections?"

"They're not as bad as the ones we employ to the public. Don't worry about it. As long as they are earnest and willing to play by the new rules, our clan will find a place for your boys."

"That's great."

"Don't forget that I expect their loyalty to the clan to be permanent and unquestionable. I don't want to hear any of the talk I used to hear from the Vandals when I was serving with them. Do you understand?"

"That's a given." Verle quickly responded. "I'll make sure the Vandals understand that they're in it for life if they accept this opportunity."

Ves moved on to his third and most controversial point. "Third.. I'm not sure whether it is wise to keep the identity of the Flagrant Vandals. As much as I value your martial tradition, we already have the Battle Criers that fulfills a similar role to yours. Will your Vandals be willing to let the Battle Criers subsume your Vandals?"

To his credit, Major Verle didn't shout his objection to this proposal. Yet the discoloration in his face made it very clear that he deeply disliked it! Letting the Battle Criers absorb the Flagrant Vandals would mean the death knell of all of its heritage and martial tradition! The Vandals would no longer exist except in record and footage!

To the proud Vandals who always took pride in their distinctive identities, this was a deeply unacceptable move! At least half of the Vandals would outright leave if Ves voiced his intentions!

"Are you testing us, Ves?"

He smiled back. "You're a smart person, Major Verle. I've seen you in action enough times to know that you are partially putting on an act. Just because we used to fight alongside each other doesn't mean I am willing to neglect my responsibilities to my clan!"

If the Vandals thought they could take advantage of him and the clan, they were sadly mistaken! He was not about to let Major Verle employ his social manipulation on him and gain passage to the Larkinson Clan for free!

Chapter 2043 Inglorious Bastards

Ves spent a lot of time under Major Verle. The mech officer wore the hat of both the Mech Corps and Flashlight.

Someone who was part of both the military and a notoriously ruthless intelligence agency should not be treated as someone average!

As one of the leadership examples that Ves always looked up to, Major Verle was someone who was very adept at social manipulation. The man was a maestro at using words to sway people into doing what he wanted.

Though he didn't acquire a fancy nickname for it, Ves always considered Major Verle to be the true Devil Tongue!

Unlike Ves who employed spiritual manipulation to augment his social manipulation, Major Verle didn't depend on this advantage!

The Brighter mech officer was highly capable of establishing his authority through mortal means alone!

This advantage alone meant that Major Verle was a very highly-prized asset.

One of his persistent concerns about running the Larkinson Clan was the overall leadership deficit at the top. People like Melkor Larkinson and Magdalena Larkinson possessed a lot of mid-level leadership experience, but there were scant few clansmen who could truly command a force of thousands of mechs!

With someone as experienced, capable and tested as Major Verle at the top, Ves could feel relieved his mech forces weren't mismanaged.

The fact that he wasn't a trueborn Larkinson would also insert some much-needed diversity and differences in perspectives at the command level. So far, the senior leadership of the clan was still vastly slanted towards the trueborn.

Was this bad? Not necessarily. At least Ves and his bloodline still remained in firm control over the clan. Yet the lack of different backgrounds meant that many of the biases held by the Larkinsons would go unchecked. Too much harmony wasn't always a boon!

Yet there was more to Major Verle than met the eye. He also held a position in the Firestarters, a secret action group of Flashlight. While Ves wasn't sure what kind of role Verle played, he was far more similar to Calabast than he appeared on the surface!

Ves never liked spooks. They were duplicitous, treacherous and dishonorable. It was fine if he was the one that hoodwinked others, but it was far from ideal if he was on the receiving end of this behavior!

Right now, just because he and Major Verle were war buddies didn't mean that they were on the same side!

Both of them had cut their ties to the Bright Republic. Both of them became independent. For all intents and purposes, there was no intrinsic reason that the Larkinson Clan and the Flagrant Vandals should move together.

Everything depended upon the negotiations that took place at this very moment. Ves couldn't afford to go too soft on Major Verle just because he considered the other man a friend!

Ves crossed his arms while Lucky hovered nearby while stared curiously at Major Verle.

"Major, please understand my position. As the leader of the Larkinson Clan, I have a duty to be very careful about the people I bring into our midst. Do you know how many citizens of the Sentinel Kingdom have been knocking on my doors these days? Some of them even possess similar backgrounds to yours, but our clan has rejected their entry. Do you know why?"

"They're not trustworthy enough?" Verle guessed.

"That is one of the reasons. Another important reason is that the rejected applicants don't bring enough value to the table. Your Vandals.. if you came as a complete mech regiment, then we would be having a completely different conversation. As it is.. How many mechs do you have? 120?"

"A bit more than that." Major Verle responded. "The Princely Jackal can hold more than a standard mech company. Our combat carriers may not be the most cutting-edge vessels of the Mech Corps, but they are all capable of dropping into hazardous war zones. Our military pedigree is also something that shouldn't be discounted. Our tactics, discipline and use of formation is not something that regular mercenary corps can match!"

"All of that is true, but my Avatars come pretty close. Don't forget that much of my relatives are veterans. They have passed on all of their training and know-how to the mech forces of my clan. Even if we can't match the qualities of a professional military unit, we can still come close!"

Besides, with mechs like the Bright Warrior and other upcoming machines, the comprehensive battle power of his Avatars and other mech troops would undergo a complete transformation in the future!

The two continued to trade various remarks. Ves constantly tried to press down the worth of the Flagrant Vandals and made it clear that it was not a unique and indispensable asset.

For his part, Major Verle did his best to parry the attacks on his boys and emphasize the benefits that the Vandals could bring to the clan.

Eventually, they ran out of arguments. Rather than circle around and repeat the same points, Ves cut to the chase.

"My point stands, major. I already have a well-rounded force composition. The Avatars of Myth is my elite mech troop. The Living Sentinels is good for general-purpose combat. My Battle Criers can perform many of the same errands as your Vandals. If discretion is paramount, then I can turn to the Black Cats and the Swordmaidens. Let me ask you again. What reason do I have to invite your Flagrant Vandals into the Larkinson Clan as a package deal?"

After all of the arguments that Ves had made, there shouldn't be any. Major Verle looked vexed. He probably never expected Ves to be too strict with regards to their requests to join.

It wasn't as if Ves enjoyed it either. The Larkinson Clan was growing bigger every day, so as clan patriarch he had to become a lot more selective about the people he added to the ranks.

Major Verle sighed. "We have an expert candidate. Captain Orfan may be rough around the edges, but she is a true warrior. She also gets along very well with Commander Dise of your Swordmaidens. Aside from that, our boys are true Brighters, which is something that your Larkinson Clan is sorely lacking."

As an intelligence operative, Verle's intelligence was on point. He did his homework, at least.

"All of that is true." Ves responded. "That makes them worthy of individual recruitment. Yet that is not enough for me to retain your Vandals as a single organizational entity. While I admire the spunk of your former mech regiment, there are plenty of customs that I would rather do away with. When it comes down to it, your Vandals are partially feral."

"That is mostly due to the neglect and ill treatment that we have received from high command. As long as your clan understands our needs and treats us with respect, I'm sure my boys can be relied upon."

"That's not enough."

A brief pause ensued after Ves made that declaration. He patiently waited for Major Verle to finish his internal deliberations.

Whether Verle was putting up an act to give Ves the illusion that he was in control, it didn't matter.

Only one person in the conference room held all the cards, and it wasn't the visitor!

Having sparred with the likes of Calabast and the Living Prophet, Ves no longer dared to underestimate socially-adept individuals. The barriers that he put up shouldn't stump Major Verle.

The major eventually made an impactful decision.

"I have one more reason that might persuade you otherwise." The Brighter mech officer said with a disarming smile. "Do you remember the Aeon Corona Mission?"

What kind of question was that? He thought back on this long and harrowing adventure every day!

"I do." Ves mildly responded. "It's difficult to forget how many times I've brushed past death during a mission I never signed up for. I'm still peeved that we lost all of those Vandals and Swordmaidens just so that Senator Tovar can live an extra hundred years."

"That's the plight of small fellows like us. We were merely pawns of the state back then." Major Verle shrugged. "Fortunately, it's different now. Our Vandals, what is left of us, are no longer an arm of the state. You on the other hand are well on your way to become your own power!"

"While I enjoy the flattery, I'm not here to reminiscence about old times. My time is very valuable, so please get to the point."

"Very well, Ves. It's like this. While Captain Orfan and the few Vandals that have managed to enter the Starlight Megalodon haven't managed to accomplish much, they did manage to raid the vault of the battleship in the end. Despite the losses that we have suffered, the mission was deemed a success."

"I know that. Senator Tovar wouldn't have been ecstatic if we came back empty handed. He even made sure to award me with a bunch of shiny medals."

Major Verle looked around the conference room and noted Nitaa's quiet presence. "What I am about to tell you next needs to be told in absolute privacy."

"Nitaa can be trusted with everything you say." Ves quickly responded, affirming his trust in her discretion.

Her recent adoption in the clan made him even more reassured of her loyalty!

The room wasn't entirely secure, but that was easily solved. He activated his jamming device, enveloping them in an interference field that should be capable of blocking nearly every form of surveillance.

"It's safe to talk now."

Major Verle was very familiar with jamming devices. He felt the strength of Ves' self-built jamming device and was satisfied with its efficacy.

"Alright." The older man took a deep breath. "When we retrieved a container bearing the precious high-grade life-prolonging serum from the Starlight Megalodon, we didn't hand all of its contents over to the government. In truth.. we held one dose to ourselves."

A very profound silence ensued after Major Verle made his shocking declaration! Ves couldn't help but widen his eyes at his former superior!

"You.. absolute madmen.. you inglorious bastards! Do you know the value of what you claim to hold?! You can buy an entire star system in the Sentinel Kingdom with what you have! An entire line of decrepit old geezers will form in front of you as soon as you put up the serum for sale!"

