

Mech 2111

Chapter 2111 The Superior Mother

Ves looked at the giant statue of his mother in shock!

Even as lightning continuously struck its surface, Ves was the only person present who could see what kind of fearsome existence resided inside.

The vessel that Ves planned to house his new design spirit if possible had instead drawn out his mother!

Ignoring every barrier, whether it was distance or the space warping that rendered communication and FTL travel in the Nyxian Gap impossible, his mother's consciousness suddenly showed up without warning!

The fact that his mother's spiritual fragment had rebirthed itself after being shattered was already shocking enough.

The fact that her mother's spiritual fragment was so aggressive as to cannibalize his unborn design spirit without mercy was also unexpected.

Yet the fact that this unplanned turn of events somehow resulted in pulling his mother from the beyond was completely insane!

Ves never wanted to call upon his mother! He just wanted to create a new design spirit! He had so many plans for the Superior Mother. What now? Should he ask his mother to spit out her partially-digested food?

His mother fell into silence. In his spiritual vision, he could see her sated spiritual fragment experiencing a lot of problems with trying to digest so many different attributes.

He even had the illusion that it was about to explode if it failed to solve this problem!

"Ves..." Her mother spiritually communicated. "Is this your handiwork? What kind of an abomination have you created? When I taught you how to draw upon fragments, I did not think you would do something as mad as mashing them all together! This is the most horrible expression of your power that I have ever seen!"

Ves cringed again. "I'm innovating! This is still a work in progress. It's not like you ever taught me or given me a manual. The point is that it works! I've been empowering all of my mechs this way. The Devil Tiger you stole from me is a good example of what I have been able to accomplish!"

"While I appreciate your mechs, your qi manifestations are abominable! I cannot even comprehend how they can even work! This is supposed to be impossible! You can't just create new manifestations out of the remnants of other manifestations!"

"Qi? Manifestations?" Ves questioned.

"It's not important." His mother brushed him off. "It's clear to me that you have been up to a lot of mischief lately. I won't ask why you are performing this insane ritual, but don't do it again! You're lucky enough that you have called upon me. You could have easily called upon a more dreadful existence if you were careless!"

"I won't do it again." Ves promised.

The pressure exerted by his mother's spiritual fragment exerted a considerable strain on his mind, making him feel as if he was completely powerless in her presence!

"Mrs. Larkinson, may I ask what kind of existence you have become?" Gloriana hesitantly asked.

"Some questions are best left unanswered." Cynthia quickly replied. "I don't have much time. Let me talk to my son. He has been very naughty today!"

"I told you, mom, I didn't mean it! And what do you mean you don't have enough time?"

"I'm sure you can see what is happening." She replied. "This.. manifestation of yours.. is unable to sustain its existence. I.. am not able to sustain its existence. It will reach its limit very soon. Once that happens, it will die, which means I will suffer a very harmful backlash!"

"Oh. Sorry."

"SORRY IS NOT ENOUGH! IF YOU CAN'T HOLD YOURSELF BACK, THEN AT LEAST LEAVE ME OUT OF IT! I'M ABOUT TO LOSE YEARS OF PROGRESS BECAUSE OF YOUR RECKLESS ACTIONS!"

Ves cringed again and again! His mother was truly angry!

"Is there anything you can do to prevent this outcome?"

"I'm thinking!"

"What if I can help? I was trying to make something else before you suddenly gobbled everything up. The way I see it, the best way to solve this problem is to separate what you have just absorbed."

His mother didn't reply for a moment. Ves could see that her spiritual fragment was growing more and more unstable. It probably took everything she had to prevent it from blowing into pieces!

"What.. was your original plan?" She finally asked. "Tell me exactly what you intended to do and what went wrong."

Ves did not waste any time. He rapidly and succinctly explained the steps to his plan to create the Superior Mother. He also explained how his procedure went out of control as soon as the life-attributed energy started to revive her spiritual remnant.

"I see... your theories are.. very crude. They shouldn't work, yet they do." Cynthia noted. "Perhaps it is something unique to mech designers like you. Whatever the case, I believe there is a way to resolve this crisis."

"Please explain, mother."

"From what I understand, you initially intended to create a manifestation called 'the Superior Mother' that harmoniously integrates this chaotic collection of source material, is that correct?"

Ves rapidly nodded. "All of my.. manifestations.. created through this method has never shown any incompatibility with its underlying makeup. No matter how much its individual sources conflict with each other, once I shatter them and fuse them all together, the result is a new form of life that has become its own existence!"

"If that is the case, then I will have to rely on you to steer this manifestation to a semblance of its original form."

"What do you plan to do, mother?"

"I can't divest myself entirely from this manifestation without incurring significant damage. Due to your reckless shenanigans, I am literally existing in two locations at once! This is not inherently bad, but the problem is that my existence here is highly unstable. As long as you can stabilize this manifestation, the threat towards me should be resolved."

"Will there be any lingering problems?" Ves asked.

"There will. I am not sure what, but let us get this ordeal over with first. As soon as you are ready, I will slowly reverse this transformation process. Instead of letting me consume the Superior Mother, I will instead induce the Superior Mother to consume myself!"

"Won't that harm you, mother?!"

"It's fine. My main essence resides in the Nyxian Gap. What is present here is an unexpected addition. As long as it remains alive, it doesn't matter how weak it becomes."

"How will letting the Superior Mother eat you resolve this crisis?"

"As long as the Superior Mother regains its primacy, the conflicting sources won't fight against each other anymore. This way, the Superior Mother will effectively become my incarnation."

"What is an incarnation?"

"Something that I do not want you to dabble with!" Cynthia snapped at Ves! "With your penchant for reckless experimentation, it's far too dangerous for you to become exposed to this knowledge! The less you know, the better!"

Ves looked upset. Did it hurt to tell him a thing or two?

He soon proceeded to help her 'reverse the transformation process', whatever that meant. It basically entailed trying to restore and breath life into the half-digested Superior Mother while the unborn design spirit resided in his mother's stomach.

The process was just as macabre as it sounded. Ves literally had to reach inside his mother's spiritual existence and try his best to employ his abilities.

The fact that the Superior Mother was still in an incomplete state happened to be advantageous this time.

While the Superior Mother wasn't able to defend herself, her state was highly malleable. This meant that Ves could effectively integrate portions of his mothers into the unfinished spiritual body of his design spirit!

Ordinarily, this wasn't possible, as his mother was too strong and too aggressive to allow something else to eat her essence!

However, his mother was currently doing her best to suppress all of those instincts. This allowed Ves to methodically cut pieces of her before merging it into the Superior Mother.

The process happened slowly. Even though lightning bolts continued to rain down on the statue at regular intervals, the audience kneeling in the giant hexagon still hadn't exited their strange fascination.

All of them had become enthralled by the pressure exuded by the statue!

Seeing how nobody showed any signs of acting up, Ves no longer worried about interruptions and patiently performed his task.

"This is very odd." Cynthia remarked as Ves continued to cut out more and more chunks of her spiritual body. "What you are doing appears to be exceptionally simple, but it shouldn't be possible. I can never do what you are doing."

Ves grew oddly confident after hearing that. "Creating life happens to be my specialty!"

"Idiot!" His mother admonished him yet again! "Forming manifestations like this is as absurd as chopping up random people's body parts before stitching them back together into meatballs. You should feel horrified for even thinking of doing this! Don't you realize that you have violated a very sacred taboo?"

"Oh. Anyway, it's working, right?"

"Astonishingly, it is. The crisis is slowly passing. I am very concerned you don't feel any remorse about what you are doing."

He shrugged. "I have been doing this for years, mom."

Ves broke so many rules and trampled over so many taboos that Ves didn't even bother to keep track of them. It didn't matter as long as he wasn't caught by the authorities.

Ves never even knew that his design philosophy was not permissible according to his mother. It made him feel strange. Who set this taboo? Who would Ves offend if they learned the truth about his specialty?

As the reversed transformation process proceeded smoothly, he finally felt confident enough to make a request.

"Mother? Can my girlfriend help? She was supposed to assist me in this process as well."

"Oh? Please show me, then."

"Gloriana, come here and open up your mind."

As Ves performed the same steps that allowed Gloriana's mind to draw out a spiritual projection, the Superior Mother soon integrated Cynthia's spiritual shards more effectively.

"What a stupid method!" Cynthia remarked. "I thought I had seen the depth of your lunacy, but it turns out that you are even more reckless than I imagined! Don't you realize that your girlfriend can incur some very serious injuries to her mind if you rummage through it without care?"

"Mom! This was the only way I could think of to draw upon Gloriana's assistance!"

"Ugh." His mother mentally sighed. "Let me help you just this once. I can't stand the thought of you performing this trick again."

Her diminishing spiritual fragment began to glow a bit before splitting off a mote. The tiny mote rapidly zipped towards Gloriana's mind and drilled into it before disappearing!

Though Gloriana briefly interrupted her work, she quickly resumed.

"What did you do?"

"I taught her a little trick."

The process continued to proceed until there was almost nothing left of his mother's spiritual fragment. According to his mother, Ves couldn't afford to kill it off entirely, lest his mother suffer some sort of backlash.

"Draw back." She commanded. "I can do the rest myself."

As Ves and Gloriana withdrew their spiritual projections and distanced themselves even further from the statue, the pressure in the air started to change.

A pure and motherly sensation engulfed everyone in the hexagon.

Lightning no longer struck the spotless statue as the inexplicable storm clouds slowly started to part.

A hole emerged from the cloud cover. A beam of sunlight shone onto the statue, making it even brighter and more holy in the eyes of the crowd!

Out of everyone present, only Ves could see a hint of the final spiritual transformation process.

Inside the statue, his mother seemed to integrate and latch onto the Superior Mother like a parasite latching onto an unwitting victim.

Though Ves tried his best to observe how his mother intended to turn the Superior Mother into her 'incarnation', she put up too much interference for him to get a detailed look!

A strong pulse suddenly emanated from the statue! A glow that belonged to the Superior Mother had suddenly taken on its final form!

After many unexpected twists and turns, his latest design spirit was finally born!

Even as the entire crowd rapturously basked in the motherly glow of his latest design spirit, Ves began to grow uncertain.

"Mother? Is that you?"

"I can't sustain my conscious presence here any longer." She spoke to him. "The Superior Mother is now a part of me, but she is also a separate being. Whenever I am not 'here', she exists on her own, so don't make any misunderstandings."

"You're leaving?" Ves asked, though he couldn't hide the hint of relief in his voice.

"I am, you brat. I need to get back and recover from this near-disaster!" His mother stated. "One more thing. Whatever you do, don't allow the Superior Mother to befall anything. One of the disadvantages of my current condition is that my life is effectively tied to hers!"

"Um, that's.. going to be a problem.."

"Why?"

Ves hesitated a bit. "Because... I designed her.. to be the ancestral spirit of the Hexadric Hegemony. According to my design, the Superior Mother's core existence is tied to the continued existence of a state!"

"You what?!"

Chapter 2112 Supreme

A different sort of silence ensued after the momentous ritual finally came to an end.

In the field where a giant hexagon had been built, thousands of people knelt on the ground with awe.

Each of the people invited to take part in the ceremony all gazed at the statue of the Superior Mother as if it had descended from the heavens!

Ves couldn't blame them. The theatrical show he conducted along with the unexpected complications like all of the lightning bolts raining down on the statue had caused everyone to lose their cool.

The strong, maternal glow emanating from the statue only reinforced the notion of a holy descent!

Thousands of local Sentinel men who filled up the zone corresponding to the phase of life were all in awe at the explosive series of events.

As a whole, the Sentinel Kingdom was a secularist state. Though it wasn't as ardently opposed to religion as the Bright Republic, there was a general sentiment that belief in something greater was not as important as respecting nobles!

However, right now, the huge crowd of men all turned into awestruck rabbits. The superiority imposed by the remarkable statue caused them all to develop a thought that not even the king of their state exuded as much majesty as this goddess!

Out of all of the men, one of them in particular was particularly awed by the whole event.

"Amazing!" Vincent Ricklin-Larkinson cried out as he gazed at the statue of the Superior Mother with an appreciative expression. "So this is the Superior Mother? What a MILF!"

The men weren't the only people in the hexagon who had become affected by the dramatic ritual.

