

Mech 2991

Chapter 2991: Multiple Loadouts

At some point during the conversations, the cats left the desk and settled onto the laps of the visitors.

Ketis played host to Blinky. The spiritual cat laid his back onto her lap and offered up his starry belly for rubs.

Mrow~ Mrow~

Meanwhile, Venerable Joshua was pampering Lucky. The expert pilot rubbed the mechanical cat on the back and tickled his pointy ears. Though the gem cat's exterior was made of hard material, Lucky was still able to feel pleasure from his treatment.

"Meow~"

The pair of lovers quietly waited as Ves quickly sketched out a couple more mounted wargear loadouts. They didn't look real, but that wasn't the point. The sketches were merely supposed to direct their thoughts.

In a couple of minutes, Ves managed to draw two additional loadouts. When they were superimposed on top of the core mech, then they always seem to supersize Joshua's expert mech. The artillery loadout was the biggest one, but the other ones weren't that much worse off. They would have slowed down the expert mech to a crawl if they didn't come with thrusters and boosters.

"The purpose of mounted wargear is to add new powerful capabilities to existing mechs on a non-permanent basis." Ves explained as he put the final touches to his hasty wireframe drawings. "Some of them are meant to be worn near-permanently by their base platforms. This turns them into something akin to a modular mech platform but to a much bigger extent. If there are any situations where an enemy is able to cripple the wargear components, the expert mech can simply purge it all and free itself from its burden in order to continue its fight in a more conventional manner."

He tapped the projection and caused the expert mech mounted with artillery gear to drop all of its extra burden. When he tapped it another time, the gear attached itself to the expert mech again.

"So the best way to look at this gear is to treat it as additional equipment. The mounted wargear loadouts will give extra options, but due to the nature of how I plan to design them, they won't last long and they're not as durable as the core mech. It's no worth bringing them out when fighting against weaker opponents, but if we ever face something like the Fridayman ambush again, then having this option is a great way to fight against other expert mechs."

While it was an extravagant and wasteful solution, it had one redeeming factor.

A single expert pilot was fully capable of controlling all of those additional systems. The Larkinson Clan did not have a lot of expert pilots at the moment. While there were plenty of expert candidates, it was questionable whether they would break through anytime soon when there were no battles on the horizon.

This meant that Ves had a great interest in maximizing the power of every expert mech. Aside from stuffing them with high-quality resonating materials, making them bigger was a possible solution. Yet making mechs bigger reduced their mobility, which was something very critical to expert mechs when they dueled each other.

How could Ves increase the power of an expert mech yet simultaneously retain their mobility advantage in duels?

The solution he settled with was the best possible compromise in his opinion. He could already tell that the design challenges would keep him up day and night, but he was incredibly excited to realize this vision.

His passion had fired up. By diverting the Chimera Project from its original bland direction, he succeeded in becoming invested in its success.

Though Joshua and Ketis still exhibited some misgivings, Ves did not allow them to become skeptical of his plan.

He turned his attention back to his presentation. "Aside from this artillery variant, there are two additional mounted wargear loadouts that I think are interesting. As you all know, we are still lacking a powerful lancer mech. We need an expert mech that can charge straight towards the enemy and punch through any obstacle, whether it is an array of defensive mechs or a powerful capital ship. Remember the earlier phases of the Battle against the Abyss where we confronted the Gravidus Knarlax?"

"I remember." Venerable Joshua looked a bit grimmer as he stoked Lucky's back. "A lot of good Larkinsons died that day, and not just against those 'dark gods'. I never want to fight a pirate warship again."

"There is no guarantee that your wish will come true, Joshua. Do you understand the environment we will be entering soon? The Red Ocean is not as tame and regulated as regular human space. The Big Two may be sweeping the indigeonous alien empires that are rooted there, but I have heard plenty of tales of fish slipping through the net. According to the galactic net, these aliens don't have a tradition for using mechs. Instead, just like humanity in the past, their main war-making potential consists of warships. Alien warships."

The strengths of these warships varied wildly depending on the alien species and other variables. Some were beatable by third-class outfits while others were so powerful that they demanded the MTA and CFA to put in a serious effort to crush the alien fleets.

No one doubted that the Big Two would be able to wipe the dwarf galaxy clean of sentient alien inhabitants, but the problem was that conquering any galaxy took a lot of time, even if it was just a miniature-sized one. Since the Big Two could not afford to direct too many warfleets away from the Milky Way, it would probably take a few decades to an entire century to finish the job.

In the meantime, the Big Two's warfleets along with all of the pioneer fleets that traveled through the Red Ocean risked getting attacked by alien warships at any time!

Fortunately, the chance of encountering a large, intact alien warfleet was very low. The ones that lurked in the territories that were recently conquered by humans were mostly isolated warships that managed to survive one way or another.

Yet a single one of them could easily slaughter thousands of mechs in some cases!

"Don't we have another expert mech in the works that can do this already?" Ketis asked. "The Vanguard Project is supposed to fulfill this role to an extent."

"It's not enough." Ves shook his head. "The Vanguard Project is not a dedicated lancer mech. It needs to retain enough dueling capabilities, so we will have to implement a lot of compromises to its design. It's a spearman mech, not a lancer mech. You can think of it as a bigger and beefier version of the Valkyrie Redeemer."

"Sir?" Joshua briefly raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"I am wondering about the speed of this lancer loadout. There's quite a lot of bulk attached to it, and that big triangular spike isn't helping much either. Will I be able to build enough acceleration to build up enough momentum? And how can I ever hit anything if it looks so bulky? I bet its turning radius is awful!"

"In the beginning, Gloriana told us to focus on defeating other expert mechs. The lancer loadout doesn't align to this goal, but it is capable of taking out other high-value threats. More specifically, I think a large lancer loadout can do wonders against enemy starships. Unlike mechs, starships can't turn or evade incoming attacks that easily. This is why there is nothing wrong with placing all of the additional boosters and thrusters to the rear of the mounted equipment. They just need to push your expert mech forward as hard as possible."

To put it in simple terms, the lancer loadout transformed the expert mech into a giant self-propelled kinetic torpedo. There was a lot of bulk and mass that were primarily

meant to increase the energy being transferred upon impact and to provide the core mech with enough of a cushion to survive a charge.

The most notable element to this fantastical-looking loadout was the large and long spike mounted to the front.

Ves didn't bother to equip the ensemble with a regular lance. A handheld weapon was too small and weak.

Instead, he simply added a large and thick 'lance' that was as wide as the length of a light mech at the rear end.

With such a big spike, the Chimera Project equipped with wargear loadout could inflict so much damage that it could even punch a huge hole through the Spirit of Bentheim!

This had the potential to turn into one of the ultimate assault solutions for the Larkinson Clan.

"Won't all of this equipment get lost upon impact?" Ketis pointed out a concerning issue. "If it doesn't get squashed after completing a charge, it has a high chance of breaking up, thereby flinging all of its broken parts in many different directions."

"It's not a problem. This is why all of the loadouts should be cheap and not too difficult to make. In addition, if our clan can solve the problem by other means, we don't have to resort to this wasteful solution."

Venerable Joshua eventually bought into this idea. The sketch that Ves had made looked rather ridiculous, but he could easily imagine how many powerful ships he could fell by adopting this strange new mech.

It was too bad that a sluggish and agile machine like this was very hard to employ against mechs. Unless their formation was exceptionally tight, it was too easy for mechs to dodge a charging lancer mech that put all of its energies into going forward!

"If we can make this work, then we have a potential solution against warships that can shrug off regular mech attacks!"

Ves was already planning ahead. He needed to make the best use of the time that remained. Once he entered the Red Ocean, the chance that his fleet bumped into a superior force was too great.

Once Ketis and Joshua understood the intention and mode of operation of the lancer loadout, Ves turned to the third loadout he sketched.

"The two loadouts that I have proposed before will allow Venerable Joshua to output a lot of damage at range or punch through starships or other large structures with a single

charge. Combined with its base hero mech form, this expert mech can retain a lot of battle effectiveness in many different situations. There is still something missing, though."

To be honest, when Joshua and Ketis saw the third loadout, they became absolutely stumped. Both of them thought that Ves had lost control or something. Did he grow mad with the possibilities opened up by making use of mounted wargear?

"Uhm... sir..." Joshua hesitated. "Why is this third loadout... made of meat?"

Ves grinned and leaned back on his chair. "Because I decided to do it. Because both my specialty and yours resonate quite well with organic matter. We've hired a lot of biotech experts when we stayed in the Life Research Association. We can borrow their assistant to develop and grow this organic loadout and see whether it is viable. There's little harm in trying. If it doesn't work out, then we can just drop it. Is that acceptable?"

The third loadout was a clear homage to Uranus. The simplest way to describe it was that it resembled a colossal meat suit. Once Joshua's expert mech became submerged by this organic loadout, it turned into a large and powerful brawler that possessed extremely high physical strength.

Though its mobility was predictably awful, its huge bulk and raw strength allowed it to rampage through large enemy mech formations. The giant meat suit could also brawl against other expert mechs as long as they weren't fast enough to evade this monstrosity. It was perfect against heavy space knights and heavy artillery mechs!

"...Uhm, Ves?"

"Yes Ketis."

"Maybe you should get some therapy. I heard that the stuff that happened on Prosperous Hill VI was bad, but I never thought that you would even get traumatized by it. What possessed you to design a loadout that reminds me of that biojuggernaut?!"

When Ves took a second look at the meat suit he designed, he reluctantly recognized that she might have a point.

But then again, Uranus proved that relying on size was a good way to attain greater power!

"Don't knock it until we try it. I know it looks grotesque, but I am absolutely confident in its battle effectiveness!"

Chapter 2992: Resonance Compatibility

When Ves presented his mounted wargear plan to Joshua and Ketis, they acquiesced quickly enough.

Who said that expert pilots couldn't be persuaded?

They might be stubborn about their own likes and the causes they fought for, but they could still be swayed in other matters!

After getting Venerable Joshua's buy-in, Ves already began to develop some ambitious plans for the mounted wargear loadouts that he had sketched out. The artillery, lancer and so-called meat suit loadouts were all big but not that terribly complex. This meant that he could delegate much of the crunch work to his assistants.

As Ves finalized the details of his proposal, he rose from his chair and left his workplace to visit his wife.

"Meow."

Mrow.

Blinky dematerialized and returned to Ves' mind while Lucky jumped off the desk and followed like a lost puppy.

When Ves reached his destination, he saw that Gloriana was explaining her thoughts to a design team. He patiently waited for her to finish her instructions.

"Miaow~"

"Meow~"

Meanwhile, Lucky landed on a large pillow where Clixie comfortably rested. The two cats bumped their noses and sniffed each other.

Mrow!

Blinky materialized above them and fell on top of Lucky's back. The gem cat did not appreciate the passenger on his back and rolled around in order to swat the spiritual cat away!

"Meow!"

The two tomcats wrestled against each other again while Clixie watched on with an amused expression. Her tail elegantly swished from side to side as she watched the boys defend their pride.

"What are you doing here?" Gloriana eventually turned to Ves after dismissing the little assistants. "Aren't you supposed to be fleshing out our draft design for the Chimera Project?"

Ves grinned and approached his wife in order to embrace her and plant a kiss on her lips, but she firmly raised her palm before he got too close.

"This is not the time! We are on duty at the moment. Can't you control your beastly urges for once and remain professional for once?"

"Hey! You never complained in the past!"

His wife frowned and crossed her arms. "That's because we weren't under so much time pressure. This is different. We are working on the most important projects of our lives. I don't want them to be ruined because we slipped up. Be serious!"