The amount of leverage the Vandals held was a thousand times more value than Ves expected!

At most, he thought that Major Verle would boast about his connections to the remnants of Flashlight, or show off his access to some secret black ops bank accounts.

Never in his imagination did Ves expect that the Flagrant Vandals actually withheld an incredibly valuable dose that was capable of extending the life of someone who already extended their lives beforehand!

In fact, Major Verle took an enormous risk by revealing this explosive news to someone else. If Ves was unscrupulous enough, he could order the Penitent Sisters to storm the Vandals and take over their ships in order to search for the serum!

While Ves felt tempted to enact this plan, he quickly set this notion aside. Major Verle wasn't stupid enough to leave something so valuable within reach. He probably had some means to destroy the serum if Ves tried to steal it or simply stashed it in another star system.

"What are your terms?" Ves asked plainly after he regained his composure.

"We won't ask for much." Major Verle replied in a disarming tone. "My priorities remain the same. We want nothing more than to retain the existence of the Flagrant Vandals and be treated with respect. We don't require any pampering or favored treatment. Simply treating us fairly like you do with any other clansmen is sufficient to keep us happy."

That.. sounded remarkably mild for someone who held the key to longevity! Major Verle was massively undercutting his demands, and that immediately aroused Ves' suspicions!

Nothing came for free! The greater the value, the greater the price! That was always an adage that Ves abided by! There was no way that Major Verle was ignorant enough to give out something so valuable without a commensurate reward in return!

"I'm not as gullible as I used to be." Ves stated with a serious expression. "What's the catch?"

Major Verle smiled and crossed his arms. He successfully regained the initiative in this negotiation!

Chapter 2044 Two Great Minds

Everything that happened before was just a precursor for this moment. Now that Major Verle finally revealed his trump card, it was his turn to set the tone for this conversation!

Ves expected the major to list out a host of demands.

Yet despite holding the upper hand in this negotiation, Verle refused to press his advantage!

"I'm being serious." He spoke with a confident smile that belied his soft approach. "We don't want special treatment. As long as our unit can continue to maintain our martial tradition under the banner of your clan, we will be willing to serve as both Larkinsons and Vandals!"

"That.. is not what I expected." Ves muttered with amazement. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Is there something.. wrong.. with the life-prolonging serum you claim to have retained?"

"It's safe." Major Verle quickly clarified. "Only a handful of people from my inner circle are even aware of its existence. They have all kept their mouths shut as far as I can tell. Even if they have leaked the news, hardly anyone would believe it. Just to be sure, our fleet doesn't carry the serum. I made sure to stash it somewhere very secret and very secure."

Ves frowned deeper. "Just to be clear, are you actually offering the serum to me? As much as I acknowledge its worth, it's pointless for me to take it into consideration if it doesn't fall into my hands."

Certainly, he really wanted to obtain the serum. Seeing how even the oldest and wisest power players went crazy as soon as they believed they had a chance of obtaining it, Ves would be a fool to push it away!

While he was still at a very tender age, at some point he would grow old enough that his remaining lifespan became a very important concern.

Though Ves had some confidence that he'd be able to earn the merits to redeem a high-grade serum through his own efforts, he still needed to spend decades or longer in order to obtain it! If he could get one early, he would be able to make much better use of his time!

Major Verle should know that as well, so it was a mystery why he didn't play hardball.

The man seemed to enjoy the confusion he generated. His smirk grew wider.

"You have just explained your situation. Let me explain mine so that you can understand why I have decided to stick to my demands. First, it is not so simple to sell or auction the serum. Do you think we'd be able to keep our gains if we submit it to an auction or approach a black market organization?"

Of course not! Even Ves could see how those parties would instantly turn on the Vandals and steal the serum at any cost! It was simply too valuable to be left in the hands of a bunch of deserters!

"You can still leverage its value if you approach the right people such as myself." Ves retorted.

"That's true. I trust you to treat us fairly, and so far you have met my expectations. It is exactly because I trust you that I have modulated our demands with an eye towards long-term gains as opposed to more immediate benefits."

"You'll have to explain that, major."

"It's quite simple. If I demand special treatment, our Vandals will always be different from the rest of your clan. The other Larkinsons will no doubt question why you treat us with so much favor. Over time, this can be very harmful towards our integration into your clan."

While that sounded plausible, it wasn't enough of a reason to forgo the riches that the Vandals could receive in exchange for handing in the serum.

"What else?"

"According to the profile we've constructed of you, we can state with a reasonable amount of confidence that your gratitude is countless times more valuable than an astronomical amount of credits or a whole host of top-grade mechs. No amount of material benefits we can ask is worth more than your enduring appreciation!"

That is a very honest and revealing assessment. Ordinarily, people would hold this back. Not Verle. He deliberately exposed this reasoning in order to come across as transparent.

Ves happened to be very appreciative towards people who were open and didn't try to hide things from him. Despite knowing that he was being manipulated, he still gained a more favorable impression of the mech officer and his Vandals.

"I.. think I understand."

The major was betting on his honesty and goodwill. As long as Ves accepted the serum at little cost, he would definitely think favorably of the Vandals for a very long time!

This gift was so profound that Ves would feel incredibly guilty if he didn't do enough to take care of the Vandals!

This essentially meant that Ves would always find ways to accommodate the Vandals in various ways while making sure they weren't being mistreated.

While the Vandals still needed to pull their own weight, at the very least Ves would always make sure to keep them content.

Still.. Ves wasn't very comfortable about this proposal. Something about it smelled rather fishy, and he never liked it when someone else held the upper hand in a negotiation.

Verle recognized his concerns and tried to allay them. "Let me be clear. We won't be asking for an early retirement or anything like that. Our Vandals would just turn into useless leeches if we lose our edge. We will fight when necessary and won't shy away just because we have suffered some casualties. In truth, hardly anyone will know about this deal except for you, me and a handful of trusted Vandals. To everyone else, our relationship will appear normal."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Are you saying you want to make a private deal?"

"Partially." The major admitted. "As much as I care about the Vandals, I have to look out for myself as well. I already explained that it is impossible for me or my Vandals to make use of the serum. I would rather trade it off to you and receive more attainable benefits in return. Aside from receiving your promise that you will take care of the Vandals, Captain Orfan and I would also like our lives to be extended by at least a single round."

This was a much more sensible demand to Ves, but still an unequal one as far as he was concerned.

A typical baseline human lived up to 130 years. Extending it to 230 years was fairly doable to most Seniors from a third-rate state.

Yet trying to prolong it further was at least ten times more difficult! The jump in lifespan from 230 years to 330 years was a much more ruinous price!

The serum that Senator Tovar made use of was even greater in value! As far as Ves was aware of, the Senator was close to 290 years old, which meant he already enjoyed two rounds of life-prolonging treatment!

This meant that the third round was astronomically more expensive, so much so that he didn't hesitate to sacrifice thousands of soldiers to be able to live up to 430 years!

"What grade is the serum, exactly?" Ves quizzed.

"Third round. You can live up to four centuries if you make effective use of it. We have already confirmed its authenticity."

So Major Verle wasn't exaggerating. Such a serum was truly a prize worth fighting for! Regardless of how prosperous Ves and the clan would grow into the future, obtaining this serum right away was a massive advantage!

He could use it for himself to ensure he would have enough time to realize his ambitions.

He could pass it on to Gloriana so that she wouldn't be burdened by her aging.

He could pass it on to his children or descendants if he thought they were worth such a lavish benefit.

He could even try and sell it in exchange for a factory ship and many other valuable goods and services!

Perhaps he could even find a way to convert it into MTA merits, thereby bringing him substantially closer to purchasing a fleet beyonder ticket!

Whatever the case, something with so much value that even the citizens from the galactic center would fight tooth and nail to obtain it was intimately valuable!

And all Major Verle asked in return was to extend his life and Captain Orfan's life by a modest century. Oh, he also wanted to make sure that Ves would maintain his gratitude towards the Vandals.

"Is my appreciation worth that much?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who thinks that way." Verle grinned. "Your future potential is very clear to see. Out of every Journeyman Mech Designer in this star sector, you are one of the most brilliant who isn't already a part of the MTA. Others may believe that you still need to prove yourself, but we have been observing your career for many years. We know that you are more than a flash in the pan. You are on the up-and-up. As long as we invest in you early, our gains in the future will definitely surpass the value of a mere high-grade life-prolonging serum!"

Ves understood. Major Verle took the same long-term investment approach as Calabast!

"Two great minds think alike." He muttered.

Similar to Major Verle, Calabast once gained a position of advantage over Ves. Instead of using her leverage to blackmail Ves or turn him into her slave or something, she settled for becoming his partner.

She made the right choice. If she pushed her advantage harder, she would only piss him off, thereby risking his retribution! Though she would doubtlessly gain amazing benefits in the short-term, his hatred for her would make her future very uncertain!

As it was, Ves had reluctantly gotten used to her presence. He didn't even object to her adoption into the Larkinson Clan.

Major Verle must be making a similar calculation. As a former member of Flashlight, he must be well aware of the tradeoffs between a short-term approach and a long-term approach.

Right now, the Vandals would doubtlessly benefit from either approaches. Verle just had to make a consideration if he wanted more modest gains in the short term or much greater gains in the future.

The fact that he chose the latter meant that he placed a lot of faith in Ves and his clan. Just like Calabast, Verle too believed that Ves would one day become a very great figure in the galactic mech community! The amount of analysis that Flashlight had conducted on Ves should have certainly hinted at such, but even with it Verle was shrewd enough to know what was best!

Two great minds think alike. Ves smiled sardonically at the surviving leader of the Vandals. People like Calabast and Verle were too astute!

"Alright." He eventually said. "I accept. Your offer is too attractive to me and your terms are very reasonable."