The 666 'damned' Penitent Sisters all looked slack jawed as they stared at the statue. They couldn't believe that a reproduction of the statue of the Superior Mother had become the vessel of something unimaginable! Many of their beliefs had started cracking. How could a boy like Ves possibly summon a Hexer goddess?

Even though the skeptical Penitent Sisters tried their best to refute this rationale, at this moment they simply couldn't. With all of the exiled Hexers standing in such close proximity to the statue, they experienced the Superior Mother's glow at full strength.

The glow felt almost exactly they imagined the Superior Mother to be! Hardly anyone of them dared to suggest that she was fake. Their steel hearts and their sincere beliefs in hexism all rang in harmony with the glow exuded by the godly statue.

As for the 66 Swordmaidens, each of them felt both awe and disappointment. They were awed at the power exuded by the Superior Mother, but felt lacking when faced with her maternal vibe.

The Swordmaidens mostly consisted of single women. Marrying someone, settling down and raising children had never been a priority to them! Each of the Swordmaidens dedicated their entire lives to combat and swordsmanship that they never thought they could fit anything in their short and dangerous lives!

Back when they were still pirates, hardly any Swordmaiden believed they would live to old age. The frontier was a brutal place where the old and weak rarely survived for long. The Swordmaidens as a whole only existed for a few decades, so they never had any members who grew old enough to think about retirement.

Each of them used to believe that only strength mattered. Women started off at a disadvantage in the frontier compared to men, so the Swordmaidens always tried to overcompensate as much as possible in order to survive.

Yet now the Swordmaidens began to doubt whether they followed the right conviction!

Perhaps.. training their swordsmanship was not the only way to become strong.

Only Commander Dise managed to retain her composure. After becoming Qilanxo's chosen and advancing to expert candidate, her will and determination had already risen to an incredible height.

However, even she began to look thoughtful. After so many months of remaining stuck in her bottleneck, she felt as if she was taking a step forward again.

Floating in the air, Ves and Gloriana slowly recovered after the Superior Mother subsided.

Ves looked around suspiciously and tried to see whether there was any of his mother. The newborn design spirit no longer became as animated, which meant that Cynthia Larkinson's consciousness must have left.

After confirming that his mother had truly left, he relaxed his shoulders and sighed. "That did NOT go according to plan!"

Summoning his mother was the last thing he wanted to do! The less he saw her, the better! Getting scolded by her was one of the worst experiences in his life! It was bad enough that his mother admonished him. It was even worse when she did it with Gloriana hanging on to their every word!

Now that was another disaster. Ves hid many of the more sensitive portions of his life from his girlfriend for good reason. He did not wish to drag her into matters that were none of her business. The less she knew, the better!

Unfortunately, the Pandora's box had been opened, and it was him who inadvertently opened the lid. He reluctantly turned his head to see how Gloriana took in all of the remarkable events.

Her eyes lit up like stars. Her smile grew as wide as the horizon. Her entire face exhibited pure pure worship and admiration towards the statue of the Superior Mother!

"Ves.. I.. I.. I'm so blessed to have witnessed this miracle! Why didn't you tell me your mother was a goddess?!"

"Uh, what?" Ves looked taken aback. "No! My mother is dead! She's just.. a bit special. Besides, she's not a goddess!"

His mother, a goddess? As if! She was nothing more than an undead ghost who only managed to retain her existence by sucking his energy on an intermittent basis!

Unfortunately, Gloriana didn't think so. She shook her head at him. "You don't have to hide it anymore. Now I know why you're so special and why your design philosophy is so remarkable. All along, you're the son of a goddess! It's no wonder you're able to create proto-gods! Divinity runs in the family!"

Ves began to feel sick. "You're misunderstanding again! My mom is not a goddess! Gods and goddesses don't exist! Besides, don't Hexers like you think that you are superior to gods?"

"That's usually in the case of male gods, silly, hihi!" Gloriana giggled. "Your mother is completely different! So far, it seems that your mother has not only cycled through the phases of existence multiple times, but she has also managed to transcend them! Don't you understand what that means? Your mother is a Supreme!"

"What the hell is a 'Supreme'?!"

"The most powerful and revered Hexers in existence! In fact, some already believe the Superior Mother is a Supreme. It turns out that they're right! Your mother is the Superior Mother!"

"The Superior Mother is just a spiritual product!" Ves protested. "I just created her just now."

She smiled at Ves. "I listened in on everything, remember? Your divine mother even blessed our relationship, hihi! Even if she wasn't the Superior Mother, she certainly is now! Don't you know what this means?"

"No?" He looked puzzled.

"The Superior Mother is a Hexer, hence your mother is also a Hexer!"

"Nonsense! She's a Brighter!"

"That isn't all. If your mother is a Hexer, then you're a Hexer as well!"

"I'm a Larkinson! Don't spout any nonsense!"

No matter how much Ves tried to persuade her otherwise, Gloriana insisted on clinging onto her warped logic and beliefs!

Ves eventually gave up. When Gloriana became caught up in superstition, she was extremely stubborn about clinging on to them. Nothing could make her change her mind!

In any case, her outrageous babbling wouldn't lead to anything. Regardless of anything, Ves officially maintained Brighter citizenship so far. Even if his home state absolutely hated his guts, that did not change the fact that his official record stated that he was a Brighter instead of a Hexer!

Since the MTA managed his most important records, there was no way his girlfriend could magically turn him into a Hexer!

"Let's wrap this all up." He coughed.

The show was over. No matter how much the people in the hexagon wanted to remain and bask in the glow of the Superior Mother further, Ves commanded the Avatars and Sentinels to lead them all away.

Soon enough, a bunch of workers and bots dismantled the giant hexagon and all of the props. A transport vessel arrived to load up the statue of the Superior Mother and send it back to the base.

As Ves and Gloriana boarded a shuttle along with their cats and enjoyed a quiet ride back.

While Ves pressed his fingers against his forehead, Gloriana continued to smile in a giddy manner as if she had truly witnessed the emergence of a Supreme!

"Our next mech.. is going to be fantastic!" She exulted. "With your mother blessing our mech, there is no way the Hex Army will reject our work!"

At least Ves was inclined to agree on that. Leaving out the shenanigans related to his mother, his latest spiritual product truly seemed impressive!

As long as he concentrated his mind and thought about the Superior Mother, he could sense the power of the dormant spiritual entity.

With the help of the life-attributed energy, she started a lot stronger than any newborn spiritual product. Not only that, but Ves suspected that he managed to hit all of his goals in her creation.

The Superior Mother was not just a design spirit. As his ambitions grew, Ves designed her to be more than an aid to mechs and mech pilots.

He did not lie to his mother when he told her that the Superior Mother was supposed to function as the ancestral spirit of the Hegemony.

He did not impart the Superior Mother with a spiritual network, even though he could have. The spiritual network was a powerful trump card that he exclusively reserved for himself and his clan.

However, in order to make the Superior Mother more appealing to the Hexers, he did impart the ancestral spirit with some of the properties of a spiritual network.

Just like the Larkinson Clan and the Golden Cat, the Superior Mother was designed to act as a guardian to every Hexer!

As long as there were Hexers who believed in the Superior Mother, the ancestral spirit grew stronger!

This also came with a downside. If the Hexers stopped respecting or believing in the Superior Mother, then she grew weaker.

The stronger the Superior Mother became, the more her glow increased in potency. The Superior Mother might also develop more abilities or empower her existing ones.

There was one other point where the Superior Mother differed from his first ancestral spirit.

When Ves designed and created the Golden Cat, he intended her to reflect the growth and evolution of the Larkinson Clan. Though he imposed some limits to this adaptation, Goldie would always change in accordance with the clan!

This was not the case with the Superior Mother.

Unlike the Golden Cat, the Superior Mother rigidly held onto its starting values and principles! It's glow was designed to be as solid and unchanging as possible!

No matter what kind of awful beliefs and biases the Hexer attempted to impose on the Superior Mother, the strict ancestral spirit would always continue to hold onto the properties bestowed by her creator!

This was a very significant detail. Secretly, Ves intended the Superior Mother to serve as a trojan horse that would enter Hexer society and slowly change it from within!

As long as the Superior Mother took the Hegemony by storm, the people who respected or worshipped the ancestral spirit would hopefully adopt some of her values.

Ves did not harbor any ambitions to spark a revolution that completely put an end to their biases against the male gender. That would only lead to a backlash.

What he actually wanted to accomplish was to subvert some of the beliefs held by the Hexers in order to improve the standing of men in their societies!

If Gloriana knew what he was really up to, she would probably look aghast at him. Ves wanted nothing less than to corrupt her people and lead them astray!

Even if some unexpected complications occurred, his plan was still intact!

Chapter 2113 Trojan Mare

His dastardly plan to subvert Hexer culture sounded incredibly ambitious. Yet it was also not. Ves could have gone overboard, but he decided to err on the side of caution when it came to setting up the Superior Mother.

Originally, the Hexers revered the semi-mythical Superior Mother as a role model of a strong and ideal parent.

Mothers needed to be strong. Mothers needed to be storm. Though the Hexers recognized that mothers also had to bear a lot of love, the way they expressed it was very different depending on the gender of their children!

In Hexer society, girls had to be raised with a combination of strictness and tenderness. Every girl was already 'strong', in a sense. Mothers were supposed to raise their expectations towards their daughters in order to produce strong women that could provide a lot of contributions to the Hegemony.

Boys experienced a different upbringing. Mothers showed a lot more tenderness and softness towards their sons. They didn't push them around too much and were inclined to treat them as if they were younger than their biological ages.

However, mothers always tried to make sure to rein in their rambunctious sons and did their best to suppress any aggression, ego and other 'undesirable' traits from them. With an entire society adopting this singular approach, a lot of Hexer boys grew up to become boys in adult form!

Even if the grown-up boys were considered to be mature enough to handle some simple jobs, the Hexers never allowed them to take on actual responsibility!

This poisonous but pervasive custom was responsible for strangling the potential of many boys in the Hegemony!

Those who possessed the aptitude to become commanders, directors, foremen, leaders and other impressive figures never had the chance to reach these positions.

Instead, male Hexers could only perform the lowest positions that required the least amount of intelligence and skills. No matter their talent or qualifications, they were destined to serve as the lackeys to female Hexers!

Of course, there were some opportunities for boys if they worked hard enough. Only the most exceptional of the bunch received some slightly better opportunities. Journeyman Mech Designers were actually allowed to contribute a bit more to collaborative mech designers, while expert pilots all earned sufficient trust to pilot a powerful expert mech.

Sadly, too few of them exist. Only the very best boys received greater opportunities. The rest were treated as immature, incompetent menials who could never be trusted with anything important!

This was one of the most pervasive biases of Hexer society and one that had always earned his contempt the most.

As a man, Ves abhorred the way the Hexers made all of these untrue assumptions about his gender!

This was what the Superior Mother was designed to address. If Ves wanted to create a spiritual product that was supposed to appeal and empower Hexer in combat, he might as well go big and tack on some other 'features'!

When he conceived of this plan, he thought back to the time where he first entered the Ylvaine Protectorate and formed Ylvaine's spiritual fragment in order to empower his Transcendent Messengers.

Overall, he succeeded in turning his Transcendent Messengers into holy machines that strongly appealed to the faith of the Ylvainans.

It was just that Ves could have done more if he realized how much influence his Ylvainan mechs exerted over the Ylvainan people.

Though Ves wasn't sure whether the Hexers were as susceptible to this approach as the Ylvainans, in case his Hexer mechs rose to prominence, he wanted the Superior Mother to do more than look pretty.

The Superior Mother was not meant to alter her values and principles when exposed to more and more Hexers.

Instead, it was supposed to be the other way around! Ves wanted the Superior Mother to be a beacon of change. Her Hexer values differed from the most predominant beliefs in several important ways.

The speech he held before he created the ancestral spirit reflected the kind of model figure that Ves wanted to create for the Hexers.

Despite Gloriana's many complaints, Ves put a lot of thought in the ritual. He invited 66,666 local Sentinel men in order to channel a different image of mothers than the one that Hexers adhered to. The fact that they weren't Hexers citizens was intentional!

If Ves really wanted to, he could have paid a lot of money to invite a lot of male Hexers to partake in his ceremony.

He didn't. Other than costing him far too much of his hard-earned money, he did not want to be surrounded by so many Hexers who believed that they were worth almost nothing compared to women!

