

Mech 2491

Chapter 2491: Cat Hide

On the eve of the wedding, many Larkinsons departed from the base on the surface of Cinach VI and flew to orbit. There, they boarded various ships in order to prepare themselves for the greatest event in the history of the clan since its founding.

Ves decided to gather several of the most important Larkinsons for a relatively private and subdued dinner. His choice of venue? The resplendent and recently-repaired dining hall of the Gravada Knarlax!

Having met with many foreigners lately, Ves found it comforting to be surrounded by his own people this time. He hadn't even invited any actual Hexers this time in order to make himself and his fellow Larkinsons feel at home.

It didn't matter. Gloriana had invited her own circle over to one of the Wodin Dynasty's capital ships in order to hold her own soirée.

Still, he couldn't snub every woman with a Hexer background.

Seated further away, Ranya Wodin talked in low tones with Juliet Stameross of the Penitent Sisters. A number of other Penitent Sister officers kept to themselves. Their controversial history prevented them from smoothly integrating into the Larkinson Clan.

Ves remained unbothered by that. The conversion of Ranya Wodin proved that the Larkinson Network was able to mellow out any Hexer no matter how much they looked down on boys.

The only concern was that thousands of strong-minded Penitent Sisters joined the clan at once. Though they lost hundreds of mech pilots and many more support personnel during the Nyxian Gap Campaign, they still had plenty of women to constitute a faction within the Larkinson.

In fact, though the Larkinson Clan was already large, the addition of thousands of Hexers would definitely influence the Larkinson Network just as it changed their views. The Penitent Sisters became Larkinsons, but the Larkinsons also became a little more sympathetic towards Hexers.

Oh well. So long as the changes were mild, Ves did not believe the Larkinson Clan would suddenly put women ahead of men. That was too drastic of a change.

"Meow~"

Lucky squinted with pleasure as he ate from a bowl of medium-grade exotics. Ves specifically picked a bunch of energetic but relatively soft materials from the Strategic Materials Reserve.

Though Ves initially wanted to feed his cat with some Unending Alloy, the gem cat still had nightmares about this infernal exotic. Even when Ves made sure it was flushed from every trace of the dark gods, his cat still rejected it. The time it took for Lucky's digestion system to process the input was too excessive!

When Ves studied Lucky's properties, he felt his cat hadn't been making the best use of all of the Unending alloy he ingested. While Lucky's exterior form had become a lot more resistant to damage, it fell short of the actual material.

Perhaps Lucky was too underdeveloped to process first-class materials to the fullest extent.

That said, the gem cat still managed to retain some of the most powerful effects of every exceptional material that passed through his stomach.

Right now, his cat possessed a part of the regeneration factor of Rorach's Bone, the sensor-blocking properties of the Cadisis and other stealth materials, the hardness of Breyer alloy and Unending alloy, the spiritual storage capabilities of P-stone and Unending alloy and a small degree of resistance against spiritual energy of B-stone.

The fact that Lucky managed to incorporate all of these properties, if in a diminished form, in a single composite metallic exterior was nothing less than miraculous!

Ves stared greedily at his own pet. As long as he was able to skin Lucky of some of his incredibly valuable exterior, he could use the composite material to take his Unending Regalia a step further! It would become the ultimate protective suit against both material and spiritual threats!

In fact, if Ves treated Lucky as the cat version of Cassandra Breyer, he could continually harvest a small but precious quantity of 'Lucky alloy'!

As long as this went on for a couple of years, Ves would eventually accumulate enough Lucky alloy to build an entire mech!

Should he utilize Lucky alloy to build Venerable Joshua's expert mech?

Maybe not. While Lucky alloy was a very good all-round material, Ves didn't quite feel it was appropriate to use it up in a humanoid mech.

"If only I still have access to my magnum opus." Ves muttered.

Out of all of the mechs he designed over the course of his career, he still considered the Devil Tiger to be his best work.

Though Ouroboros should technically hold the crown, Ves didn't actually feel any sense of ownership towards that accidental work. He never intended for the one-off hero mech designed for duelling purposes to mutate in its current incarnation as an ace mech. At best, he gave birth to the Terran mech before subsequently giving it up for adoption.

Instead, a material as remarkable as Lucky alloy should actually be used to uplift the Devil Tiger, or maybe even used to design an entirely different tiger mech!

As Ves began to entertain various interesting tiger mech concepts, Lucky paused his chewing and shuddered.

The unsuspecting mechanical cat turned around.

"Meow..?"

Ves drew his mind away from his ideas and gently stroked Lucky's tiger-striped exterior. Its smooth and hardy surface was pure value in his eyes.

"It's nothing. Just go back to enjoying your meal. Grow stronger. I don't mind if you use up your entire meal to strengthen yourself. Don't stop upgrading, okay?"

"Meow." Lucky shrugged and went back to crunching his teeth through the soft but delectable exotics.

As everyone slowly partook their sumptuous meals, they spoke with each other about the future of the Larkinson Clan.

People regularly came to talk to Ves to explore his views on the Red Ocean.

If the Larkinson Clan ever reached this exciting new frontier, what exactly were they supposed to do? Would they be roaming through the new galaxy without ever settling down? Would they depend entirely on selling mechs to go by, or should they be diversifying their income streams?

Previously, Ves simply brushed aside these topics because they were too distant. Let alone gathering a proper fleet, the Larkinson Clan was still extremely far away from earning passage through the inter-galactic beyonder gate!

It was different now. The Red Ocean had already become within reach. With almost 40 million MTA merits, the Larkinson Clan could easily join forces with other pioneers and enter the Red Ocean as soon as it traveled to the right system!

For better or worse, Ves had to show at least some semblance of a plan to his fellow Larkinsons. They didn't want to enter a completely new environment without any further directions!

"Prospecting for phasewater is too distant for us. Other pioneers will eat us alive as soon as we step foot out of the protected star systems." Ves replied to Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson. "We should instead take it slow and focus on setting up an industry while steadily acquiring the ships and mechs we need to resume our expedition."

"That is prudent. We are only allowed to bring up to twenty capital ships to the Red Ocean. Such a fleet is wholly inadequate to venture into dangerous territory. We will have to acquire a hundred if not more combat carriers to restore our fighting strength to its peak. It's a pity we'll have to discard most of the ships we're about to receive from the Hegemony."

Ves casually waved his hand in a brushing motion. "The second-hand Hexer combat carriers are only transitional vessels. They're good enough for the galactic rim but wholly inadequate for the Red Ocean. A few years from now, our financial might will grow to the point where we can acquire much better vessels. Rather than wasting time, effort and resources into upgrading those disposable ships, we might as well purchase newer ones that incorporate some of the tech and materials of better regions."

That was going to cost a lot. Raymond did not need to remind Ves that the LMC had to keep a lot of mechs in order to realize this plan!

"At least we won't be starting from nothing." Ves smirked. "Our capital ships will form the foundation of our main fleet. Starting from our factory ship, we'll be acquiring additional capital ships to expand and round out our capabilities. I'm already on track to hire a young but talented shipwright to assist us in these endeavors."

"I've heard. Vivian Tsai is not what I had in mind for our chief ship designer. Still, in the absence of any better, I suppose she will do. We still have to rent a drydock everytime we want to construct a ship, though. I do not think it is realistic for us to establish a shipbuilding industry. Our clan doesn't possess a foundation in this sector."

Ves frowned. "What are you trying to say?"

"Some of us Larkinsons, especially the older ones, think we should find a place to settle down. We're too old to take part in wild adventures. There are families with us who would doubtlessly enjoy their better life if they resided on an open planet rather than some floating coffins."

"The Red Ocean is too dangerous to think about settling down." Ves forcefully replied. "We have suffered not once, but twice from the consequences of betrayal. Founding a

colony or living on someone else's planet will just tie a portion of us down. Any enemy of ours can easily prepare a devastating strike on us. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, some of us are willing to take that risk. None of us have gotten used to living on starships. Most of us grew up with enough space to run for hours. With soil underneath our feet and open skies above our heads, we grew up in the classical human fashion. Don't deprive us of this opportunity. Personally, I believe you are being overly paranoid about the risks. Not every planet is as prone to attacks as you claim. As long as we build a strong settlement and ally ourselves to a greater community or alliance, we'll enjoy plenty of cover."

"Feh. Allies are no better than fair-weather friends. They'll be glad to associate with us when times are good, but once we suffer a mishap, they'll be gone in no time."

Raymond let out an exasperated sigh. "You're too paranoid for your own good, you know that? The galaxy isn't out to get you, and we can't explore the Red Ocean without making friends."

"We'll see. Depending on the circumstances, we might be forced to change my plans. However, my stance is always clear. We should rely on ourselves as much as possible."

Seeing that this talk wasn't going very well, Raymond changed the topic.

"How is my grandson doing?"

"He's a fine expert pilot. As the only light mech specialist of his rank, Venerable Tusa will play an indispensable role."

"What of his expert mech? I have not received much word about it. How difficult is it for you to supply one to Tusa?"

"We're still working on that. You should know how complex and demanding they are. We can't speed up this process because we don't have a foundation in expert mech design. Just tell him to be patient."

"That is rather difficult for him. He's not the most patient mech pilot."

"Don't worry about it. He will be the first of our expert pilots to receive an expert mech. He's at the top of our list."

"That's good to hear. Do you need any assistance in gathering the materials, licenses or other necessities to design his expert mech?"

"Ah, I don't have a good idea yet of what we need to begin this project. I'll have to discuss it with Master Willix."

Raymond was very excited about the fact that an MTA Master Mech Designer would work on his grandson's expert mech. Even though Master Willix wouldn't be contributing much beyond the minimum, her involvement still suggested that Tusa should be very happy with his upcoming expert mech.

As long as he received a high-quality mech, Tusa should be able to progress quickly!

Chapter 2492: Redeemed

The evening dinner continued in harmony. The Gravada Knarlax's dining hall was large enough to accommodate thousands of people. Bots and dishes continued to float above the heads of the Larkinsons as they enjoyed the night before the wedding.

Numerous Larkinsons approached Ves to talk about matters that they normally wouldn't be able to bring up. As the Larkinson Clan grew, so did the status of the patriarch. His time was too valuable to spend on addressing each and every Larkinson's personal concerns.

So meeting him to talk about something that wasn't on any agenda was quite difficult these days.

Today was an exception. As Ves looked forward to his wedding, he was in a good mood.

Melkor stepped up to him. "Hey, Ves."

"Hello. Are the Avatars doing okay?"

"We are already back to full strength. The new recruits are a little raw, of course, but the veterans of the Nyxian Gap Campaign have more than enough experience to cover for that. I'm proud of our cadre, though it's a shame you've pulled out all of my expert pilots."

"You know why we had to do that. Expert pilots need room to develop themselves. Your men also shouldn't look up to them all the time."

"I don't think you're here to talk about that, Melkor."

Ves sensed an anxious mind behind his cousin's visor.

"You're right. I have a rather presumptuous request. I heard from one of your assistants that you recently designed a second version of the Crystal Lord."

"Yes. The Crystal Lord Mark II is a modernized upgrade of the Mark I. It not only possesses a much more powerful glow, but it also incorporates restricted alien crystal

tech, courtesy of the MTA. It's a fine machine that will be sure to dominate many battles on land."

"Can you design an improved, customized variant for me? I.. I want to pilot a mech you've personally made for me. I saved up all of my merits to get the best mech possible."

Ves grew serious when he heard that. This was a big request.

"It's not going to be easy. This is a time-consuming project. The Crystal Lord is a third-class rifleman mech. It's also completely landbound. Such a mech is not a great fit to our current clan. I'd have to spend months on your customised variant. This is not a cost-effective use of my time."

"So that's a no?" Melkor's heart sank.

"I didn't say that. You should let me finish. Instead of trying to adapt the Crystal Lord Mark II design to your needs, it is much more convenient for us to design a clan mech that will already be up to standard once it's finished. Granted, this clan-exclusive rifleman mech is meant to be piloted by any Larkinson, but it will serve as a much more convenient base for your custom mech. Do you understand what I am saying?"

The Avatar Commander relaxed. "I get it. You need to design a new base model first so that it won't take much work to develop a suitable custom mech."

"It's a much better use of my time. This way, every other ranged mech specialized in the Larkinson Clan will receive something new as well."

"Will you be upgrading the Bright Warrior design to serve as this base?"