"I knew you would accept." Verle smiled in satisfaction.

The two men shook hands. For this type of agreement, there was no need to sign a formal contract. In fact, it was best to put as little in writing as possible, as Ves did not wish for the existence of the high-grade life-prolonging serum to be leaked!

As soon as they finished the handshake, they became comrades-in-arms once more! Ves felt strangely warm now that he gained another dependable group of helpers.

"Welcome to the clan." Ves announced as he deactivated his jamming device and stowed it away. "I will personally induct you all into the clan as soon as we make the arrangements. Your men will still need to be vetted, but I trust that they will pass all of our checks without problem."

"How do you plan to slot us into our clan?"

"I don't know yet. As I've already mentioned, the Battle Criers are already my preferred unit of fixers." Ves paused for a moment to think. "Perhaps you can find a new purpose for the Vandals after speaking to Calabast. I'm sure you are already familiar with her and her current role in the clan. Her Black Cats already makes use of the Swordmaidens as their muscle, but they aren't as versatile and sophisticated as your Vandals."

Calabast and Verle both possessed an intelligence background. Ves believed they would get along well for that reason.

Before they left the conference room, Ves didn't forget to ask a critical question.

"Where is the 'package'?"

"It's not here, obviously." Major Verle replied. "We'll have to go out of our way to retrieve it. I advise you to treat it with great care. You don't want it to suffer any accidents, do you?"

Ves idly waved his hand. "I'll tell Calabast to work with you to retrieve it. I'm sure the two of you will do what is necessary without incident."

Though Ves looked forward to receiving the valuable serum, he would not get his hopes up until it actually landed in his hands!

Chapter 2045 Hope of Recovery

The induction of the Flagrant Vandals into the Larkinson Clan went smoothly. Ves made sure to reserve some time to hold a proper induction ceremony.

Most people thought that Ves went out of his way to honor the Vandals with a personal appearance because they were former war buddies.

That was partially true.

The benefits that Major Verle provided to Ves was the biggest reason why they received special treatment!

Ordinary candidates didn't get to place their palms on the Larkinson Mandate. They didn't receive an opportunity to swear an oath to the Larkinson Clan in front of the clan patriarch.

With how busy he was these days, the recruiters assigned by the Larkinson Clan mostly conducted the ceremonies themselves. The Bright Warrior mechs served as an adequate substitute for the Larkinson Mandate.

The fact that Ves went out of his way to eschew this perfunctory treatment and treat the Flagrant Vandals with a greater ceremony was a message in itself. He cared about the Vandals and valued them a lot higher than ordinary recruits!

No one in the clan rejected their entry. While it was true that the Flagrant Vandals deserted the Bright Republic, they fought valiantly in the previous Bright-Vesia War and the Sand War.

The fact that they held their ground in the Battle of Bentheim and lost the bulk of their comrades was enough to redeem the stain of their desertion!

From a more practical perspective, the addition of a remnant of a proper military mech regiment was very useful to the clan.

The Princely Jackal, the Shield of Hispania and the Gorgon's Gaze were all combat carriers that have proven to be resilient enough to survive several intensive battles. Though they were all banged up to an extent, their scars could easily be fixed.

While the Vandal combat carriers weren't as impressive as the ships in the possession of the Penitent Sisters, at the very least Ves had more direct control over them! He never fully trusted the Hexer punishment outfit, and the various restrictions they came with made it very difficult to make full use of their strength.

Certainly, Ves planned to replace every third-class vessel in his fleet with second-class ships in the future, but that might take years to complete. Until then, having a handful of military combat carriers at his disposal was better than nothing!

Before the arrival of the Flagrant Vandals, Ves always had a headache about the possible force composition of any excursion into the Nyxian Gap. If he wanted to complete a mission into this perilous space, then bringing a bunch of light carriers was sheer folly!

The ubiquitous asteroid that floated everywhere in this anomalous space made it trivially easy for the pirate gangs that infested the Gap to ambush any travelling fleets. Just a couple of surprise attacks was enough to cripple a lightly-armored light carrier!

Even with the protection of the Penitent Sisters, they only needed to expose a single hole in their defenses to cripple the weakest vessels in the fleet!

Ves wouldn't have to worry so much if he could limit his selection to armored vessels. While that might mean that he would have to leave the bulk of his Avatars and Sentinels behind, at the very least he wouldn't need to worry too much about incurring an excessive amount of losses.

Aside from the assets they brought, the military heritage they retained and the immediate battle power in the form of trained, disciplined mech pilots who spent years honing their coordination was of great value!

The clan became a bit more confident in its ability to repel attacks.

Even if the Larkinsons looked down on the modest number of Vandals, there was one more reason why they didn't look down on the new additions.

"Another expert candidate has joined our clan!"

"Who is Captain Orfan?"

"I heard some mixed stories about her when I was still serving in the Mech Corps. I don't think they matter anymore now that she has become an expert candidate. We can never have too many of them! I'm looking forward to the day our clan gains our first expert pilot!"

With the Golden Cat bestowing her personal approval to Major Verle, Captain Orfan and the rest, Ves became fully reassured that the Vandals weren't pulling the wool over his eyes.

Goldie would have said something to him if Verle had tried to scam him with a non-existent serum!

Once the Vandals became a part of the clan, he let Calabast and the other leaders of the clan take charge of the follow-up arrangements.

Right now, it seemed that Major Quinlist Verle-Larkinson would likely retain his rank and occupy a senior military position in the hierarchy.

Captain Rosa Orfan-Larkinson on the other hand would take charge of the diminished number of Vandals. They had grown small enough that it wasn't necessary for someone as competent as Major Verle-Larkinson to lead them in person.

"All of these compound names sound rather ugly." Ves complained.

"It gets better over time." Gavin told him during a briefing. "In case we can never get used to them, we can just adopt a different solution. There are plenty of proponents to the idea of turning everyone's last name into Larkinson."

That was not so ideal either. Everyone would probably have to resort to serial numbers to refer to the correct Larkinson!

Just as Ves thought he was done with current affairs, yet another incident demanded his attention.

Brutus Wodin made a personal visit to Ves. When an expert pilot went out of his way to knock on his doors, then something truly important must be happening!

To his surprise, Brutus didn't come alone.

His companion wasn't who he expected, either. Instead of bringing his sister or Ranya, he instead came with a completely different woman.

"Davia Stark." Ves greeted. "I hope the clan has accommodated you well. I apologise for my lack of visits to you. I was too busy to spare time on you. I hope you understand."

With everything that was going on, trying to help a broken expert pilot sat rather low on his list of priorities! He was especially disinclined to waste his time on her when she was barely functional as a human!

So far, Ves had been content to leave her in the hands of Clinton Larkinson and the various doctors and specialists of the clan.

"It is no issue." Davia softly responded.

Ves looked taken aback at her response! Though the sense of gloom and malaise was very evident on her, the fact that she actually spoke like a normal human being was a substantial leap in progress!

Ves studied Davia a bit more thoroughly. He concentrated his mind and tried to observe her through his spiritual vision.

What he observed utterly surprised him! The protective force of will that Brutus often liked to drape on his sister and close family now nestled protectively around Davia's fragile and broken will!

This strange interaction must have been responsible for Davia's transformation. Her force of will, though still broken, looked like it was starting to piece back together!

While Ves didn't know how difficult it was for her to regain her original strength as an expert pilot, at the very least the odds were significantly greater than before!

His entire stance on her changed. Her importance shot up in priority now that there was actual hope of her recovery.

"Congratulations on your improvement. You look a lot better than before."

Davia didn't respond. Instead, she turned towards Brutus, who spoke on her behalf.

"Do you remember our previous request?"

"I remember." Ves responded. "You wanted to divert our fleet to the former capital of the Vindmar Republic. I rejected it because our entire fleet was desperate to reach safe harbor. I can't afford to frustrate the interests of tens of thousands of people just to accommodate a single wounded veteran of the Sand War."

Brutus smiled as if he didn't take offense. "We understand. Your choice is the most proper one. However, now that you have reached the Cinach System, you are doing quite well these days. Not only have you consolidated your clan, you have also expanded your forces and recruited a large number of skilled recruits. The recent addition of the Flagrant Vandals has increased your strength even further."

"What is it that you are getting at, Brutus?" Ves frowned.

"I plan to take Miss Stark to the border state which she hailed from on the Serendipity. At this time, the dust of the Sand War has sufficiently settled. While it is not entirely safe to travel to the destroyed state, I'm confident that I alone can fend off any opportunistic scavengers."

The tone that Brutus adopted made it clear that he wasn't asking for permission. He was stating his intentions as a courtesy. There was nothing Ves could do to retain Brutus in the fleet and enjoy his protection!

That was bad news to Ves. As much as he could depend on his own forces and the Penitent Sisters for protection, the presence of Brutus alone was a very powerful deterrent!

Expert pilots enjoyed a lot of respect, more than any other average mech pilot! A second-class expert pilot like Brutus was of immense value to Ves. He was like a lucky talisman that ensured that no one would have any funny ideas!

Ves could react in two different ways. He could try to talk Brutus out of this inconvenient excursion, or he could roll over and support the expert pilot's decision.

Short of persuading Gloriana to hold her brother back, there was nothing Ves could do to force Brutus to stay! Instead of coming across as selfish, Ves decided it was better to acquiesce.

In any case, Brutus wasn't wrong. He enjoyed plenty of protection even without a powerful expert pilot presiding over the fleet.

Ves smiled charitably at Brutus and Davia. "How long do you intend to take?"

"It depends. My Serendipity is quite a fast ship, so it can take as little as three weeks to make a round trip. The former Vindmar Republic isn't that far away from the Sentinel Kingdom. We might incur some delays. Perhaps Davia wishes to visit some other star systems along the way."