What Ves truly aimed to instill in the Superior Mother was the idea that there were multiple ways that mothers, and by extension women, could become strong!

It wasn't necessary for women to beat down boys.

What was the greatest purpose of mothers? Nurturing their children!

However, this did not mean that a good mother should raise their daughters into adults while keeping their sons as useless boys!

That defeated the purpose of nurturing children. What Ves instead tried to impart in the Superior Mother was the idea that it was better and more admirable to raise boys into more productive members of society!

"What is more difficult? Raising a son to become an incompetent manchild, or raising a son to become a competent engineer or bureaucrat?"

This was the challenge that the Superior Mother posed to Hexers. A mother who failed to raise her children was the opposite of a good mother!

Only those who put earnest effort into raising both their daughters and sons into capable, responsible adults deserved to be called a 'superior mother'!

Ves believed that issuing this kind of challenge in the form of his reinterpreted ancestral spirit would definitely appeal to the competitive spirit of Hexers.

Hexers always held the assumption that it was easier to raise a daughter than a son. The latter was smarter, more talented, more capable and more obedient.

As for the latter, Hexer mothers automatically assumed that their sons were trouble in the making. That was also why those mothers did not dare to teach too much to their boys.

Ves aimed to subvert this assumption.

So what if boys were more dangerous? So what if boys held greater potential for death and destruction?

Wouldn't it be an accomplishment if Hexer mothers transformed them into productive, upstanding members of society?

It wouldn't be easy, but the Superior Mother was not called this way for nothing! If mothers aimed to earn the ancestral spirit's approval, then they better do a good job in raising both their male and female offspring!

Those who moved closer to the ideal of the Superior Mother would receive more validation from her glow. Those who still held hateful thoughts about boys would instead perceive a form of pressure that encouraged them to change their ways, lest they become damned!

This was why Ves insisted on putting 666 Penitent Sisters in the zone that represented the phase of damnation.

They were the worst kind of Hexers in the eyes of the Superior Mother.

A mother who withheld love and attention from her son was not a qualified mother at all! By extension, any female Hexer who treated boys as idiots weren't worthy either, because they too carried some responsibility.

Anyone whose thoughts on boys strayed in the direction of the beliefs of the Penitent Sisters were all damned! The Superior Mother's glow wouldn't be as beneficial to them. If they wanted to earn the ancestral spirit's good graces, then they had to alter their views!

Whether this worked or not depended on how popular the Superior Mother became. Ves did not dare to assume that it would become popular instantly.

No matter what, the Hexers were very strong and proud of themselves. A glow that originated from the hands of a boy, a foreigner no less, would definitely become a hurdle!

Nonetheless, the Superior Mother still adopted most of the facets of Hexer beliefs. She still maintained the assumption that women were superior and such. What Ves merely did was to raise the standing of boys.

Aside from that, the Superior Mother was still a Hexer, just one who carried a different interpretation than most. If Ves deviated further from Hexer orthodoxy in her design, he feared his ancestral spirit might not get accepted!

Ves never lost sight of the magnitude of this grand undertaking. In his opinion, what he attempted to do was no nothing less than to redesign existing Hexer culture!

It was impossible to force a group of people to change their mindsets, especially at once. Rather than spark a radical revolution with a high chance of failure, he instead wanted to encourage a gradual evolution that would turn the Hexadric Hegemony into a more boy-friendly state.

Taking half a step forward was better than tripping backwards.

Whether this ambitious plan actually worked or not, Ves had some hopes for his female Trojan Horse.

"Actually, I should call her a Trojan Mare." He muttered.

Originally, Ves figured that even if the Superior Mother failed to catch on, no harm was done. Ves didn't care too much about the Hexers anyway.

Now, reforming them or at least getting them to appreciate the Superior Mother had become a much higher priority!

Ves didn't know what his mother meant by turning the Superior Mother into her incarnation. What exactly was an incarnation anyway?

The only crucial fact his mother told him was that her life was tied to the life of the Superior Mother!

Though Ves wasn't sure whether he should take this statement seriously, he did not dare to assume otherwise.

His mother's life was at stake!

This was an incredibly bad outcome. Ves never thought that something like this would happen!

When Ves designed the Superior Mother in a way that tied her to Hexers, he figured that she was only useful as long as the Hegemony existed.

If the Hexers somehow lost the Komodo War, then much of their culture would probably be gone in time.

At that time, there was no point for the Superior Mother to remain in existence. In fact, Ves wanted her to be gone lest she convert other women into Hexers!

That made his mother's sudden bond with the Superior Mother so crucial. With their lives tied together, Ves had to make sure that the Superior Mother remained alive and well!

The only way to do that was to preserve the Hexers, which basically meant that he could not afford to let the Hexers lose their war against the Fridaymen!

"Goddamn it."

Ves could no longer remain disinterested in the outcome of the Komodo War! Previously, he only wanted the Fridaymen to lose or suffer serious setbacks due to provoking him. In truth, he didn't mind all that much if the Fridaymen somehow managed to gain the upper hand.

He was leaving the Komodo Star Sector anyway. Only Gloriana might shed some tears, but Ves really couldn't care less about her state and people.

It was different this time. Ves, for all his ambivalence towards his mother, still loved her and wanted her to live.

This meant that Ves had to make sure the Hexers survived the Komodo War! Even if they didn't win, they at least had to end the war at a stalemate!

The immensity of this challenge put a lot of pressure on his shoulders.

While Ves hoped the Hexers were strong enough to win the war on their own. If not, Ves had to do his best to prop them up in his own way!

"I already turned around the Sand War." He softly peppered himself up. "This is not much different!"

In truth, the Komodo War was entirely different. Its scale and magnitude was countless times greater. A lot more mechs entered battle, and all of them were vastly more powerful than the pitiful mechs and starfighters used to resist the sandmen.

Not only that, but the Hexers weren't fighting against mentally-challenged sandmen! The Fridaymen were just as smart, if not smarter, and did not expend their war assets on brainless, wasteful assaults.

"They're going to be a lot harder to crack."

Chapter 2114 Sacred and Inviolable

When Ves, Gloriana and the rest returned to the base, the news of the remarkable ceremony spread by word of mouth.

Soon, the regional section of the galactic net went ablaze at all of the wild claims associated with Ves Larkinson's latest stunt!

Fortunately, the news was rather contained and did not have any further effects other than reinforcing his eccentric image.

Due to all of the precautions that Ves and the clan had taken, no direct recordings of the event had proliferated. Every single participant had to relinquish their comms and any

other electronic devices. Those with internal implants that could have recorded the ceremony had already been filtered out beforehand.

This wasn't all. Every single mech and machine present at the event had to have their logs and memory banks scrubbed. Ves ordered Crindon and his team of security experts to do more than wipe out the data.

He wanted all of the physical storage hardware to be ripped out of the mechs and machines and melted down into scrap as soon as possible.

Ves did not want a single bit of data about the ceremony to be leaked onto the galactic net, or worse, the MTA!

Hearsay and stories should be enough to increase his notoriety as a weirdo. Ves did not want any detailed recordings to land in the hands of those who could possibly glean some clues from all of the events that took place.

Perhaps the most perplexing phenomenon of all was the sudden storm clouds that formed over the giant hexagon.

No one expected this to happen. It wasn't in the plans. Cinach VI's weather forecast also didn't say anything about storms or clouds.

If Ves bothered to retain all of the data recorded by all of the machines at the event, then he might have been able to figure out why the storm had come.

Sadly, the only data he had left was the internal memory recording he stored in his implant. When he rewatched the footage of his own perspective, he wasn't able to derive an explanation behind the sudden formation of storm clouds.

"It doesn't make any sense!" Ves complained.

Like most major settled planets, Cinach VI did not feature uncontrolled weather.

Ves had already looked up the meteorological agency in charge of managing the planet's weather on behalf of House Evenson.

The control the agency exerted was fairly strict. Sunshine shone on areas when it was good to do so. Rain fell on areas where there was a need to water crops or maintain the water table.

Though the degree of control the meteorological agency exerted was not that precise, the point was to provide every piece of land with the sustenance they required on a steady and predictable schedule.

Chaotic weather was bad for business. How would tourism agencies be able to hold sunny tours if a rain cloud suddenly drenched their destination? How could farms keep their plants watered at a precisely-calculated level if there was no pattern to the rain?

Above all, meteorological disasters had to be avoided at all costs. There was hardly any benefit to letting hurricanes, typhoons, tornados and other weird weather phenomena run their course.

In short, there was no reason for storm clouds to emerge at the site during the event at that specific time.

It was impossible for them to form naturally, especially when the clouds literally emerged out of nowhere before starting to rain down thunder and lightning several minutes later!

It was even more impossible for those storms to have been induced artificially. At the very least, someone had to seed the skies with something that induced the storm clouds to form, but they were almost always a lot bigger and a lot more uncontrolled!

Even if a third-parties intended to spoil the ceremony in this fashion, the mech patrols should have hindered their approach!

The day after the eventful ceremony, Ves and Gloriana both visited a secure chamber where the Larkinson Clan placed the statue of the Superior Mother.

The mech-sized object still radiated a sense of sacred motherhood when the pair of mech designers arrived.

Gloriana instantly lit up and respectfully bowed. "Good morning, Cynthia Larkinson!"

"Cut it out!" Ves admonished his girlfriend. "The Superior Mother is not my mother! She's a spiritual product! My mother is just.. tied to it. That's all."

Gloriana looked oddly at him. "You should be more respectful towards your mother, Ves. She's a goddess and a Supreme."

Ves palmed his face.

She took no notice of his reaction and happily approached the statue. She then proceeded to kneel in front of it in order to pray!

The sight disturbed Ves beyond belief. Though he expected his own girlfriend to become enamored by his new spiritual product, the fact that it was a part of his mother made this situation very weird!

As a Brighter, Ves abhorred superstition. What Gloriana was doing was no less than treating his mother as a goddess that deserved to be revered!

He slowly stepped forward and began to scan the statue with the equipment he had already brought forward.

Ves wanted to inspect the physical condition of the statue and see if it had changed due to the formation of the Superior Mother or the random lightning that struck its surface.

Fortunately, it quickly became clear that the statue was still intact and whole. How could mere lightning damage something as strong as his work? The statue largely consisted of Breyer alloy, which was tough enough to resist a lot of second-class ordnance! The power of a lightning bolt paled in comparison to a positron beam!

Nonetheless, his intuition hinted that the lightning storm was not as simple as it appeared. Perhaps its power was more destructive than he thought.

However, it was still a stretch to think that the lightning could have been powerful enough to damage something made out of Breyer alloy.

The odd thing about the statue was when he began to inspect it through his spiritual senses rather than his scanners.

The entire statue glowed as if it was one of his gold label mechs. It had somehow acquired a spiritual foundation that seemed to compliment the dormant ancestral spirit that resided within.

It gave the statue a sacred and inviolable quality that Ves had not intended to add to the work.

As for the Superior Mother herself, the newborn ancestral spirit did not respond to his spiritual queries. Ves guessed that the process that his mother used to turn the spiritual product into her incarnation might have sapped a lot of energy or something.

Whatever the case, the Superior Mother did not look sick or anything.

Since the Superior Mother was dormant, Ves took a closer look with his spiritual senses and tried to see what was different now that a portion of his mother now resided in her spiritual being.

He found nothing. As far as he could tell on the surface, the Superior Mother largely matched the product he set out to create from the start.

"Where is my mother?"

Perhaps Ves had to break the Superior Mother apart in order to uncover a trace of his mother, but obviously he couldn't do that. He just had to take his mother's word that the spiritual product was tied to her life.

Ves scratched his head as he proceeded to look for any bond or connection that led back to his mother.

He spotted nothing.

"How are they tied, then?"

His mother's abilities worked on different principles than the ones he was familiar with. Their methods were so different that his plan to decipher and reverse-engineer his mother's incarnation technique had failed!

Even though his mother told him no, Ves wasn't resigned to that answer!

"A technique with such a massive disadvantage should at least have a corresponding advantage. What are the uses of incarnation?"

Ves suspected that this might be the way for him to be in two places at once.

Wouldn't that be great? He could retain his main consciousness in his body while ordering Ranya to make a clone and somehow turn it into his incarnation.

If this wild plan succeeded, he could practically live a second life through his second body! Ves could opt to foist an alternate identity on his incarnation and leave him behind in the Milky Way Galaxy while he merrily left for the Red Ocean.