"I'm not sure yet to be honest." Ves admitted as he fell into thought. "I think.. our implementation of the Bright Warrior model hasn't fit our circumstances. The modular mech platform exists to provide our mech pilots with choice. It is meant to make us adaptable against a variety of different threats. Instead, most mech pilots simply opt to choose one of the four configurations and stick to that for the remainder of their assignments."

"Part of that is due to the lack of resources. You didn't have enough materials to build the parts to give every Bright Warrior the opportunity to switch configurations."

"That's true, but your Avatars are also too accustomed to lacking choice that they don't quite know what to do now that they have options. I am quite aware that your Avatars has optimized their spare parts stockpile so that there is considerably more leeway to switch configurations than before."

After all, it was incredibly wasteful and completely unnecessary to prepare for sets of configurations for every individual Bright Warrior. Retaining just half of the parts was already enough to give every mech pilot enough choice.

Yet even then, the Avatar mech pilots simply didn't switch.

Melkor shrugged. "I can't force my men to pilot a different configuration. You are asking too much of them. Joshua can pilot all four configurations because he's a prodigy. Our Avatars, while good, cannot master multiple mech types. You can force them to do so, but nobody will be able to rely on them in battle."

That was very fatal in battle. One of the reasons why the Larkinsons always performed well in battle was due to the trust they held towards each other. The mech forces did not recruit incompetent mech pilots.

"It's due to that reason and more that I'm not quite certain whether the Bright Warrior model has a future. It served its purpose as a convenient, versatile mech model. A year ago, the Bright Warrior perfectly fit our needs due to its ability to overpower any third-class mech. This won't be the case today. It's unrealistic to design a second version of the Bright Warrior that can crush other second-class mechs. At best it will be on par with them, but due to the nature of modular mech platforms, its performance will always be 10 to 20 percent worse than specialized mechs."

While Ves hadn't entirely made up his mind yet, he was already leaning away from multi-purpose mechs. They might work well enough for first-class mechs, but he would rather spend his time on designing a roster of specialized mechs in order to maximize performance.

"What will you do with the Quint, then?"

"It has already diverged from a regular Bright Warrior. Most of the upgrades we've applied to it are still applied to the frame. Rather than reverting these changes, I might as well continue to iterate on it whenever needed. It is a mech that has already gained its own life."

"How is that different from upgrading the regular Bright Warrior model then?"

"Upgrading a single mech is considerably less demanding than upgrading a mech design. Normally, I wouldn't even bother with this, but the Quint is worth the investment. It's a mech that has lived through two consecutive breakthroughs, and therefore possesses more life than any other mech in the clan aside from the Shield of Samar."

All of these considerations were a bit over Melkor's head, so he excused himself a few minutes later.

He achieved his main purpose. Ves promised to look into designing a custom mech for Melkor once the right base model came along.

Ves spoke with some other people. Ketis and Dietrich stopped by to talk about mechs. Some older Larkinsons exchanged views with him as well.

The original members of the Larkinson Family were all proud of the clan. Though it evolved in a different direction than they originally planned, the Larkinson heritage had become stronger than ever before. The decision to adopt a lot of outsiders and induct them into the Larkinson way of life had borne a lot fruit. The integration of different people and cultures had proceeded a lot more smoothly than everyone expected!

Of course, Ves essentially cheated this process by relying on the Larkinson Network. If outsiders truly knew what was in store for them if they joined the clan, then they probably wouldn't be so eager to become a Larkinson!

Commander Valerie Chancy approached him next.

As a former Hexer, many Larkinsons unconsciously shied away from her. Ves was a bit disappointed at that. He hoped that every member of the Larkinson Clan would no longer be judged by their past, but rather by their current accomplishments.

No matter what sins she accrued in the past, all of that was over now that the Penitent Sisters formally became a part of the Larkinson Clan.

"Thank you for advocating for our redemption." The Penitent Sister Commander began. "In our hearts, we don't feel we have deserved the Superior Mother's mercy yet. We will endeavor to do our best to fight on the clan's behalf as recompense."

"It's no problem." Ves casually answered. "The Hexers are glad to get rid of you. Combined with my growing clout, it is easy to negotiate your release. The only condition the Hexers have set is that you and your sisters never return to the Hegemony again, but this is already a given."

Commander Chancy and the Penitent Sisters still had to get used to thinking of themselves as Larkinsons. At least the former Hexers appeared to be receptive to the idea.

"Will we be able stay together within the clan?"

This was a difficult matter. Ves sighed. It seemed he wouldn't be able to relax entirely this evening.

"If you ask me, I would prefer it if you Penitent Sisters split up and join one of the established mech forces. Those who have a preference for sword combat can join the

Swordmaidens. Those who want to reduce their commitment can go to the Living Sentinels. I think the remainder of you will fit nicely in the Avatars of Myth."

Commander Chancy grimaced. "That is not what my sisters had in mind when we joined this clan. We agreed to become Larkinsons with the implicit assumption that you would allow us to retain our heritage and traditions. We can't do that if you force us to disband the Penitent Sisters."

"I understand your concerns, but I have to balance out your interests with the interests of the rest of the clan. We already possess an all-female mech force. It works for the Swordmaidens because their training standards are exceptionally strict, so they'll never grow too big. I don't want to add a broader all-female mech force. Your Penitent Sisters will just absorb most of the female mech pilots in our clan. Where will that leave the Avatars and Sentinels? The last thing I want to see is to turn them into a bro fest!"

Balancing the genders of most of his mech forces ensured they remained diverse and open-minded. It didn't make sense to be selective about men or women since either of them were equally good at piloting mechs and performing support functions.

However, there were still cultural and other reasons why some people preferred to serve in an all-male or all-female unit. Commander Chancy and the Penitent Sisters didn't appear to relish the prospect of mingling with the Avatars or Sentinels.

"Is there any way to convince you to give us a chance to stay together? Breaking us up will be seen as a betrayal to us. We won't feel any belonging to the Larkinson Clan if we cannot hold on to our most cherished traditions. If you are concerned about producing a disparity between men and women in the mech forces, why not form an all-male unit as a counterbalance?"

That sounded like a bad idea to Ves. The entire notion of separating genders was a horribly archaic practice.

"We'll talk about this later, commander. I won't make any promises. It will help if you can argue your case by providing me with compelling reasons why your existence benefits the clan."

"We are blessed by the Superior Mother. Of all of the mech forces, only we are fully capable of channeling her strength. If you split us apart, we won't be able to call upon her blessing in battle."

Well, that was a good point. The battle network connected to the Penitent Sisters only worked as long as the latter were identifiably Hexers.

Ves may be able to change that, but he was afraid he might ruin the battle network instead. He did not dare to tamper with it lightly considering it was built directly in an extension of his own mother.

"By the way, you don't have to refer to yourselves as Penitent Sisters anymore. As far as everyone is concerned, you have already done enough to repent your past crimes."

Commander Chancy shook her head and smiled. "I think we'll keep it. If anything, it reminds us of our hubris."

Chapter 2493: Sleep Well

After the quiet dinner party came to an end, every Larkinson returned to their own berths. The Gravada Knarlax was not a hotel, after all. Engineers and inspectors from the MTA constantly crawled through the huge vessel.

Ves decided to have some fun for his last night as a bachelor. He spontaneously decided to spend the night on the Gravada Knarlax.

Though this caused the clan a small amount of consternation, he eventually got his way.

In any case, the Gravada Knarlax was completely safe and devoid of pirates. With the MTA in firm control over the captured pirate vessel, Ves doubted that any boobytraps were left intact.

He approached the grand and spacious stateroom of Lord Hivex.

Though the Larkinsons had taken some of the furniture and trophies away, enough was left to make Ves feel as if he was a pirate lord.

"My new stateroom aboard our upcoming factory ship will look just as impressive as this compartment!"

"Meow."

Lucky, who was content with the exotics filling up his belly, floated over to the new king-sized bed placed in the center.

"Yeah, you're right. I'll be sharing it with Gloriana, so I'll effectively control half the space."

"Meow meow!"

"Hey! That won't happen! She won't hog my space!"

Lucky opened his maw to yawn before settling himself for some rest.

Ves proceeded to enter the bathroom to change his clothes. Once he reached his bed, he sat on it and looked around.

The banners, weapons and broken armor pieces each had a story behind them. If he was interested, he could access the archives in order to study Lord Hivex's backstory.

There was little point in doing so. The leader of the Allidus Alliance had become yet another dead enemy of his. Now that he exited the Nyxian Gap, Ves had no reason to entangle himself with people like Lord Hivex any further.

His parents should be able to meet any further challenges. His father piloted the Devil Tiger while his mother had gained a boost in strength. Not even other dark gods could rival their current strength.

Only the Five Scrolls Compact remained a bit of a question mark. What would they do after losing contact with Temple Protector Dista? The fall of such a powerful and transcendental figure would definitely alarm the higher ups of the Compact.

"Whatever the case, I don't want to be here when their inevitable follow-up party arrives."

As Ves slipped underneath the covers and tried to go sleep, a nervous tension prevented him from doing so. He was too excited and apprehensive to rest.

Though his physical condition wouldn't suffer if he decided to stay up all night, his mind might not be as acute.

"I have to be in my best condition for the wedding."

Yet the more he tried, the harder it was for him to fall asleep.

With his enhanced physique, regular sleeping pills weren't enough to make him slumber.

"This is a bit of a problem."

He shifted in his bed.

Lucky floated up to his head and landed on the pillow.

"Meow."

"Cats are nocturnal. It's fine for you to stay awake."

The cat pressed his paw against Ves' nose. "Meow meow"

"You don't understand. Tomorrow is an important day. Nothing must go wrong."

Why was he talking to his cat? He should go to sleep instead!

Ves huffed and turned his body so he faced to the opposite side. Lucky did not entangle with him any further and began to curl up to rest.

As time went by, Ves grew a little hazy. He hoped that sleep would come soon. His heartbeat calmed and his mind increasingly became less cohesive.

Tomorrow, he was about to become a married man.

Tomorrow, he would become husband to a Hexer.

Tomorrow, his grandfather would finally see one of his wishes come true.

By marrying Gloriana, Ves foreswore any other woman. The prospect of spending the rest of his life with her made him feel quite mixed.

Though she had her flaws, he trusted all the more because of it. No matter what interests she possessed, she would never betray him, and that was enough for his paranoid self to give her a pass.

Once they tied the knot, Ves wondered how soon they would begin to have children.

His face grew a bit concerned as this prospect.

He was not afraid of raising children. In fact, he looked forward to the fatherhood experience. He had fond memories of his early childhood. His parents took good care of him. Though his mother left quite soon, his father had done his best to pick up the slack.

Ves was very thankful for the efforts of his father. It made him even more eager to pass on the same teaching to his sons and daughters.

There were two reasons why he was worried.

First, Gloriana had made it clear that she insisted on following Hexer traditions regarding the amount of children she wanted to bear. She didn't want to settle for anything except rearing six offspring!

That was quite a handful to Ves to take care of. Even though there was no financial strain for him to raise this many children, the amount of time he needed to invest in him ought to be very considerable.

The more time he spent with his children, the less time he had left to design his mechs. It was a given that he would have to make some compromises in order to spend a sufficient amount of time in both.

Even then, he would never be able to fully satisfy his responsibilities as a father and a mech designer.

His career would definitely be affected. The younger years of a mech designer were critical. If Ves slacked off in any way, his advancement to Senior might very well be delayed by 20 or even 50 years. That was an unacceptable delay!

Perhaps he should suggest to Gloriana to spread out the birth of their children. Some long-lived pairs preferred to sire a child every decade. In any case, with modern medical technology and life-prolonging treatment, a wealthy couple could easily live more than two centuries.

During much of that time, their bodies remained in a good enough condition that they were able to procreate. Instances where 200-year olds or even 300-year olds birthed new kids weren't rare in the more prosperous parts of the galaxy!

Of course, sometimes they needed some help.

This was the second concern of Ves. With how much his genes and physique had diverged from the baseline human norm, he was not strictly a human anymore.

To be sure, he still identified himself as a member of the human race. Human civilization also recognized him as a human even if a part of his chest was filled with alien-derived tissue.

It was different from a biological perspective. When Ves threw away all of these mental and social constructs, he was actually a unique half-human, half-alien specimen.