"I think.. I need to visit the site of my defeat as well." She whispered while keeping her eyes down. "I never.. properly said goodbye to my mercenary commander."

"A month." Brutus declared. "We won't take more than a month. Even if you have already departed the Sentinel Kingdom, my ship is fast enough to catch up. Don't worry. I am still committed to protecting my sister."

Considering that Ves had no intentions of leaving the Cinach System within a month, that sounded entirely reasonable. During their entire stay in this star system, Ves and the Larkinson Clan encountered no meaningful threat to their safety.

This deep in the Sentinel Kingdom, the Friday Coalition should never be able to assault this star system!

Of course, the Nyxian pirates were a different story, but Ves didn't worry about them too much. Their strength couldn't compare against a second-rate state. The most they could do was launch futile raids and terrorist attacks.

"Very well." Ves smiled. "I wish the two of you good luck on your endeavors. As a Larkinson, I respect every mech pilot who has answered the call of duty. You deserve another chance to fight on behalf of humanity."

"It is a pity... I was not able to fight against the sandmen one last time."

Regret suffused her tone and her crushed expression. If she recovered faster, she might have been able to take part in the Battle of Bentheim!

As it was, she was completely useless now. She wasn't even in a state to pilot a mech in a normal fashion, let alone exhibit the strength of an expert pilot!

Ves tried to console her. "The sandmen are hardly the only threat to humanity. There are more enemies out there who dream of nothing but slaughtering innocent people. Your fight is not over yet, Miss Stark."

She didn't respond as she and Brutus rose up from their seats.

As the pair of exceptional mech pilots departed, Ves frowned. Even if Davia recovered, he wasn't sure whether he would be able to retain her. There was hardly anything tying her to the Larkinson Clan. To be honest, Brutus did much more to help her recover than he ever did during the months she stayed in the fleet!

Chapter 2046 Military Bureau

The departure of Brutus Wodin and his charity case didn't affect the Larkinson Clan. Ves felt almost just as secure as before.

Certainly, the emergence of an enemy expert pilot would definitely inflict a lot of pain. Without one of his own constraining such a powerful actor, a single powerful mech could wreak untold havoc in his ranks.

While the Larkinson veterans and the Flagrant Vandals received training on how to resist the aggression of an expert pilot, it was easier said than done to put it into practice!

The natural awe and fear towards expert pilots was a huge detriment to the effectiveness of such massed tactics.

Cases where a single expert pilot managed to disintegrate a force consisting of a thousand mechs weren't unheard of in the galaxy!

If all of those regular mech pilots kept their composure and worked together to surround and tire out the expert mech, then the latter would not be able to achieve much results before being taken down by sheer numbers.

Yet this was not always the case in practice! The success rate of these plans often hinged on the discipline and training of the mech pilots. As long as they didn't trust each other to cover their backs or possessed the will to sacrifice their lives for a greater purpose, the selfish mech pilots would always back off and try to avoid being included in the list of casualties!

Larkinson Network or not, Ves did not believe that most of his clansmen had reached the point of dying for the clan. Due to their training and unique characteristics, the Avatars of Myth and the Battle Criers came close, but Ves knew they still fell short in this area and many other areas.

Having an experienced mech officer who once commanded half of a mech regiment at his side turned out to be a very useful boon.

Major Verle-Larkinson was an all-round asset, possessing a wealth of knowledge, wisdom and insight in military matters. Not only that, he also possessed a dash of intelligence experience. From sabotage, kidnapping, wetwork and other unsavory activities, Verle-Larkinson had done it all throughout his decades-long career.

"Calling you Verle-Larkinson all the time is getting really tired." Ves complained during a meeting with the latest member of his inner circle. "Can I call you Quinlist?"

The major's mouth twitched. Evidently, he did not like his first name! "You can just call me Verle or Major Verle if that is what you prefer. Others in the clan have already reverted to ignoring the compound name."

The name Larkinson consisted of three syllables, and it was a lot of trouble to recite this name all of the time! Even the clansmen who proudly wore this name eventually got tired of saying it in rapid succession!

Ves palmed his face. "We need to find a better solution to this stupid naming problem."

"It's not a major issue, Ves. Just forget about it and let your clansmen sort it out by themselves."

It didn't matter too much anyway. Ves could see through his spiritual vision that Major Verle was already integrating deeper into the spiritual network centered around the Larkinson Mandate. So long as this bond remained healthy, Verle could be trusted to act in the interests of the clan!

"Alright. Let's get back to the topic at hand. What was it you said about the organization of our mech forces?"

The major coughed. "As I was saying, I have comprehensively inspected each and every force that is under your direct and indirect command. I even paid a visit to the Penitent Sisters, though they have been understandable reluctant to show me around."

"That must have been quite an ordeal." Ves smirked.

"I count myself lucky I managed to leave alive." Verle laughed. "In any case, after I have taken stock of your combat assets, I have ascertained many shortcomings and inefficiencies. While the various forces such as the Avatars and my Flagrant Vandals are individually well-run, at the strategic level there is a dangerous lack of cooperation and coordination."

Ves blinked at this answer. "Please explain."

"Hmm.. let's take the Mech Corps as a model. In a very simplified overview, the Mech Corps consists of three basic layers. At the bottom, there are the individual mech regiments which do all of the fighting as cohesive units with distinctive specialties. At the middle, there is the mech division level which gathers a number of diverse mech regiments together to achieve a strategic goal in a war theater. Above this level is HQ which manages the military at the state level."

It didn't take long for Ves to understand what Verle was getting at. "We are lacking in layers, is that what you are saying?"

Verle nodded. "Headquarters isn't just a place where the brass makes all of the big decisions. It also functions as an administrative center, much like the headquarters of your mech company. Countless policies, standards and other aspects are constantly being updated by one of its many offices and departments."

"I can understand that." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "So far, the Avatars, Sentinels and other forces run their own affairs as self-contained silos. That is fine if they are only expected to operate by themselves, but the truth is that they will likely be asked to fight alongside other forces. Some conflict and friction is inevitable."

"I've reviewed the after-action reports of the Battle of Kesseling VIII." Major Verle stated. "It's obvious that the problems I've mentioned have already started to become evident during that time. The unexpected and uncoordinated reinforcements from the Swordmaidens and the Ylvainan defectors may have saved your clan from defeat, but the lack of coordination in their movements has led to an excessive number of preventable casualties."

"You're saying that a lot less mech pilots would have fallen if our forces all cooperated better?"

"Yes."

That was a very harsh statement. The truth hurt sometimes, and Ves felt very remorseful for not doing enough to deepen the integration between the Avatars, Sentinels, Battle Criers and Glory Battalion.

The major noted the effect he had on his audience. "It's okay, Ves. Your forces did their best. None of you expected to face an attack at that time and place. Let's move forward and establish a plan to address our shortcomings so that we won't be caught so flat-footed the next time."

"Let's do that. What is your proposal?"

Verle activated his comm and quickly sent a document to Ves. "I have already taken the liberty to write out a series of steps on what we need to do. The gist of my plan is to establish an office called the Military Bureau to make the beginning steps towards greater coordination and cooperation between the forces."

While the major spoke, Ves connected to his comm via his implant and rapidly scanned through the document in his mind.

"It sounds like you are working towards establishing a headquarters." He noted with surprise. "Why not create one straight-away?"

"It's not necessary, Ves. Starting too big will not only lead to a lot of disruption, but also attract a lot of animosity from your troops. I don't intend to replicate the flaws of the Mech Corps in the Larkinson Clan. You have already witnessed and suffered from the great disconnect between high command and the soldiers doing all of the fighting, right?"

Ves immediately nodded. He had no good opinion of the leadership of the Mech Corps!

"So the purpose of establishing a modest-sounding Military Bureau is to begin with a light touch, is that right?"

"Right. The Bureau will initially concern itself with establishing some common standards and protocols between the different forces. There are plenty of areas that need to be standardized, such as recruitment, wages and transfers. Once we get up to speed in matters related to human resources, we can move on to harmonizing certain rules and regulations in order to establish a common law between all of the forces. After that, we can tackle something more substantial as standardizing the technological specifications of most of their hardware."

All of this sounded very beneficial, but Ves also understood that this would be a huge endeavor. It might take years for all of these measures to make a difference!

Still, considering that the Larkinson Clan would only grow larger in the future, it was best to address these matters early when it was still easy to enact these kinds of changes.

"You have my permission to establish a Military Bureau and enact the changes which the clan deems necessary." Ves officially declared. "While I am willing to afford your Bureau a certain degree of independence, I want you to regularly report your findings and your actions to someone higher-up in the clan. For now, that includes both me and the Executive Council. Is that clear?"

"Looks like you are developing your Larkinson Clan into a state-like entity." Verle cleverly observed.

"Do you approve?"

He shrugged. "All of this is a bit new to me. I don't exactly have the best impression of spaceborn clans. They can be rather snobbish and elitist. I hope you won't steer your clan in the same direction."

"We'll see."

Before they ended the meeting, Verle brought up one more topic.

"Aside from establishing the Military Bureau, I also wanted to talk about the evolution direction of your forces."

"What is your opinion?"

"So far, their roles are fairly clear. I think it is best to continue their development in their chosen directions, but with a greater eye towards specialization so that they can better complement each other. With a true combined arms approach, our clan can handle any crisis."

"What will be the role of each force if you had your way?"

Verle listed out his views. "The Avatars of Myth can stay as our elite mech force. The Living Sentinels should specialize in defensive warfare. The Battle Criers are suited for irregular operations. The Swordmaidens are already transitioning into a black ops unit. As for the Flagrant Vandals, I think it is best to turn them into a raiding and reconnaissance force."

"The mech roster of the Vandals don't reflect this role." Ves pointed out. "You have plenty of medium mechs and even a couple of heavy mechs, right?"