"Uhm, okay." Ves lamely replied. He would just have to try again when they were off-duty and back in their grand stateroom. "Anyway, I did have some business to talk about. I just came up with a fantastic new idea that would definitely elevate the Chimera Project!"

He enthusiastically explained his proposal. He even projected his sketches in order to convey his thoughts in the clearest fashion possible.

"...With all of this mounted wargear, we can use the Chimera Project as a powerful rallying symbol and a vessel to intimidate the mech pilots arrayed against us. The impact on morale when fighting against an extremely powerful giant is not something you can imagine."

"...The best part of this all is that it plays to our strengths and mitigates our weaknesses. Since we are nowhere near the size of conventional states, we don't have a large base of mech pilots to establish a continuous supply of expert pilots. People like Venerable Joshua are very scarce to us, so it makes sense to invest in them and empower them as much as possible."

"...Since it is much easier for us to acquire funding, we can invest them all in large amounts of regular exotics and low-grade resonating exotics that are readily available on the market. It doesn't matter if their properties are relatively shabby. As long as we cobble them together into a loadout that is massive enough, sheer quantity will ensure that the final product is still powerful!"

"...In short, this plan is perfect! This will truly make the Chimera Project shine!"

As Ves finished his brief presentation, he waited to hear the praises of his wife.

..She did not look amused. Her frown grew deeper as she formulated a lot of thoughts.

"Uhm, Gloriana?"

"Ves." She finally ground out. "Have you gone crazy?"

"What?"

"Did you go mad?"

"No."

"THEN WHY DID YOU DEVIATE FROM MY INSTRUCTIONS AND EXPAND THE SCOPE OF THE CHIMERA PROJECT?!"

"It's not as bad as it sounds! This is a great way to—

"YOU IDIOT! THE DESIGN DEPARTMENT IS HORRIBLY SHORT OF MANPOWER! IF WE PURSUE YOUR INANE IDEAS, THE CHIMERA PROJECT WILL BE DELAYED BY AT LEAST A YEAR!"

"It won't take that long! We're not designing an extra expert mech, but merely external add-ons that can temporarily augment an existing expert mech. It's just another form of mech equipment!"

Gloriana slapped her palm against his chest. "YOU ARE OVERLOOKING AT LEAST ONE CRUCIAL FACTOR! I participated in an expert mech design project. Even though I was just working in an assisting capacity back then, I still know something that you don't! Have you ever considered the issue of resonance compatibility?"

Ves finally paused. "Uhhh... what?"

"Thought so." Gloriana huffed and crossed her arms. "To be honest, if you proposed to apply this mounted wargear concept onto regular mechs or prime mechs, I wouldn't be so opposed to it. This is different. Do you know why? Because expert mechs must be internally consistent when it comes to their resonance profile."

Ves scratched his head. "Please explain."

The two of them sat down on a nearby couch. Clixie moved over and dropped herself onto Gloriana's lap. She curled her back as a dainty hand began to stroke her furry back.

"Miaow~"

"The most defining factor that makes expert mechs so powerful is because they resonate with expert pilots. This is something that you already know, but think deeper about what I just said. Why are some expert mechs stronger and some of them weaker?"

Assume that they are designed by the same mech designers with the same materials and mech components."

That left out a lot of obvious answers. Ves had to think over it a little deeper.

"It has to be a design factor, then."

"Correct." She said. "Just by having the same designer, the same materials and the same components doesn't ensure that the end result will be similar in terms of quality. This is because resonating materials have to abide by additional rules in order for them to show their value. One of them is that they also affect the resonance of other resonating exotics. Do you understand?"

A light shone in Ves' eyes. "If that is the case..."

Gloriana waved her hand and activated a simple projection. "Let me give you a brief example. Let's say that material A is a resonating exotic that can regenerate armor systems and is compatible with Venerable Joshua. Since the material's properties are relatively simple and uncomplicated, we can easily implement small or large quantities of it onto his expert mech."

"And that is not always the case?" Ves puzzlingly frowned.

"Yes. Many resonating exotics are weird. Don't ask me why. However, let's say that material B is also a resonating exotic that is compatible with Venerable Joshua. Now, let me say that it can empower the firepower of his energy rifle, but when we test it out, it turns out that it is only effective when used at a quantity at or greater than 50 kilograms. Any less and it loses its resonance effect."

Those were some odd rules, but certain regular exotics also work in this fashion.

"Now let me state a third rule. Material B inhibits the resonance of material A and vice versa. In other words, they cancel each other out. Now think about that. What does this mean, Ves?"

"It means... a powerful rifle must incorporate a large quantity of material B in order to be powerful enough, but that will directly weaken the effects of material A. The regeneration resonance ability of the expert mech drops as a consequence. That.. is quite bad."

"There's more to it than that." Gloriana said. "The large quantities of material A that is incorporated in the armor system will also weaken the effectiveness of material B. The energy rifle won't receive as much empowerment. In fact, the degree of weakening is so much that it makes it so that material B acts as if there are less than 50 kilograms incorporated in the expert mech. When it falls below this threshold, the resonance is canceled out. That lump of material B has effectively been neutralized."

"Then we apply more material B."

"Ah, but then material A will be weakened even further." Gloriana shook her head. "The end result is an expert mech that makes only a fraction of the use of the expensive resonating exotics it incorporates. The degree of utilization is just 20 percent from what it could have been if the two resonating exotics didn't fight each other."

That did sound like a huge problem, but Ves didn't think that was all. "If there are resonating exotics that cancel each other out, then there should also be ones that mutually reinforce each other."

"There are. The problem is that there are way more relationships that lead to mutual suppression than mutual reinforcement. The latter is relatively rare, and that leads to all kinds of complications. Let's say that there is material C that can enhance the resonance shield of an expert mech. When this material is in close proximity to material A, a wonderful effect happens. They strengthen each other by as much as 50 percent. The defensive properties of the expert mech become drastically stronger."

"I can hear a 'but' coming..."

Gloriana grinned. "Of course. Do you think that everything is perfect? Far from it. Material C also happens to be incompatible with material B. The two weaken each other, causing the rifle of the expert mech to lose power while the resonance shield weakens as well."

"Then why not just get rid of material B since it is such a problem?"

"What if I told you that it is the only viable material that we can use to strengthen the offensive power of our expert mech? It wouldn't be a big deal if we're talking about an expert space knight, but what if we're dealing with an expert rifleman mech? It is intolerable for us to abandon this means of strengthening for a mech that centers around ranged combat!"

"Then we ditch material A and C instead! I don't believe there are more resonating materials out there that can also strengthen the defenses of an expert mech!"

"Then we have to deal with other problems! Say that there is material D that can also strengthen the armor of an expert mech. It also happens to establish mutual resonance with material B, causing the resonance abilities based on both of them to strengthen by as much as 300 percent! It is in fact the best possible solution that we can identify."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Then what is the problem?"

"It's a high-grade resonating exotic. Let's say we need at least 3 kilograms of material D in order to make it worthwhile for us. There are no deposits of this rare resonating exotic

in any of the local states. The only way for us to obtain it is to exchange 5 million MTA merits per kilogram of material D. Would you agree to such a deal?"

Increasing the effective performance of a couple of resonance effects by 300 percent sounded insanely powerful, but if Ves had to cough up a whopping 15 million MTA merits for it, then he would rather forget about it. He didn't even want to relinquish even a single merit!

Gloriana suddenly looked tired. "Do you understand now what I have been trying to deal with in the past month? A typical expert mech does not incorporate so few resonating exotics. A low-tier expert mech incorporates at least a dozen of them, and that is mostly to take advantage of the mutual resonance of cheaper exotics to produce a strong effect."

"If it is already that complicated for lower-end expert mechs, then what about the better ones?" Ves curiously asked.

High-tier expert mechs incorporate as much as thirty different types of resonating exotics, and the amount of work that goes into making everything fit together is insane! There are countless properties to take into account. For example, material E only works if it is shaped in a horseshoe form. Material F only works if it is blended with material G in a 1-to-103 proportion. Material G is relatively easy to obtain, but it suppresses the effectiveness of materials D, H and I. Do I need to go on, Ves?"

He finally understood the reason why she objected to his proposal. "So the point is that making an expert mech bigger and adding more resonating exotics will make it difficult to achieve a high degree of mutual resonance?"

"Exactly! The smaller the expert mech, the fewer the quantities and varieties of resonating exotics, the less complications we have to face. This is why I think we will probably complete the Disruptor Project first and leave the Bulwark Project for last. What you have just suggested will definitely push the Chimera Project further behind, because each mounted wargear loadout has to be compatible with the mech that carries all of that extra gear! And before you suggest, if you just make it out of regular materials, then the loadout won't be able to enjoy any strengthening and protection effects. The expert mech will probably tear it apart when it activates its resonance shield or exerts lots of force and stress due to its extreme performance!"

If this was the case, then applying mounted wargear to Venerable Joshua's expert mech would be a lot more complicated than he thought!

Chapter 2993: Another Disagreement

Gloriana saw that the dose of realism she just dished out had crushed her husband's dreams. She sighed and patted his shoulder.

"There is a lot more to expert mechs than you realize. Even I don't fully grasp all of the intricacies to them. The unusual properties of resonating exotics, from how they interact with each other to how they interact with expert pilots, all form an intricate web of positive and negative relationships that we have to navigate in order to design a good expert mech."

The greater the variety of resonating exotics, the more time it took to integrate them into an expert mech.

The greater the quantity of resonating exotics, the more difficult it became to keep them behaved.

If an expert mech used too much of these special materials, then the expense and design time would probably become prohibitive.

If an expert mech used too little of them, then the degree of power amplification when resonating with an expert pilot would become too weak.

"Did you know that much of the extra expert mechs that the Friday Coalition provided to its guest expert pilots are like this?" Gloriana suddenly brought up. "The reason why those foreign third-class expert pilots didn't raise a greater amount of hell on the battlefield is because most but not all of their expert mechs rank at the bottom in terms of strength."

Ves raised his eyebrows. "If that is the case, can they be defeated more easily by the Hegemony's own experts?"

It is true that any one of them can be defeated by a typical Hexer expert mech because the Fridaymen were only willing to use up low-grade resonating exotics for their construction. That said, there are also the likes of Venerable Ghanso Larkinson and Venerable Relia Foster who received a little bit more extra attention due to their strength and capabilities. In the end, it doesn't matter if the majority of extra expert mechs are trash. When three or four of them gang up against a mid-tier Hexer expert mech, the latter will more likely than not lose!"

What was worse was that the relatively weak expert mechs were still extremely lethal towards regular mechs. Expert pilots were so powerful compared to regular mech pilots that they and their powerful machines could easily demolish entire mech companies without feeling any pressure.

Ves suddenly learned a lot of new theories on expert mechs and resonating exotics. Was this part of the package of secrets that he would learn when he advanced to Senior?

"Why are resonating exotics so weird?"

"Well, there are lots of theories that attempt to explain that. The most common consensus is that resonating exotics are more energetic than regular substances. They possess the capacity to resonate because their internal structure and stability is less rigid in a way. That also makes them volatile and prone to breaking up or devolving into lower-quality materials, so they are actually quite difficult to salvage from wrecks."

"So once you use them, you lose them. Is that right?"

She nodded. "The yield is typically just 30 percent if you attempt to salvage all of the resonating exotics from a broken wreck. Why do you think the cost of servicing expert mechs is so prohibitive? Repairing them requires the use of a considerable stockpile of replacement materials. You always need more resonating exotics than what you are putting in an expert mech design at the beginning."