In some cases, the alterations to a human's genes and body still allowed them to sire children naturally.

If the changes surpassed a certain limit, then complications would begin to arise. Incidences of birth defects, stillbirth and other awful outcomes shot up very quickly the more someone diverged from the human norm.

If this wasn't bad enough, then if Ves wanted to have children with another half-alien, then the chance of failure was nearly 100 percent!

The CFA gene optimization treatments he enjoyed failed to solve this problem. In fact, it made the problem worse.

One of the defining goals of gene optimization treatments was to tailor them to enhance a single individual. This came at the cost of universality.

If the exact same changes were applied to a brother or sister, then the recipients wouldn't feel so good!

This was why most gene treatments weren't actually inheritable. Passing them on rarely worked. Even if a child managed to survive the gestation period, the poor kid needed frequent medical treatment in order to make it to adulthood.

This was one of the actual reasons why baseline humans still held an important place in human civilization.

Dr. Ranya had already studied his ability to procreate with baseline humans. Her verdict was not optimistic.

While Gloriana appeared to be a baseline human, many of her parameters were too high to be human. She was partially alien herself, though her genetic modifications were much more conservative and refined than Dr. Jutland's work.

Natural birth was out of the question.

The only way for them to have kids was to resort to artificial processes. In order to conceive a healthy child, Ves and his wife would have to rear a designer baby that incorporates the older versions of their genes.

There was no problem in this regard. Both of them had access to the complete records of their baseline human genes. Though combining them to produce a fetus with the help of technology did not sound right, it was a fine substitute to the natural process.

There were even advantages through employing this method. As their name suggested, designer babies offered their parents a lot of choice.

Of course, there were many ethical and legal limits to how extensively the parents could demand a change. In addition, making too many changes to the genes of a child might give the parents the illusion that the offspring was not theirs!

Ves did not intend to go this far with Gloriana, but he did not want to waste this opportunity to design some fantastic children.

He hadn't given up on his intention to raise some children as qualified spiritual engineers. He wasn't sure which of his genes he needed to pass on to impart his offspring with heightened spiritual perception and spiritual control.

He had six chances in total to get it right.

Aside from this, Ves also wanted to bless his children in other ways. With all of the spiritual techniques he developed, surely he employed some of them to empower his sons and daughters.

Several interesting ideas came to mind.

He could implant his children with a small spiritual dynamo made from the Unending One's remains.

He could infuse their minds with doses of his own spiritual energy in order to enhance their spiritual growth.

He could create new spiritual entities that were specifically designed to form a symbiotic relationship with his children and would grow up alongside them over the course of their lives.

Each idea was more radical than the last. Though Ves knew they were risky, they were incredibly attractive to him. He didn't want to raise mediocre children!

Though it was a bit premature to think about his children, thinking about his future life as a happy father successfully caused him to fall asleep.

A quiet night passed. The entire compartment fell completely silent. Only Nitaa remained awake and alert. Even Lucky closed his eyes and grew dormant.

At some point in time, a large hand materialized into view. Despite the appearance of such an abnormal organ, no alarms went off as the sensors didn't detect anything amiss.

Nitaa, who should have been able to spot such a huge apparition, saw nothing at all. The space occupied by the giant hand might as well be empty space!

As for Ves and Lucky, neither of them were aware at all. They had both entered deep sleep and weren't cognizant of what happened around their sleeping forms.

The hand hovered over Ves' body for a moment. It lowered itself at a gentle pace. Once it hit the body, the hand phased right through.

Only the tip of the giant finger brushed against Ves' mind. Despite its passive and active defenses, his mind did not fight back against the foreign presence. Instead, it grew even calmer, as if the finger belonged to someone friendly.

The giant hand disappeared. No trace of it remained. No sensor captured anything. Ves and Lucky continued to sleep blissfully while Nitaa remained as ignorant as ever of what transpired.

Perhaps nothing happened at all.

Chapter 2494: A New Day

A bright new day arrived!

Though day and night strictly didn't have any meaning in place, according to the standard clock that was synced to time on Old Earth, the day of the wedding had arrived!

Many people woke up and followed a meticulous schedule. Ves and Gloriana each came under the care of a team of bots and attendants.

Ves had to leave the Gravada Knarlax and move to another ship in order to prepare for his big day.

He underwent a cleaning so thorough that not even a speck of dust was left on his body. Bots then proceeded to cover him with a lotion synthesized specifically for his skin that made him appear at his best in broadcasts.

After that, some other attendants arrived to dress him up with the special clothes he made for the occasion.

His wedding outfit was only a fraction as elaborate as that of Gloriana. However, that did not mean it was simple.

Light and indestructible to small arms fire, the value of his attire exceeded that of a Hexer combat carrier!

The fabric of his suit was harvested from wild exobeasts from the frontier. After some light treatment and dying, the fabric acquired a rich red shade that appeared especially lustrous under changing light.

In the process of making the suit, the expert tailors incorporated various other fabrics and materials. His wedding attire not only had to make him stand out as a man, but also as the patriarch of a powerful clan.

The main colors of the Larkinson Clan as a whole were red, white and gold. The suit therefore incorporated various ornamental lines and bands made out of white fabric and a special golden alloy.

Ves even incorporated a limited amount of Unending alloy to increase its capacity to contain spiritual energy.

Throughout its entire creation process, it turned into a totem of sorts. Ves originally decided to infuse it with a spiritual fragment taken from Zeigra. The former Crown Cat might not be the strongest design spirit, but his glow exuded a sense of pride and aggression. This fit well with the image he wanted to project.

The only problem was that Zeigra was a bit too aggressive and hostile for a wedding occasion. In order to moderate the totem's glow, Ves blended in minor fragments taken from other design spirits.

The Golden Cat slanted the glow towards the Larkinson Clan.

Qilanxo reduced some of the hostility of the outfit.

The Solemn Guardian made Ves more regal.

Bravo amplified his masculinity.

The Illustrious One enhanced his resplendent nature even further.

Lufa took off the edge of the other influences and caused him to look a bit sacred.

The moment he donned his elaborate outfit, Ves no longer felt like a human.

His stature increased considerably! The dressers and makeup artists looked incredibly impressed at how much the outfit made him larger than life!

His groom attire was a lot more powerful than the Pride of Dusk. Ves had to dial down some of the glow in order to stop his attendants from getting distracted.

"Wow, boss. I'm so jealous right now, you know that?" Gavin told him as he stood by the side. "Can you let me borrow it for my own wedding?"

Ves grinned. "My outfit is completely unique, Benny. I'm never going to let anyone wear it. I can make a weaker suit for you if you're willing to hand in a thousand Larkinson merits."

"Forget it." Gavin immediately said.

A Larkinson could earn a single merit by performing a regular job for an entire year. It was impossible for a clansman to earn a thousand merits unless they were promoted to a higher rank and went above and beyond what was expected from them. Ves deliberately set up the merit system to encourage his clansmen to take more risks and find ways to make major contributions!

Gavin proceeded to report on various matters. No matter how well they planned the wedding, the sheer complexity of it made it difficult to get everything right. There were far too many people and moving parts involved to ensure they were all in place.

Of course, with the depth of preparations, these problems didn't affect the overall schedule. Gloriana and her mother had gone so crazy with contingencies that they were even prepared to hold the wedding aboard the Gravada Knarlax if someone blew up the original venue!

Not that anyone expected that to happen. The giant hexagonal platform that the Wodins spent months to build was incredibly secure. Nothing was allowed to go wrong.

In fact, only crazies would dare to launch an attack. There were so many important guests and envoys attending the wedding that killing was tantamount to offending many local powers in the Yeina Star Cluster!

Not even the Friday Coalition would be stupid enough to mess around. The Fridaymen depended so much on trade that an embargo would definitely cripple their warmaking potential in a matter of months. They might as well roll over and let the Hexers take over straight away in that event.

"So what's on the agenda first?"

"You'll be having breakfast with your closest clansmen. After that, you will take part in various rituals for the rest of the morning."

The rituals consisted of both public and private events that were mostly ceremonial and symbolic in nature. They ranged from honoring his ancestors, paying tribute to the Big Two, acknowledging the heritage of the human race, presenting a monument dedicated to his life in the Komodo Star Sector and so on. He would be doing each of these activities alone.

The Larkinson Clan and Wodin Dynasty both had different ideas on how the wedding should proceed. The Larkinsons wanted to hold a secular ceremony while the Wodins insisted on following hexism traditions.

Suffice to say, neither side agreed with each other.

After many rounds of contentious negotiations, the two sides eventually agreed to carry out their own plans in parallel. This meant that Ves wouldn't be meeting with Gloriana until the main ceremony began.

This was another contentious matter. Since the main ceremony couldn't be split up, the Larkinsons and the Wodins were forced to make numerous compromises. The result was a plan that wasn't quite Brighter or Hexer, but rather an unholy fusion of the two. It was a miracle that the two sides managed to come up with a decent solution.

There was just enough hexism to make Gloriana and the Wodins happy. Ves and the Larkinsons were happy as well because the ceremony was devoid of any man-hating or overt superstition.

Perhaps one of the most important reasons why Gloriana and the Hexers relented on this matter was because they wanted to avoid offending any of their foreign guests.

Though Hexers generally didn't care about the views of ignorant and misguided foreigners, this was different. The honor and pride of the Hexadric Hegemony was at stake. As the Hexers began to fare worse in the Komodo War, they increasingly acknowledged that it was very detrimental for them to turn up their noses at foreigners.

The Friday Coalition maintained a lot more friendly relations with foreign states compared to the Hegemony! This diplomatic edge allowed the Fridaymen to punch above its weight and catch up to the Hexers despite the latter's superior territorial advantages.

While the Hexers weren't delusional enough to make any new allies today, it was already a win in their book if they didn't encourage more foreigners to help the Fridaymen.

Of course, the Hexers had to be appeased as well, or the Wodin Dynasty's position in the Hegemony might become very precarious. No matter what benefits Ves brought to the table, the Wodins couldn't afford to give the impression that they were betraying their Hexer heritage.

Hence why Gloriana received a separate itinerary. Ves only took a single glance at it before he immediately turned away.

"Women." He grumbled.

"Meow."

"You look great!"

Lucky curiously floated over his head. Just like Ves, the cat also dressed up for the occasion. The mechanical cat wore a precisely-fitted tuxedo over the front half of his body, complete with a cute red bow tie to his neck.

An attendant also tied a silky red ribbon to his tail. Lucky hated it at first, but eventually got used to it. Overall, he looked both formal and cute!

Once the makeup bots and artists finished working on his face, he proceeded to step out and have breakfast.

This was a different breakfast than usual. Aside from the formality involved and the impressive-looking venue, half of the diners came in the form of projections.

For this occasion, the Larkinson Clan reached out to the new Larkinson Family. Despite the bad blood between them, they were still Larkinsons who cherished their relatives.

As a result, Ves and some of his clansmen sat on one side of a rectangular table while projections of Benjamin, Ark and many other trueblood Larkinsons sat on the opposite side.

Separated across light-years and star sectors, the two groups of Larkinsons weren't able to partake in the same dishes. However, they were able to hug and touch each other due to the physical projection devices provided by the Hexers.

"Ves!" Benjamin greeted with a warm smile. "You look exceptionally grand today!"

"Thank you." Ves lightly embraced his grandfather's physical projection.

The two groups of Larkinsons soon took their seats and sampled their first dishes.

"We are all proud of you, Ves." His uncle Ark said. "What was it like to take down an armed warship?"

"Defeating the Gravada Knarlax wasn't even the most difficult part about making it through the Nyxian Gap. It's unfortunate that I can't share too many details."

"We understand. A regular battle doesn't produce so many breakthroughs. We're quite jealous about how much welfare you're providing to the clan."

"It's the least that I can do." Ves shrugged as he took a bite off a sausage. "I've been pushing my men hard. I need to whip into shape in order to ready them for the trials to come."

"Maybe it was right that you went your own way." Benjamin sighed. "If you tried to subject all of us to so many dangers, we would have cast you out before you even stepped foot in the Nyxian Gap. It takes a special kind of person to exercise his men by going on a trip through this pirate-infested region."

"There were more reasons why I entered the Nyxian Gap. It's quite an exotic place and has its own charm. While it's filled black-hearted pirates, there are also heroes whose hearts are in the right place. We wouldn't have been able to survive the last battle if the Oblivion Hand hadn't intervened."