"We can slowly phase them out. Since you have served with us for some time, you already know that we already employ light mechs extensively. We can deepen our use of light mechs while acquiring some medium mech models that all feature great mobility. Once we complete this transformation, our Vandals will become fully capable of fulfilling the scouting function that your other mech troops aren't as suited to perform."

That sounded quite logical. Ves was glad that Major Verle was able to find a place for the Flagrant Vandals in the clan.

"What about the possibility of operating in the auspices of the Black Cats?"

"I've already spoken to Madame Calabast. We both came to the conclusion that it is best for my Vandals to steer clear of her Black Cats." Verle admitted. "While I do possess an intelligence background, most of our Vandals are not. They are honest soldiers. Deep down, they all wish to prove themselves on the battlefield in an upright and honorable manner. I think we owe it to them to give them the chance the Mech Corps has denied them for too long."

"The Larkinson Clan will be happy to give them this opportunity." Ves smiled in acceptance. "The Larkinson Family has always valued honor, and our clan is no different. I'm sure your Vandals will acquit themselves well in their new role."

As soon as Major Verle received the green light for his proposals, he departed from Ves' office. His first step after establishing the Military Bureau was to pull in Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon-Larkinson.

In a way, Ophelia already played the role that Verle described. She constantly kept an eye on the ships of the Larkinson Clan and suggested ways to increase their coordination.

Placing her in the newly-established Military Bureau would cement her role and allow her to act with greater authority with the mandate she gained.

Chapter 2047 Burning Red

The addition of the Flagrant Vandals to the Larkinson Clan proceeded smoothly, all things considered. Their military pedigree and their Brighter heritage meant that they were already very compatible with the ideals of the Larkinson Clan.

Though they were a little rough around the edges, they were hardly the worst in this aspect.

With Major Verle-Larkinson and Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon-Larkinson banding together to form the nucleus of the Military Bureau, a lot of changes were in store.

Hopefully, the various combat units of the Larkinson Clan would soon be able to function alongside each other as parts of a greater whole.

In a way, what Major Verle started was much like designing a mech. The Larkinson Clan already possessed different parts which could fulfill their functions by themselves. Yet in order to transform their strength to a level where they could meet any crisis with confidence, it was essential to combine them together into a single design that brought out the most of the specialized components!

The undercurrent of the Larkinson Clan surged even further. Though not every Larkinson accepted Major Verle's sudden elevation in leadership, the former Brighter proved to be a quick worker.

Much of his work entailed convincing other people to accept his suggestions. This was something that Major Verle was particularly good at. After meeting Commander Melkor, Commander Magdalena and Commander Cinnabar on a regular basis, he soon managed to come to an accord with each of them. Every commander became willing to accept his suggestions!

While all of these movements took place, Ves could finally devote himself fully to his mech design projects.

Though they had already been chugging along in his absence, his personal attention was still essential.

He not only conducted marathon design sessions with Gloriana in order to speed up the progress of their Hexer mech design project, but also supervised his design teams as they fumbled with the testing of the prototypes of the striker mech.

As a project that was much closer to completion, Ves paid an increasing amount of attention to the final stretch of development of the striker mech.

During the second round of prototype testing, he even took Maikel and Zanthar on a little excursion into space.

At one of the Cinach System's asteroid belts, a fair number of spaceborn testing grounds had been set up. Cinach VI was the home to a large number of mech companies, each of which constantly developed new products that needed to be tested.

Right now, the LMC booked one of these testing grounds in order to comprehensively examine the performance of the current iteration of the striker mech under real conditions.

The sight was very spectacular. Thick, armored mechs flew steadily across an obstacle course while firing their large and slightly-oversized flamethrowers at various groups of targets along the way!

The test pilots skillfully increased the spread of the Enison Spreaders to engulf entire squads of projected mechs in flames.

Against a single, more distant target, the pilots narrowed the cone of their flamethrowers in order to increase their range and concentration of energy.

The striker mechs expended a huge amount of propellant and oxidizers. Both of these substances were stored in the storage tanks attached to the Enison Spreaders and integrated in the frame of the machines.

While Ves had contemplated attaching the storage tanks to the exterior of the mech, they were far too vulnerable if left exposed!

A traditional striker mech had to be able to withstand a lot of hits. The carefully-planned tests exquisitely pushed the limits of the prototypes by subjecting them to precisely-calculated attacks.

It hurt Ves a bit to see one of the prototypes being blasted by laser drones from every direction. Yet despite the barrage, the armor system of the striker mech held up exactly as its specifications allowed!

To the two boys, ahem, adolescent men, seeing the mechs in action with their very own eyes was an unforgettable experience!

Even though they were Larkinsons, their only opportunities to see mechs in action was when they attended the mech games in their old lives. Aside from that, they never got the opportunity to see an actual mech in action outside of footage and drama programs!

They even missed out the opportunity to watch the Battle of Kesseling VIII unfold because they had been among the first clansmen to be evacuated!

"Wow." Maikel sighed as he practically pressed his entire face against the transparent screen of the space station. His eyes continued to follow the maneuvers of the nearest

prototype as it spread its unnatural hellfire red flames in precise bursts. "I've seen the projections of the simulated tests, but they're not even close to the real thing!"

Ves smiled. "We aren't playing a video game, Maikel. We are mech designers. Just because we sit behind terminals in order to manipulate projections all day doesn't mean that our work has real consequences. The machines we design are just like this prototype, capable of unleashing an unimaginable amount of destruction in the right circumstances!"

Though Ves had already lectured them about this topic before, theory was different from practice. Now that they finally witnessed the outcome of the effort that Ves and the rest of the design teams put into their striker mech design, the Larkinson seeds gained a clearer idea on what their profession entailed!

Mech designers mainly created war machines that killed!

The flames unleashed by the huge machines that could tower over many buildings could burn an entire town if left unchecked!

The scalding hot flames possessed a rather sticky quality that allowed them to continue to burn in space for a number of seconds. If the flames ever landed on a mech, then it would continue to burn it down!

The main reason for this was the special propellant used. Not only did it burn longer, the Enison Spreader also released in a higher density.

The purpose of doing so was to enhance its area denial role by allowing it to continue to block off portions of space with longer-lasting flames.

The downside to this was the faster depletion of the propellant tanks. In most cases, the striker mech lasted from ten to thirty minutes before needing to return to resupply.

To Ves, this was barely adequate and far from ideal. He had never been able to solve the fundamental capacity problem of his striker mech design. The consequence was that he had to accept the fact that his upcoming product would be shipping with average endurance at best compared to the industry standard!

Of course, none of that affected the cool factor of his product. Both Maikel and Zanthar hadn't progressed enough to look beneath the surface of a mech. All they saw was big machines burning everything in their way in an awesome fashion! They were still kids at heart!

Not that this was anything bad. Every mech designer started off with a shallow fascination of mechs in their youth. People like Ves simply retained their admiration for these machines into their adulthood and centered their entire lives around designing better models!

"How hot do these flames burn?" Zanthar asked. "Why are the flames so red? Aren't hotter flames supposed to be blue?"

Ves gently shook his head. "The color of the flames isn't necessarily correlated by the energy being released. While it's true that a more energetic thermal reaction can result in the release of higher frequencies of electromagnetic radiation or light, in practice it's always a mix. The propellant formula contains a lot of different substances that each emit a varying amount of energy in the form of heat and energy."

"So why are the flames released by your striker mech so red?"

"It's a cosmetic design choice." Ves admitted. "It fits the overall theme of my design. The mech already comes with a red-brown coating by default. Giving it the illusion of spitting hellfire will likely evoke all sorts of frightening associations to approaching enemies."

"I don't know, teacher. I think blue flames are scarier." Zanthar commented.

"I watched a drama once where a squad of striker mechs burned an entire street with purple flames!" Maikel shouted.

Ves chuckled in a good-natured manner. "As long as you work hard and study well, you can design a striker mech that releases flames in any color you like. Until then, you better learn honestly and keep up with my demands."

Their motivation was still as high as ever, especially after viewing the impressive striker mechs in action with their own two eyes!

While Ves enjoyed witnessing his prototype in action, he wasn't looking at them in the perspective of a child.

While there weren't any control panels in front of him, his implant was receiving a lot of data. His implant quickly processed them and analyzed the patterns.

The test results largely met his expectations.

He felt a little disappointed at that. Though his striker mech was a functionally-sound product, it didn't perform notably better than the other offerings on the market.

Ves could only rely on the glow he planned to impart on his striker mech design to make the crucial difference!

Sometimes, a boy was a boy, a Hexer was a Hexer and a striker mech was a striker mech.

Ves tried his best to square the circle and surpass the limitations inherent to this mech type, to no avail. Reality could be bent, but not to this extent!

Aside from opening his wallet and breaking his budget, there was no way to develop a striker mech that was completely to his liking.

It was worse now that Ves had a taste of second-class mech design.

Before he designed the Bright Warrior and embarked on the Hexer mech design project, Ves was fully grounded in third-class mechs. He almost never had the opportunity to design something better, which meant that his horizons had never been widened.

It was a lot easier to design third-class mechs back then. Ignorance was bliss and Ves had closed his eyes to the greater possibilities that second-class mech designers like Gloriana regularly took for granted!

That was not possible anymore. Once he was promoted to a second-class mech designer, Ves would never be able to stop his mind from imagining the endless possibilities if he just stuffed an expensive component or material in his third-class mech designs!

"Urgh! It's torture sometimes!"

Despite these complaints, Ves still believed in his end product. A mech was more than the numbers on a spec sheet. Throughout his entire career, he had become increasingly more dependent on his glows to augment his mechs.

The material performance of his products didn't matter as much as the combination of the tangible and intangible properties of the mechs!