Sadly, his stingy mother declined to teach him this trick. According to her, it was too dangerous to leave in his hands.

"Tch. Why are you hogging all of the good stuff to yourself?"

His fantasy of living two lives at once were dashed.

Perhaps it was for the better. He already had his hands full with his current life, after all!

When Gloriana finally finished praying to his mother, she walked to him with a radiant smile.

"This statue serves as a much better altar than my other ones! I love basking in your mother's divine domain. I feel so validated and encouraged under its influence that I can't imagine resorting to anything else."

Ves pressed his lips. "It's too big, though. I designed the statue to impress a crowd of 66,666 men."

"Can't you reproduce it on a smaller scale? Preferably with the same glow?"

"I.. could.. but.. let's talk about that later. We should focus on our work."

Ves did not wish for his girlfriend to carry around a miniature altar based around the Superior Mother everywhere!

"What do you want to discuss?" She asked when her religious fervor subsided.

"We should finalize our mech design as fast as possible. Have we received any data on the tests performed on the first iteration of Hexer mech design?"

"My mother's people have already sent the first batch of test data. It's already very detailed. I suppose we can use that to start on developing the second iteration of our mech design. It's just.."

She looked uncertain.

"What is it, Gloriana?"

His girlfriend pointed at the statue. "I'm not sure whether it's appropriate to attach a Supreme to a male mech design. It seems.. wrong."

Ves sighed. "I already told you. The Superior Mother is not exclusive to women. As a design spirit, she is quite versatile. I designed her that way. While she is just a single entity, she also encompasses the six phases of existence and many of the facets of Hexers. In the case of our landbound knight mech, she acts as a reassuring mother that watches over her son. I believe our finalized mech will produce some surprising results once the Superior Mother takes hold."

One spiritual product, countless applications.

This was one of his other goals with the creation of the Superior Mother. He did not want to create a specific Hexer mech design for every other Hexer mech he designed.

Instead, he tried to make sure he added enough versatility in the ancestral spirit to add something useful in every mech design. Landbound or spaceborn, male or female, offensive or defense, the Superior Mother was compatible with every possible variety!

"I think my mother will be very impressed with our debut Hexer mech design." She smiled impishly at him. "In fact, once she learns that your mother is a Supreme, she will—"

"—NO!" Ves immediately turned and held her shoulders. "Do not tell your mother or anyone else about my mother!"

"B-But why?" Gloriana sputtered with shock.

"It's a long story. Suffice to say, there's a very good reason why she is gone."

He briefly explained that his mother attracted some very powerful enemies and was being persecuted. Gloriana predictably reacted with outrage and alarm, but Ves did not reveal anything about the Five Scrolls Compact or anything else that would get her in trouble.

"I see." She spoke after she calmed down. "If that is true, then.. it's best to keep this news under wraps. Will there be any problem with spreading the Superior Mother?"

Ves shook his head. "There shouldn't be. The Superior Mother doesn't contain any trace of my mother. If the ancestral spirit posed any threat to her, then my mother would have warned me or chosen another solution."

In fact, he suspected that his mother may have chosen to turn the Superior Mother into an incarnation because it hid her presence so well!

If Ves with his powerful spiritual sensitivity wasn't able to detect a trace of her mother in the ancestral spirit, then the Five Scrolls Compact and any other enemies would probably have no clue either!

In this way, Ves did not have to worry about attracting any unwelcome attention if the Superior Mother proliferated.

A curious thought began to enter his mind.

Would the Superior Mother be able to strengthen his mother and feed her addiction to spiritual energy?

His eyes lit up. In theory, this should be the case!

If everything went well, Ves would finally be able to get rid of his status as her personal energy battery! His mother should no longer have any reason to suck him dry!

Chapter 2115 Watching Mother

With the creation of the Superior Mother, Ves and Gloriana spent all of their remaining time on bringing their Hexer mech design project to completion.

With the assistance provided by the Wodin Dynasty, the subsequent testing, debugging and optimization phases took place in rapid tempo.

Since the Hexers always expected their mechs to be sound and free of defects, the pair invested a lot more time and effort into this final sprint.

As a private commission, their mech design did not have to pass through the notoriously difficult approval process conducted by a board of matriarchs.

DIVA enjoyed the right to use any mech it saw fit. How else could their agents infiltrate other forces and misdirect their enemies if their mechs always looked the same. Even an idiot could tell that the Hexers were up to something if a bunch of superb female mechs appeared out of nowhere!

That said, both Ves and Gloriana tried their best to meet the exacting standards of the Hex Army.

It was a fantasy to believe that they were capable of matching the best efforts of Hexer Master Mech Designers. They didn't even come close. The test data and the commentary provided by the Hexer testing ground made it very clear that their mech fell short in many areas, from optimization to absolute performance criteria.

Neither Ves nor Gloriana let this discouraging feedback stop them from pouring their all into their mech.

To Ves, the mech was his first and most important opportunity to spread the Superior Mother in Hexer society! If his Hexer mech design fell flat, then the future of his new ancestral spirit was anything but certain.

Now that his own mother's life was at stake, Ves felt pressured to do his best to deliver a successful product!

As for Gloriana, she made a request right after Ves conducted the dramatic ceremony.

"Could you bring the statue of the Superior Mother to the design lab?" She asked.

"Huh? Why?"

She smiled shyly at Ves. "I want your mother to watch over me while I work on her first mech. It would feel so good to know that she is supporting me from behind."

"I already told you that the Superior Mother may not necessarily be my real mother!"

"Oh, the ways of a goddess and a Supreme is beyond our ken." She baselessly stated as if it was the absolute truth. "You shouldn't doubt your mother so much. She quite possibly ranks among the greatest Hexers alive and dead. In fact, in my opinion, she is already the best because she raised a good son like you, hihi!"

Ves did not look amused. Ever since she became aware of the continued existence of his mother, his girlfriend's superstitious delusions had grown worse!

No matter what he said, his words simply failed to register in her head. She didn't even try to refute his sober arguments. She just acted as if he didn't say anything!

He was already used to this behavioral quirk of hers. Fanatics always limited their attention to what they wanted to hear, and her sincere beliefs in hexism turned her mind into an impenetrable fortress against any form of doubt!

In the end, Gloriana wouldn't stop nagging him until he acquiesced. Some heavy-duty bots moved the statue to the design lab, which for many purposes had to be big enough to accommodate a mech.

Once there, the entire design lab basked in the pervasive motherly glow of the Superior Mother. Though the ancestral spirit was still dormant for some reason, both Ves and Gloriana were hit full-blast with the glow that would nurture many Hexer mech pilots in the future!

Ves figured that it was a good thing that his design teams weren't present. Everyone, including the older assistants, were currently participating in a month-long acclimatization tour.

The only people he had to worry about was Maikel and Zanthar, but Ves quickly handed the two boys, ahem, adolescent men a lot of homework assignments.

At their impressionable ages, Ves did not want his young students to endure long-term exposure to the Superior Mother. Perhaps they might inadvertently become indoctrinated by her matronly glow!

"I'm raising them to become brave and daring Larkinson lads, not Hexers who need to look up to women in order to do anything!"

Ves figured that this might become a recurring problem each time he designed another Hexer mech. He contemplated setting up multiple design labs, for example one on the Scarlet Rose and another lab on the Stellar Chaser. A single shipboard design lab could easily get crowded once over seventy mech designers gathered together.

As much as he was interested in designing more Hexer mechs, he needed to make sure that those who worked on the design were resilient enough to hold on to their own values and principles.

Fortunately, most of the new hires consisted of mech designers who all possessed at least some experience and personal development. Fresh, young-faced rookies such as Mayer Torto-Larkinson were fairly rare.

In any case, now that Ves and Gloriana worked on their project in the presence of Superior Mother, their results improved.

Ves was able to get much closer in tune with the future design spirit of his product. As a mech designer who was sensitive towards moods and emotions, this was a helpful development and allowed him to make small tweaks that harmonized his design a little more with his vision.

As for Gloriana, she truly believed that his mother was watching over her efforts! Like a little girl who wanted to show off her best in front of her parents, she began to get fired up and came up with several inspiring solutions!

With their increased productivity, they developed three more iterations in quick succession, each of them becoming more flawless and optimized in a matter of days!

Due to certain time constraints, the pair did not wait for the complete test results to come back but continued to iterate on the design even as the new prototypes were still being fabricated by the Wodin Dynasty.

Compressing their schedule like this allowed them to save precious time and squeeze a little bit more performance out of their mech design. While it was still better to optimize the design for a couple more months, Ves simply didn't think it was worth the time investment.

He had been staying in the Cinach System long enough. Ves should have begun to enter the Nyxian Gap by now, but he delayed his departure in order to make sure his first second-class mech design turned into a fine representation of his work.

As Ves and Gloriana completed the fourth and final iteration to their design, they both took a step back.

The projected design was beautiful in his eyes. Its large frame, its sturdy exterior, its robust energy siphoning appendages and its solid sword and shield all looked imposing.

Ves was largely responsible for shaping the overall look of the mech. His artistic sensibilities and his vision drove him to design an external appearance that conveyed rock-solid reliability.

Even though it was functionally a damage sponge and an energy dispenser, Ves wanted his Hexer knight mech to break with the conventional pattern of male Hexer mech design.

His girlfriend couldn't help but remark on this distinct difference. "Your mech looks very stocky and sturdy. It boasts a lot more sharp edges than what Hexers are used to. If you ask me, this mech is quite masculine. I'm not sure it will go over well with our target audience."

"If you study its appearance alone, then you're right. However, don't forget about the Superior Mother. With such a nurturing, feminine glow, Hexers will probably have a better impression of the mech."

"That is mainly the case when they are physically close to a copy. The mech won't be able to convince those who have never been close to one. That will likely lead to a lot of problems for us in the near future."

"We'll attract critics and pushback regardless of what we do." He shrugged. "After all, a 'boy' is one of its lead designers. I trust DIVA to recognize the value of our product. If Calabast is anything like the rest of its agents, then our mech will likely be put to good use. Once our mech shows off its value on the battlefield, interest in it will likely grow!"

As one of its creators, Ves held a lot of pride and confidence in his work! His previous original mech designs such as the Doom Guards, Deliverer and the Desolate Soldier all received critical acclaim from the mech community.

His constant successes and his faith in his own design philosophy made him very sure that his latest product would definitely be able to make an impact. Man-haters or not, Ves believed that hardly any Hexer could resist the appeal of a glow tailored to their kind!

"There is truly nothing like the glow of the Superior in the Hegemony." Gloriana sighed, thereby reinforcing his confidence!

After performing a final inspection of their design, the pair finally decided to finalize it. They wrote their final reports and wrapped up all of their documentation.

Gloriana soon noticed an important detail. "Officially, we should hand in all of our files to DIVA in order to complete the commission. I'm not sure whether we are even allowed to fabricate a copy of our mech design."

If DIVA wanted to keep the mech design in reserve in order to deliver a sudden surprise to the Fridaymen, then Ves and Gloriana were not allowed to expose their work ahead of time!

This was a difficult question. Ves frowned and began to think.

"I think we should ask Calabast."

"Do we have to?" Gloriana pouted.

"It's no big deal. Besides, she manages all of our communications with the agency. Our completed mech design has to pass through her anyway."

Ves activated his comm and began to call the spymaster of the Larkinson Clan.

As soon as her projection appeared, Ves asked a couple of questions.

Calabast briefly paused. "I'm not aware of DIVA's plans for your mech design. Regardless, this commission is still confidential and needs to be handled with care. It is vital that the Friday Coalition doesn't get wind of your mech design in order to leave as many strategic options alive as possible. It is not prudent to fabricate a copy of your new mech design at this time."

"I won't accept that!" Gloriana approached the projection and looked upset. "It's important for Ves and I to make at least one copy of the mech! This is our best chance to produce another masterwork! Can't we do it in a secure workshop? We'll accept every security precaution you might impose."

"This.." Calabast grimaced.

"It's better to let Gloriana have her wish." Ves pushed as much blame as possible towards his girlfriend. "She'll nag you to no end if you deny her this opportunity."

"I feel really good about this mech design! We might be able to produce our second collaborative masterwork mech tomorrow, especially if your mother is backing up our efforts!"