Both grandson and grandfather shared an unspoken message through his eyes. Ves minutely nodded, causing Benjamin to feel as if a weight lifted off shoulders.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"Right."

As breakfast progressed, they continued to discuss various matters. The Larkinson Family achieved some progress as well. After some twists and turns, they finally arrived at Vicious Mountain.

"How is it over there?"

"Different." Ark curtly answered. "It's not ideal, but it's a good place for us to develop. Soldiers and warriors are always valued over there, and my qualifications ensure that we will always be treated with dignity. It is just..."

"What is it, uncle?"

"Your reputation is beginning to overshadow ours. People are starting to treat us as an extension of the Larkinson Clan."

"Oh. Sorry."

"It's fine. To be honest, we have taken advantage of this association and secured better treatment for ourselves. While it isn't entirely proper, I want to secure the best treatment for our family members."

Ves smiled. "I don't mind what you're doing. In fact, I endorse your approach. You are still family to me. If you can use us to get ahead, then just do so. As long as you check up with us and keep us in the loop, we don't mind making some gestures to prove your backing."

Both Benjamin and Ark looked ashamed. Only a short time had passed and already the Larkinson Clan left the Larkinson Family in the dust!

Chapter 2495: Honoring Ancestors

As breakfast came to an end, Ves had gained a lot more insight about the current state of the Larkinson Family.

Though it hadn't grown much after leaving the Cinach System, Ark managed to find some decent opportunities for the family. Banking on his strength and the stellar reputation of the Larkinson Family, many different groups were eager to cooperate with the Larkinson in various matters.

Unfortunately, these cushy deals did not provide much growth to the Larkinson Family. There simply wasn't enough to arouse anyone's interests. Who cared about a group of exiled third-raters? Even though Venerable Ark was a proven expert pilot and commanding officer, many states weren't short of either.

The Larkinson Family simply didn't matter.

In the end, it was the rise of the Miracle Couple and the Larkinson Clan that increased their fortunes. Even second-rate powers began to pay attention to the Larkinson Family.

It was very hard for the family members to remain unmoved. The generous offers they received allowed them to develop far more rapidly than before.

"We tried to scrape by on our own merits, but... it's difficult to take care of all of our needs without a solid income." Ark helplessly explained to Ves. "Unlike you we're not good in business. The only way for us to earn enough money to expand our clan is to take high-risk mercenary contracts, but that will certainly lead to a lot of objections."

"Nothing comes for free. There is a lot of competition in the galaxy. No matter how much pride you possess, you aren't special. You'll have to work honestly if you want to develop the Larkinson Family beyond its current state."

Both Ark and Benjamin looked as if they had agonized over the issue for many months. It was much more difficult to manage the Larkinson Family now that it was divorced from the Bright Republic.

Not only did they lose their protection against many threats, they also lost most of their businesses.

Though neither of the older Larkinsons mentioned it, the actual reason why the family was able to remain afloat was their 1 percent ownership in the LMC!

In many aspects, the Larkinson Family had become dependent on the Larkinson Clan. This seriously affected the pride of the former. How could the members of the original Larkinson Family hold their heads high when they were essentially leeching off the efforts of an outcast?

This was an infuriating situation to many stubborn Larkinsons!

It was good that Ark and Benjamin weren't hardliners. They weren't opposed to making use of the Larkinson Clan to get ahead.

Ves discussed some more ways in which the clan and family could work together. Of course, they all amounted to the clan offering aid to the family in various ways.

He no longer had any hard feelings about the Larkinson Family. He achieved so much success and experienced so many wild events that his separation from the original family wasn't a big deal anymore.

"I've designed a couple of mechs that are exclusive to the Larkinson Clan." Ves spoke. "I have even more designs in store that will grant a unique edge to our fighting forces. If you want, we can grant you an exclusive license of our mechs. They're expensive and difficult to produce, but you will find that their advantages are unmatched by other products."

Both Ark and Benjamin looked at each other.

Ark turned back to Ves. "We won't lie. We're tempted. Very tempted. We have heard about your famed Bright Warrior."

"The Bright Warrior isn't a good mech for you to adopt. It's rather outdated by my standards. I intend to build up a mech roster that consists entirely of second-class mechs. I already completed some excellent designs a short time ago. If you want, we can talk about this after the wedding."

"This might be going too far." Ark frowned. "Your mechs are powerful, but.. we are not part of your clan. Our family has to retain its own identity. If we become overly dependent on your handouts, we'll never be able to get our own footing."

Grandfather Benjamin nodded in agreement. "I know you want to help your family, but your own clan advocates for hard work. We can make do without your mechs."

"Don't be so quick to refuse. I have some interesting mechs that will continue to strengthen your position once you acquire them. The mechs I design for my clan are useful for all Larkinsons, so don't worry about compatibility problems."

Breakfast came to an end. Ves separated from many Larkinsons in order to attend his next ritual.

This time, only Lucky and his grandfather's physical projection accompanied him to the next venue.

They boarded a shuttle that brought them to a small platform in space.

Ves stepped onto the platform. This time, he adopted a serious expression. Hidden recorders broadcasted what he was doing live to the Larkinsons, the wedding guests and the public.

Both Lucky and his grandfather flanked him from each side as he strode forwards.

The trio passed through a winding path through a serene-looking garden. Various commemorative statues of famous Larkinson expert pilots lined the path. Ves even shared some of their blood.

Each time Ves came close to a statue, he stood in front of it and bowed his head in respect.

There was nothing deep about this gesture. He was merely honoring his ancestors and paying tribute to their efforts in keeping the Larkinson heritage alive.

While not many people honored their ancestors in this fashion, Ves thought it was a nice way to reinforce the Larkinson brand.

In truth, the ritual was largely meaningless to him as the Larkinsons of the past were completely irrelevant. However, appearing to be filial and respectful of some long-dead heroes was an excellent public relations move.

His grandfather thought that Ves was being sincere, though. Whenever they passed by a noteworthy statue, Benjamin narrated the accomplishments of the hero in question."

"Venerable Gelber Larkinson was not an exceptional expert pilot. He advanced after the first war he took part in had ended. A generation passed before he was finally able to fight earnestly, but an ambush forced him into early retirement. Gelber didn't let that stop him from doing duty. He put his all into training the subsequent generations of Larkinsons. In the end, his tutoring efforts led to the rise of Venerable Irene Larkinson, Venerable Opal Larkinson and Venerable Emma Larkinson. The three of them brought great honor to the Larkinson Family."

"They're all women." Ves noted.

"Yes. It's a complete coincidence. Their aptitudes happen to be better than the rest, I suppose." Benjamin's physical projection stated.

They moved on and passed some other marble-like statues. Though Ves hadn't been involved in making any of it, he admired their craftsmanship. That made this tedious ritual a lot more tolerable.

At the end, they came to the very end. They walked around a fountain and climbed some steep steps until they reached an altar of sorts.

A large statue of an iconic Larkinson stood inside an open dome. The statue's features were kept deliberately vague out of respect for his identity.

"Here is where our lineage truly started." Benjamin reverentially spoke. "The Larkinson Ancestor is our common progenitor. His blood and genes flow through every original Larkinson. Without his heroics, our Larkinson Family would have never gotten off the ground. He started a tradition of honorable service that has lasted for four centuries."

Though Ves had been taught to respect the Larkinson Ancestor as the greatest member of the family in existence, his views had changed over the last few years.

Now that he became a leader and grew the Larkinson Clan to far greater height than the Larkinson Ancestor ever accomplished, Ves felt as if he was looking at a lesser.

For all of the Larkinson Ancestor's remarkable battle accomplishments, he failed to convert that into enduring gains. Once the Bright Republic came into existence, the founding families grasped most of the benefits while only throwing a couple of bones to the Larkinson Ancestor.

What an idiot.

Ves became even more certain that letting mech pilots run anything other than a combat unit was counterproductive.

Of course, he couldn't afford to reveal his contempt for the Larkinson Ancestor. That would tank his reputation and ruin Gloriana's perfect day.

He composed himself and knelt in front of the austere-looking statue. He adopted an expression that made it look as if he completely looked up to the legendary figure.

Lucky lowered himself to the ground as well while Benjamin sank to one knee.

"The Larkinson Ancestor lived in a special day and age. The end of the Age of Conquest was marked by large amounts of devastation in human space. The galactic center and the galactic heartland were especially marked by death and destruction. Too many star sectors were barely livable. Despite their power, the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire suffered most of all, because they built the most powerful and destructive battleships of the time."

The madness that had infected all of humanity led to more destruction than the alien races ever managed to deal.

In that age, the human race tragically discovered that it was its own worst enemy!

"The trauma of this time has marked every survivor. Many were sick and tired of falling victim to the games played by tyrants. A large exodus took place. Many Terrans, Rubarthans and other well-off citizens voluntarily gave up their lives in the heart of human civilization in order to seek a simpler, peaceful life in the far reaches of the galaxy."

Not many humans actually made it all the way through. The journey was simply too long for that. In most cases, the emigrating people only crossed a number of star sector or star clusters before they grew tired of endless travel. The galactic heartland's population grew considerably at that time.

"We do not know much about the Larkinson Ancestor's origin. The records are rather spotty in those chaotic times. We even suspect that he may have deliberately erased the records in order to cut a clean break with the past." Benjamin told Ves.

The quality of the Larkinson Ancestor's original genes suggested that he came from a line of professional soldiers from Rubarth.

"Mechs already existed during those times. They weren't as popular, ubiquitous and advanced as today, but they held a lot of potential. The Larkinson Ancestor happened to be among the pioneers who embraced them wholeheartedly. When the Big Two introduced a new order, our ancestor's foresight meant he was ahead of many other people when it came to piloting mechs."

That sounded fairly remarkable, but in truth he was just slightly ahead. The MTA already spread its influence and converted more and more people into using mechs instead of warships.

"The rest is history, as they say." Benjamin smiled. "With skill and valor, the Larkinson Ancestor helped the predecessors of the Bright Republic fend off the predecessors of the Vesia Kingdom. He was just one man, but his performance increasingly stood out from the rest. Back then, mechs were very primitive. The concepts of expert mechs and expert pilots did not exist. At most, there were just a few mech pilots who were uncommonly good in battle. Our ancestor happened to be one of them. Whether he was an expert pilot or even an ace pilot is shrouded in history."

Ves had his own suspicions. The strong X-Factor and weight of history of the Valiant suggested that the Larkinson Ancestor had at least reached demigod.

Whatever genetic advantage the ancestor possessed in this aspect, he partially passed it down to his descendants. Every generation of Larkinsons that followed always succeeded in producing at least one expert pilot.

In the end, Ves was still thankful to the Larkinson Ancestor.

Even though the early mech pilot or his parents made the incredibly stupid decision to forsake Rubarth, the Larkinson Ancestor set an example that many descendants followed to this day!

Chapter 2496: Child of Humanity

Once Ves finished honoring his ancestors, he departed the garden platform and returned to his shuttle.

He still had a lot of more rituals to go through. Whether they were relevant to him or not didn't matter. The point was to show off what a good man he was and what a good spouse he would be. With how much publicity this wedding attracted, Ves and the Larkinsons had to appear at their very best in order to leave a favorable impression to the public.

In fact, Ves had to go above and beyond what was necessary to emphasize his virtues. This was because he had to compensate for the negative influence brought by the Hexers.

To this day, many outsiders were scratching their heads at the wedding. Why in the hell was Ves marrying a Hexer of all people?

Even Ves asked this question sometimes.

If he was being absolutely honest, he didn't have to marry Gloriana. His life would have taken a different turn if he hadn't followed his grandfather's advice to seek a girlfriend. He may not have developed to this point, but he had little doubt that he would have achieved at least some level of success even if he hooked up with Aisling or some other woman.

It was just that events progressed in a way that ruled out every other option except for Gloriana.

Granted, he wasn't unwilling. Despite her shenanigans and excesses, she truly possessed qualities to his liking. Ignoring everything else, the trust they shared with each other was enough for him to accept the prospect of partnering up with her for the rest of his life.

Questions such as whether he could have snagged a 'better' wife did not bother him. Objectively, Ves could have certainly found a more pleasant and compatible lover than Gloriana, but life wasn't about seeking the perfect outcome.

Life was about grasping opportunities within reach.

Ves took part in some other rituals.