This complicated the acquisition issues of resonating exotics even further. The Larkinson Clan would have to forgo a lot of opportunities to acquire some if they weren't able to obtain sufficient quantities of a given material.

It was pointless to acquire just enough of a single material to fabricate an expert mech but have nothing left to perform repairs!

When Ves thought about all of the limitations that Gloriana had to abide by, it was no wonder that she had grown a bit more irritable and impatient as of late. Even Ves would tear his hair out if he had to find a way to mix and match sufficient types and quantities of resonating exotics together in a way that caused them all to fit in place.

"It's not as difficult as you think." She relaxed a bit and told him. "As I have mentioned earlier, Master Willix has provided a lot of assistance to me. She knows a lot of existing combinations of resonating exotics that are proven success formulas. The MTA has developed a detailed database of all of the properties of many known types of resonating exotics. As long as we give instructions to an AI or algorithm, we can let them perform all of the mixing and matching in the background. The only issue is that we can't rely on automation completely considering we are still working out how to apply them all in specific mech designs."

Solving all of these issues was not a big deal for Seniors or Masters whose superior cognitive and design capabilities enabled them to handle these problems with ease. They could also rely on existing databases as well as their own prior accumulations to minimize the amount of original research they needed to perform.

States and large organizations also provided a lot of assistance. The complexity of balancing out so many different resonating exotics was yet another reason why expert mechs were mostly developed by government institutions or in cooperation by them. The greater the cooperation, the faster an expert mech design project reached completion.

Ves frowned. "This knowledge is essential to me. I would have liked to know all of this from the start."

"Well, you would have gotten it if you didn't get distracted and go missing for weeks on end!" Gloriana sneered. "If you want to learn the essentials, then go ask Master Willix. She's been a huge help to me with regards to this issue. You should get in touch with her again so that you won't stay as clueless as you are now."

"I'll do that." He nodded. "So... can I design some mounted wargear for the Chimera Project? I haven't given up on it. One of the characteristics of this addition is that it is meant to be expendable, so it doesn't have to incorporate a lot of resonating exotics. It shouldn't be too big of a burden to design one that is at least barely compatible with the core mech."

"I already said no, Ves! Even if it's not as bad as you think, the fact of the matter is that you will still divert valuable manpower and time away from our core work. I don't want to compromise the core expert mech that will become the foundation of Venerable Joshua's strength. Look, you can play around with these toys after the first round design projects are over, but until we get to that point, I am in charge, is that understood? Our projects are critical. If we lose our restraint and start to pursue every little idea, we'll get swept by feature creep and end up with expert mechs that are years behind schedule and weighed down by too much bloat!"

Though Ves suffered under her admonishment, he did not want to back down and let go of his fantastic idea. His passion was stoked and he did not want his wife to douse it just when it got going!

"Look, I understand that you are afraid of screwing up, but don't you think you are going overboard, Gloriana?"

"What do you mean by that?!" She replied in a defensive manner while starting to hug Clixie against her chest. "Being in charge of designing expert mechs is a dream to me. I never thought I would be able to be in this position so soon. Ordinarily, I would have to wait until I become a Senior before I can dictate the development of expert mechs, but now that we have this deal with Master Willix, I can finally utilize my design philosophy as it was meant to be used!"

"I understand all of that, Gloriana. I get why this is a high-stakes period for you. It's just that I think you are being too conservative. Do you think that is good mech design? I don't. People like us advanced to Journeymen because we were willing to take risks, willing to invent new ways to design better mechs and willing to go against the current in order to achieve our ambitions! What you are doing right now sounds more like letting the current push you down the river rather than actively swimming against the flow!"

Gloriana vigorously shook her head. "This is not a moment for us to go contrarian, Ves! You can experiment all you like when you design your conventional mechs, but we are

in the process of designing our best and most powerful individual works. This is a time where we need to consolidate all of our existing theories and methods and use them to the best of our abilities. Everytime we try out something new and unproven, we risk botching the entire project! The cost of that is very great because unlike normal mechs, when we fabricate an expert mech and it turns out defective, we can't break down the faulty parts and recycle the resonating exotics we put into it without suffering a significant loss!"

"What is a little risk when we have the potential to achieve greatness?"

Gloriana punched his arm as hard as she could. Unfortunately, her arm strength was as feeble as that of any civilian baseline woman, so Ves didn't even bat an eyelid.

"You and your stupid risks again! Your ability to assess risks is completely skewed!"

"Hey! That's not true! I make CALCULATED risks. There is a difference. I don't gamble like I'm in a casino. I calculate probabilities all the time. My success rate is quite high!"

"The only reason that hasn't blown up in your face is because you always find some way to weasel your way out of a crisis. Any other mech designer would have died if they followed your footsteps!"

"You didn't seem to have much of a problem with that when you married me. Don't you realize that much of the accomplishments that your design philosophy adores is because I actively sought out opportunities? I never sat back and thought that designing mechs in peace will elevate me all the way to Star Designer. That is because I know that anyone who has reached the apex of mech design never adopted the slow and steady approach and acted conservatively when they designed their most important mechs. Don't you want to fulfill your ambitions and design the perfect vessel? You do that by treating every mech design as an opportunity to try something new, not by playing it safe and ending up with a product that does not live up to your potential."

"You're just saying that because you want me to board your crazy shuttle! I am not allowing you to ruin my plan."

"The Chimera Project will become too boring if it develops according to your direction! Your roadmap for this project is too restrained. There's not enough innovation to keep my passion stoked."

Gloriana grunted in frustration. "Then just wait until I have sorted out the resonance exotics that we can use to empower Venerable Joshua's mechs. It will look a lot more impressive if we can plan out the resonance abilities that we'll be able to incorporate in his mech."

"That will just turn it into a regular expert mech. That's not enough for me. I need more!"

The couple argued with each other for twenty more minutes until they finally came to a consensus.

"ENOUGH!" Gloriana shouted. She had grown more tired of trying to change his mind. "Fine! I'll allow you to design this stupid wargear, but only one of them, okay?! You also can't divert any of our existing design teams to complete this time-consuming chore. Either do the work in your own time or hire a batch of new assistants. No matter what you do, I will never tolerate any delays in our core projects!"

Ves grinned. "It won't be a problem. I will set aside the conventional loadouts for later and focus on integrating the meat suit first. Since it is mostly organic in nature, I can just assign Dr. Perris and a bunch of biotech experts aboard the Dragon's Den to organize a separate development team. Is that acceptable to you, honey?"

She sighed. "Very well. I don't want you to get consumed by this side project though. I expect you to finish the bare expert mechs without all of this extra nonsense according to schedule. As long as we complete them first and in a beautiful manner, we can pursue all the upgrades afterwards."

Chapter 2994: Incarnation

Though his meeting with Gloriana did not end on the best of terms, Ves got what he wanted. It didn't matter too much to him that he was forced to postpone the development of additional loadouts such as the artillery and lancer ones. As long as he could complete one loadout at the same time he completed the core expert mech, Venerable Joshua would immediately be able to unleash a lot of power in battle!

"You're being way too controlling, Gloriana." Ves shook his head.

He disapproved of her approach. Though there were definitely merits to planning out the development of their projects in advance and limiting the scope of new ideas, he felt it was less appropriate for projects like these.

Expert mechs were some of the best machines that mech designers designed in their careers. They were magnificent platforms that incorporated the best technology and enjoyed much more lavish budgets than ordinary projects.

They were playgrounds for new ideas and served as excellent test beds for new innovations. Their parameters were so great that Ves could get away with implementing a lot of powerful ideas that would have been too impractical if he designed a regular mech.

"Not even my Devil Tiger is this extravagant!"

The Devil Tiger was a fantastic mech and one of his all-time favorites, but it possessed a very serious shortcoming.

Ves did not design it as an expert mech.

Instead, he treated it as a pure experiment that was meant to be piloted by some inconsequential pirates. How could he have known that his mother would steal a mech that was not entirely safe to pilot and hand it over to his father?

All sorts of problems resulted from this uncontrolled outcome!

The most fundamental one was that Ves never designed the Devil Tiger for his father or any specific mech pilot. This forced his father, who had piloted humanoid mechs for his entire life, to learn how to pilot a tiger mech.

Even though it worked out in the end, Ves didn't like the process. The Devil Tiger distorted his father's original piloting tendencies, and for some reason his mother used a strange trick with the stolen mech's design spirit to forcibly uplift his father to the rank of expert pilot, thereby achieving a desirable result but through the wrong means!

"A real expert mech should be adapted to an expert pilot, not the other way around!"

Ves saw hope of doing things correctly this time and providing the best possible accommodation for Venerable Joshua.

Expert pilots already had a lot of challenges to deal with. They already possessed a lot of power for humans, but that was also the main reason why it was so difficult for them to improve their strength. Humans were never meant to wield so much strength or possess so much willpower, so grinding it even further was very challenging without a suitable expert mech.

They were incomplete products on their own. Expert pilots only reached completion after they paired up with an expert mech. If the two were separated, both of the two elements lost their capital to be proud.

Aside from this, expert pilots also had to bear the risks of battle each time they deployed in battle. Many people admired their piloting prowess, but few of them thought about the huge risks they incurred when they fought against their peers.

Ves had witnessed a handful of battles between expert mechs, and each time he became appalled at how bloody they were! He had seen multiple instances of expert pilots dying far too quickly because their opponents possessed powerful capabilities.

"Mech designers exist to serve mech pilots." He reminded himself.

This common phrase that was popularized by the MTA gained more weight as he thought about this issue. Expert pilots were strong, but they were also pitiful. As warriors, they were extremely dependent on their expert mechs, so having the right ones was extremely important to their future progress and survival!

This was why Ves cared so much about the Chimera Project. He truly wanted to achieve the best result for Venerable Joshua. In fact, Gloriana had the same goal in mind.

It was too bad that husband and wife disagreed on how to accomplish this goal.

Gloriana did not want anything to go wrong. Her approach to project management was to minimize risks and avoid accidents. She wanted to guarantee a good result.

Ves clearly wasn't satisfied with that. He felt he could get a great result if he did something more with the Chimera Project. He was willing to take some risks and accept the possibility of failure because he was confident he could find a way to achieve a favorable outcome somehow!

Not everything could be planned. Not every outcome was set in stone. No experiment was destined to fail.

Unfortunately, Ves never managed to convince Gloriana to loosen up and set her sights higher. She wanted to establish firm control and never let anything slip.

"At least she made a concession." Ves happily stated as he returned to his workplace. "Isn't that right, Lucky?"

His gem cat, who floated beside his head, looked at him as if he was an idiot.

"Meow."

"Hehehe, you're the same as her. You severely underestimate what I can do with mounted wargear. Didn't the biojuggernaut teach you not to underestimate size?"

"Meow!"

Ves didn't expect a powerful mechanical lifeform that was literally the size of an ordinary house cat to understand his point. He would just have to prove Gloriana and all of his skeptics wrong by unveiling a powerful result!

Once he returned to his corner of the design lab, he called up his sketch for the so-called meat suit and started to think on how he could best approach this side project.

The more he stared at it, the more Ves thought it was inadequate. It looked too simple, basic and grotesque to impress the likes of his wife. Its simplistic design principles and planned features also sounded a bit lackluster to him. He felt that mounted wargear had much greater potential than just serving as temporary equipment for mechs.

"If my initial proposal is too simple, then I will just get ugly looks from my wife."

This was an intolerable outcome!

"It seems I need to come up with a more refined idea."