Unfortunately, Ves didn't get to see the full potential of his striker mech design yet. Only when he was finally ready to formulate the glow of the mech would he truly be able realize his vision. The weak spiritual foundation that the prototypes currently conveyed was just a pale shadow of what was to come.

"Let's go, students." He said. "The testing will proceed for at least three more days. That's far too much time to be wasted on seeing mechs burn empty space. There's a lot more homework in store for you once we return to Cinach VI!"

"Awww!"

While his striker mech already performed well enough to be competitive on the market, Ves had already made the decision to subject it to iterate on it for at least another round.

While he wanted to finish this project as fast as possible, he couldn't rush the project too much. Ves noticed plenty of details that required further optimization in order to receive good reviews from industry outlets.

This was not the time where he was in the middle in a crisis and in a hurry to publish a new mech design! The circumstances surrounding the development of the Desolate Soldier was completely different from his current project!

"I won't tolerate as much sloppiness this time!"

Chapter 2048 Most Honest Mech Designer

While the striker mech project underwent its third round of iteration, the Hexer mech project also made a lot of progress.

As long as he wasn't distracted by clan affairs, he achieved a lot of progress. The support-oriented knight mech became more complete after every session.

Both Ves and Gloriana cuddled together after pulling their minds out of another exhausting mental design session.

Linking their implants together and designing their mechs under accelerated time perception was very productive, but also very straining.

Their mental and spiritual strength didn't play a role in this aspect. Only the physical resilience of their brains determined how far they could push this mode of mech design!

This was why Gloriana always ended up better off after they completed a session. While Ves was stuffed with genetic and biological augmentations, their effects were mostly scattered or leaned more in the direction of enhancing his physical attributes.

Gloriana on the other hand enjoyed more modest augmentations planned by her mother Constance.

Unlike the haphazard improvements applied to Ves, his girlfriend mainly received upgrades that focused on improving her cognitive functions!

The only physical augmentations she received mostly pertained to improving her health, enhancing her beauty, increasing her resilience to diseases and certain other matters pertaining exclusively to women.

As a result, she was much more suited to become a mech designer like Ves. This had always been something of a pet peeve of his. If Dr. Jutland didn't go crazy on his body, he would have lived his life as a normal mech designer!

On the other hand, if he didn't possess the Jutland organ, then he would have died by now!

If Ves had to choose between death and life as a suboptimal mech designer, he would definitely settle on the latter!

"Are you satisfied with our work so far, Ves?" Gloriana asked.

A projection of their current progress spun in front them. The landbound knight mech looked quite hefty, but its formidable appearance was partially an illusion.

Much of the bulk inside was made up of energy cells, heat sinks and energy transmission systems. All of that capacity could have been allocated towards improving the defensive aspects of his mech.

If Ves had a choice, he would have outfitted his mech with an energy shielding system, but that was a bit too expensive and impractical for their current budget!

Besides, male Hexer mechs were rarely equipped with shields.

"I know what you are thinking about." She said as she leaned her head against his shoulder. "Just forget about it, Ves. Women in our state always hog the best assets for themselves. Mech-grade energy shield modules are quite expensive, so the Hex Army has to allocate them wisely. They are much more needed in our female mechs as they are expected to brave a lot of danger. A lot more women would have died by now in the Komodo War if their mechs lack these crucial shields!"

While Ves acknowledged the logic behind this decision, he still thought it was rather upside down to deny a knight mech more defensive tools.

Still, an energy shield wasn't as important as the extensive energy reserves and energy transmission systems they managed to stuff inside the frame of their mech.

This ensured that their mech would not only be able to support the efforts of female mechs during the beginning of their assaults, but also prolong their utility by siphoning energy from fallen mechs and other energy sources!

"This mech is best suited to operate in urban and developed environments." Ves remarked. "While I designed its extra appendages to pierce through the open cavities or weak points of a wreck, they can also dig into the power network of a building to recharge its energy cells. As long as the city has an intact power grid or enough backup power, our knight mech can keep supplying a continuous amount of energy to the rest of its squad!"

Gloriana nodded, causing her hair to brush against his clothes. "That sounds very useful. A lot of the fighting so far takes place in fortified, highly-urbanized planets. The Komodo War won't budge any further before either side makes it through all of the defenses that they prepared in the centuries leading up to this struggle."

The war slowed down but the casualties continued to mount. No matter how the Coalition and the Hegemony tried to tout their successes on the galactic net, Ves saw precious little movement on the map. The lines budged in either direction at a glacial

pace, yet the greater states continued to pour more mechs into these disputed war zones!

This would be a good time for a supportive knight mech optimized for urban combat to make its entry. Sadly, Ves and Gloriana still required more time to finalize their mech design. They hadn't even tested the first prototype up to this point!

Fortunately, it looked as if the stalemate would probably persist for at least a year if nothing drastic happened. That left plenty of time for the Hexers to try out his revolutionary new mech and deploy it on a wider scale!

Gloriana stirred again. "I'm not so sure about the development of its divine nature, though. We're obviously making a mech for male mech pilots. Sometimes, I get the feeling we are doing a huge disservice by attempting to instill it with a female proto-god."

To be honest, this fact bothered him as well. If he had a choice, he would have rather paired his upcoming design spirit with a female mech, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

"The gender of the mech doesn't have to correlate with the gender of its design spirit. The relationship between the two can be as close or as loose as we like. For example, the Aurora Titan is clearly a masculine mech design, but I linked it with Qilanxo without any issue. The Bright Warrior is vaguely male in its configurations, but it also meshes well with the Golden Cat."

"Those are non-Hexer designs, Ves. I can understand why you chose not to pay attention to the gender of the mechs and their proto-gods, but this is different. Gender matters a lot."

This was something Ves hadn't fully considered. Unlike her, he didn't think about the significance of something gender all the time.

"How do you think the Hexers will react to our end product?"

"That's the scary part. I don't know." She paused for a moment. "From what I understand, you are trying to create a motherly proto-god for our mech design, right?"

He nodded. "The design spirit derived from the Idol of the Superior Mother and.. other ingredients.. will be unquestionably female. She'll likely act like a nurturing mother to the mech pilot and a fierce guardian against opponents."

That wasn't all. He still wanted to give the design spirit more dimensions by imparting it with the different meanings of the six phases of existence, but that was a work in progress.

Just because he could break some spiritual fragments and merge them back together didn't mean he always got what he wanted. He still needed to guide the entire process and make sure it didn't go off the rails.

The last thing he wanted to do was to create an abomination and waste all of the ingredients he used!

The spiritual residue from the Idol of the Superior Mother was irreplaceable to Ves. He only had one shot to create the right design spirit, so he had to make sure to exert enough control over the process.

Gloriana would be lending her help as well, and each time she did so, she exhausted herself. It would take at least a month before she could do something like this again!

"I'm actually rather reluctant to proceed." She said. "I'm afraid my peers back in the Hegemony will tear me apart with their criticism for designing something that may be deemed heretical!"

Though Ves could sense that Gloriana truly feared this outcome, he was a lot more nonchalant about this issue.

"So what if a bunch of close-minded Hexers think our product is heresy? As long as you stay with me and accompany me on my travels, you won't have to bother yourself with those useless women. As long as our mech fulfills its purpose and swings the war in our favor, what does it matter if it offends someone's sensibilities?"

"But Ves! Those people are my friends! My colleagues! Maybe even my family!"

He placed his arm around her shoulder. "You're not entirely a Hexer anymore. It's okay to take some liberties. In mech design, we shouldn't let societal constraints hinder us if it gets in the way of designing the mechs of our dreams."

"Hmph! I'm still a Hexer!" She resisted. "You may not care for my state, but I still do. Any trouble I incur will also reflect on my mother and the rest of the Wodin Dynasty. I don't want to bring them any trouble."

Urgh. That was a good point. Gloriana essentially faced the same situation as Ves when he landed on the bad side of the Friday Coalition.

As a result of his conflict with the Fridaymen, they went after his family.

Now, Gloriana risked something similar, but from her very own state this time!

Even so.. Ves was very reluctant to alter his design because of external pressure! He was convinced that his current vision was the best one they should pursue! He was not

willing to neuter his design just so he wouldn't step on the toes of some rabid female supremacists!

"Gloriana, it's really bad if we change the direction of our mech design project at this advanced state. We would have to throw out at least thirty percent of our work if we change our mind. Let's just keep building up our mech design until it's finished and decide from there. As long as we confirm its performance and the value it can bring to the Hegemony, I'm certain that you'll change your mind!"

"If you say so. I'm willing to give it a shot, but only because of you. If my co-designer was anyone else, I would have long pulled the plug on this project!"

Ves believed it wouldn't come to that. Only he possessed a complete picture of the vision of this mech. The design spirit he had in mind for this mech would be so profound that he was convinced that he could sway every Hexer into supporting his product!

As the two enjoyed their loving moment, his hand that was resting on her shoulder gradually swept lower and lower. Just as it started to inch towards a more sensitive part of her body, it soon bumped into an obstacle!

"Miaow miaow miaow!"

Clixie angrily woke up from her doze and climbed up to Gloriana's chest to block the intruder!

"Uhm, Gloriana, could you please move your cat away?" He pleaded.

"No."

"Why not?"

"We're at work, Ves!" She replied in an exasperated tone! "Aren't you the one who said that we should always stay professional while we are at our workplace?"

"I did? Wow, I must have been very stupid back then."

She giggled. "I think you're quite cute, Ves."

"So about your cat.."

"No. This is not the time."

"What about tonight?" Ves hopefully asked.

"You only get a reward if you've been good." Gloriana stated with a tone of finality. "Right now, it seems you've been quite naughty so far, so it looks like you won't be getting your fun tonight!"

She pushed herself away from her side and stood up. She continued to hug Clixie as she started to head towards the exit.