For example, in order to honor his human heritage, the Larkinsons prepared a different floating platform.

Smaller than the last one, this platform simply simulated the pristine landscape of Old Earth. Every single plant and material completely conformed to Terran standard.

When Ves stepped foot on it, even the air kept in place by energy shields gained a distinct tang.

"So this is how Old Earth smells."

There were no actual Terrans or humans who were born on Old Earth to preside over this ceremony. Though they had the option of hiring an authentic Terran to preside over the ceremony via physical projection, the requirements were too onerous.

Instead, Ves decided to do without one. In any case, many other ceremonies of this nature eschewed involving actual Terrans as well. Not only did it cost a lot of money to gain their cooperation, they were also incredibly picky and prone to picking faults.

He walked forward with Lucky until he reached a small stable. Several objects were placed on it. Ves picked up a simple sapling and a small hand shovel.

He moved to his left and carefully bent down. He did not worry about staining or dirtying his elaborate outfit. It naturally resisted dirt and was able to clean itself to an extent.

Ves bent down and began to dig up a random patch of soil from the grassy surface. The soil was already treated so that it was especially loose. Ves hardly had to employ any strength at all to dig up a serviceable hole.

After just a couple of scoops, Ves carefully inserted the sapling so that its roots fully entered the hole. He used the shovel to put back the soil as best as possible.

Ves didn't speak a word throughout this event. The simple act of planting an earth-derived sapling into soil that simulated Old Earth's environment was entirely symbolic.

It was a silent message that stated that no matter how far humans had spread, their roots still resided on the planet that birthed their race.

With hundreds of thousands of light-years separating some humans from other humans, it was far too easy to become distant to each other. The citizens of the galactic center looked down at people who lived in the galactic rim. Those who were born in the most impoverished regions of human space practically considered those who enjoyed better births as different species.

While it was difficult to counteract these differences, people still needed to remember that they all shared a common origin.

The human race must never split. This was the wisdom that humanity acquired after passing through many ups and downs.

In the Age of Stars, humanity was made up of different nations that constantly contested against each other.

Yet when they first expanded into space, they encountered many powerful and superior aliens. Even the weakest alien empire back then was more than capable of ending the human race!

Humanity back then learned to set aside most of their differences and work together for the common good. If they still engaged in infighting, they would have never been able to accomplish the great feats that were necessary to solidify humanity's place in the galaxy!

This was the origin of what would eventually become the Greater Terran United Confederation, the first truly unified interstellar human nation!

Planting the sapling not only acknowledged his fealty to his humanity, but also honored the early Terrans who allowed the human race to survive its initial steps into space.

Ves rose up and approached the table again. He picked up some seeds and returned to the saplings.

He used the small shovel to dig up some small holes to plant his seeds. It didn't matter where he dug, but just to be sure, he planted the seeds in a perfect circle around the sapling.

This was a gesture that signalled that he took pride in humanity's successful expansion. It also served as a message that stated that he acknowledged that he was part of humanity's enormous diaspora.

As much as Old Earth was considered to be the cradle of humanity, their race had already outgrown it. If everyone wanted to live on the ancestral planet, then it would have been choked of all life due to the sheer amount of people it was forced to accommodate!

In order to preserve the original environment of their birth planet, many humans had to go out and seek life elsewhere. The seeds represented the fact that while a huge amount of humans had set out to find their way, they had not traveled to the extent they lost contact with Old Earth.

During the Age of Conquest, the Terrans expanded their empire aggressively. They competed against the local alien powers and somehow managed to expand without getting snuffed midway.

Any of the dominant alien empires could have snuffed human civilization out. However, they were so wary of their established rivals that they overlooked the emergent threat of humanity for a very long time.

When most aliens finally took humanity seriously, it was already too late. Through a combination of subterfuge, manipulation, cheating and breaking promises, the humans at that time rapidly accumulated strength in the dark. They only revealed just enough to accomplish their goals and always held back something in reserve in case of accidents.

This was how humanity amazingly managed to supplant every other alien power in the first half of the Age of Conquest. Even the successful rebellion of the New Rubarth Empire and many other upstart colonies did not diminish humanity's ascendancy.

It was only later on that divisions between nations and individual citizens deepened.

The reduction of external pressure in the form of enemy alien threats meant that humans increasingly turned against each other.

Ves stepped back. Seconds later, the patch of ground where he planted the sapling and seeds spontaneously erupted in flames.

The fire burned for a few seconds before automatically snuffing out by itself.

The burning only lasted a couple of seconds, but the damage was considerable. Smoke burned from the branches. None of its young leaves were left as they had long turned into ashes. Much of the grass on the patch of ground was blackened beyond recognition.

The waning years of the Age of Conquest was one of the biggest stains in humanity's history. Due to a combination of factors such as runaway genetic modification and the development of bigger and more destructive battleships, humans began to slaughter each other to fuel their delusional ambitions.

Ves had always doubted a couple of aspects about this dark time. Now that he learned about the existence of the Five Scrolls Compact and its supposed role in orchestrating humanity's rise, he began to suspect that the truth of this period was not what it seemed.

The history books were probably wrong. Much of humanity remained in the dark of what took place behind the curtain. The Five Scrolls Compact invested millenia into a goal, only for two emergent factions to launch a rebellion that eventually succeeded as well.

Ves grabbed two rods from the table and began to plant them into the blackened ground.

The rods began to project a small energy screen then enveloped the blackened ground.

Inside, some unknown processes took place that caused the blackened grass to make way for newer growths. Through some kind of rapid growth treatment, the artificially-modified grass shot up until they reached twice the height of the original!

In the Age of Mechs, the protective umbrella of the Big Two shielded and sheltered the broken pieces of the human race until it finally recovered.

At this time, something unusual happened a short distance away. The hazy form of a human materialized into place.

Jovy Armalon teleported onto the platform!

The young Journeyman held a serious expression. Not an inkling of his friendship with Ves was apparent from his appearance.

He came to represent the MTA instead of himself. The MTA mech designer strode forward in a precise cadence until he stopped right in front of the protective field.

His participation in this little ritual was a very welcome surprise. In fact, it would have been even better if Master Willix performed this role, but that was way too much to ask of such an august figure.

In fact, the Larkinson Clan wasn't even qualified to invite Jovy. He only came because he wanted to and because Master Willix bent some rules.

Jovy peered through the energy screen and witnessed the growth taking place inside. After half a minute, he looked at Ves.

"What does it mean to be a human?"

"Humans are unique. Each individual holds limitless potential. It is through our circumstances and our choices that we grow into the people we are today. Yet no matter how much we diverge from each other, we will always be tied by our species."

Ves answered from the heart instead of reading out a prepared answer. He didn't know which questions Jovy would ask.

"What is your place in human society?"

"I am a creator. I make products that other humans desire. I am a leader. I guide a growing clan to prosperity. I am a pioneer. I venture out into new and unknown space to expand humanity's domain."

Ves identified himself with all three roles, though the first one would always be his primary focus.

"What role does the Mech Trade Association play in your life?"

"The Mech Trade Association is the guardian of all of humanity, including myself. Everything I am and everything I accomplish is thanks to the benevolence of your protection. I am deeply grateful that the Mech Trade Association has saved humanity from its own darkness. Since I have dedicated myself to designing mechs, I have always shown my gratitude to the protectors of the human race and the patrons of the mech industry."

Naturally, Ves resorted to the Devil Tongue this time. If he had to issue his complete, unvarnished opinion, Jovy would have probably been compelled to shoot him down!

As it was, his false opinion passed the test. Jovy nodded in satisfaction.

"As a child of humanity and a citizen of the galaxy, the Mech Trade Association wishes you well. Never forget your place in our civilization."

Jovy teleported away, thereby ending this serious ritual.

Ves turned his back and left the platform.

Chapter 2497: Growth and Decline

As morning went by, Ves finally completed all of the rituals.

All of the theater made him tired. If he had a choice, he would have been fine with conducting a shorter and more subdued wedding.

Regretfully, he was too big of a person to get away with a private ceremony. His clan benefited a lot from his celebrity persona. The attention his wedding attracted today was such an incredibly valuable public relations opportunity that it would be criminal to throw it away!

"Besides, Gloriana will kill me if she doesn't get her perfect wedding." He muttered.

He was glad the bride wasn't by his side at the moment. While it might be strange for the groom to think this way, his soon-to-be-wife wasn't exactly the pleasant person to be around when she became invested in these kinds of matters.

Fortunately, she was engaged in her own ceremonies right now. As a devout follower of hexism, Gloriana insisted on paying tribute to the six phases of existence. Naturally, she also wanted to show her devotion to the Superior Mother.

When Ves glanced at her itinerary, he immediately became disgusted. The sheer amount of superstition involved made him crazy.

He was more than glad that she and her family went off to entertain the Hexers by themselves. If he took part in them, then he would just be forced to play the role of a 'good boy' whose only purpose was to stand still and let the women pat his head!

Though the rituals he had just completed were also spectacles, at the very least the symbolism wasn't rooted in baseless beliefs. The reason why he honored his ancestors and his human heritage was because these acts reinforced his image as an exemplary husband and a proper galactic citizen.

A good reputation was incredibly important to Ves. As long as people knew that he was a 'good' person, no one would believe he engaged in illegal activities!

"Ves, a war criminal? How could that be! He's such a good person! Just look at how close he is with the MTA. He's so successful already. Why would he possibly risk his career by breaking the rules?"

As long as Ves worked hard enough to cultivate a virtuous image, he could get away with a lot more improper acts when it truly mattered!

Naturally, he considered giving up on breaking the rules entirely. He couldn't really imagine becoming a goody two shoes though. If there was one lesson he learned about life, it was that everyone cheated whenever possible.

Rules only constrained people when they were too weak to avoid getting caught.

He was different. He had gotten away plenty of times already.

One of his ultimate ambitions was to become powerful enough to join the ranks of those who made the rules. Once he attained this goal, every rule became negotiable.

The Big Two served as a great example to Ves. They imposed several strict taboos to lower humanity's destructive potential, but they continued right along with performing mass human experimentation, fielding incredible weapons of mass destruction and building enormous battleships.

What amazed Ves was that the MTA and CFA actually got away with engaging in hypocrisy on a galactic scale!

Sometimes, Ves took pride in being called the Devil Tongue. He had to develop his social manipulation ability quickly in order to survive and thrive, yet he was a mere novice compared to Big Two. For centuries, the mechers and fleeters deceived and indoctrinated the entirety of human space that only they deserved to field all of the best weapons!

While Ves learned that the Big Two's hegemony over human space generated at least some opposition, by and large the vast majority of humans simply agreed to be stripped of their sovereignty!

How long did he have to develop himself until he reached this height? It would take a century at a minimum, but realistically he probably had to be patient for a couple of centuries more. Human civilization was so expansive that there were many more talented and capable people in front of him. Their backing was no less effective at boosting their careers than the Mech Designer System.

In fact, for the most privileged sons and daughters such as Axelar Streon, they received much more benefits!

If Ves only looked at mech designers, then the descendants of Star Designers were definitely in heaven as far as he was concerned.

When Ves recalled the sheer amount of wealth and luxury Axelar had access to in his younger years, he suddenly felt as if his wedding ceremony was not that much of a spectacle.

To local standards, his wedding was quite extravagant, yet in the galactic center, he would probably be seen as a boor!

He sighed and he petted Lucky's back. "We're still too weak."

Lucky arched his back to adjust how his miniature tuxedo outfit fit his upper body. "Meow."

"That's easy for you to say. Growing stronger by eating materials doesn't require any thinking at all!" Ves snorted.

"Meow meow."

"I have to go out of my way to gain inspiration and keep up a rapid pace of growth. Innovating is not something that you can do with your brain turned off. I don't even know how long it will take for me to reach Senior."

As someone who began to utilize the process of growth in his work, he was quite intrigued by his own growth trajectory. He constantly tried to figure out ways to accelerate his progress, but ever since he reached Journeyman, he found no easy solutions.

It wasn't unusual to hear about Apprentices breaking through to Journeyman in a couple of years, but the same was not the case for the next big leap.

Though Ves wasn't dissatisfied with his current status, he became more and more constrained by the fact that Senior was still too far away. Right now, his lack of qualifications posed a serious hindrance in his ambition to design his own expert mechs.

"I guess I have no choice but to turn to other people to make up for my shortcomings."