He thought about it and spent the next hour exploring a number of different ideas. He still held the goal of designing an organic mounted wargear loadout, but this time he tried to form a more complete and more dramatic concept.

At some point, Ves thought about combining this idea with the fact that Venerable Joshua's core expert mech would be designed with the ability to switch design spirits right from the start.

"If this is the case, what if I can attune the mounted wargear to this feature? What if I turn it into an incarnation and see if I can achieve some sort of synergy with this interaction?"

His boldest thought was that this might be a way for Venerable Joshua to allow design spirits to descend upon his expert mech and take over the form that was made in their likeness!

This was a brilliant idea, and a radical one as well! Ves became so excited by it that he instantly decided that this should be the way for Venerable Joshua to fight at his full potential from now on! It was not enough for him to fight his opponents like an ordinary expert pilot.

With his ability to empathize and connect with different entities, Joshua was practically made for this unique approach!

"Which design spirit should I choose?" Ves suddenly frowned.

This was an extremely critical choice to him. The choice of design spirit would not only affect the difficulty and chance of success of this innovative new idea, but also set the tone for how Venerable Joshua's expert mech would fight in the future.

If Ves botched the implementation, it would become much harder for him to make another attempt. He not only had to pick an easy design spirit to work with, but also one that could fully show the power of his idea.

"Which one is suitable?"

Design spirits like Bravo and the Solemn Guardian were clearly unsuitable. The former was weak and the latter did not really possess any powerful spiritual abilities at all. In fact, the lack of triggerable abilities in the Solemn Guardian was a pretty major shortcoming for one of his most popular design spirits.

"Hmmm. Maybe I'll have to upgrade you so that you won't fall behind compared to my other design spirits." He softly murmured.

That was something that he should address another time. Ves continued to go over other possible design spirits.

Only a few powerful and friendly ones caught his attention.

"I can pick between Qilanxo, the Superior Mother or the Illustrious One."

He was tempted to add the Golden Cat to the list as well, but remembered that she did not excel in battle.

The three design spirits that Ves had picked out were all powerful, possessed well-defined abilities and were friendly enough to cooperate with him on this idea.

"One choice is not necessarily better than the others." Ves judged. "At this point, it is more about my own preferences and what mech type I can best use to fulfill a specific role."

His original intention was to design an organic mounted wargear loadout that would transform Venerable Joshua's expert mech into a supreme assault machine.

Picking the Illustrious One would turn it into a powerful ranged beast instead. While Ves felt tempted to explore this idea because his fleet was lacking in ranged expert mechs, he did not understand enough about the luminar design spirit.

Ves never really interacted with it since it kept to itself. He also never got in touch with the Crystal Lord Mark I and II's either. It would be too abrupt for him to design a fleshy incarnation of him when the Illustrious One was still a relative stranger.

"What about Qilanxo?"

The big lizard excelled at defense, but she was never the frontline warrior in her pantheon back Aeon Corona VII. That job was left to her husband and the other sacred gods that used to be her colleagues.

"I don't need another version of Jannzi and her expert heavy space knight." Ves shook his head.

That left the Superior Mother. While the matronly design spirit was technically an all-rounder, she was so strong and inherited so many methods from Cynthia Larkinson that it didn't matter too much!

The great success of the Valkyrie Redeemer was solid proof that the Superior Mother was able to serve as an adequate design spirit for offensive mechs.

Besides, Gloriana would love it if Ves created a female incarnation of her favorite 'proto-god'!

"My mother will be my first!" Ves firmly decided.

Once he made his decision, he quickly revised the ugly and grotesque meat suit and made it a lot more refined. He gave it a feminine shape and covered it with bone armor to preserve her modesty. He also integrated some devices into the frame so that they could project a dignified custom over the giant flesh body.

This was just a draft design, so Ves didn't bother adding too many details to it. He just had to invest enough effort to convey his idea.

"I'm done!"

As soon as he completed his revised draft, he didn't bother to visit Gloriana again. He summoned Dr. Perris, who curiously approached his workplace.

"You called, sir?"

"Yes. Please sit down. I have just come up with a new side project related to Venerable Joshua's expert mech that I think will be of interest to you. Let me start from the beginning..."

Ves quickly rushed through his explanations before he unveiled his design for the incarnation of the Superior Mother.

He already expected to shock Dr. Perris with his new idea. No one normal would ever think of cladding an ordinary expert mech with a meat suit that turned into a giant woman!

Yet her actual reaction was a lot worse than he expected.

"Patriarch! This is wrong!" She stood up and shouted! Her eyes shook as his proposal inadvertently triggered her trauma. "Are you trying to recreate Special Project 'U'? We can't create a second bioabomination! We'll become war criminals! We will all get devoured by this giant monstrosity if it comes to life!"

"It's not that big!" Ves attempted to correct her misunderstanding. "This incarnation is only a fraction of the size of Uranus. There is no way it will go out of control!"

"This is just the first step to recreating a monster like Uranus! This is a slippery slope! Don't do it Patriarch. Designing this so-called incarnation is the first step to damnation!"

"I'm already further ahead than that. I'm not called the Devil Tongue for nothing." Ves jested.

Dr... Perris clearly missed the joke.

Chapter 2995: Tender Mercies

When Ketis returned to the Larkinson fleet, her days became busy but fulfilling.

Her current life took on a completely different turn from the time when she was just an Apprentice Mech Designer.

The Larkinsons did not lack for Apprentices. The design department concentrated on just over fifty of them and there were hundreds more spread throughout the fleet.

Back in those days, there was an obvious gulf between her status and that of Ves and Gloriana, whom she looked up to. She envied their capabilities so much, but there was no way for her to rush her advancement to Journeyman. It could come in the next month or in the next decade. There was no proven method for Apprentices to undergo the advancement process as far as she knew!

Fortunately, her adventure in the Heavensword Association neatly solved this problem. Though the highlight of her changes was definitely her ascension to the exalted rank of swordmaster, Ketis had always known that her promotion to Journeyman Mech Designer mattered more once she returned to the Larkinson fleet!

Her guess turned out to be correct. Most of the Larkinsons outside her own sword followers did not really take her status as swordmaster that seriously. Aside from feeling the effects of her condensed will, it was hard for them to fully appreciate that she could cut through ship hulls and slaughter hundreds of people at once.

The Larkinson Clan had always been an organization that centered around mechs, and just like the MTA, it looked down on infantry-scale combat solutions.

No matter how cool it was to slice the roof of a massive arena, a squad of mechs could easily blast her body apart from afar!

"I can feel you're a bit depressed. What are you thinking, Ketis?"

"Oh, it's nothing." She replied as she stretched her arms.

"That didn't feel like nothing." Joshua said as he opened his eyes and gazed at the woman laying on the other side of the luxurious bed. "I'm quite sensitive towards feelings. I can tell you are definitely affected by something."

Ketis gathered her will and snorted. "I'm a big girl, you know. I can take care of myself. Don't presume to know me just because you can peek into my mind like Ves. It's always annoying when he thinks he figured me out, and I don't want you to do the same."

"Uhm, I'm sorry."

The pair cuddled together for a moment before moving out to get freshened up and enjoy a hearty breakfast.

As a Journeyman in the Larkinson Clan, Ketis no longer lived in the same cabin as before. Ves had personally assigned her to one of the exclusive grand staterooms of the Spirit of Bentheim. Though she wasn't able to enjoy its luxury all the time due to her frequent visits to the Swordmaidens, it was still a great honor to be able to live in the best living spaces in the entire fleet.

In fact, as a relatively sober Swordmaiden, she felt that all of the luxury was too extravagant. She knew that the space dedicated to her grand stateroom could have easily accommodated hundreds of crewmen in relative comfort. To carve out so much valuable space aboard a starship only to devote it to a single person or family unit was excessive!

No one complained about the unfairness, though. Journeymen served as the root of the financial power of the Larkinson Clan. All of its starships, mechs and personnel all required enormous sums of money to operate. If not for the fact that Ves was so abnormally successful in the commercial mech market, the Larkinsons would have never been able to absorb tens of thousands of mech pilots at once!

After enjoying a high-energy breakfast prepared by Gloriana's exclusive chefs, the young pair moved down to a large training compartment.

Hundreds of Larkinsons dressed in training clothes were already busy exercising their bodies or practising their personal skills. An energetic air suffused the entire training hall as the soldiers of the Larkinson Clan all trained diligently in order to increase their strength and rise up the ranks.

"Venerable Joshua."

"Miss Ketis."

Many Larkinsons already sensed the force of wills of the two new entrants. They quickly interrupted their training and bowed or saluted in respect.

To be honest, neither of the two exceptional Larkinsons wanted to cause such disturbances everywhere they went, but their status within the clan ranked at the top. There was no way that ordinary clansmen would be able to ignore their presence!

Ketis missed the times when she was just one of the Swordmaidens.

"Good morning, everyone." She nodded before moving past the Larkinsons who watched her with admiring eyes.

Joshua did the same, though he put a bit more effort into his greetings.

"Hey, Jimmy. It looks like your arm has healed already."

"Keep this up and your application to join the Avatars of Myth will surely go through this time, Nelrin!"

"Don't bother Ketis for this, Finn. Just send your application straight to the Annihilator Sword School. They'll either take you in or won't. It is your responsibility if you can't meet the entry requirements."

They soon passed through the large public area and entered a smaller training compartment that was more exclusive. Only high-ranking officers and special personnel such as expert pilots received access to this space.

Only a couple of Larkinsons were present this time, and none of them acknowledged the pair other than giving them a quick greeting.

Once Ketis and Joshua donned special protective training clothes, they briefly warmed up before moving to a sparring ring.

Ketis practically hopped onto the ring while Joshua dragged his body over as if he was a zombie. The gap in enthusiasm was very obvious from their demeanor.

"Must we do this again?" He whined.

Ketis stretched out her hand, causing Bloodsinger to automatically fly out of its sheath and press its hilt into her familiar hands.

"Slacking off will get you killed. You must always train at the highest intensity you can bear. In fact, with your schedule, this workout is too short. If you were a Swordmaiden, you would have gladly endured at least for times as long."

"I'm an expert pilot, Ketis. I have many different responsibilities. I can only spare so much time on polishing my swordsmanship."

"Excuses, excuses. The sooner you approach my strength, the less worries I have about sending you off into battle. The opponents you'll face in the future won't be limited to regular mechs piloted by regular mech pilots. What if you encounter an expert mech some day? I don't want you to fall because you got outmatched by a more diligent expert pilot!"

Before Joshua could get a sword in, Ketis dashed forward and chopped her incredibly deadly greatsword down on his shoulder!

It took all of his strength and experience for the young expert pilot to dodge!

Ketis did not let up. She smoothly transitioned her attack into an upward swing that threatened to chop his legs. This time, Joshua couldn't dodge again, so he had to lower his ordinary-looking sword to parry the attack.

Unfortunately, the hasty response along with the force behind Ketis' blow caused Joshua to almost lose control of his weapon.

"Too weak!"

Instead of swinging her sword for another attack, Ketis abruptly stepped forward and crashed her shoulder into Joshua's chest!

A brief protective energy shield came to life that bled off most of the force. Joshua only got pushed back a couple of steps while Ketis automatically bounced back.

"Again!"

Venerable Joshua used this brief moment of time to regain his bearings. He couldn't afford to stay on the defensive! He knew Ketis well enough to know that she could crack any defense long before she got exhausted. The only way to win this bout was to go on the offensive straight away!

He pressed forward heedless of the fact that he was fighting against a master of the sword. He moved faster than ever and unleashed a flurry of slashes that Ketis managed to block with ease with her massive greatsword.