"Ves.. I really hope your plan works out for our Hexer mech design. If not, I'll be the first to punish you! I won't tolerate any attempt at mocking my beliefs!"

He innocently threw up his hands. "It's not like that! My mech will truly pay tribute to the greatness of Hexer culture and the truths of hexism, I swear!"

"Really?"

"I am the most honest mech designer in the galaxy! Have I ever broken my principles?"

Gloriana looked suspiciously at him, and so did her cat!

"Miaow!"

Chapter 2049 The Big Preparation

After several months, the striker mech project neared completion.

After a third round of iteration and prototype testing, hardly any surprises emerged. The few unexpected deviations didn't meaningfully affect the performance of the mech.

Of course, performance nerds still cared a lot about these small discrepancies. Any instances of inefficiencies and lack of optimization had to be worked away with entirely before they were remotely satisfied with their work!

Fortunately for Ves, he was the one who decided when to drop the curtains on the project. Though his girlfriend still demanded extra time to refine the design even further, he resolutely blocked her requests!

She may have the upper hand on him in bed, but he would be damned if he let her take charge of the design lab as well! This was his most important bastion and the source of his confidence!

Besides, they already agreed that Ves had the final word on mass-production mech designs. When they designed a custom mech, then Gloriana possessed the biggest say, but their striker mech was anything but a product tailored to a single customer!

"We don't have the time to iterate further." Ves put his foot down. "Our Larkinson Clan is bleeding cash left and right and will likely deplete all of our savings in less than a year."

On top of that, the LMC hasn't published a new product that possesses wide appeal since the start of the Sand War! With all of the disruption that has happened in the Komodo Star Sector, all kinds of pirates and scum are already pouring into the space devastated by the sandmen. A mech that can proficiently deal with hordes of low-quality mechs will be incredibly valuable to many outfits looking to pick the ruins!"

His personal analysis of the market situation concurred with the market reports compiled by the LMC's Marketing Department. Everyone saw that his product would likely sell well if it fulfilled its role!

While its technical performance didn't particularly exceed other spaceborn striker mechs, its promised fear-inducing glow was something that might completely revolutionize everyone's views on this mech type!

The Living Mech Corporation needed to strike while the iron was hot! Not only did Ves want to take advantage of the current market trend, he also wanted his mech company to show up on the news again! The company's hard-earned reputation was already eroding due to its lack of activity because the market's attention span was too short!

"Are we truly ready?" Gloriana asked with doubt. "This isn't the Sand War anymore. While the Komodo War is still raging in the center of the star sector, many of the lesser states are in the process of accumulating their strength."

He shook his head. "Even with some minor inefficiencies, our striker mech is still competitive compared to the competition. Besides, what you are talking about mostly concerns state actors. Our striker mech is a purely commercial product that is targeted towards security companies, mercenary corps and other private outfits. Their procurement patterns aren't as sensitive towards generational shifts."

States possessed a high sensitivity towards new generation shifts. Their mech militaries abhorred fielding outdated mechs. Even a ten percent difference in performance between the generations was enough to shift the outcome of a war against a rival state!

For this reason, ever since the new generation rolled in, practically any state that wasn't destitute or in collapse had undergone a very broad renewal process.

Their mech militaries gradually recycled as many mechs as possible and built new generation mechs as fast as their military industrial capacity allowed.

Of course, they mostly procured mechs designed in-house or in partnership with certain trusted Seniors.

As for the regular outfits, they tended to cling onto their older mechs for a longer time. Their financial situation usually didn't afford them the luxury of exchanging their mechs as if they were clothes.

While the more prudent outfits saved enough money in the past to invest in new war machines, even they tended to be cautious and patient. The first models to enter the market were usually overpriced and underpowered.

It took several years for the product offerings to slowly ramp up their standards to an optimum level. At that time, the mech designers became fully proficient in the changes the MTA introduced in the new generation.

So far, this ramp-up pattern was still an on-going process, but the rate of improvement had already slowed down. The mech industry already familiarized itself with the most drastic changes.

This meant that more and more outfits were entering the market in waves. The actual details concerning their purchasing behavior was actually very nuanced and complex, and Ves could talk for days about this subject.

However, that didn't change his overall conclusion, and that was that this was a good time to release a new product!

"Are we really going to settle with this iteration of our design?" Gloriana asked.

"We are." Ves smiled. "Let's finalize our work. We have spent enough time on it already."

The process of finalizing a mech design was a bit more complicated than before. With the growth of the LMC and its expansion in other states, the mech company had to comply with a lot more legal and administrative demands.

The headquarters of the LMC turned into a hive of activity. Both new and old workers initiated the process of introducing the new products to a diverse range of markets.

In some states with open economies, that might be as simple as filing a simple document to a government institution.

For the more troublesome states with more regulated economies, the LMC had to submit a more elaborate application. Not only that, but the mech company also had to submit the mech design and a physical copy to the MTA for validation.

Without the Mech Trade Association's stamp of approval, there was no way those picky foreigners would allow a potentially-dangerous mech to be put on sale!

In addition to all of this regulation-related work, the LMC also needed to finish its preparation for a large, multi-state marketing campaign.

In truth, the mech company already began its marketing preparations at the start of the striker mech design project. Ves frequently fed pertinent information about the project to Gavin, who proceeded to pass it on to the Marketing Department.

Ves and the LMC both had high hopes about this new product. Most of the LMC mechs with glows had already proven successful, and this one should be no different.

The question wasn't whether the product would be a success. The true issue they worried about was whether it would sell quickly enough!

As long as the opening sales surpassed a certain threshold, the momentum generated from all of the hype about the new product release could be used to drive up even more interest!

In order to reach sales figures that were close to the numbers of the Desolate Soldier, the LMC had to go all-out and invest a lot of money to publicize the new release!

Though Ves winced at the astronomical price of the marketing campaign, he knew it would likely pay off in the end. Just because Ves and the LMC had both become famed throughout the star sector after their latest accomplishments didn't mean they could just coast on free publicity!

While all of this took place, Ves and Gloriana prepared to fabricate the first production model.

The first copy of a mech design was always a significant step to mech designers. This was usually the time when they both 'completed' their mech design and received the corresponding feedback from their design seeds.

It was also the best and most hopeful opportunity to fabricate another masterwork mech.

To Ves, this moment was even more significant.

First, he deliberately refrained from bestowing a name upon the mech design.

Second, he held off on bestowing the mech with a design spirit until the final moment.

Both of these measures served to maximize his momentum for his upcoming fabrication session!

Every member of the design team gathered at the mech workshop next to the design lab. The Tovars and the Ylvainans both looked incredibly enthusiastic at the show they were about to witness!

It was rare to see Ves and Gloriana put together a mech in person. Each time they did so, they served as an example for the others to follow. This was because their fabrication and assembly skills were some of the best in the LMC!

It was a pity they weren't allowed to assist in person, but with their lack of experience and proficiency, they would just get in the way of the lead designers. In the worst case, the clumsiness exhibited by the assistant mech designers might very well spoil the creation of another masterwork mech!

Both Ves and Gloriana prepared carefully for this fabrication session. Gloriana, in a rare moment of benevolence, dismissed the guards from their stateroom the night before and allowed Ves to enjoy some much-desired fun!

The glow he exuded when he woke up the next morning was so bright that even Lucky couldn't stand its intensity!

"Meow!"

"What do you mean I smell?" Ves frowned as he began to eat his hearty breakfast. "I took an extra-long shower this morning!"

Sitting on the opposite side of the table, Gloriana partook in her breakfast as well. She grinned at her boyfriend.

"I'll give you another reward if you do well in our fabrication session." She promised with a coy smile. "I already told you, Ves. As long as I'm in a good mood, I'm open for anything! If we happen to make another masterwork mech..."

Ves gulped.

Though she didn't elaborate on what might happen, his overactive imagination was already conjuring up all kinds of heated scenarios!

"I will do my best!" He quickly coughed and tried to regain his composure. "I mean, I will endeavor to replicate our previous success and craft a mech that meets our expectations."

To be honest, Ves had a hunch that he wouldn't be getting lucky anytime soon. Making a masterwork mech was anything but guaranteed and building one consecutively right after the Quint was highly improbable!

Though Ves harbored plenty of enthusiasm for his striker mech design, it hadn't reached the level of anticipation he held towards his Hexer mech design project. The latter was a true game changer as far as he was concerned, and Ves already made more elaborate preparations in order to maximize its impact.

As for this session, he believed it was much more likely he would be getting the cold shoulder after this conclusion!

Ves tactfully refrained from voicing his doubts. There was always a chance a fluke might occur, and he never ruled out a lucky break. It was just that his intuition hinted that he should temper his expectations this time.

Before he began to bestow his mech design with a glow, he turned to the two Larkinson seeds that had been invited to the mech workshop as well. Just like his assistants, they looked forward to witnessing their idols in action!

"When you witness what we are about to do, don't focus too much on what you can see with your eyes." He advised. "Instead, feel the love and care we put into our work. Close your eyes and sense how we shape the intangible properties of our mech with our efforts. As long as you can perceive what we do on this level, there is hope that you may be able to develop a similar specialty to mine."

Both Maikel and Zanthar looked incredibly hopeful at his vague words!

Though Ves didn't outright spell it out, he basically suggested that he might pass on some of his core teachings to the Larkinson seeds!

He had no intentions on passing all of his exclusive knowledge to them both. Neither of them possessed the high degree of spiritual perception that his design philosophy depended upon. That did not mean he could steer them in a direction that enabled some forms of spiritual manipulation.

Perhaps he could raise another mech designer like Ketis, who received so much influence from him that she found a way to manipulate spirituality in her own unique way!

Chapter 2050 Spiritual Counterbalancing

Ketis watched from the sidelines along with the rest of the assistants. This time, Lucky approached her position, causing her to hold him in a hug.