This was one of his goals today. The wedding attracted a lot of powerful people and groups. While most of them did not have anything to offer to him, some of them had a basis of cooperation. The Cross Clan was a decent example of this. There were bound to be more among the list of guests.

After Ves enjoyed a sumptuous lunch, he continued to take part in various public events.

He took part in a couple of interviews. He talked in detail about his mechs when interviewed by a mech publication and talked about general matters when questioned by the Rimward Star Herald. With the reach of these news portals, Ves knew for certain that his name would spread to star clusters beyond his native one. Perhaps his reputation might even spread all the way to the Smiling Samuel Star Sector!

"I can't forget about that." He muttered under his breath.

The System was probably staring at him with an intensity greater than that of Gloriana. After going through so much trouble to put him in a position to retrieve Timpala Steel, Ves had to travel to the location where he secretly stashed it during his most recent Mastery experience!

This would be his first main objective once his grand expedition commenced. Visiting the Life Research Association in Majestic Teal was just a convenient stop.

Hopefully, he'd be able to complete the System's remaining Supply Missions in the Red Ocean. Even if the other ultra-rare exotics such as Orphedian Glow Glass wasn't naturally available in the dwarf galaxy, there were bound to be Terrans or Rubarthans who had some lying in their vaults.

One of his favorite moments of the day was when the Larkinson Clan held its long-anticipated triumph. He impressed the audience by parading the savage Gravada Knarlax and her dangerous escorts over their heads.

Though the Larkinsons requested permission to fire the heavy cruiser's main guns, the MTA resolutely turned them down.

What a shame!

The Larkinsons could only make do with showing heavily-edited footage of the Battle against the Abyss. By showing some never-before-seen footage of the Gravada Knarlax blowing up a succession of resilient Hexer combat carriers, the wedding guests became suitably impressed by the effort the Larkinsons invested in defeating the Allidus Alliance!

Throughout the afternoon, Ves no longer spent time with his fellow Larkinsons. He began to mingle with some of the honored guests.

One of them approached. Several other prominent people who wanted to have a word with Ves suddenly felt uneasy and moved away.

"Patriarch Cross. How are you enjoying the show so far?"

"This triumph is definitely a unique experience. I have taken part in numerous parades, but none of them feature actual warships."

"We aim to please."

Just like Ves, the patriarch dressed up. The expert pilot's white and pale blue dress uniform exuded a much more militaristic vibe. His chest was bedecked by medals and ribbons while his velvety cape showed off the emblem of his clan, a prominent templar cross.

Together with his force of will, Reginald's presence did not lose out against that of Ves!

"You must feel proud for conquering the Gravada Knarlax." Patriarch Reginald Cross remarked.

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Should I feel differently?"

"No. The act of defeating the pirates who fielded this terrible weapon is a great accomplishment. I am merely trying to caution you not grow overconfident. I have fought many battles against enemies who have brought enough firepower to break the Gravada Knarlax in half. Although we never had to fight in an environment as abnormal as the Nyxian Gap, the enemies we have fought against are on an entirely different level."

The Cross Patriarch made a subtle jab at the Larkinson Clan's lack of depth. Ves and his clansmen were still upstarts compared to the established powers.

"We are still new at this." Ves conceded. "However, we're growing quickly. We were much smaller a year ago. Have you ever heard of third-raters turning into second-raters in so little time? We didn't even receive any help. We managed to climb our way up through our own efforts. Not only that, we are still continuing to grow. Our future is getting brighter and brighter."

He could be snarky as well. While Ves ostensibly defended his clan, he actually made an unfavorable comparison between the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan. The latter used to be much more powerful, but it had gone downhill ever since Lord Hemmington Cross fell in battle.

Now, the Cross Clan had been reduced to a remnant fleet. What was worse was that its decline hadn't stopped. Without territory, the Crossers weren't able to earn enough money to keep their expensive assets afloat.

The main question was how much cash reserves the Cross Clan had left. Patriarch Reginald and the Crossers did well in hiding this critical detail. Ves wasn't able to read how desperate the Crossers were. If their money was about to run out in a matter of months, then they would probably fold easily in subsequent negotiations!

The Cross Patriarch maintained a stone-cold expression. "The true basis of power in the galaxy is might, not wealth. Possessing the latter without the former leaves you vulnerable to predation."

"Wealth can be converted in many different forms." Ves lightly retorted. "Even now, we are investing in many different assets to strengthen our forces. It is only a matter of time before our fleet surpasses yours in might."

"Some things can't be bought with money."

"My men aren't wallet warriors. Good mechs are indispensable to us, but that doesn't mean we are neglecting the development of our mech pilots. In fact, it's the opposite. The mechs we design mainly exist to facilitate their growth. This one of the exclusive

benefits that I provide to my men. If you wish to enjoy my attention, then I need to hear more than condescending remarks."

The Cross Clan may be powerful, but it was definitely in decline! There was no reason for Ves to show too much respect to a bleeding body!

Chapter 2498: Greater Concessions

Patriarch Reginald Cross looked more and more displeased. It was difficult for him to refute the suggestion that his clan was in decline.

Although he was an expert pilot, he was also a leader. He had been in power long enough to know that he needed to gain as much leverage as possible to secure a favorable deal with someone.

He initially thought that Ves was too young and inexperienced, but the more they talked, the more leverage he was giving up. If this continued on for a couple of weeks, the Cross Clan might have no choice but to sign a deeply lop-sided agreement if it wanted to cooperate with the Larkinson Clan!

Near the end of the triumph, Patriarch Reginald finally made a major concession.

He revealed another bargaining chip. He leaned in to whisper in Ves' ear.

"Our clan may have lost many assets, but don't underestimate how many treasures we've gathered at our height. We defeated several powerful clans and tribes back in the Garlen Empire. Just as you've plundered pirates, we have been plundering much greater opponents."

"You lost most of those gains, right?" Ves replied.

"We do not deny that, but we have still managed to empty our most valuable vaults in the confusion. Among our gains are strategic reserves of incredibly rare exotics. These materials are only produced in our star sector at exceedingly limited quantities due to their scarcity. Some of the exotics can be classified as first-class materials. While our clan is reserving most of it for my eventual ace mech, we may be open to trading the excess to you in exchange for your services."

There was no way Ves could remain unmoved after hearing this. Even though he plundered large quantities of Unending alloy from the Nyxian Gap, the applicability of this material was very limited. Aside from expanding a mech's spiritual capacity, the main way to utilize this hard material was to incorporate it into the armor and structure of a machine.

In effect, this meant that any expert mech that Ves was able to design with Unending alloy would fall into a similar situation as the Bright Warrior. The armor and protection of

the expert mech might reach first-class standards, but the power reactor, mech engine, flight system, inertial dampeners and so on lagged too far behind.

Granted, such a resilient mech would definitely be more powerful than regular second-class expert mechs, but Ves yearned for more.

If he followed his original plan and designed an expert mech with his current means, then Venerable Joshua and his other expert pilots would receive adequate machines.

However, there was a decent chance that his expert pilots could no longer go any further because their expert mechs failed to keep up. Once the expert pilots reached the limits of their machines, Ves would have to upgrade them at great cost and effort.

In fact, this was how state militaries such as the Sundered Phalanx and the Hex Army handled their expert mechs. While providing fresh expert pilots with high-tier expert mechs accelerated their development, the chance that they would fall was too great.

The Fridaymen and Hexers couldn't afford to waste so many strategic materials at once. Therefore, they kept their high-grade exotics and other valuable materials in reserve and developed more modest expert mechs to their expert pilots.

As long as the demigods proved their worth and grew in strength, then their expert mechs would definitely be upgraded or replaced with better ones sooner or later.

Although Ves could adopt this gradual growth model as well for his expert pilots, it was too slow and timid for his liking.

The Hex Army and so on had to meet the needs of many different expert pilots. The Hexers might have stockpiled a lot of strategic materials, but they had to ration them in order to keep their options open in the later stages of the Komodo War.

The Larkinson Clan was in a different situation. It wasn't locked in costly wars. While it possessed relatively many expert pilots and expert candidates for its size, they didn't suffer any attrition due to being forced to fight in destructive wars.

At most, his Larkinsons would have to fight sporadically against enemies they met over the course of his expedition. Having the strongest possible mechs at hand would go a long way in securing victory and preserving the lives of his precious expert pilots.

In short, the advantages of securing high-tier expert mechs early were too great for Ves to ignore!

The reason why strategic materials were called this way was because they rarely circulated on the open market.

Even if someone was stupid enough to get rid of them, they would only offer them up to buyers through exclusive auctions.

From mining to processing these high-value exotics, the states maintained a tight grip on the entire supply chain.

One of the downsides of turning his Larkinson Clan nomadic was that it was incredibly hard for Ves to obtain these strategic materials.

Currently, his most viable option was to exchange them from the MTA or Rim Guards with MTA merits. Suffice to say, Ves would have to give up at least several million MTA merits to obtain a relatively modest quantity of materials. The pricing was so ludicrously high that Ves might as well call it an outright scam!

That said, Ves wasn't sure whether working together with the Cross Clan was a viable alternative.

"Your description is too vague." Ves told the Cross Patriarch. "I need more data. Give me a list. I need to judge the value of the materials you are willing to put before deciding anything else."

Patriarch Reginald instantly sent a file to Ves through his implant.

The document did not contain a lot of information, but it was more than sufficient for Ves to make a preliminary judgement.

The materials he encountered were quite obscure. Ves had to look them up on the galactic net in order to identify their properties.

His eyes widened a bit. While Reginald Cross did not put up any armor materials on the list, he listed various high-grade exotics that would add considerable power to the components of a mech.

Two exotics stood out to Ves. They held very special meaning to him. Ves instantly thought back of the Groening Mission and how much of a disaster it turned out to be. It was his first brush with the Five Scrolls Compact!

"Is Vicious Mountain a producer of monoexurite?" He asked.

"To be honest, we don't know where it came from." Reginald replied. "We just raided a stockpile from one of our defeated enemies."

It likely came from the frontier. If a planet in the frontier such as Groening IV held monoexurite deposits, then it was plausible for other nearby star systems to contain some as well!

In fact, perhaps the monoexurite in the Cross Clan's hands originated from that very same planet where Ves gained his Jutland organ!

No matter the origin, monoexurite was critically important to Ves, but not because of its use in mechs. Monoexurite had the remarkable ability to increase the range and traversal speed of FTL drives.

His ships would be able to travel across space a lot faster!

The only downside was that the Cross Clan only put up enough monoexurite to enhance a handful of FTL drives. If Ves managed to get his hands on the material, he intended to use it to improve the FTL drives of his factory ship!

Aside from monoexurite, the Cross Clan offered another interesting material.

"How did you get your hands on a Worclaw Crystal? I thought those only showed up closer to the center of the galaxy."

"It is likely a souvenir that someone carried all the way to the galactic rim." Patriarch Reginald casually guessed. "We only have one of them. The only reason why we're putting it up for exchange is because we have no use for this exotic."

Though Ves hadn't paid much attention to his abnormal physique in recent years, he never forgot about its similarities to the once-powerful Alshyr race.

One of the key reasons why the avian aliens grew so formidable was because they derived their strength from the Worclaw Crystals that were naturally found on their home planet!

While Ves had no idea what Worclaw Crystals would do to his abnormal physique and weird internal energy cycle, he would at least be able to advance his understanding of Dr. Jutland's work!

Ves continued to ask about the details of some of the other exotics. Unlike monoexurite and Worclaw Crystals, the remaining materials on the list were mainly relevant to mechs.

"I'm not satisfied with the quantities you are willing to provide to us. They're barely enough to strengthen a single expert mech."

The Cross Patriarch held the upper hand this time. "We have to reserve most of our stockpile for our own needs. Back when we were in charge of the Becker Tribe, we took possession of much greater stockpiles of strategic materials. My father wanted to keep fighting in order to preserve momentum. If he chose to halt and allowed his men to upgrade his expert mech, then he might have been able to survive the ambush that robbed us of our warlord."

This sounded like a sore point to Reginald Cross. However, Ves was not about to let a sob story hold him back from clawing more concessions from the Cross Clan!

"Be that as it may, your expert mech can probably make due with less. Pumping too much value into it will only lead to a lot of wasted strength."