"Hah!"

At some point, he slashed, only to reveal that it was a faint. He quickly stabbed into her chest, knowing full well that the protective measures of the sparring ring would easily be able to block his attack before it got serious.

Ketis smirked as soon as he transitioned to a lunge, and that was when he knew he was screwed.

Her leg flew up in an impressive snap kick that neatly knocked into the flat of his blade. This caused his sword to fly out of control!

Though Joshua knew better than to maintain his hold over the weapon, he had too little time to retreat before his girlfriend's next attack arrived.

"DEAD!"

Bloodsinger's tip thrust straight to his face, only stopping when it was blocked by a strong energy shield just a centimeter away from his protective helmet!

Venerable Joshua truly felt that he was dead before the energy shield bailed him out. Even so, Bloodsinger was surrounded by a strange energy that seemed to cut straight through his force of will, causing his unflinching confidence to show some flaws. He was so frightened that he momentarily lost control of his body.

In the first few times, he collapsed on the ground as if Ketis had cut off all of the strings of his body.

This time, his response was a bit better. He soon regained his awareness and forcibly pushed his body back in a rather undignified roll that nonetheless allowed him to distance himself from the she-devil.

He scrambled to pick up his discarded sword and raised himself back up to his feet before entering a battle-ready stance. His force of will had already reasserted itself as well, allowing him to put on a brave face.

Ketis tutted and lowered her greatsword. This action marked the end of their first bout.

"Your progress is too slow. You should have lasted longer against me by now."

Venerable Joshua looked a little helpless. "I'm already doing the best I can. I specialize in piloting mechs, not fighting with swords."

"That's not a valid excuse. The battlefield won't care if you failed to keep up your practice. No matter what mech you pilot or what weapons it carries, you can always fit a sword somewhere. Mastering this weapon will give you great benefits, so you better keep up with my training!"

They spent an entire hour on the sparring ring. Since Ketis had to condense Joshua's training as much as possible, she did not slack off but attacked in increasingly more brutal fashions!

Her Bloodsinger aimed at Joshua's limbs, stabbed into his heart and heart and chopped on top of his head! If not for the fact that the sparring ring was equipped with an excellent shield generator, her attacks could have cut him to pieces!

The advantages he enjoyed as an expert pilot did not avail him much. Even if his reaction speed and body reflexes had surpassed human limitations, he was only able to unleash his true strength in combination with an expert mech.

At the end of the intensive training session, Joshua collapsed to the ground yet again. He breathed deeply as he emptied an entire bottle of high-energy nutrient water.

"Can you stop aiming at my vitals all the time? The shield generator has been activated so many times that I'm afraid it will glitch at some point."

Ketis snorted as she let go of Bloodsinger, allowing it to float freely. "That won't happen. I personally installed it. I also make sure to inspect it at least twice a week. Besides, my control over my own attacks is so great that I can definitely pull back if the shield malfunctions. You don't need to worry about this. You just focus on getting accustomed to dueling against higher-skilled opponents who won't hesitate to go for the throat. As long as you can tough it out, your dueling ability will reach another level!"

There was no way that Venerable Joshua would be able to meet her standards in a short amount of time. It seems he would have to continue subject himself to his girlfriend's tender mercies for a couple of months!

Chapter 2996: Winged Serenade Star Sector

The expeditionary fleet had almost reached the border of Majestic Teal. Weeks of uninterrupted travel without making any stops allowed the Golden Skull Alliance to make swift progress.

After getting swept up by the chaos that erupted in the Prosperous Hill System, none of the Larkinsons and their allies had any stomach left to visit the remaining sights of the star sector.

They passed by numerous states that each had something unique to offer in favor of distancing themselves from the Life Research Association as much as possible. Who knew if the aftermath of the civil war and the biojuggernaut's rampage would affect the clan in any way. If the LRA dispatched a military fleet in order to drag the patriarch back for whatever reason, it would be very hard for the clan to resist.

Fortunately, the LRA had bigger problems to deal with at the moment. Not only did its famed biomech industry suffer a huge crisis of confidence, one of its biggest trade planets suffered an enormous humanitarian disaster.

The entire state had already suffered a lot of damage due to the civil war. The biggest urban metropolis on Prosperous Hill VI that also happened to be a nexus of trade and commerce was practically wiped out in totality. How could the LRA possibly continue to return to business as usual at this point?

The government faced the prospect of suffering an enormous budget deficit. Aside from rebuilding and restoring its reputation, solving this acute problem was the highest priority of all of the surviving leaders of the state!

Besides, even if a high-ranking official wanted to use their authority to request the military to chase after the Larkinson fleet, how could they possibly spare any of their forces?

The military garrison stationed at Prosperous Hill VI suffered heavy damage. The remaining military units were all preoccupied with stabilizing the planets marked by

anarchy and infighting. They also had to patrol the borders of the state in order to prevent any neighbors from perceiving any weaknesses.

This eventually allowed the Golden Skull Alliance to smoothly exit the Majestic Teal Star Sector.

This time, the Larkinsons and the rest truly entered foreign territory.

Almost no one in the entire allied fleet had ever set foot in the central star sector of the Yeina Star Cluster.

After a relatively difficult journey that caused some of the starships to rattle a bit, hundreds of vessels of different sizes and shapes eventually passed through the gravitic barrier that partitioned space into different star sectors.

Though the space on the other side of the border was pretty much exactly the same as in Majestic Teal, the people in the fleet still experienced a significant psychological shift.

Ves stood on the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim at the moment of transition.

Lucky had claimed his seat for himself. The cat casually yawned and napped onto the soft padded surface.

"Meow..."

The cat didn't see much reason to get excited about, but it was different for Ves. This was the third star sector he entered and each crossing was still eventful to him. The rest of his clansmen were no different. They each entertained different thoughts now that they entered the famed Winged Serenade Star Sector.

"You know, if you stop by in any of the states around here, you can probably pick up a lot of high-skilled personnel." Calabast said as she stood at his side.

An eight-legged exobeast scurried around the wide deck of the bridge. He looked astounded at all of the elegant decorations and the amount of bridge operators on duty.

"Squeak."

Arnold soon waddled back to Calabast. He sniffed the bottom of Calabast's black pants and hugged it with his two forelimbs.

"Squeak squeak squeak."

Ves directed his eyes downwards and frowned. "Arnold is not supposed to be a pet, you know. He's a captured exobeast of a species that has never been bred or modified to become tame."

"That's not a problem to me. Arnold is smart enough to understand me, and that's enough. I know how to tame pets." Calabast smirked.

"Well, don't blame me if Arnold bites you or something. You know, he's supposed to be my test subject. I planned to perform all kinds of interesting experiments on him. He has powers that no average lifeform possesses. Performing studies on him will certainly progress my design philosophy."

"If that's the case, you can borrow Arnold whenever you want. He's adorable but he's no Lucky. I won't complain if you can strengthen his powers and make him useful in battle."

Though Arnold had become preoccupied with chewing Calabast's pants, he wasn't completely unattentive. In the past, he constantly had to monitor his surroundings in order to stay alive.

"Squeak...?"

Ves smiled at the chubby mammal. "Don't worry, Arnold. I'll take great care of you when I come up with an interesting experiment. It's too bad that I am way too busy with working on my design projects at the moment. It might take some months before I can free enough time to conduct another minor study."

A shudder ran through the eight-legged creature's body. Why did Arnold feel as if he was facing an apex predator?

As Ves contemplated what kind of interesting experiments he could perform on an exobeast with strange displacement and illusion powers, Calabast completely disregarded the possible harm that the mech designer could inflict on the exobeast.

"What are your plans for the next month?" She asked. "Will you continue to focus on your design work?"

"Of course. The projects we are working on at the moment are too critical for us. Their heightened complexity and advanced nature also means that Journeymen like myself have to do more work in person. There are way too many problems that can't be solved by my assistants."

"Your schedule is too one-sided." Calabast shook her head in disapproval. "I couldn't even find a moment to meet you until you decided to visit this bridge to witness our transition into Winged Serenade. There are many other issues that require your time as well."

"Such as?"

"Our search for diplomats isn't making any significant progress. The Ylvainans and Lifers are almost done with establishing their mech forces. The Glory Seekers have

absorbed a lot of Hexer evacuees. The influence of the Swordmaidens is still increasing. The LMC's growth has stagnated after reaching the limits of its growth. The lack of new mech models is also taking a lot of wind out of your mech company's sails. Do I need to go on, kid?"

Ves pressed his fingers against his face. "I know, I know. None of those problems sound acute, though. In fact, I don't need to deal with them in person. I have people like you, Raymond and General Verle to address these issues."

"You're the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan, but you're not acting like it. You can't delegate everything whenever you feel it is inconvenient. Your high station and the power it bestows comes with a lot of responsibility. While it is true that you can just leave it to us to address some of the issues I've mentioned, we are different from you. We can make decisions that go against your intentions at any moment. The longer you remain absent, the less we can serve as your agents. You need to show up to some of the meetings at least in order to provide direction. Otherwise, we'll increasingly pursue our own agendas instead."

"I've already accounted for that." Ves casually replied. "I don't think that is an adverse development. I really can't be bothered with spending too much time on solving these problems. It is good if the people underneath me can address them without needing me to hold their hands all the time. If they go out of line, then I'll just say so afterwards. Maybe I should appoint a vice-leader in order to act on my behalf."

Ves was the patriarch but also the head designer of the Larkinson Clan. One person could not fully invest all of their time in both positions. It wasn't a big deal at the beginning, but as the scope of both the clan and its mech design projects had grown over time, it became increasingly more unrealistic for him to do both jobs at once.

That said, he did not want to let go of the highest authority of his clan. He simply could not trust anyone with that much power.

Calabast was already aware of his tendencies, so she did not press him further. This was also a deliberate approach on her part. She knew that there was a high chance that he would only grow more stubborn if she came on too hard.

Her real purpose was to make him more attentive to the problem and prompt him into coming up with solutions. That way, she could still realize her desired outcome without risking her relationship with Ves.

"What was that about our search for diplomats?" Ves asked after a few moments of silence.

"Winged Serenade is the administrative center of our native star cluster. Even if we are still in a remote part of human space, there are so many enormous organizations in human space that the amount of branch offices they've established in this star sector is

astounding. That doesn't factor in all of the native organizations that have emerged from this star sector that interact regularly with these trans-galactic organizations."

"I can imagine it's quite a challenge for all of these people and organizations to maintain relations with others." Ves said.

"Indeed. If there is any place where you can find diplomats, it's here. Winged Serenade hosts an entire industry of professionals whose main jobs entail making new friends, negotiating favorable business deals, persuading powerful states to trade their exclusive goods and so on. There are even entire dynasties centered around raising and educating highly competent diplomats."

Ves grew more interested. While his original goal was to just fly through this star sector without pause, he was willing to make a brief stop if that was what it took to acquire a talent that the Larkinson Clan was sorely lacking.

"Have we found any qualified and interested applicants?"

"We have found some potential diplomats who can be persuaded to join our clan, but they have all requested to meet you in person."

His mood quickly soured. "They want me to visit them instead of the other way around?"

"These diplomats are highly valued by everyone, Ves. They're not your average career relations manager."

"I don't sense much sincerity from them." Ves frowned and crossed his arms. "I don't feel like visiting another planet at the moment. Not after surviving Prosperous Hill VI. If these supposedly impressive diplomats don't want to go out and visit our fleet, then forget about it. They apparently don't want to expend much effort to join our clan. I don't need any half-hearted clansmen. Keep searching for diplomats but don't bother me with this issue until one of them is willing to visit our fleet."