"What do you think, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"I don't even know why I ask." She ruefully smiled. "I don't even know what you're saying."

Clixie soon padded over as well. She looked up to Ketis and Lucky with a curious expression.

"Miaow?"

"Do you want me to hug you as well?"

"Miaow."

Since Clixie didn't seem to refuse her suggestion, Ketis picked up the organic cat.

"Wow, you're so soft! Your fur is so fluffy! No wonder Gloriana likes to carry you around a lot!"

Both cats were incredibly adorable in their own way! For a moment, Ketis wanted to obtain her own cat!

"Stupid Ves." She grumbled. "You never did get me a pet."

"Meow."

"Miaow."

"Oh, you lovelies. At least I can cuddle with you! The two of you are so warm!"

While Ketis fooled around with the two cats, Ves temporarily withdrew himself to a private office with Gloriana and Nitaa and activated his signal jammer.

He held out his hand and accepted the Larkinson Mandate from Nitaa. The Golden Cat who resided inside looked curiously at the clan patriarch.

"I might need your help." He spoke to Goldie. "What I'm about to do is very experimental and likely very dangerous. I may have to depend on your abilities to contain the possible fallout. Can you do that?"

Nyaaaaa.

The Golden Cat eagerly nodded. She had finally stabilized her strength after the Larkinson Clan had ballooned in size. Not only that, but the constant development of clan culture and clan cohesion constantly shaped her as well. Her horizons constantly expanded due to all of the diverse people that joined the clan.

With the guidance she received from Qilanxo, she was far from simple these days!

With Goldie's reassuring aura suffusing his body, Ves felt as confident as ever in the experiment he was about to perform!

His goal? To stuff two spiritual entities of equal strengths into a single mech!

This was something that he had never really done. He vaguely did something similar with his images, but that was a different case.

His original plan for his striker mech project was to designate Zeigra as its design spirit.

This was a simple and cheap solution that cost almost no effort on his part. The reason why he settled on this choice was because he believed that Zeigra's predatory intimidation should be enough to impart his striker mech with a reasonable amount of deterrence power!

Yet when he failed to solve the capacity problem, he no longer thought that was enough. Making the striker mech's flames a little more frightening was not sufficient anymore!

In order to truly raise the value of his product, Ves concluded that he needed to amp up the fear factor of his mech!

Of all of the fearsome spiritual entities at his disposal, he could only turn on the only remaining entity that had the power to frighten everyone out of their wits as long as they came close!

For this reason, Ves turned his attention to a couple of boxes placed on the desk.

He first opened up a box containing his precious F-stone. He wanted it to be ready and within his reach should anything go wrong.

He next inspected the P-stone he retrieved from the vault that contained a reserve of spiritual energy. While he didn't anticipate expending a lot of energy this time, it was still prudent to have an extra supply within reach.

After that, he took a brief glance at the P-stone which held the spiritual entity known as Zeigra. Though the former Crown Cat hated Ves with a vengeance, it knew better than to leave its confines. Zeigra would almost certainly die if he attempted to brave the corrosive winds of the imaginary realm!

After making sure that everything was in order, he finally proceeded with the most important step. He approached the B-stone lockbox and carefully opened it up, revealing a P-stone containing a very ominous spiritual fragment!

He picked it up with his hand and tried his best not to become affected by the spiritual fragment's unsettling attributes.

Ves had already purified the fragment he carved out of Nyxie beforehand. Through a ruthless cutting process, he spiritually isolated and amputated many of the spiritual attributes that had nothing to do with what he wanted.

As a result, the fragment rapidly dropped in strength while at the same time becoming less muddled!

The final version was a spiritual fragment that contained a reasonable amount of spiritual attributes that Ves found creepy.

Ever since he opened the B-stone lockbox, the fragment's disconcerting aura already started to bleed out into the office. Both Gloriana and Nitaa paled as they sensed as if something very powerful was looking down on their existences like they were bugs that needed to be squashed!

"Goldie!"

Nyaaaa!

The Golden Cat soon began to intensify her glow. The Larkinson Mandate began to unleash an aura that spiritually counteracted the purified fragment's influence!

The altered fragment backed down a bit, but still seemed determined to scare everyone within reach!

"Is this.. what you plan to put inside our mech?" Gloriana asked with worry. "This is way too much! What stops our customers from dying from fright?!"

Though he understood her concerns, the fragment wasn't representative of the end result.

"I have a plan, Gloriana. Please be patient. The glow of our mech design will be substantially different."

Actually, Ves didn't really have a good estimate on how it will end up. This was because he was doing something new. Though he formulated a range of possibilities, even he couldn't control the process!

As he held the P-stone with the suppressed fragment, he took a deep breath.

"It's time we bestow a name to our striker mech design. As a machine that is meant to deter approaching enemies in space, it should have a name that reinforces its dominion! At the same time, its name should also reflect the terror that it is able to evoke in its foes!"

What name did Ves settle on for this ambitious new mech design?

"From now on, this mech design shall be known as the Doom Guard!"

Doom Guard!

It was a name that reflected both aspects of his vision! Gloriana's eyes widened as she contemplated her boyfriend's choice!

The word doom described the unsettling certainty that people felt whenever they came under the sway of Nyxie's frightening influence.

The word guard alluded to its defensive role. Ves designed the mech to guard a ship or defensive position with its thick armor plating and formidable flamethrower.

The slow acceleration of his mech due to its proportionally-underpowered flight system meant that it moved far too slow to participate in many offensive actions.

The moment he confirmed the name for the mech design, a small shift in mentality took place in both Ves and Gloriana. After so many months of working on their mech design, they could finally call it by its true name instead of its mech type!

Calling it the Doom Guard at this moment served a very specific purpose. Ves wanted to latch on to the meaning and connotations of this name to guide the process he was about to start!

After he concentrated his mind, he began to perform several simple acts.

First, he attempted to project Zeigra's presence into the imaginary space of the Doom Guard design.

This was a relatively familiar process to him now. Soon enough, the mech design gained a glow that was very reminiscent to the Devil Tiger!

Ves didn't need all of those properties. In order to modulate the glow, he brought out various empowered images from his mind and stuffed it into the Doom Guard design.

The spiritual foundation of the design combined with the newly-introduced images. The resulting combination exerted more influence on Zeigra's projected presence.

The glow of the Doom Guard design slowly grew weaker. At the same time, it became a bit less mixed as the images weakened the primal and cat-like qualities.

What was left was mostly a sense of restrained aggression. The glow of the Doom Guard now exuded a sense of predatory intimidation, which fell in line with his previous vision.

If Ves followed his original plan, then he would call it a day at this point.

That was not what he intended to do today. He wanted to augment the glow of Doom Guard!

If he wanted to form a proper spiritual configuration for his Doom Guard, then his normal solution was to form a new spiritual product.

This option was not on the table. Each time he created one, Gloriana exhausted herself! How could Ves ask her to make this sacrifice when their Hexer mech design was close to completion?

For this reason, Ves racked his brain for an alternate solution. He wanted a way to achieve his objective without resorting to costly methods.

Eventually, he took inspiration from the haphazard spiritual surgery he performed on Silent William. He became fascinated by the way his original spiritual potential coexisted alongside Nyxie's spiritual contamination.

Ves eventually resolved this contradiction between the two spiritual presences. He broke them apart in order to create a new spiritual product derived from both.

What if he didn't?

What if he allowed the status quo to remain in existence?

Certainly, Silent William would never be able to advance to expert candidate with a conflicted mind and spirit, but other than that, he performed quite well!

During the period where his spirituality was split in opposing sides, Silent William exhibited the traits of both his original personality and Nyxie!

This was what Ves sought! This was what Ves wanted to establish in his Doom Guard!

Despite the latent risks and the inherent instability of such a dynamic arrangement, Ves believed he could establish the same kind of split presence in a mech design!

"Besides, if anything goes wrong, I can always abort this experiment." He whispered.

If Nyxie's purified spiritual fragment suddenly went out of control, then Ves wouldn't hesitate to end its existence!

With a deep breath, Ves began to initiate the phenomenon called spiritual counterbalancing.

He took the P-stone that rested fitfully in his B-stone lockbox and mustered up his spiritual strength.

In a single, continuous motion, he yanked out Nyxie's purified fragment out of the P-stone and quickly stuffed it into the intangible space of his Doom Guard!

Introducing this weakened but still volatile spiritual fragment into a space that was already occupied by something else immediately led to an explosive clash!

Though Zeigra was pissed at being treated like a tool, at the very least he was starting to get used to his role as design spirit.

What he wasn't used to was sharing his space with a spiritual entity whose strength was on par with his own!

This was completely unacceptable to the former apex predator of Felixia II!

The prideful former Crown Cat immediately set upon the entity he regarded as an intruder!

However, his opponent wasn't so easily felled!

Though cut off and cut down from its progenitor, Nyxie's purified fragment was still very formidable! It quickly resisted Zeigra's attacks and began to counterattack!

The spiritual ripples resulting from their violent conflict began to spill over into the material realm! Ves, Gloriana, Nitaa and the Golden Cat all felt nauseous to some degree!

Nyaaaaa!

Goldie quickly exuded more strength in order to suppress the spiritual ripples! The problem was that she was barely able to calm everything down at her current level of strength!

Zeigra had grown stronger after serving as the design spirit of the Devil Tiger and the Prideful Soldier!

Nyxie had always been strong, and grew even more imposing as his main spirit slowly began to emerge out of his eons-long slumber!

Their direct clashes turned out to be considerably more violent than Ves anticipated! He struggled to maintain his concentration! It was vitally important he maintained his spiritual sight in order to intervene when necessary!

He could not allow Zeigra or Nyxie to gain the upper hand and dominate each other! Once that happened, the spiritual counterbalancing that Ves attempted to achieve would fail!