"You two..." Calabast sighed and stared at both Ves and Gloriana. "I'll allow it, but only under very strict circumstances. I will go ahead and prepare a secure space for you to put your tools and production machines. My Black Cats and I will thoroughly inspect them from top to bottom in order to make sure that they aren't compromised in any fashion. Only then will I give you two the green light to make your attempt."

Though his clan's security forces regularly checked the integrity of their tools, Ves didn't argue with her precautionary measures. It was best to be sure.

"How long will that take?"

"At least 36 hours if we pull an all-nighter."

"Okay. If nothing goes wrong, we'll begin our fabrication run in two days, is that okay?"

With that set, Ves finally felt a weight lift off his shoulders. He had spent more than enough time at Cinach. Though there was plenty for him to explore, he didn't feel like staying any longer than necessary.

He was more than ready to move on from this boring star system!

Chapter 2116 Mission Readiness

With the Larkinson Clan's time at Cinach coming to end, Ves began to notify everyone that they needed to prepare for departure in the near future.

After four months of rest, growth and preparation, the Larkinson Clan had become at least several times stronger and more vigorous than it had been at the beginning of its arrival at Cinach!

Ves was very proud of what he and his clan managed to accomplish over this period of time

Every starship had been serviced and readied for the challenges that lay ahead. While Ves was dissatisfied with the quality and capabilities of most of them, at this time it was still too unrealistic to procure anything better.

If Ves wanted to leave the Komodo Star Sector, he could only do so with his second-class ships such as the Barracuda and the Scarlet Rose. That entailed leaving the rest of his clan behind, which was unacceptable.

Upgrading the FTL drives of his existing vessels or procuring more second-class ships became more important than ever! With the huge amount of revenue the LMC earned from the Doom Guard, it actually became possible to pursue either option.

However, at the moment, mechs mattered more. With the influx of a lot of new mech pilots, the LMC had to produce or procure a lot of new mechs.

Every mech roster had been overhauled or upgraded to make sure that every mech pilot was paired with a good machine. While most Larkinson mech pilots had to make do with various types of third-class mech models, enough Breyer alloy became available to provide the Avatars of Myth with an additional mech company's worth of Bright Warriors.

In fact, the Avatars could have received more copies of the resilient modular mech platform, but Ves put a stop to its production. He no longer wanted to waste any Breyer alloy. He wanted to save it up and build a huge reserve for other purposes.

Over 10,000 new recruits had joined the clan, pushing up the total number of clansmen past 20,000 and counting. The numbers still grew every day, though the growth had obviously flattened off as the existing clan structure was already straining to integrate so many new members.

Despite the challenges, Ves could feel the energy in the clan. Morale was high and plenty of newly-adopted Larkinsons couldn't wait to prove their chops!

Those who applied to the Larkinson Clan and passed the rigorous selection process weren't average people. Though they predominantly consisted of Sentinel commoners, each of them possessed excellent resumes and possessed personalities that were already compatible with the Larkinson culture and mindset.

Therefore, Ves was not afraid that the new recruits were hesitant to enter the Nyxian Gap.

Of course, some were more eager than others. Civilians who joined the clan in order to work for the LMC did not possess as much stomach for danger as an elite Avatar pilot!

In order to get a good understanding of the current disposition of his combat forces, Ves scheduled a meeting to discuss their readiness.

Major Quinlist Verle-Larkinson entered the conference first together with Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon-Larkinson.

"Good morning, sir."

"Have a seat."

Soon enough, Commander Melkor Larkinson arrived. He tipped his head at Ves and took a seat while fiddling with his visor.

Commander Magdalena Larkinson entered shortly afterwards. The older woman nodded at everyone with respect before sitting next to Melkor.

Commander Cinnabar-Larkinson and Commander Dise-Larkinson arrived in unison. They sat down while swapping some old stories.

Finally, Commander Rosa Orfan-Larkinson barged through the door five minutes late.

"Sorry about that. I lost track of time when I was chatting with one of my buddies!"

Ves coughed. "Please take your seat. We are all more than ready to begin this meeting."

He sent a measured look at Major Verle, who shrugged in helplessness.

When the Flagrant Vandals defected from the Bright Republic and decided to go their own way, they splintered. Several ships and many former servicemen refused to join the Larkinson Clan.

Among them were several capable officers who could have taken over command of the Flagrant Vandals after Major Verle received a more senior position.

The lack of senior command talent meant that Orfan was the only Vandal who possessed the 'experience', 'skills' and 'qualifications' to command the Vandals.

Putting an expert candidate or an expert pilot in charge was not an unusual phenomenon. However, there were certain people who were much more gifted in leadership than others.

Sadly, Major Verle already warned Ves that his former men wouldn't accept anyone else but Orfan. Despite her mixed results, she was a well-liked officer among the Vandals and earned their respect and trust. No one else aside from Major Verle himself could match her sway!

Therefore, Ves had no choice but to tolerate the new Vandal Commander.

If Major Verle hadn't supplied him with the incredibly valuable high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum, Ves would have put an external leader in charge!

"Alright, everyone is here. Let's start." He spoke. "Everyone knows what this meeting is all about. It is no secret that I intend to enter the Nyxian Gap and perform a possible mission for the MTA. Such missions are very dangerous, but also very lucrative."

"I have one question." The recently-promoted Commander Orfan asked. "Where are those sanctimonious Hexers? Have they pulled their sticks out of their butts yet, or do they need some help?"

"Please be more respectful towards our allies and friends." Ves warned her. "The Glory Battalion won't be accompanying us. Protecting Gloriana is a higher priority and I would feel much better if her bodyguards are all doing what they are supposed to be doing. As for the Penitent Sisters, I intend to address them separately. They have no say in our decisions."

That answered many of their doubts.

Ves clapped and turned to Melkor. "Let's begin with the Avatars of Myth. How many mech pilots and mechs can you field?"

"After extensive training and recruitment, we can field at least 600 mechs." Melkor replied. "All of them are paired with Avatar mech pilots that are largely up to our standards. In fact, we have more mechs and mech pilots than that. If necessary, we can bring 800 additional bodies, though the quality of our Avatar candidates are very inconsistent."

That was a lot! The Avatars had diminished to just a couple of hundred mech pilots after the Battle of Kesseling VIII, and that included both spaceborn and landbound specialists!

"Let's keep our expeditionary force into the frontier on the lean side, Melkor. Bring only the best and the ones who we can depend upon. There is little room for deadweight in a depraved environment like the Nyxian Gap. There won't be any safe harbor for us to shelter in and recruit new mech pilots or repair our damaged ships."

"Understood. I will stick to the original plan."

Ves turned to Commander Magdalena. "I won't bring too many Sentinels along. Most of your men need to guard the Larkinsons who remain in Cinach."

"That is prudent." Magdalena stoically answered. "Out of every division of the clan, ours has expanded the most. We are already capable of fielding 2000 mechs and mech pilots, of which 1500 are spaceborn and 500 are landbound or aerial."

The Sentinels skewed towards recruiting spaceborn pilots and procuring spaceborn mechs because there was a much greater need to protect the clan's growing fleet.

"How many do you intend to bring to the expedition?"

"Not every Sentinel has volunteered for this dangerous duty, sir. As of now, I believe it is acceptable to dispatch 500 mechs and mech pilots."

Ves looked disappointed at this anemic figure. "That is less than the Avatars. Doesn't that sound strange?"

Commander Magdalena kept her cool. ???The Avatars recruited the best out of the mech pilots that have joined our clan. To put it bluntly, my Sentinels have turned into a dumping ground for the rejects. While I take no offense at this circumstance, the reality is that hardly any of the recruits we've received are ready to participate in a high-intensity, high-risk mission in the Nyxian Gap. Even the Sentinel Peacekeepers only consist of seasoned war veterans and highly-experienced mercenaries!"

She made a very good point, though her words hardly lifted his mood.

"What is your opinion, then? Do you think it is a good idea to bring any Sentinels at all?" He asked.

"While we aren't the Avatars, we have our own pride, sir." She pushed back against the implicit doubt in his words. "There are Sentinels among us who have more ambition than others. Anyone who participates in this dangerous expedition stands to earn a lot of merits. With our reward structure, those who perform the toughest jobs are entitled to the best treatment."

The determination that Commander Magdalena conveyed convinced Ves of her sincerity.

"Very well. I'll be expecting 500 of your mechs to be a part of our upcoming mission." He then turned to Commander Cinnabar. "What about your Battle Criers?"

"Every single one of us are ready to follow you wherever you go. Unless you intend to dive straight into a black hole, we will fight with you to the end!"

Though the former mercenary commander sounded crazy, Ves was very confident that Cinnabar meant what he said.

This was the benefit of buying Kinners. Even though the emergence of the Golden Cat and the Larkinson Network massively decreased the chances of betrayal, Ves was still inclined to lean onto his Kinners for some of his more sensitive priorities. At this time, the crew of the Scarlet Rose largely consisted of Kinner bondsmen!

"How many mechs?"

"We aren't as large as the Avatars or Sentinels." The Battle Crier Commander answered. "That said, our reinforcements from the Kinner Tribe have already arrived and joined my command. We can field 240 mechs right away."

"That sounds good, though you are not necessarily required to bring everyone." Ves nodded in satisfaction. "The role your Battle Criers shall play in the Nyxian Gap may be different from everyone else. I don't need too much of your boys to come along."

He turned to the Commander Orfan, who already opened her mouth before Ves could make his query.

"Don't worry, Ves. My Vandals are in tip-top shape. Though we haven't turned into a 'raiding and reconnaissance' force as of yet, our mechs can take a lot of hits as long as we aren't fighting against Fridaymen or something."

"That's... good to hear. How many mechs and mech pilots can you bring?"

"Easily over three-hundred. We've been expanding our ranks a bit since we've arrived. We picked up a few Mech Corps deserters here and there after they heard what a sweet deal we got. We don't have the combat carriers to bring them all, though."

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven cheek. "I need your combat carriers as well as your mechs. Just bring as many mechs you can stuff in the Princely Jackal, the Shield of Hispania and the Gorgon's Gaze."

"Got it, Ves."

He moved on to Commander Dise, who exuded a sharper vibe than Commander Orfan. "Your Swordmaidens have suffered heavily losses during the Battle of Kesseling VIII."

"That doesn't mean we have lost our edge. We've already recruited a lot of promising young women to turn them into the next generation of Swordmaidens." Dise replied defensively. "As for my veterans, we could use some exercise. The Nyxian Gap is just another frontier for us. While we can only bring a single mech company, our swords are more than sharp enough to chop some pirate scum!"

"I'll make sure to facilitate some of your needs in the coming weeks." Ves promised to Commander Dise.

He owed it to the Swordmaidens to take care of them. While he couldn't provide them with better mechs as of yet, perhaps he could do something about their swords.

From spending a lot of time with Ketis, he knew that the Swordmaidens revered their blades above everything else!

Chapter 2117 Bargain Hunting

The discussion between the commanders of the Larkinson Clan dove into more complicated matters.

After every mech commander revealed how many mechs they were able to commit to an expedition, Major Verle took over and presented his thoughts on the overall force makeup.

"Spaceborn mechs are king in the Nyxian Gap." He began. "That does not mean that landbound mechs are redundant. Depending on our priorities, we might need to land on a dangerous moon or planet. While the Nyxian Gap is famous for its ubiquitous quantity of asteroids, some of them are so big that they are no different from actual planets. In addition, the Gap frequently absorbs rogue planets and other satellites. Most of these planets are barren, but some contain extremely valuable resources."

"I understand." Ves replied. "Do you think we are prepared to fight on land if necessary?"

"Our landbound combat prowess has lagged behind our spaceborn combat capabilities, sir. While it is possible for us to deploy a strong mid-sized landbound force, we must make sure to pick our targets."

"I'll take that into account, major."

"In contrast, I'm very confident we can smash any opponent in space. In the last couple of weeks, I have worked hard to facilitate greater coordination between your different mech forces. Everyone is aware of their roles and how they should act in basic scenarios. I'm still aiming to establish closer cooperation and coordination, but for now it is enough to prevent mechs from bumping into each other during battle."

The major proceeded to elaborate on the overall mech composition of the proposed expeditionary force.

With 600 Avatars, 500 Sentinels, 160 Battle Criers, 140 Vandals and 40 Swordmaidens, Ves felt confident his forces could smash any Nyxian pirate organization even without the help of the Penitent Sisters!