"You won't make a lot of new friends with that approach."

"I don't care. We still have time. We can afford to be patient. We'll still be crossing through a couple of star clusters before we reach the beyonder gate. I don't believe we will fail to find someone who proactively wants to join our clan."

Time passed as the two continued to discuss other matters. They did not touch upon anything that was too sensitive, but they still touched upon a lot of important subjects.

Calabast grew a bit dissatisfied with her strategic partner's lack of interest in running the clan. He held so much power but refused to use it to the fullest. A Hexer matriarch would have never been so blase about the power she wielded!

Then again, Ves wasn't really a leader or a politician... He always considered himself a mech designer first, so everything that wasn't directly related to his primary occupation didn't hold his interest for long.

Chapter 2997: Dedicated Personnel

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They had traveled even further away from the Komodo Star Sector than before. The chances of encountering another Fridayman ambush force was minimal. In addition, crossing over the border put another barrier in between any possible pursuit from the Life Research Association, not that it seemed likely for the state to chase after a bunch of foreign visitors.

Ves nonetheless felt a lot more liberated than before. He not only separated himself from the trouble in the previous star sectors, but also took another step away from the Nyxian Gap and all of the trouble it contained.

One of the greatest reasons why he was so eager to move away was to escape the attention of the Five Scrolls Compact. As long as he moved away fast enough before the Compact's next batch of cultists arrived, the chances that Ves would get swept up by their investigation decreased.

Though it was probably unrealistic for him to escape their notice completely when he had already accomplished a lot of notable deeds in the hazardous region, it was very hard to perform follow-up investigation on him when his fleet was already on the other side of the star cluster!

Now that he had reached the Winged Serenade Star Sector, he became even more confident that he had left the troubles of the past behind.

He could fully look forward to the future now on. The journey through the star clusters occupied his thoughts to an increasing degree.

He did not want to stir up any more trouble from now until he reached the beyonder gate.

If he got caught up in yet another incident, then he hoped that he at least reached the Red Ocean. The Larkinson Clan may have grown explosively, but it still lacked too much time to integrate the new members and acquire enough mechs to make use of all of its new mech pilots.

After his meeting with Calabast, Ves realized that he was becoming too detached from all of the developments happening within his clan.

Even though Gloriana expected him to perform a lot of work every day, he did not want to miss all of the crucial changes happening within this clan. This was why he occasionally went out and toured different parts of his fleet on occasion.

One of his first destinations was the new Swordmaidens and the former Heavensworders. Tens of thousands of people from the Heavensword Association had just suddenly decided to follow Ketis back to the Larkinson Clan due to hero worship. This was extremely abnormal and something that Ves should have looked into sooner.

Unlike the former Lifers who occupied the Dragon's Den, Ves did not have any personal impression of the Heavensworders. He only heard stories and watched footage of them. He also received occasional reports about their development from General Verle and others in the clan.

Though the Heavensworders kept themselves well-behaved, their culture was still too different from that of the rest of the clan. Their obsession with swordsmanship played such a huge part of their lives that they had trouble befriending those who didn't share in their common passion.

This cultural trait slowed down their assimilation and kept many of them isolated aboard their Heavensworder starships.

This was why Ves decided to visit one of their combat carriers. He contemplated whether he should take Ketis along, but thought better of this option.

As a newly-advanced Journeyman, her ability to solve high-level problems was not as good as his. Her knowledge accumulation also wasn't as good. She was forced to spend much of her time studying more advanced textbooks in order to acquire the knowledge to work on second-class mech designs.

"Besides, I don't want to turn all of those Heavensworders into fanboys and fangirls." He muttered.

He knew how the Heavensworders behaved in her presence. They became so starry-eyed that Ketis could even command them to strip their clothes without receiving any objection!

This was not what Ves wanted to encounter. He wanted to witness the Heavensworders in their most regular condition.

Ironically enough, the extremely high status of Ketis played in his favor. His student was such a great authority figure to them that these 'clansmen' didn't really look up to Ves that much!

The greeting party he received when his shuttle docked in the hangar bay only consisted of a handful of personnel.

An old man along with a few serious-looking guards armed with prominent swords stood a small distance away from the landing site.

"Patriarch Larkinson, welcome aboard the Vinter Mercy. Please forgive our lack of preparations for your reception. Your visit came on short notice and we haven't been able to organize a proper welcome for your arrival."

"It's fine." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Are you Director Fred Walinski?"

"Deputy director, actually. Swordmaster Ketis is still the true head of our sword school. I cannot hold the highest seat due to my inferior swordsmanship."

Ves briefly frowned. He already knew that Fred was the actual person who ran this organization within his clan. Ketis did not possess any inherent administration and management abilities. Even if her recent advancement gave her the confidence to take charge, that did not solve the fact that she didn't have the time to run all of the affairs of her sword school.

Her solution was to simply let Fred take care of all of the work. She was much like him in that regard, so he didn't have much grounds to criticize this arrangement.

"Are those the swordsman mechs of your former state?"

"Why yes. Would you like to take a closer look?"

"Yes. They are quite intriguing to me. I can see their quality is not low."

When Ves, Fred and their bodyguards moved in front of the feet of one of the large sword-wielding machines, they all paused for a moment.

Ves observed every single detail he could see with his eyes. He also expanded his spiritual senses and tried to get a glimpse of the character of the mech.

Though the swordsman mech was dead to his senses, he could still perceive hints of dedication from their mech pilots. A faint intensity that reminded him of Ketis lingered in the cockpit area far above his head.

What he had just sensed told him quite a lot about the mech and the mech pilots assigned to it. When Ves swept his senses to the adjacent mechs parked in the hangar bay, he saw that their situation was not different.

"I've heard a lot of praises about the mech pilots from your former state. They're very enthusiastic and always put in a lot of effort in training."

"That is natural." Fred beamed with pride. "We wouldn't be Heavensworders if we did not take our training seriously. Swordsmanship is everything to us. Anyone who slacks

off not only profanes the sword school they belong to, but also profanes our very tradition!"

It seemed that more than a month of joining the Larkinson Clan did not have much effect in diminishing their identities as citizens of the Heavensword Association. That was not good news to Ves.

He did not bring this topic up, though. Instead, he glanced around and noted the conditions of the swordsman mechs and the mech technicians performing routine maintenance on the machines.

"I'm glad to see that your men are taking excellent care of your mechs." Ves genuinely smiled. "Few crews realize the importance of performing frequent, preventative maintenance."

"We treat our mechs like we do our swords. These weapons are our most valuable partners. We cannot allow them to falter in battle due to negligence. Any swordsman who leaves a single stain of corrosion on his blade will get beaten up by his fellow peers. Any mech pilot who notices that a fault hasn't been fixed will beat up the mech technicians who failed to do their jobs."

"And that is allowed?"

Fred firmly nodded. "Faulty equipment won't just affect the swordsman or mech pilot in question, but will also drag down their comrades."

Ves was pleasantly surprised by that attitude. He appreciated those who took their equipment seriously and did the best they could to keep them in good shape. He too believed that small slip-ups and misses could lead to preventable losses.

"Do you have to resort to physical punishment, though?"

"Getting your arm cut off or your teeth knocked out is not a big deal, patriarch. Our doctors can always grow them back. What they can't do is to bring a corpse back to life. Not even those snobbish Lifers you took on can accomplish the impossible."

That made a lot of sense, though Ves still thought it was too extreme. He did not want Larkinsons to brawl with each other like they were thugs. There were better ways to address shortcomings than resorting to fists and swords.

He spent a few more minutes inspecting the hangar bay before he was satisfied.

"Let's tour the rest of this fine ship. I am curious how you Heavensworders are faring in our fleet. How have you adapted to life in space?"

The small group moved out of the hangar bay and moved through the corridors of the sizable combat carrier.

The interior design had only been partially converted to the Larkinson Clan's aesthetic standards. While Ves saw plenty of banners and markings of the Golden Cat and so on, he also spotted a large amount of traditional Heavensword Association symbols such as a sword with wings and so on. The crew of the Vinter Mercy hadn't tried very hard to wipe away the traces of their past lives.

"We're a tough bunch, patriarch. Hardly any of us have suffered from any major discomfort. We all knew what we signed up for, and we faced plenty of harsh circumstances during our most intensive training periods."

"That sounds good."

They eventually moved into a large training hall. While Ves had visited his fair share of physical training venues, none of that prepared him for the sheer energy displayed by the disciples of the Annihilator Sword School!

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"Just twenty percent." Fred replied.

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The deputy director looked at the patriarch more seriously. "We do not view the profession of swordsman as something useless or outdated. There is always a place for those who pursue the limits of martial ability. Perhaps we might seem as antiques to

you, but to us this is a sacred tradition. Our entry into the Larkinson Clan hasn't changed that. We believe we can spread the glory of swordsmanship to our new comrades!"

Ves realized he underestimated the extreme nature of the 'former' Heavensworders. The reports he received did not fully explain how stubborn these new clansmen clung to their old ways and resisted the ways of their new clan.

He thought that since the Heavensworders were secularists, these new sword enthusiasts would eventually blend in with the rest of the clan sooner or later.

It appeared that he had been hopelessly optimistic when he made this assessment. The strong deviation and willpower exhibited by all of these sword disciples made them no different from religious fanatics in his eyes!

These weren't secularists. They were literal sword worshippers!

Ves just had to sweep his spiritual senses over the minds of these training swordsmen to know that each and every one of them was putting their full concentration into their regular practice. Their training program was practically a sacred ritual to them. None of these Heavensworders ever thought about taking it easy because that was an act of blasphemy towards the object of their worship!

"Do these people ever take a break?" He softly asked. "Do they go on vacation or something?"

"Oh, don't assume that every citizen of the Heavensword Association are as diligent and disciplined as our men here. There are many citizens who haven't been able to pursue swordsmanship at all or as much as our men here. We still need people to design our mechs, crew our starships, man our factories, run our businesses and so on. This part of our former state shares a much greater resemblance to your Larkinsons."

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Unfortunately, he did not relax for long.

"We left all of them behind." Deputy Director Fred stated with a grin. "We brought only the most deviated and dedicated followers of Swordmaster Ketis. Only the best and most diligent citizens and swordsmen of our states deserve the honor to follow her into the Red Ocean! Have no fear, Mr. Larkinson. We did not introduce any deadweight into the clan. I can guarantee you that each and every Heavensworders among us is just as committed to swordsmanship as these fine warriors!"

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Chapter 2998: Daphania

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Chapter 2999: Wearer of the Golden Crown

When Daphania sat atop her throne of bone that provided her with a commanding view over the bottom of the high temple compartment, her eyes turned grim as she was reminded how far the cult she led had fallen.

Daphania was one of the most eminent existences of the Five Scrolls Compact. She was the latest in a long line of chosen men and women to ascend to the top of one of the most powerful organizations of human civilization.

Words could never describe the sheer amount of power, influence and authority she wielded.

Despite the fallen and diminished state of the Five Scrolls Compact, it was still one of the oldest and most far-reaching influences in human society.

Its tentacles stretched everywhere. Its cultists were legion and its vassal organizations spread through every part of human space and beyond.

Whether the Five Scrolls Compact possessed the might to contend against either one or both of the Big Two was still in question.

Yet there was no doubt that in the minds of those who occupied positions at the top of human society that no third organization ever came close to keeping up with the MTA and CFA!

The three organizations shared a common root. The Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance may be the current dominators of human civilization, but the shadow of the Five Scrolls Compact was still present in places where few people looked.