The two sparred a bit about this matter, but Reginald remained obstinate about this point. In fact, the Cross Patriarch originally didn't intend to hand over any exotics at all! He was only driven to the point because his clan didn't have anything else to give that would interest the Larkinsons.

As the military parade finished, Ves had to move onto the next phase. He quickly bid goodbye Patriarch Reginald.

"We'll discuss this further after the wedding. Think about putting more strategic materials on the table. The more you give to us, the more effort I will put into strengthening the expert mech that might help you become an ace pilot. The benefits I provide are worth much more than the marginal performance gains you'll get when you keep the valuable exotics to yourself. Perhaps you'll be able to increase your performance by 5 to 10 percent or so, but if you secure your breakthrough to ace pilot with my help, your effective performance will probably increase by 1000 percent!"

The difference in strength between an ace pilot and an expert pilot was very substantial! The former could beat the latter with ease.

The only reason why ace pilots hadn't been able to terrorize the galaxy was because they were too few in number. States never employed them casually onto the battlefield because the loss of just one of them significantly damaged their national strength!

Now that the Cross Clan lost its foundation as a controller of a state, it no longer possessed the infrastructure to nurture ace pilots. This was why Ves still held a lot of leverage in the negotiations. As long as Patriarch Reginald believed that working together with Ves was the only way for him to become an ace pilot without becoming subordinate to another state, the Cross Clan would definitely be willing to make a lot of concessions.

No matter how much wealth and assets the Cross Clan traded away, Patriarch Reginald would be able to earn ten times more if he succeeded in breaking through to ace pilot!

As Ves distanced himself from Reginald Cross, he temporarily shoved this matter aside. The most important moment of the wedding was approaching.

More and more guests began to enter the central space of the giant hexagonal platform. Both Hexers and foreigners arrived and took their seats at the opposite halves.

Many looked forward to witnessing the much-awaited moment where Ves would exchange vows with Gloriana. After going through so many rituals and ceremonies, the guests were all impatient to see the lucky couple pledge their eternal love with each other!

Chapter 2499: Seating Arrangement

Almost a hundred-thousand people gathered on the enormous platform.

With an open view of space and the endless stars when anyone looked up, the huge platform seemed fit to preside over a union of gods!

The main venue where the audience would witness the lucky couple exchanging vows was bedecked with opulence.

From above, the venue looked like a garden in the middle of an ancient city. White marble-like monuments harmoniously blended in with exotic trees and plants. Arched bridges tastefully spanned over tranquil-looking ponds and canals. Exquisite fish ranging from authentic Terran koi to multi-limbed aquatic exobeasts swam beneath the surface.

There were no seats or room for seats on the surface, but that was not a big issue.

The Wodins who built and installed all of the ornaments may have refrained from using too many hexagons, but their overall influence was still clear in many other touches.

Still, not many guests felt bothered by the setting. There was nothing about the venue that made men uncomfortable. That was as much as the Larkinsons could ask from Hexers.

Calming music sounded evenly throughout the open space. The Wodins hired and shipped in an entire orchestra from the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty.

The reason why the Wodins didn't invite an equally-renowned orchestra from the Evern Matriarchal Dynasty was because all of the musicians down to the bots that cleaned the instruments were female!

While the Wodins were more than glad to employ them, the Larkinsons vehemently objected. Hiring an orchestra that imposed an unnatural gender distribution would send the wrong message to their guests!

After a lot of back and forth, the two sides eventually compromised by hiring the Vraken orchestra. The Vrakens were more progressive than the Everns. While the conductor, first violin and every other lead position were taken by women, a surprisingly large amount of seats were taken by male musicians.

Music and art were one of the few fields where Hexer boys were allowed to express themselves more freely. Of course, how far they were allowed to go varied quite a bit throughout the Hegemony.

In any case, the orchestra was placed off to the side, so hardly anyone should bother look at them. They weren't here to draw attention.

"Open the doors!"

The enormous double doors that loomed taller than a mech slowly slid open.

Tens of thousands of Larkinsons entered first. Every non-essential clansman was allowed to attend today. A horde of children, adults and elderly stepped forward and sat onto the chairs placed very close to the massive entrance.

Once these Larkinsons took their seats, the chairs gradually floated up and flew towards the front of the giant venue. Antigrav modules and other safety measures made sure that kids and grannies didn't randomly push themselves off and fall to their deaths.

The floating chairs positioned the Wodins and other Hexers who arrived at the same time on the other half of the venue.

The Larkinsons mainly rearranged the order of their seats by rank or closeness to Ves, but only generally. The exact seating arrangement became more mixed as the Larkinsons commanded their floating chairs to swap places with other ones in order for them to sit next to their friends and family.

The Hexers did not engage in this behavior. Their seating arrangement was much more strictly regulated. Women were seated at the front while the few boys who were allowed to attend were pushed to the very back.

The only exceptions were Gloriana's direct brothers. Marcus and Tarkus Wodin looked very nervous and out of place as their chairs settled at the front row of their group.

Only a couple of thousands of Hexers attended. It was too inconvenient for many Hexers to travel all the way out to the Sentinel Kingdom. The Komodo War consumed so much of their attention that it was rare to see Hexers who ranked as high as Constance Wodin.

The Hexers mainly kept to themselves. They weren't particularly interested in socializing with the Larkinsons. The two groups of people simply didn't have much in common.

Considering how much the Hex Army depended so much on Ves' work, perhaps the Hexers should have made more overtures to the Larkinsons while they resided in the Cinach System.

However, aside from a few exceptions, the Hexers preferred to remain in their own enclave.

As almost every Hexer and Larkinson took their places above the idyllic garden, the most notable members of both groups arrived.

The expert pilots attracted the most attention.

A luxurious lineup of seven demigods advanced in a row. Though most guests were too far away to come under the influence of their force of wills, the gravitas they exuded made it so that no one was able to ignore their entry!

Jannzi, Joshua, Tusa, Dise, Orfan formed a single united group. No matter how much Venerable Jannzi disagreed with Venerable Joshua, this was not the time to air their dirty laundry. On this great day, the Larkinson Clan needed to show unity and harmony.

Two additional expert pilots walked by the side.

Venerable Davia Stark was a new addition to the expert pilot lineup of the Larkinson Clan. Different from the other five, Davia distinctly did not wear a dress uniform of the Larkinson Clan.

Instead, she opted to wear a replica dress uniform of the mech military of the Vindmar Republic.

"You could loosen up, you know." Joshua whispered to the older woman. "Weddings are supposed to be happy occasions. Is it too much to ask for you to smile?"

"I don't like taking part in vain spectacles." She grumbled. "If not for your patriarch, I would have preferred to remain in my bunk."

"Why are you so pissed?"

"I loathe Hexers. If the Hexadric Hegemony ever loses the Komodo War, I will dance upon their graves. My only regret is that the Friday Coalition won't follow suit."

All of the expert pilots looked askance at Davia. Her vendetta against the local second-rate states ran very deep!

Perhaps it was good to bring her out of the Komodo Star Sector! No good would come from letting her stay!

"Hush now. Please pay attention to decorum. Ves will not be pleased if you cause an incident." Brutus attempted to calm the volatile expert pilot.

"You don't have to treat me like an infant. I know how to persevere." She growled.

Unlike the comfortable white seats of the other guests, the expert pilots sat on special chairs.

The chairs reserved for the Larkinson expert pilots were gold. Aside from bearing the emblem of the Golden Cat, their high backs also carried the stylized symbols that Ves had individually designed to serve as their personal emblems.

Venerable Jannzi's emblem depicted Qilanxo projecting a spatial barrier.

Venerable Joshua's emblem depicted a mech carrying a giant heart like how Atlas carried Old Earth.

Venerable Dise's emblem depicted the iconic greatsword of the Swordmaidens.

Venerable Orfan's emblem depicted a spearman mech triumphantly raising its weapon.

Venerable Tusa's emblem depicted a flying bird that shared a passing resemblance to the Inexorable One.

Tusa happened to be quite upset at that. "Is Ves mocking me or something?"

"He must have his reasons." Joshua remarked.

"Well, as soon as this wedding is over, I'm going to request a change. I don't want to be represented by the enemy who beat me down."

The seats prepared for Venerable Davia and Venerable Brutus looked less distinct. As Davia was officially guest expert pilot of the Larkinson Clan, it wasn't appropriate to draw too much attention to her. This was fine as far as she was concerned.

Meanwhile, Venerable Brutus was not allowed to outshine the most prominent Hexers. His grey, hexagonal-shaped chair possessed a shorter back that did not loom so tall.

Brutus cared little about how he was being perceived. His seat steadily rose and moved him to the Hexer half.

More notable people arrived. The members of the Larkinson Family who accepted the invitation appeared through remote projections. Benjamin, Ark, Melinda and many other familiar faces emerged on seats that were positioned right alongside the members of the Larkinson Clan.

Though the Larkinsons had split up into two very different directions, today they only paid attention to what they had in common.

"Raymond." Benjamin greeted his fellow elder Larkinson.

"Benjamin." The effective head of the LMC greeted back. "Have you reconsidered my proposal? The Larkinson Family stands to gain a lot of money and influence if it becomes the designated agent of the LMC in the local star cluster. We would rather entrust our business to blood kin than random hires."

Ves' grandfather sighed. "We've talked about this already. While it is tempting to obtain more power, influence and money through this method, it wouldn't be ours. We'll only become more dependent on Ves, the Larkinson Clan and the LMC. I already spoke to Ves about this. We will not accept any measure that will subordinate our family to your clan. Too many of our family members cannot bear the humiliation of such an outcome."

The two elder Larkinsons continued to argue with each other about this topic until another prominent figure arrived.

The Hexers grew very still. They straightened their backs and looked utterly respectful as a spotlight shone on a single arriving figure.

"All rise for Matriarch Xiaphna Wodin!"

The Hexers all stood up from their floating chairs. Though their feet rested on empty air, their antigrav clothes ensured that they continued to maintain altitude.

Matriarch Xiaphna was Constance's mother and Gloriana's grandmother. She effectively headed the Wodin Dynasty, though she didn't hold all of the power.

Just like many other women who earned the right to carry the title of matriarch, she was mainly respected for her age and wisdom.

Unlike Ves' grandfather who opted to sit in a plain white chair that was no different from that of the other ones, the chair reserved for Matriarch Xiaphna was by far the largest one available.

Made personally by Gloriana, the purple chair resembled a throne that incorporated as many hexagons as possible. From the armrest to the cushioning, the massive seat reflected the incredible amount of regard that Hexers held towards matriarchs.

Matriarch Xiaphna's throne floated in the air while leaving a purple trail in its wake. It drove straight through the group of seats occupied by other Hexers. Each and every seat automatically made way to grant passage to the throne.

Eventually, the seat reached the front. None of the Hexers filled the gap that had formed in the middle.

After that, the remainder of the invited guests arrived.

In order to forestall any arguments about who deserved to sit on better seats than their rivals, they each received the exact same plain white chair as the rest.

Not even an expert pilot and the head of a potential partner such as Reginald Cross received special treatment.

This was not their show today.

Tens of thousands of guests wearing their very best slowly filtered in. A large and strong detail of Hexer security guards ensured that no one stirred up any trouble.

Even if someone managed to bypass the guards, the mechs patrolling right outside the energy shield isolating the interior from the vacuum of space could immediately pass through and suppress any incidents!

If that wasn't enough, every expert pilot was secretly close to their assigned mechs. The machines were cleverly hidden right underneath the ground they were hovering over!

As long as a serious crisis took place, the chairs should immediately carry them to the ground, which would automatically open up a tunnel for them to pass through.

Once all of the visitors crowded the space above the garden, a final group of guests arrived to attend the wedding.

The MTA came in style. The Ubiquitous Force approached from afar and seamlessly passed through the giant energy shield.

A sense of weight and gravity surrounded the MTA frigate. Even from afar, it appeared to every single guest that they had fallen into the Ubiquitous Force's orbit!

Venerable Davia scoffed. "Pretentious bastards."

Chapter 2500: The Perfect Union

The Mech Trade Association certainly had a flair for the dramatic. The Ubiquitous Force exuded such a considerable presence that not even Patriarch Reginald Cross or Matriarch Xiaphna Wodin could maintain their dominant posture.

In front of the current hegemony of human civilization, every other power was but a mere speck of dust!