Still, that didn't mean that he should grow complacent.

The major laid out another concern. "Of the mechs we can bring into battle, most of them consist of medium mechs. This should give us a good array of options, but if you look closer, you'll see that we aren't as flexible as you think. Most of our mechs consists of beefy mechs with lackluster mobility. Models such as the Doom Guard and the Aurora Titan are not exactly known for charging at the enemy."

"I'm aware of the shortcomings of my mech models." Ves dryly replied. "What you're really saying is that we don't have enough mobility, is that right?"

Verle nodded. "I've studied the battles that typically take place in the Nyxian Gap. In many cases, light mechs can add a lot to the table and they are typically more effective in this region. All of the asteroids floating in every direction provide a lot of cover to any approaching mechs. Light mechs may be quick, but they are easily taken down if they are met with a storm of fire. If the machines instead hop from asteroid to asteroid, it becomes a lot harder to intercept them before they get into range."

That was a very frightening scenario. Ves only had to think back on the time the light mechs of the CRC made mince meat out of his powerful second-class battle bots when they finally closed the distance!

"We don't have enough time to field more light mechs." Ves declared. "We can address this shortcoming afterwards. For now, we will have to make the best out of the assets and resources we have on hand."

"I understand, sir."

They soon moved on to discussing more finer points. Issues such as the availability of spare parts and support services came up as well as the lack of veterancy in the Avatars and Sentinels.

"The Avatars and Sentinels are the mainstays of our expeditionary fleet." Verle noted and gestured to Commander Melkor and Commander Magdalena. "However, both troops have mainly opened their doors to younger recruits. While I understand the desire to hire talent with high potential and plenty of growth opportunities, that comes at the expensive of shutting our doors to capable veterans."

Ves turned to Melkor and Magdalena. "What do you have to say about Major Verle's warning?"

Melkor maintained his confidence. "Our Avatars are young and eager. None of them will falter. With the recent release of the Doom Guard, I have put a high priority on toughening them up in preparation for all of the setbacks that we might face in the Nyxian Gap."

"Young does not necessarily equate to being green, sir." Magdalena added. "My Sentinels have made use of the Doom Guards as well. While their performance isn't as exemplary as the Avatars, none of our Sentinels will crack so easily under pressure."

"That's enough. So long as they don't give up in battle, I can work with that." Ves declared.

After they worked out everything related to their mechs and mech pilots, Ves soon turned to the fleet component of his expeditionary force.

Fleet Commander Kronon succinctly elaborated on the readiness of the ships of every mech force. Ves listened closely as the quality and resilience of his carriers had always been of great concern.

"Our starship crews are in high spirits. My Ylvainan compatriots are especially eager to fight on your behalf."

Ves grimaced a bit at that. "I see. Our starships are in good hands, then. However, as much as I applaud the quality of our crews, what about the quality of our ships?"

"Our ships are less than stellar." Ophelia admitted without any shame. "Most of our expeditionary fleet will consist of affordable but thinly-armored light carriers. That is not very encouraging. Due to the complex environment of the Nyxian Gap, there is a significantly greater chance of encountering sudden ambushes and catastrophic traps. While the size and strength of our forces will likely deter most pirates from attacking us, you can't rule the possibility. If they do want to harm us, then I can think of many ways they can harm us without sacrificing a lot of assets. Crippling our vulnerable starships is the best way to stymie our progress."

"Our ships can take a beating." Commander Orfan proudly noted. "Just put us in front!"

"That won't guard us against ambushes from the flanks or rear." Major Verle snapped.

"Oh. Yeah, you're right."

Three combat carriers wouldn't do much to cover their entire formation. Ves just had to accept the fact that his other vessels were vulnerable targets.

"How many support ships do we plan to bring?" He asked.

"That depends on the mission parameters." Ophelia stated. "The deeper we go and the longer the expedition lasts, the more support ships we require. There are no resupply and repair points in the Gap unless you take the pirate strongholds into account. We will have to take care of all of our material and servicing needs on our own. At a minimum, I would say we should bring a dozen logistics vessels, but we may easily require more."

That meant that the expeditionary fleet would consist of even more fragile, high-value ships!

Having participated in the Aeon Corona Mission, Ves knew how vital it was to keep those ships alive. While every carrier possessed a mech workshop and some repair capabilities, their capacity was very meager.

"I'll defer to your judgement and the judgment of the commanders." Ves told Ophelia. "This isn't an option for the future, though. Our Larkinson Clan isn't short on money these days. Have you found a channel to procure better ships?"

"I have talked with Miss Gloriana who referred me to her personal assistant. Miss Melody Raft has been very helpful in sounding out ship providers from the Hegemony."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "I thought they weren't selling any second-class ships to outsiders."

"That's not exactly the case." Ophelia shook her head. "Certainly, it is very difficult to procure brand-new ships, but the Hexers have accumulated plenty of mothballed and decommissioned ships. If you don't mind relying on aged hardware, it is possible to acquire decent, armored vessels at a sharp price. Ordinarily, the Hexers who own or manage these vessels won't sell them to us, but if we use the Wodin Dynasty as an intermediary, I'm sure we can arrange something."

The Hexers disdained passing off their old but valuable starships to their lessers, but they had no problem trading them to other Hexers.

As long as those ship sellers didn't know that Gloriana's relatives intended to pass on the ships to the Larkinson Clan, then this might actually work!

Ves smiled. "Investigate this option further, please. I don't mind getting our hands on old hardware. They don't need to last decades when they fall into our hands. I will notify some people in the clan to reserve a fund for this purpose. How much money do you think you need?"

The fleet coordinator paused and performed some mental calculations. "I'm not sure the LMC can cover the cost at this time. An 'affordable' second-hand combat carrier built to Hexer specifications typically ranges from 3 to 5 billion hex credits, though don't take my

word for it. With the turbulence caused by the Komodo War, the prices fluctuate every day."

That.. did not sound as bad as Ves expected. Certainly, in the past he couldn't dream of spending so much money to procure a single ship. While the cost was still rather hefty, it was well within the tolerance of the Larkinson Clan!

The only issue was the quantity of ships the Larkinson Clan needed to accommodate all of its mechs! With thousands of mechs at their disposal, each of them needed to have a berth on a ship!

How many second-class carriers did the Larkinson Clan need to fit so many mechs?

Maybe a hundred. Even if Ves spent as little as possible, he would still have to fork over 300 billion hex credits, and that didn't take into account all of the other associated costs!

The worst part of it all was that Ves did not intend to retain so many ships for his grand expedition. A fleet beyonder ticket only allowed a galactic pioneer to bring 20 ships at most. This meant that the Larkinson Clan had to get rid of more than a hundred ships by the time Ves was ready to travel to the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy.

Of course, as long as the Larkinson Clan took good care of the vessels, it was still possible to sell them for a good price. That took some of the sting of the high price tag of such a massive expenditure.

"It's unrealistic to expect that we can cover the cost of all of those ships with the LMC's current earnings." Ves concluded. "Even if our successful Doom Guard has sparked more interest in our older products, we need to come up with a few more super sellers in order to rake in enough cash to upgrade our entire fleet."

It would be worth it, though. Once the Larkinson got rid of all of its weak third-class ships, they could travel anywhere they wished! Ves would no longer have to deal with the crap the Komodo Star Sector flung into his face every so often!

Ves expected to see some changes once he returned from his jaunt through the Nyxian Gap.

"If you are open to it, we don't have to pay for all of the ships up front." Ophelia added, which immediately caught his attention. "The Wodin Dynasty is willing to accept a modest deposit from us in order to extend sufficient credit to procure all of those ships at once. Don't forget that the longer the Komodo War rages on, the more ships get destroyed. The Hexers will eventually have to draw upon their reserve of older vessels. Picking them up before that happens will save us a lot of money."

"The Wodins aren't extending a favor to us for nothing." Ves crossed his arms. "It's an attractive solution, but not one I'm willing to accept. I don't want to increase our

entanglement with the Hexers any further. We pay for the ships with our money, understood?"

Though Ophelia obviously disagreed, she had no choice but to abide by his demand. "I understand."

Chapter 2118 Loyalty Medallions

In general, any upgrades to the Larkinson Fleet had to wait until after Ves concluded his excursion into the Nyxian Gap.

The release of the Doom Guard had already proved that Ves possessed amazing earning potential. While there were better-performing mech designs on the market, none of them could replicate the sheer utility provided by his glows!

As long as he did a good job at realizing amazing design concepts, Ves believed he could sustain his success. Even if his subsequent mech designs only achieved a quarter of the sales of the Doom Guard, that still constituted a success!

The Larkinson Clan had become stronger than it had ever been. With thousands of mechs at its disposal, the clan had reached a strength comparable to a military mech regiment.

This was quite remarkable! Not every mech designer was able to fund the establishment of such a formidable combat group. Ves was quite blessed in that regard. Other mech designers, from tiny Novices to notable Seniors, had to compete against other rivals and price their products accordingly.

Ves was spared from doing so, to a large extent. While he still had to take the competition into account, the fact that his products were so unique that they could form their own market category was an enduring advantage. The margins for all of his recent mechs likely made every other Journeyman and even Senior jealous!

The high margins also allowed the LMC to pursue a strategy of outsourcing production to third-party manufacturers and entering as many foreign markets as possible.

It was very onerous and costly to conduct business in so many foreign states with nothing but some branch offices to manage them all. Screw ups happened every day and the further from the headquarters, the more tenuous it became to maintain control.

Fortunately, the LMC's headquarters had developed quite well. Hiring notable managers and talents from the Bright Republic, Ylvaine Protectorate and Sentinel Kingdom had continuously increased HQ's capability to meet these growing challenges.

These days, Ves didn't even bother to review any reports about mundane issues such as inconsistent quality output or breach of contract. He had better things to do with his

time than to take note of problems that his managers and executives could take care of by themselves.

With the rapid expansion of the LMC and the increasing level of competence of its upper management, the roles of some people started to change.

Some of the figures that Ves was familiar with slowly made way for other people.

Calsie Doornbos-Larkinson Was one of them. As one of his earliest employees, Ves had entrusted her with a lot of responsibility, far more than a woman of her age and experience should hold.

However, with the establishment of the Larkinson Clan, Ves was able to extend a lot more trust to every member of his circle. This diminished her role until she felt she wasn't of much use anymore in the LMC.

Through Gavin, she was able to meet with Ves in order to explain her predicament.

"I see." Ves folded his hands while Lucky playfully gnawed at a chunk of mineral on his desk. "I truly value your loyalty. Being able to trust someone and be rewarded by it has been very helpful to me. You're better than your fellow Cloudy Curtainer in that regard."

He was obviously referring to Gavin, who shifted uncomfortably as his boss brought up his original sin yet again.

"My role these days isn't as good as Gavin's." She calmly spoke. "He serves as your link to your company, while I am basically reduced to watching more qualified executives do their work."

"You want to do something useful then, correct?"

"I want to earn my keep!" She placed her hand on her chest. "I put my heart in the LMC as well as everyone else who stuck with you from the beginning. I have kept up with my studies and continuously invested in myself in order to keep up with what is going on as best as possible. It is my hope that I can do something meaningful."

"Hmmm.." Though Ves empathized with her desire, to be honest he didn't even know how his company was run these days. Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson was in charge, and so far Ves heard nothing but good things about the old man. "Benny, perhaps you could suggest something. What position can Calsie fulfill that is within her range of competence?"

Gavin blinked, not expecting that Ves would freely solicit his input. "Uhm, while it's true that the LMC is being very well run these days, that only applies to the headquarters. The management of the branch offices can be.. less than stellar most of the times. It's

mostly due to distance. Our headquarters can't exert strong control over the branches, and it will only grow worse in the event we eventually depart from this star sector."

This was a looming problem for the LMC.

"What do you suggest?" Ves asked, already suspecting that his assistant had something to say about this conundrum.

"Several proposals have emerged. Personally, I think one of them in particular is quite good as long as you are willing to invest a bit." Gavin carefully spoke. "The main issue is the lack of loyalty from the directors of the branch offices. They're mostly hired remotely. Though we make sure to vet them through a talent management company or the like, people tend to change, especially if they are suddenly in charge of cash flows that can reach hundreds of millions of hex credits."

Ves immediately frowned. "Are people skimming off the top of those cash flows?!"

"It has happened."

"That's my money! Without my mechs, those greedy traitors would never even come close to so much money!"