It was not an exaggeration to say that Daphania was one of the most powerful humans in human space and the rest of the galaxy.

In fact, her actual power exceeded that of an MTA Galactic Mech Councilor or a CFA Grand Admiral!

This was because each of the Big Two was led by a hundred of their highest-ranking officials.

The MTA presided over pivotal, galaxy-changing affairs whenever they convened their Galactic Mech Council. Every Galactic Mech Councilor was an absolute elite in the galaxy, and not all of them consisted of mech designers. Yet this diversity also bred an alarming lack of common ground, causing this supreme governing body to be rife with factions that sought to pursue their own interests.

Each CFA Grand Admiral enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy, so they did not convene as often as their mecher counterparts. Yet when they did, they rarely came to a consensus because of the considerable differences between each individual Grand Admiral, who each stood at the head of a separate faction within the warship-oriented organization.

The Five Scrolls Compact was different. Its highest leaders weren't chosen by a huge population of members. Its supreme authority figures did not have to pander to their supporters or earn the appreciation of any human within the ranks in order to remain in power.

The only demand that Holy Sons and Daughters had to meet in order to stay in power was to retain the approval of the Sacred Scrolls. As long as these exalted artifacts maintained the blessings on their chosen heralds, the Holy Sons and Daughters wielded absolute power over the entire Compact.

Since Daphania only had a single peer within the Compact, she effectively ruled half of arguably the third-most powerful organization in human space!

This means that she was effectively the closest thing to a human empress in this day and age. Though few inhabitants of human space ever learned of her existence, her decisions and her direction had the potential to alter the course of human history.

With a single command, she could plunge every star sector into chaos!

With a single sentence, she could end the lives of several Galactic Mech Councilors or Grand Admirals!

With a single thought, she could compel trillions of cultists to commit suicide!

The reason why she was able to wield so much power without ever encountering any opposition from the lower ranks was due to the golden laurel wreath crown that rested above her head.

It was her chosen symbol of authority and the most visible proof of the Water Scroll's favor.

This was because it was not made of regular gold or other exotic substances.

If anyone looked closely enough at the crown, they would notice that it was actually liquid. Near-invisible flows of gold swirled while simultaneously maintaining the shape of a perfect laurel wreath.

This was the blood of an immortal god!

When Daphania ascended to her supreme calling a few years ago, the Sacred Scroll bestowed the holy blood to her in the most central hall of the Ruined Temple!

It was a tradition for each Holy Son or Daughter selected by the Water Scroll to shape the large drops of sacred blood in whatever form they wished.

Daphania chose to wear it as her crown, because she was one the youngest and also the most abrupt to assume her current position.

It did not matter what identity she possessed in the past. Yet the past chosen of the Water Scroll was still in her prime and could have reigned over the Five Scrolls Compact for at least several centuries!

Yet the Water Scroll withdrew its blessing a few years ago, causing Daphania's predecessor to fall from grace.

Though she was still an honored figure within the Compact, the Scroll had removed her right to assume leadership.

These days, Holy Mother Alesia entered the deepest halls of the Ruined Temple and lived in seclusion, cutting herself off from all of her former subordinates, allies and power base.

Daphania's mood grew grimmer, though her stony expression did not reveal a glimpse of her fluctuations. Her soft blue corona made it even more difficult for the grey-robed dignitaries standing before her throne to notice her very human-like concerns.

The blessings of the Sacred Scrolls came and went without warning. They could vault even the most humblest of cultists without warning, yet withdraw the holy blood that signified their authority a few months later!

Fortunately, the Sacred Scrolls were not that erratic in the long span of history of the Compact. As long as the Holy Son or Daughter acted in accordance with the intentions of the Sacred Scrolls, they were able to retain their eminent positions for at least a century.

Daphania had no intention of becoming the youngest 'Holy Mother' in the history of the Compact.

To that end, she needed to show her initiative, brilliance and competence like any new CEO that just took over a company.

Yet in a relatively calm and stable galaxy where the light of the Big Two shone across all of human space, how could she make her mark and stabilize her position without risking a backlash?

Her attention turned to one of the most important goals of the Compact in this day and age.

The loss of multiple Sacred Scrolls wounded the foundation of the cult and directly caused it to relinquish its throne to the upstart MTA and CFA.

Returning just one of the Sacred Scrolls would strengthen the Compact by 50 percent, and would definitely earn her the approval of not just the Water Scroll, but the other ones as well!

This was the reason why she quickly honed in on the news surrounding the missing Metal Scroll!

She had made its retrieval her sacred purpose. Her future within the organization rested upon the success of her current endeavor. Her bet was so big in fact that she did not feel assured in dispatching her minions to complete this incredibly pivotal task.

Only she could ensure that the retrieval happened smoothly and without any chance of failure! She did not hesitate to enter the sphere of influence of the Big Two and risk running into their warfleets in order to personally handle the most important undertaking of the Five Scrolls Compact in the Age of Mechs!

"Temple Protector Kravitz." She spoke, her voice thrumming with soul-shaking authority.

A ripple spread through the bodies of the grey-robed high officials. They all lowered their heads aside from one of them. The man who answered by this name and title stepped forward and slammed his fist against his chest.

Even though this man possessed enormous might and could easily extinguish all life in a star system, the temple protector adopted an utterly submissive posture in front of the woman that only lived a fraction of his years.

There was no dissatisfaction nor discontent in his mind and soul. She was the voice of the Water Scroll while he was not. It was that simple to him and everyone else in the high temple.

"Have you succeeded in finding the location of the failure?" Daphania asked in an imperious tone.

"We have achieved some results, Your Holiness. Since we have come close enough to peer past the distortion of time and space, my team and I have succeeded in locking in the coordinates of Temple Protector Dista!" Kravitz shouted, his low voice booming throughout the massive hall!

Daphania's mouth curled into a humorless smirk. "Then can we jump to his position and question him why he has failed to perform his holy mission?"

Her right-hand man did not dare to provide anything less than a satisfactory answer, but the truth was that he had nothing better to say. He shook, which Daphania could clearly perceive even if she closed her glowing eyes.

"SPEAK!"

"The coordinates that we have locked in are still within the outer range of the hazardous region in the remote star sector, Your Holiness. Jumping in rashly can easily lead to casualties among our supplicants and structural damage to our great vessel."

"Are you doubting the ability of our great flagship and my ability to navigate the currents of the universe?"

"I do not dare, Your Holiness! You are the Wearer of the Golden Crown! You are the Voice of the Immortal Gods! I have never questioned your ability to bring our great vessel to the target destination. It is just that... a considerable amount of insignificant lives may be lost. The violent fluctuations of a direct jump will most certainly cause our great vessel to fall into momentary disorder."

Daphania dismissively waved her hand. "The poor and pathetic lives of slaves and supplicants are inconsequential to the Compact. It is their honor to die in this sacred journey. We have crossed hundreds of thousands of light-years in the span of just a couple of months. That is already too long. Each day that passes brings us further and further away from the heretic who holds our missing Sacred Scroll. Do I need to remind you of our priorities?"

Temple Protector Kravitz shook again. "Your Holiness, we will do our utmost to punish the thieves and return the Metal Scroll to its rightful place in our great temple! However... our powers might not be enough to lead us directly into the Nyxian Gap. We... humbly request you demonstrate your blessed might and deliver our vessel to our chosen destination."

A heavy silence ensued after the man said his piece. If not for his exquisite control over his own body, buckets of sweat would have poured from his body!

Daphania pinned the temple protector with a stony stare. The man in question had lived for centuries and faced all sorts of beasts and horrors. Yet the attention he received from one of the Sacred Speakers caused him to lose all thoughts of resistance!

"If not for the fact that our current mission takes precedence, I would have crushed your body, devoured your blood and shred your soul into pieces for your incompetence!"

"Forgive us, Your Holiness!"

The Holy Daughter let out a disgusted sound. "I shall spare for now, if only because I still need a dog to handle our affairs at our destination in my stead. Let us get on with it, then. Hand me the coordinates."

The temple protector did not dare to delay and concentrated his mind. He transmitted an invisible signal from his head that bumped into the soft blue corona of the Holy Daughter.

Daphania did not even have to lower her guard. She directly extracted the coordinates from the air and already began to activate something hidden in her vast and powerful mind.

Her red-robed body began to rise to her feet. The black-robed supplicant that acted as her footrest did not dare to grunt even as her weight caused his spine to snap!

The blood-winged Holy Daughter strode forward, her heels slamming into the backs of one supplicant after another. She strode down the carpet of bodies until she reached a position that opened up a hole.

The supplicants who laid there in order to act as human carpets plunged into the hole and dropped into the depths of the pyramid temple without a scream!

Their fate was anyone's guess, but no one cared about their insignificant lives.

A head-sized orb of grey that was enveloped by glowing blue runes rose from the pit. The runes had been carved on the surface with absolute precision by the Holy Daughter herself!

Now, Daphania directly placed her palm against the surface.

An invisible control system activated that interfaced with her mind. She issued a large series of commands that already caused her vessel to turn into a hive of activity.

Soon, she fed the coordinates she received before issuing her final commands.

"Ghohocolabadis!" She shouted! "Carve your way through the fabric of space and time! Let no obstacle hinder you! Let no barrier halt you in place! Let the edge of the galaxy and the scum who live at our destination tremble at your passage!"

The pyramid temple and the entire high temple compartment shook as something massive began to move.

In fact, every compartment and section of Daphania's new flagship vibrated at this time!

The shaking kept getting more and more intense. A strong surge of energy descended across the humongous organic vessel. The pressure kept building up and soon the fluctuations grew too strong for the weakest people aboard the ship to bear!

Daphania and the high-ranking officers and officials at the top of the temple pyramid completely ignored the uncontrolled screams ringing throughout the massive compartment.

Instead, the Holy Daughter counted down an invisible clock. As soon as she saw that the time was right, she issued her most important command!

"Ghohocolabadis, consume the gift that I bestow you and tunnel your way to your destination!"

Her words triggered a pivotal process in a hidden chamber. A precious quantity of phasewater that was enough to make the MTA jealous entered into a large vein.

Seconds after this simple process took place, the entire vessel that Daphania was one started to warp and shift in a manner that was completely unnatural and out of the ordinary!

Ghohocolabadis was not a regular starship or warship!

Within a starry backdrop that was close the Komodo Star Sector, a massive living space worm wriggled its body. With a length of thirty kilometers, this artificially-cultivated 'ship' was one of the biggest megaprojects that the Five Scrolls Compact had completed in recent times!

Designed and grown for the express purpose of utilizing phasewater to cross unimaginable distances, Ghohocolabadis was one of the most powerful and massive starships that humanity had ever conceived in the last couple of decades!

Though the Five Scrolls Compact could have cultivated an even larger abomination, Ghohocolabadis was already more than powerful enough to serve Daphania's purpose.

What she required the most was speed. She had to travel from the galactic center to the outer reaches of the galactic rim in the most expedient manner possible. She could not let the trail of the Metal Scroll run cold due to any delays in reaching her destination!

Ghohocolabadis did not disappoint. After consuming enough phasewater, the giant worm gained enough power to breach through space!

The gigantic worm disappeared. Its entire, thirty-kilometer length seemed to dip into a space crack.

Moments later, the head of the giant worm reemerged in a vastly different region of space. Thousands of floating asteroids crushed into nothing as the massive worm emerged out of an unstable-looking space portal and emerged into the dark and anomalous region that was known as the Nyxian Gap!

"We have arrived!"

Chapter 3000: Holy Mother

Ghohocolabadis had succeeded in tunneling its way into the Nyxian Gap!