When Saint Hemmington Cross was still alive and kicking, the mighty Association only paid faint attention to him. While ace pilots enjoyed an exalted status in Vicious Mountain, he was anything but unique across the entire galaxy.

As for the Hexers, their pride and confidence deflated. The MTA effectively controlled most of human space while the Hexers only clung to a portion of a very inconsequential star sector. If the female supremacists did anything to displease the mechers, they could easily be removed!

Living under this suppression, no matter how benevolent the MTA might seem, made everyone in the audience uncomfortable. While every single important wedding guest may be able to dictate the lives of billions or trillions of people back home, here they were reduced to bystanders!

Master Willix and Jovy Armalon appeared alone. Instead of exiting from a hatch like normal people, they teleported just beneath the Ubiquitous Force.

Several people among the crowd decried the waste of this move. Teleportation was a form of high technology and inaccessible to ordinary second-rate states. Not only was it difficult to build a teleportation device, it also expended an extravagant amount of energy!

Of course, the two MTA mech designers took no notice of this fact. They kept hovering above the heads of everyone without meaning to sit. They were like gods in heaven watching over the affairs of mortals.

Neither the Larkinsons nor the Wodins knew what to expect from the MTA when they planned the wedding. Fortunately, the Ubiquitous Force gradually rose up and passed through the energy shield without disturbing it. The MTA frigate halted just a short distance away, thereby continuing to exert a lot of deterrence.

How overbearing!

Yet no one dared to issue a complaint. Even though Master Willix was just one of many senior officials within the vast Association, this time she represented her organization in its entirety!

The last of the wedding guests had arrived. Almost a hundred-thousand floating chairs crowded above the idyllic garden. Despite the arrival of so many people, there was still plenty of space available due to the size of the hexagonal platform.

No one spoke. Everyone maintained a respectful silence as they waited for the next phase of the wedding ceremony to commence.

Not just the people sitting on the floating chairs, but also others paid rapt attention to this grand occasion. In the Komodo Star Sector and beyond, trillions of people who heard about the spectacle tuned in to the broadcast.

Loyal customers of LMC mechs, mech fanatics, industrialists and even the ruling powers of several states watched the proceedings. The uncharacteristic arrival of

Master Willix attracted the attention of many people, some of whom were much more powerful or prominent than the Miracle Couple!

Wasn't the MTA supposed to be neutral? According to its own rules, its members had to remain detached from local affairs. How does someone as high as a Master Mech Designer show such obvious favoritism to a pair of natives?

There must be something very special about the young lovers!

As the wedding guests and audience from afar entertained various theories, a new development took place.

A swarm of animals poured out of the double doors. A veritable army of cats sedately passed through the entrance and fanned out into the garden. The playful animals expanded in each direction. Some of them bounded across the grass like cheetahs. Others used their sharp claws to climb on top of attractive trees and towering ornaments.

"Mew."

"Nyeow nyeow!"

"Mrew mrew mrew."

Other animals passed through the entrance as well. Dogs, lizards, turtles, birds and even more exotic-looking exobeasts all emerged and spread across the expansive garden.

Many of the animals wore collars embedded with sophisticated chips. Each of them were tame, and each of them were pets of the Larkinson Clan!

Due to their connection to the Larkinson Network, the animals possessed an extra quality. Though it wasn't apparent when they were alone, with tens of thousands of cats and other animals arriving all at once, they brought an aura that felt distinctly Larkinson!

The infusion of so much life in the garden seemed to make the entire platform alive. The grass appeared greener, the statues seemed to move and the trees gave the illusion as if they were reaching out into the stars!

A spotlight from nowhere shone into the middle of the horde of animals.

The music changed as the orchestra played a grand tune with a militaristic vibe.

The groom had arrived.

Yes, wearing his opulent red outfit, stepped forward with grace and confidence.

The animals surrounding him matched his paced, making it seem as if they were his honor guard.

At some point, he began to step into the air. Steps made of light and energy seemed to form before his path. His exquisite shoes pressed onto the illusionary surface at a steady pace. The brilliant, colorful stairs that formed in front of him and faded out of existence behind him appeared like an exclusive invitation to the groom.

It was as if he was stepping into a higher realm!

None of the animals except for one followed in his wake. Lucky, who still wore his tiny tuxedo and tail ribbon, attracted the admiration of animal lovers!

"Meow."

The gem cat proudly held his tail high as he hopped and floated up the steps.

Ves and Lucky soon reached high enough to pass through the aisle in the middle of the floating chairs.

The people closest to it felt the amalgamated glow of his unique attire. The pride of Zeigra tempered by the influences of other design spirits added so much weight to his presence that even people watching the broadcast felt as if Ves was special in some way!

The stairs leveled out into a seemingly-solid path made of light and fluorescent colors.

He passed by many familiar faces.

Dietrich looked enviously at Ves.

Maikel and Zanthar enthusiastically grinned at his passing.

Major Verle and many soldiers saluted him out of respect.

Vincent gave him a thumbs up while Raella raised her eyebrow in a suggestive manner.

The projections of Melinda, Benjamin and Ark genuinely wished him well.

Ranya Wodin and the other Hexer defectors showed their support in their own ways.

The older brother and sisters of Gloriana viewed him with mixed expressions.

Matriarch Xiaphna Wodin only gave him a passing glance before she returned to staring straight ahead.

So many Larkinsons and other people showed their admiration or support towards Ves. He didn't feel nervous at all. Instead, he seemed to feed off the huge amount of attention, swelling his confidence and boosting his stature to even greater heights!

Once Ves and Lucky passed by the audience the path stretched on for a bit until it reached a floating altar. They stopped and faced the crowd in silence.

Someone emerged from behind. Wearing an ornate, white Ylvainan robe, James Ylvaine floated forward with the Larkinson Mandate in his hands.

The Larkinsons and Wodins had argued a lot about who the officiant of the wedding should be. Suffice to say, a lot of shouting was involved!

The Wodins wanted the wedding to be officiated by a Priestess of the Temple of Hexism.

The Larkinsons wanted to put forward someone neutral and non-religious such as a Larkinson elder or a foreign dignitary such as King Barameth XXIV.

Long story short, neither of them got their way. They eventually settled for a compromise in the form of the Living Prophet!

How the cult leader managed to get into consideration and snag the approval of both groups was a mystery even to Ves. At least the officiant wasn't a Hexer!

"Honored guests." James began to speak. His smooth voice passed through the ears of every person attending the wedding no matter how far they sat. "This is a happy day for everyone. The Larkinson Clan and the Wodin Dynasty shall be bound together in law and in their hearts today. Two exceptional Journeyman Mech Designers will be joining both their hearts and minds in front of witnesses."

In order to keep the ceremony as inoffensive as possible to certain groups of people, James did not speak too long. While his considerable charisma allowed him to lull even Hexers, nobody wanted the Living Prophet to steal the show.

Ves only spoke a brief remark after James welcomed the guests. While he had plenty to say, he wanted to wait until after he tied the knot in order to take advantage of the rising tide.

Right now, the wedding ceremony was still building up, so the timing wasn't right.

"Let us welcome the bride!" James announced and gestured up into the air!

The entire hexagonal platform seemed to dim. The light dimmed and cast people aside from the people at the altar into darkness.

Six light sources came online from six different corners of the hexagonal platform. The bright but not too overpowering beams shone at a shining white presence descending from above.

The same rainbow steps that brought Ves up to the altar had reappeared again. This time, the illusionary steps led the new arrival and her followers downwards from above.

It was as if a goddess descended from an unimaginably high realm.

As the bride came closer, those watching from below were able to see her in her full magnificence.

Her bridal dress was indescribable. White and bedecked with transparent hexagonal-shaped jewels, her grand dress accentuated her svelte upper body well before expanding drastically from the waist.

A humongous train of embroidered white fabric extended from the back of the dress. Its length was so stupendously long that it seemed to never end!

A procession of cherubic little girls lifted the exceptionally long train up so that it did not land on the steps.

The light beams shining on Gloriana from six directions caused the fabric of her dress to glow and the jewels embedded into it to sparkle in a brilliant manner.

A veil extended from her exquisitely-braided hair, shrouding her lovely face. Nonetheless, the audience could clearly see her proud and blissful smile.

Aside from the girls holding up her lengthy wedding dress train, Constance Wodin accompanied her as well. With her head lifted up high, she held her daughter's hand and seemed to lead her forward.

Of course, Clixie was present as well. The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat wore a beautiful red bow above her head. Just like Lucky, a ribbon had also been tied to her tail, which she held high with pride.

Just like before, the light stairs flattened out into a straight and level path through the floating chairs. Those who sat close felt an entirely different glow as the bride passed by. The unmistakably motherly and Hexer aura radiating from her belonged to no one else but the Superior Mother!

While the foreigners and Larkinsons merely admired Gloriana's beauty and dress, the Hexers each stood up in respect at her passage.

Since Gloriana carried the blessing of the Supreme, the Hexers had to show their due respect!

Constance eventually stopped and joined the side of Matriarch Xiaphna. Gloriana walked on until she reached the altar.

Clixie sat next to Lucky. Their tails intertwined as they looked up at their owners.

The light beams began to lessen in intensity and the overall light levels of the venue returned to normal.

At this time, something emerged from below.

The lightning-struck statue of the Superior Mother came into view and floated upward until it stopped right in front of the altar!

Though the Superior Mother's glow was strong, it did not dominate the wedding. The Larkinson Mandate held by James exuded a glow of its own. The two glows did not compete with each other but existed alongside each other in harmony.

James began to speak again.

"Welcome, everyone. We are gathered here today to celebrate a holy union between Miss Gloriana Wodin and Mr. Ves Larkinson. Under the light of the stars and the gaze of the most holiest mother, we are here to witness their vows and express our joy at the joining of two talented creators."

The Prophet continued to recite his prepared remarks with genuine pleasure. Even though the Larkinsons and Wodins carefully composed his speech to control what people heard, James did not show any sign that he was speaking someone else's words.

The critical moment had come. Once James got all of the introduction out of the way, he invited Ves and Gloriana to step closer.

"Please hold hands."

The groom reached out to hold the bride's slim and dainty fingers.

"Ves Larkinson, do you take Gloriana Wodin to be your beloved wife and partner?"

"I do." He proudly declared.

"Gloriana Larkinson, do you take Ves Larkinson to be your faithful husband and partner?"

"I do!" Gloriana happily responded!

Both lovers looked each other in the eyes with pure devotion. No matter what kind of disagreements they had, none of that mattered today. They only held love and trust towards each other.

"I promise to dedicate my love and life to you and our family." Ves spoke from memory and with emotion. "I will invest you with my trust, and cherish the trust you extend to me in return. I will enjoy our time together and promise to be honest, fair and open towards you. You have my heart and my devotion. I wish for us to raise a family that will deepen our love and strengthen our union. I wish to grow old with you and hold our together like this until we have reached the last of our days."

Pure devotion shone from Gloriana's face as she gazed at him with love.

It was her turn to speak.

"I promise to love you and respect you for who you are." She spoke. "I will trust you as I have always done and appreciate the trust you have extended to me with each passing day. I will never stop loving you or look at anyone else in the same way I do to you. I hope to stay together with you in life, death and beyond. I would be happy to start a family with you. Our children shall become the legacy of our love and the living proof of our faith towards each other. May the Superior Mother bless our union!"

It was time to exchange their rings.

With smiles on each other's faces, they brought out the rings made by Ves. The mysterious, highly-materials and strange gems embedded into the bands spoke of excellent craftsmanship. The maker not only drew on his skills, but also his love in the making of the wedding bands.

The two slipped the rings on each other's fingers with anticipatory smiles on their faces. As soon as the rings took their places, it was as if a switch had flipped in their minds!

As both bride and groom seemed to feel more connected with each other, the statue of the Superior Mother and the Larkinson Mandate seemed to swell in power. Their glows grew in strength and increased in reach.

"You may now kiss the bride!" James proclaimed.

Ves lifted Gloriana's veil. He admired her perfect face before kissing her passionately!

A festive eruption took place as the entire venue seemed to celebrate the marriage!

Fireworks exploded in the air!

The Vraken orchestra played an uplifting tune!

The entire audience clapped with unreserved admiration!

Every Larkinson pat meowed, woofed or chirped in happiness!

The statue of the Superior Mother and the Larkinson Mandate seemed to swell with life!

The passionate kiss triggered numerous changes which rippled all across the star sector and beyond!