"That's why we should develop an effective solution to this problem as quickly as possible."

"What is your suggestion, then?"

"A Bright Warrior."

Ves blinked. "Explain."

"We should ship a Bright Warrior to every branch office, or barring that, rotate it around." Gavin spoke. "We can use it to induct the directors and any other employee worth retaining into the clan! Once they're a part of the Larkinson Clan, they will be much less likely to abuse their power!"

That.. was a good idea. It was also a very troublesome one. Lending the Bright Warrior for this venture was a very risky prospect. It was a design exclusive to the Larkinson Clan and Ves did NOT wish for it to fall into anyone else's hands!

Ves shook his head. "I can't risk any of my Bright Warriors falling into the hands of my enemies. I won't send any of them to my branch offices. While I understand the purpose of your suggestion, I can't provide the same level of care and attention to Larkinsons who will eventually be left behind once we embark on our grand expedition."

"If a Bright Warrior doesn't work, then perhaps something smaller!" Calsie suddenly suggested. "You attached a glow to other objects such as one of your outfits and that new statue you made, right? Why not add the same glow of the Bright Warrior to a small and convenient medallion and hand that out to the branch offices instead? Even if it's stolen, there's no harm. Smaller objects are very easy to secure and you can even integrate a self-destruct mechanism if you are really afraid they'll end up in the wrong hands."

Her suggestion excited Gavin. "That's a great idea, Calsie! Aside from this, we don't have to promise the same treatment to the people manning our branch offices. We can treat them as half-members and categorize them as lesser Larkinsons."

That did not sit well with Ves. He frowned deeply. "One of the core tenets of the Larkinson Clan is that every clansman is family."

"Look, I get it. You don't want to turn any inconsequential people into clansmen. You don't have to, boss. We can just promise to pay them well and give them some more benefits in exchange for pledging their loyalty to us. The directors and core personnel we choose to run the branches mostly aren't interested in abandoning their cozy lives in their home states. The pay and benefits we promise already puts them ahead of nearly anyone else at their location. They'll be grateful to receive this opportunity. It's similar to hiring retainers in that regard."

The comparison to retainers made the suggestion more reasonable. Ves began to look thoughtful.

"I can see how that might work. I can make these medallions and allow them to be dispatched to the different branches." He said after a pause. "Calsie, do you want to manage this operation?"

She smiled and nodded. "I'd be glad to, sir."

"Then you have my blessing."

They soon began to discuss some details. Ves left it to others to determine the exact benefits and obligations that came with becoming a retainer to the Larkinson Clan. He already decided to treat them as disposable but trustworthy external employees. Even if Ves added them to the Larkinson Network, he needed to make sure they didn't get the full treatment.

Only genuine Larkinson clansmen were entitled to this treatment.

It didn't take very long to set matters up. Ves dismissed Gavin and Calsie and spent some time to design the so-called Loyalty Medallions. He basically recycled the medallion that depicted the head of the Golden Cat on the Larkinson Mandate but added some extras.

He incorporated a tracker, a comm and more importantly a self-destruct mechanism in the design of the medallion. He made sure to impart it with a spiritual foundation that was conducive to the Golden Cat in order to contain her glow.

Since he was doing a rush job, its glow would never be able to match the presence of the Bright Warrior.

"It doesn't have to." Ves muttered. "If a medallion is radiating a glow at full strength, then it'll affect an entire office building!"

It was enough to make people in the same room or office feel the distinct aura associated with the Larkinsons.

Compared to designing the medallion, it was a lot harder for him to set up the spiritual functionality of its use. Ves had to convey his intentions to the Golden Cat in order to set up a separate tier of access for retainers in the Larkinson Network.

Just explaining the concept of retainers and separate tiers and justifying their existence took a lot of effort!

Fortunately, the Golden Cat was very obedient, and quickly went to work once she understood and agreed with his suggestions.

After a quick session at his lab, Ves expended a very modest amount of Breyer alloy and some miscellaneous materials to produce a batch of loyalty medallions.

Due to the relative simplicity of their design and their very manageable sizes, Ves had been able to produce hundreds of them at a time!

There was no way he would bother with making them by hand. They weren't worth the effort. The glows of the mass-produced medallions were already sufficient enough to perform their intended purpose, and that was all that mattered.

Once he packaged them all up in a floating crate and delivered it to Calsie, she reacted with awe as she inspected the goods.

She picked up one of the thick, hand-sized medallions and felt its heft and weight. "These will do very nicely as long as they work, sir! Even if our fleet departs this star sector, we can still rely on the retainers we have left behind to do their job properly!"

"Mind you, only a Larkinson clansman or a retainer can make use of this medallion." He warned. "If there aren't any retainers in a state, you'll have to dispatch a retainer stationed elsewhere to make use of it. Have you come up with a plan?"

Calsie grinned as she carefully put back the medallion in the crate. "Yes. Aside from entrusting the medallions to the branch directors, I am already working on a proposal to

set up a sector headquarters that can manage all of the branches and address the situation that you have described."

"Good idea. Tell Raymond to work with you on that. Make sure to set everything up correctly the first time around. Hopefully, we can use these measures to ensure the LMC's continued market presence in the star sectors we are leaving behind."

The use of loyalty medallions wasn't a guarantee that nothing would go wrong. Ves merely hoped it would reduce the problems related to the disconnect between the branch offices and the roving headquarters of the LMC.

The Komodo Star Sector was his home and the first market that embraced his distinctive products. He owed it to his local customers to continue to meet their needs as best as possible even if Ves departed for greener pastures.

However, there was one glaring problem that might hinder this commitment. The range problem. Every mech designer below Journeyman could only exert their specialty onto their products within a limited range.

Though that still encompassed a lot of light-years, on a galactic scale that was not a lot!

Chapter 2119 Blessed by the Supreme

The big day had come. Ves and Gloriana were about to fabricate the first production model of their very first collaborative Hexer mech design.

This mech was very significant for multiple reasons.

It was the first mech that was aimed towards Hexers.

It was Ves' first true second-class product.

It was his first mech whose complexity and difficulty significantly exceeded that of his prior products!

All of these factors and more meant that Ves was under a lot of pressure to perform. When he woke up in the morning, his mood was good but not fantastic.

That was not a good sign. A normal demeanor was not conducive to entering an inspired mood!

Would serendipity be deprived from him once again?

Perhaps the only consolidation was the enthusiasm shown by Gloriana. She practically bounced on her feet as they traveled to the newly-constructed underground workshop.

In order to meet Calabast's demands for absolute security, the Black Cats dug and built the underground structure from scratch. Each and every single tool and production equipment that the pair intended to use in the fabrication attempt had already been vetted at least three times over.

When the pair of mech designers entered the restricted workshop with their cats, no one else was present aside from Calabast and some bodyguards of the Glory Battalion.

"For security purposes, it's best that I remain present for the entire duration of this run." She explained.

Ves frowned. "It will take at least three to four days to make our mech."

"I'm aware, kid. I have already taken the proper medication. Staying awake for entire weeks isn't unusual in my line of business. Besides, my optimized genes already make sure I can make do with much less sleep."

During the Aeon Corona Mission, Calabast outranked Ves. She managed to receive one more round of gene optimization treatment than himself!

Ves still felt glum about this difference. CFA-grade gene optimization treatments were unobtainable to him in ordinary circumstances. This was bad because the treatments were designed to be applied in succession.

Even if he advanced to Master one day, it was impossible for him to knock on the CFA doors and request another round of treatment!

Well, that was a problem for later.

"Do what you want, but don't get in the way."

"Very polite, kid."

"You can stop calling me kid, you know."

"Grow up first."

Ves proceeded to ignore Calabast and moved on to the statue of the Superior Mother.

Lucky and Clixie had arrived at the feet of the giant statue.

"Meow."

"Miaow?"

"Meow meow."

"Miaow!"

It seemed that Lucky was already introducing his mother to Gloriana's cat.

As for Gloriana, she prostrated to the statue just a short distance away! Ves immediately grimaced at the sight.

Ves never worshipped spiritual entities, let alone the ones he brought to life! As their creator, it was silly for him to look up to them. He was basically the equivalent of a parent who changed their diapers!

Most of the time, Gloriana adopted the same mindset. In Hexer culture, gods were not necessarily respected if they were male.

However, the Superior Mother was different. Not only was she female, she also embodied some of the ideal traits that Hexers valued.

The fact that Gloriana half-mistook the Superior Mother as Cynthia Larkinson was an even greater reason for her to bend her knees to the statue!

The sight frankly disgusted Ves. If she wasn't his lover, he would have stormed over and kicked her in the butt until she stood upright again!

As it was, he allowed her to indulge in her fancy, not just to get it out of her system, but to make sure that she was at her best.

"Alright." She spoke after she finally finished her prayer session. "I'm ready! Before we start, have you already decided on the name for our mech."

"I did." Ves nodded. "Our knight mech is designed to accompany a squad of offensive female Hexer mechs and support them as best as possible. The combination of defense and resupply capabilities make it very useful for high-intensity battles and sustained assaults. It's not a mech that does well on its own. Considering its pronounced support role, I've decided upon naming our design the Blessed Squire."

The Blessed Squire!

Gloriana widened her eyes as soon as she heard the name that Ves had decided upon! There was something compelling about the label.

"Why call it a squire, and why is it blessed?"

"It's very simple. A squire used to be someone who attends to the duties of a knight. Think of cleaning the gear, helping the knight dress in his armor, caring for the horses and so on. They're not just servants, but instead noble born teenagers who are expected to become knights themselves."

"So they're knights, but not really." She said. "I think that somewhat aptly fits with our mech design. Compared to well-rounded knight mechs, our design is lacking in several aspects, most notably offense."

Ves nodded. "Therefore, calling it a squire fits."

"I suspect that you also chose this word because it is a disarming way to describe a knight mech, isn't that right?"

He smiled. "You know me too well. It's as deadly as a proper knight."

Hexers were very insistent that mechs piloted by boys should never be good enough to threaten mechs piloted by women!

Though Ves wasn't worried that his Blessed Squire posed an actual threat to a high-quality Hexer mech, truth and perception was not the same.

If the Hexers felt threatened by the design because he was one of its lead designers, then it would be very hard to overcome their prejudices!

As for calling it Blessed, Gloriana did not have to ask.

The mech design was literally blessed by the Superior Mother! This was a great honor and privilege that fully justified the use of this term! No other Hexer mech design could make the same boast!

Ves did not worry about adding a religious overtone to his mech design. He refrained from doing so to his other mech designs in order to exclude as little markets as possible.

The Hexadric Hegemony was not completely religious but neither fully secularist either. It was a mix of both. According to Gloriana, most Hexers leaned in one or the other direction.

What truly mattered was the level of tolerance shown to Hexers with different outlooks. Religious Hexers such as Gloriana did not arouse disgust from secularist Hexers like Calabast and vice versa. Secularist Hexers were all somewhat familiar with the principles of hexism.

This meant that adding a religious label to his mech design was not a difficult choice. The name as well as the glow would definitely appeal to the religious-minded Hexers, while the secularists would merely shrug their shoulders.

Naming their mech design was a very significant event. To Ves and Gloriana, the name of the mech design they worked so hard to realize provided them with a direction on how to fabricate its first production model.

The mech was a squire, so it had to be made with an auxiliary role in mind.

The mech was blessed, so it had to be exemplary in order to reflect the Superior Mother's majesty!

Ves gazed up at the head of the marble-like statue. His mother's imperious visage looked straight ahead. The strong glow and holiness exuded by the statue had a very profound effect on his mind!

Previously, Ves never designed a mech while experiencing its full glow at the beginning. Though he was able to channel his design spirits by concentrating on the designs in question, it put a lot of strain on his mind.

Now that he was about to work next to a spiritual totem that already exuded the exact same glow he intended to impart onto his mech, he no longer had to strain his mind as much.

Instead, it was the opposite! With an external source of the Superior Mother's acting on his mind, he could get in tune with the design spirit much easier now. This allowed Ves to direct more of his attention on his work.

Even better, Gloriana received similar benefits! Though her approach differed that from his own, experiencing the Superior Mother's glow instead of trying to imagine it was much better!

Both of them noticed the difference as soon as they initiated the fabrication run. Gloriana's passion and drive immediately skyrocketed, causing her to become hyperactive and hyperattentive towards her work!

"Don't worry, Mrs. Larkinson, I will make sure to produce a mech worthy of your stature!"

Though Ves felt like vomiting when he heard that, he recognized that it was best if Gloriana maintained her current delusion.

This was because the output she generated when she was in her current mood was astounding! She quickly overtook Ves in terms of speed, fluency, consistency and quality when fabricating parts.

As soon as Ves realized his girlfriend was overshadowing him, he automatically pulled back and allowed her to take the lead.

In previous fabrication runs, they mostly divided their work equally. Ves boasted a pretty high affinity for mechs and his Assembly Skills and Sub-Skills were very good for a Journeyman. He had always been confident that he could match his girlfriend as long as he had mastered all of the tools and equipment at hand.

However, it was different today. Ves realized that this fabrication run might produce an exceptional result, but not because of him. With the statue of the Superior Mother looming over the entire secure workshop, Gloriana worked as if she had become a vessel of the will of a Supreme!

Ves continuously diminished his own role until he was relegated to acting as her squire.

He managed the supply of materials and inspected the finished parts. He controlled the bots so that they would always be available whenever Gloriana had need of them. He warmed up all of the specialized production machines that she needed to operate next in order to produce the many specialized parts of the Blessed Squire.

At some moments, Ves felt the urge to scratch his head and question what he was doing. How come their first attempt at fabricating a Hexer mech caused him to adopt the role of a meek male Hexer?

He felt as if his pride as man was being impugned upon! He had contributed just as much to the Blessed Squire as Gloriana, if not more!

Yet.. compared to pride, what was the worth of potentially producing another masterwork?

Though Ves still figured that it was unrealistic to expect this session to succeed, the hope was there, unlike the time where he fabricated the Doom Guard.

Back then, neither Ves nor Gloriana received any inspiration.

From a logical standpoint, the benefit of potentially producing another masterwork mech or at least coming close to it outweighed the benefit of preserving his pride.

An increased mech affinity.

A radiant lottery ticket.

Increasing his stature among the Hexers.

Boosting the prominence of his Blessed Squire design.

Solidifying his reputation as a legitimate masterwork mech designer.

Compared to all of these gains, he could regain his pride later if need be! Compared to the many rewards he stood to gain from producing a masterwork, he would readily serve as Gloriana's squire for a couple of days!

With the Superior Mother extending her glow towards Gloriana, she worked like an angel who channeled the touch of a goddess. As the hours went by, she showed no signs of stopping. Instead, the quality of her parts continued to improve!

She even performed some difficult techniques that caused Ves to sigh in admiration. It took a lot of guts to take so many risks in order to elevate the quality of a part, yet she did so with remarkable ease!

Several days passed by. Due to the measures that both of them had already took, they only needed to take some brief breaks in order to visit the bathroom and fill up their stomachs. Gloriana raced through these chores as fast as possible in order to retain her momentum.

She was on a roll, and she knew it! There was no way she could stop at this point!

Chapter 2120 Wordless

As soon as Ves noticed that Gloriana worked like a woman possessed, he wanted to make absolutely sure that nothing interrupted her exceptional state of mind.

As someone who experienced these magical moments himself, he knew how precious they were and how hard it was to regain them once he let them go. It would definitely break his girlfriend's heart if someone ruined her special moment!

During one of their brief, five-minute breaks, Gloriana approached a dining table where some food had already been laid out. She picked up a tray and literally gobbled down the contents of a nutrient pack within a matter of seconds!

Normally, she abhorred eating something as low-class as this. This was not the time for her to be picky about her food, though. As soon as she filled up her stomach with nutrient paste, she quickly grabbed a glass of water and emptied it just as fast.

After that, she immediately returned to work!

Ves could only shrug when he saw his driven girlfriend finish her lunch within a minute. He approached Calabast, who had been observing the entire fabrication session since yesterday!

"How long until the mech is complete?"

"Three days, maybe less." Ves quickly estimated. "I'm sure you've noticed that Gloriana's productivity has skyrocketed. Even though I'm relegated to serving as her gopher, she is outputting as much work as both of us on a normal day."

Calabast instantly noticed his emphasis. "I take it this is not a normal day."

He nodded. "I think.. the best-case scenario is within our reach."

"I see."

He did not need to explain what that meant. Calabast was well aware of how significant it was to make a masterwork mech.

"What do I need to do?"

"Pass on some of my instructions to the Avatars and the Battle Criers." He told her. He transferred some messages from his comm to hers. "Tell them to mobilize as much mechs as possible and guard the site around this workshop as extensively as possible. For a possible masterwork, it is worth rousing them all! I don't want to take ANY risks."

"Understood." Calabast nodded seriously. "I'll make sure my Black Cats and the Swordmaidens are on full alert as well. What are the odds of success?"

"I truly can't say. There are so many variables at play that you can't perform a simple prediction. Even if Gloriana pours her entire heart and soul in our first production model, it is still up to us whether she'll be rewarded for her extraordinary effort. All I can say is that there is a non-zero chance that we'll deliver a masterwork mech at the end of the session."

"Can you give me a range at least?"

"No more than twenty percent."

She looked impressed. "That's already pretty decent considering how rare it is to encounter a masterwork."

"That's why I'm quite hopeful for this mech. I have to return now."

"Good luck, Ves!"

The work resumed. As Gloriana began to fabricate the larger parts such as the thick armor plating of the Blessed Squire, she focused so much on minimizing as many irregularities as possible that some of the plating rolled off the production line as works of art!

While Ves continued to perform his role as her dutiful squire, he constantly sighed in admiration at the excellence she displayed.

Thinking that the Superior Mother herself was watching her every move, Gloriana pushed herself again and again.

Normally, a highly-controlled mech designer like her would never take so many risks.

In order to build up and sustain her momentum, she needed to work quickly.

In order to produce the highest quality components that she could make, she needed to meticulously.

Oftentimes, she preferred to lean towards the latter rather than the former.

However, masterwork mechs were products of energy, luck and passion. They could never be made by mech designers who plodded in their work and constantly calculated every single move.

Drawing from his personal experience, a mech designer would only be able to produce a masterwork mech if they surrendered to their passion and worked with their hearts rather than their minds!

As long as he was skilled and confident enough, Ves could rely on his instincts and intuition to perform a difficult task.

However, that was easier said than done. In most cases, Ves slipped up. Only during exceptional times would his instincts and intuition be raised to a level where he could rely on them to carry him through an entire fabrication session!

During this session, Ves did not even come close to reaching this level.

He didn't have to. Gloriana exhibited so much spirit and motivation that he felt that she might actually have a decent shot at producing a masterwork on her own merits!

This was one of the hidden advantages of collaborative mech design.

The chance of producing a masterwork did not solely rest on the shoulders of a single mech designer. Every lead or contributing designer involved in the design process had a chance to get inspired.

Of course, in practice, such situations were so rare that ordinary mech designers had a better chance at winning the lottery.

This was different. Ves already had two masterwork mechs under his belt while Gloriana crucially claimed credit for one as well.

That last detail was extremely important! Though she gained only a modest boost in her affinity for mechs for participating in the creation of the Quint, this was still a crucial development to her as a mech designer!

Mentally, a crack had opened in her mind. She became aware that producing another masterwork after the Quint had already become possible! Even if the chance was small, it was a lot better than other Journeyman at her age!

Spiritually, the formation of a masterwork had imprinted onto her spirituality. Her design seed remembered what the experience was like, therefore making it easier for Gloriana to seek it out again!

Mech affinity was something precious and something that every mech designer chased after. Though the MTA claimed that possessing a high affinity for mechs wasn't essential to becoming a good mech designer, it made many actions related to mechs a lot easier!

At the very least, the mech industry had come to a general consensus that only those with a high mech affinity were capable of creating masterwork mechs!

Right now, Gloriana exhibited the tell-tale signs of leaning onto her mech affinity. She worked both fast and with care. That could only be sustained by much higher-ranked mech designers or those who were able to express the utmost of their affinity!

As the assembly stage finally wrapped up, they moved on to the crucial assembly stage.

Ves worried for a moment whether his girlfriend would be able to sustain her momentum. The Blessed Squire was a true second-class mech design that not only featured bloated internals, but also a lot of sophisticated parts developed and built to military standards. Fitting them all together in a harmonious fashion was quite challenging!

However, it turned out that he worried in vain. Unlike him who would definitely show some struggle at first, assembling a second-class mech was already familiar territory to Gloriana.

She studied and graduated from Kelma University, one of the most prestigious mech design institutions in the entire Hegemony!

From the very start, she learned the ins and out of advanced second-class mech design until she practically breathed it in her sleep!

When she graduated, she started a small but successful mech boutique and designed high-performing custom mechs for many upper-class clients. Perhaps she had already designed and fabricated mechs that were several times more powerful and complicated than the Blessed Squire!

As Gloriana fluently slotted the parts in place, Ves had the illusion that she was composing a grand symphony.

No matter how many instruments were in play, she maintained control over the performance of every single instrument! With her exquisite ability, she managed to make sure to maintain as much harmony as possible.

If the old and new assistant mech designers could see Gloriana at work right now, their jaws would drop to the floor. There was no way they could conceive that a mech designer could make and fit together the parts of a mech with such an inhuman level of skill and judgement!

The steps performed by Gloriana had already surpassed the level of mortals. She had reached a realm beyond where her extraordinary judgement found solutions to problems that weren't even noticeable in her original design!

Ves had gradually realized that the direction of her design philosophy empowered her momentum in a very useful way!

The more she got caught up in her work, the more she was able to draw upon the strength of her specialty.

In this case, that just so happened to minimize flaws and correcting errors! Perfection was closely associated with masterwork, and her choice of design philosophy finally paid off at this moment!

When Gloriana finally slotted in the final parts and put the finishing touches on the Blessed Squire, Ves had basically been reduced to a total bystander.

Forget acting as here squire, the knight he served had become so competent that Ves had been fired!

He didn't mind, though. He had already contributed to the fabrication run in his own way. Aside from facilitating Gloriana, he also made sure to shape and correct the spiritual component of the mech.

This was one aspect that Gloriana could never achieve on her own. If not for his crucial combination, her chances of fabricating a masterwork would probably be a tenth as much!

As Gloriana mounted the last parts onto the mech, the results became clear.

The strong glow exuded by the finished Blessed Squire was practically a mirror of the glow propagated by the statue of the Superior Mother!

Both the statue and the mech had already begun to mingle and overlap their identical glows. This caused the air in the secure workshop to bear the oppressive presence of the Superior Mother!

As Gloriana slowly descended from the air until she landed next to Ves, she slowly turned around and stared at him in the eyes.

Her orbs burned with the intensity of stars. She had stayed awake for four days straight, working non-stop to complete the first Blessed Squire as quickly and as perfectly as possible.

She stretched out her hand.

Ves looked at her smooth and delicate palm and reached out into his uniform pocket. He drew out a Synthra Umbra pouch and rummaged through it. He eventually pulled out a gem he did not expect to employ so soon.

[Mother's Love]

The love of a mother towards her offspring resides within this royal gem. Increases the allure of a mech by 100 percent to females.

There was no other choice, really. The description of the gem matched perfectly with the Blessed Squire design!

It was not a waste to affix it to their current mech. After putting so much effort into her work, the quality of the end product had come within reach of masterwork!

Gloriana just fell short to an extent. Though she worked like the Superior Mother blessed her every move, she was just a Journeyman, after all. Even if she had reached her absolute best state, she was still too weak to produce a masterwork by relying solely on her efforts.

Fortunately, Ves possessed a means to cheat the process, and Gloriana knew it. This time, he felt no pain at giving up a gem.

Once he handed over the gem to Gloriana, she slowly turned around and took one step at a time. It seemed that with each passing step she took, she came one step to fulfilling one her cherished ambitions!

When she ascended into the air and entered the cockpit of the mech, she steadily socketed the Mother's Love

The Blessed Squire pulsed! Ves, who had been preparing himself for this moment, finally witnessed the effect of installing one of Lucky's gems once again. The quality of the Blessed Squire abruptly surpassed the threshold of masterwork, transforming its whole frame into something exceptional and sublime!

"Masterwork!"

Though he always hoped to repeat this feat, he never thought this day would come so soon. If the creation of the Quint had sent the entire star cluster talking, then the

creation of another masterwork mech less than a year later would definitely ripple further!