The gigantic space worm that could crush CFA battleships with its body and devour entire mech regiments worth of MTA mechs had entered a region of space that was infamous for making entire warfleets disappear!

Despite the considerable risks, the Wearer of the Golden Crown and the Lady Drenched in Blood did not show any concern.

She immediately sensed the differences in a realm beyond the material one. It was kind of hard for people with her sensitivity to miss the enormous vortex swirling throughout the entire Nyxian Gap.

Yet she quickly dismissed the anomalous features. She had witnessed similar and even greater anomalies in the past. In fact, the Five Scrolls Compact possessed the greatest degree of understanding towards their properties and behavior.

These natural and ancient scars in space were often reflections of past traumas. The alien empires that reigned over the Milky Way in prior eons did not live in peace with each other. They waged terrible wars that could easily put humanity's Age of Conquest to shame!

The galaxy was old. Sentient life already emerged an incredibly long time ago. Even if the sands of time had already eradicated many of the traces of these primordial aliens, that did not stop the Compact from uncovering the hidden ruins and extraordinary traces of these past civilizations.

"What a dark little hole." Daphania muttered in contempt as she figured out the lay of the land, as it were. "It is a disgrace for the Sacred Metal Scroll to pass through this sordid region. What are those traitors thinking?!"

No one responded to her outbursts. Temple Protector Kravitz and the other grey-robed officials remained still and kept their heads bent as the Wearer of the Golden Crown continued to interface with the grey control orb.

The hierarchy of the Five Scrolls Compact was very strict and vertical, to put it lightly. Daphania was literally the direct chosen of the Water Scroll.

This meant that no one outranked her aside from the Scrolls themselves! Even the chosen of the other Sacred Scroll could not overrule her despite her young age and lack of experience.

"What is the status of our flagship?"

"Our emergence in this region is seventeen times as rough as our last jump." Temple Protector Kravitz replied, even though Daphania could have retrieved that information herself from the orb. "Our men are reporting multiple systems failures and excessive stresses through the interior of Ghohocolabadis. We are still tallying our casualties, but

our initial count suggests that over 3 million slaves and supplicants have failed to survive the transition. We have also lost tens of thousands of higher-ranking supplicants. The accidents that have taken place have also caused us to lose dozens of critical researchers, combat specialists, sages, with more to come as the overall situation becomes clearer."

This damage was quite severe! Though Daphania looked down on the abnormalities of the Nyxian Gap, it still caused Ghohocolabadis to suffer extensive injuries throughout its massive worm-like body!

Yet Daphania didn't even bat her eyes at the severity of the damage.

Ghohocolabadis was so big and long that it could fit the population of an entire planet into its internal volume. The loss of all of those people was but a small price to pay to reach the Nyxian Gap as quickly as possible.

She already tuned out the rest of Temple Protector Kravitz's report. As a Sacred Speaker who ruled over an uncountable amount of cultists, the scope of damage suffered by this turbulent space jump simply didn't register as important.

Daphania had greater concerns in mind.

"I have found the failure." She spoke after a minute. "I will retrieve him from the ditch he has fallen in myself. Please present me with five milliliters of phasewater."

"Right away, Your Holiness."

Temple Protector Kravitz carefully walked forward, his boots crushing the backs of the supplicants beneath his feet. He kept his body bent and continually maintained a servile posture as he got closer.

Once he was within arm's reach, he stopped as both of his feet crushed the skulls of the poor black-robed humans lying underneath. Squashed brain matter and broken skull fragments spilled across the top of the temple pyramid as the temple protector carefully retrieved a tiny vial from the pockets of his robe.

He did not dare to dirty the vial with his fingers. Instead, he utilized his powers to lift the object and slowly push it towards the Lady Drenched in Blood.

Daphania did not turn her glowing eyes towards the approaching vial. Instead, they remained focused on the orb as if it was conveying lots of data.

When the vial came close enough, the Blessed Speaker opened her mouth. The cap of the vial screwed open and droplets of shimmering, energetic liquids floated out of the container before gently entering her body...

She directly ingested phasewater, something which no one thought was possible!

Phasewater was so potent and toxic to the human body that dying instantly was already assured. It took an extraordinarily altered physique for a human to ingest phasewater without getting torn apart or poisoned to death!

None of those outcomes came to pass. Daphania slowly felt more invigorated as a strange energy flowed through her entire body.

Her white hair flowed more vigorously behind her back as if it had completely escaped the influence of gravity.

Her dense red robe shook and became more vibrant.

Her glowing eyes rippled at a frequency that was too fast for baseline humans to notice.

Daphania cleverly and skillfully harnessed the power that flowed through her body. She manipulated it into a special pattern that caused a small patch of space next to Ghohocolabadis to shimmer.

A shaky portal opened up. Even though the Nyxian Gap tried its best to squash this portal, the Golden Crown above the Holy Daughter's head shone brighter as it blessed her endeavor.

The portal that emerged besides the Compact flagship finally stabilized to the point where it was safe for passage.

Seconds later, a wretched body soared from the portal. As soon as it emerged, Daphania quickly halted her intensive act, causing the portal to fade out of existence.

"Retrieve the failure and bring him before my throne."

"As you command, Your Holiness!" Temple Protector Kravitz shouted and bumped his fist against his chest!

The man descended upon the steps made out of human bodies in order to bring his former colleague back in person.

It wasn't until Kravitz reached the bottom of the 999 steps that he dared to use his powers to blink out of the high temple section and reappear out into space.

His robed body did not experience any of the effects of naked exposure into space. His flesh remained pale and healthy and his body heat was still stable.

The temple protector over to a disgusting body that looks no different from a dehydrated corpse. Even though it made absolutely no sense for a human body that was exposed to space to look this way, it didn't matter.

Kravitz could clearly sense the life clinging to existence inside the hollowed body.

"You had one job, Aramid. You took several decades to travel from the Ruined Temple to this little hole at the edge of the galaxy, only to fall and stumble at the end."

Even though sound did not propagate in a vacuum, Kravitz communicated at a level beyond sound pressure.

A faint, tortuous fluctuation transmitted from the mangled body. Its once-magnificent robes that temple protectors wore to convey the full majesty of their power and status to outsiders had long eroded into a blackened mess.

"Your excuses will not avail you. If you wish to defend yourself, then plead your case in front of the new Holy Daughter of the Water Scroll yourself!"

Pure panic radiated from the mangled body all of a sudden! There were even signs that the consciousness locked within the boy wanted to commit suicide, but Temple Protector Kravitz expertly waved his hand, transmitting a powerful fluctuation that locked the body and its consciousness into near-stasis.

If the fallen figure was still in his prime, he could have resisted this invisible imprisonment with ease. It was too bad that he had expended nearly his entire strength to survive the ravages of the higher dimensions.

After a brief moment of concentration, Kravitz and his package blinked back into the interior of Ghohocolabadis. The gigantic space worm did not allow anyone to teleport inside its body at random, but Kravitz had transmitted the right signal for him to pass through.

He emerged right back at the bottom of the temple pyramid. After he quickly ascended above the steps, his faster pace causing his boots to squash nearly every person he stepped upon, he reached the top and quickly paused in front of Daphania and the grey orb.

Kravitz waved his hand, causing a few black-robed supplicants to fling from the surface and soar past the top of the pyramid before falling to their deaths below.

The man dropped the ruined body that he retrieved from space onto the floor.

Failures like him deserved to eat the dirt on the bone metal surface.

Daphania finally pulled her attention away from her control orb. She turned around and beheld the ugly body with a glare that could cut through battleship hulls.

The body locked in near-stasis shuddered, but no matter how much the confined consciousness wanted to die, Kravitz would never allow that to happen!

"Do you know your failure?" Daphania asked.

"..."

"Do you understand how much you failed my predecessor?"

"..."

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA OF HOW MUCH YOU DAMAGED THE COMPACT?!" She shouted, her sharp voice causing the entire high temple section to amplify her fury!

"..."

"What is that?" Daphania frowned. "Speak clearer, you failure."

"..."

She frowned deeper. Though she wanted to wipe off this stain from existence, she needed some answers first.

"Release him from his bondage. I can take over from here."

"As you wish, Your Holiness."

From the moment Kravitz released his control, a much more powerful but gentle hold pinned the barely-living individual's body and soul in place.

Daphania took a faint breath before breathing out. A misty plume escaped her mouth. Under her exquisite control, her saliva descended upon the ruined body and began to heal and rejuvenate the mummified body.

In a matter of seconds, the body seemed to inflate and return to glory, though only barely as Daphania did not bother to put too much effort into restoring the fallen Compact member.

"That should be enough for you to answer my question. Now tell me. What has happened. Why did you fall?"

"Mmm... Your... Holiness... I..."

"No excuses! I want answers!"

The eyes of the half-revived body shook even harder. It was as if he was still under heavy pressure. He shakily lifted his restored arm and slowly pointed it towards Temple Protector Kravitz.

"I-I-I-It's... a... t-t-t-trap..."

This was the first time since her ascension to her supreme position that Daphania became stumped.

"What nonsense are you talking about, you failure? What is wrong with Kravitz?"

Though she thought that the delirious failure of a temple protector had lost all sense of his awareness, a part of her still felt a thread of uncertainty. She turned her sight away from the rescued body and stared into the eyes of her right-hand man.

The confident gaze and the bold smirk on the face of her most diligent and dependable lackey looked completely out of place for a cultist who was in the presence of a Sacred Speaker!

"Welcome to the Nyxian Gap." A female voice uttered from Kravitz's throat.

An instant later, the half-restored body detonated, unleashing an explosion that was so powerful and violent that the entire pyramid temple blasted into pieces and caused the entire high temple compartment to become awash with death!

Yet all of this devastation was just the start of what was about to come!

Ghohocolabadis violently shook and vibrated as it sensed extreme danger. It even attempted to fly away from this patch of space, yet the damage it incurred due to its hasty and ill-advised space jump prevented it from jumping away or accelerating ahead in a short amount of time.

Its organs, its systems and its crew had not yet fully recovered from all of the damage!

This proved to be a fatal consequence as hundreds of asteroids around its lengthy body began to shine in ominous black.

Buried within these asteroids were large, rough chunks of dense black material that would have made Ves drool with greed.

The energies locked within tons and tons of Unending alloy began to get excited all of a sudden!

Several events happened in rapid succession.

First, the distance between the realms abruptly narrowed. The huge vortex along with the ocean of locked and undying souls became visible to the naked eye as they flowed throughout the entire zone including the body of Ghohocolabadis!

Second, as these souls passed through the bulk of the living vessel, they inexplicably became extinguished. Yet the chains that locked them in eternal torment did not disappear.

Instead, they connected to the bodies, minds and souls of the people residing within this 30 kilometer space worm!

Screams echoed throughout every single section as millions of slaves, supplicants and even more powerful cultists lost control of themselves while simultaneously losing whatever strength they possessed!

"WUUUUHHHHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Even the mighty Ghohocolabadis itself was not immune to the intangible chains that locked onto its body and consciousness!

Though its bulk was immense and its mind even more so, that just meant that a lot more chains began to sink into Ghohocolabadis in a very short amount of time. As the vortex kept spinning, more and more ancient lifeforms that had been imprisoned in the Nyxian Gap for eons surprisingly escaped their eternal turmoil as the trap transferred all of their shackles over to the Ghohocolabadis and its crew!

The worm thrashed in an attempt to escape the shackles, yet that only made things worse for everyone as hundreds of thousands of people died as the compartments they were in bent and flung their bodies against the bulkheads!

"TRAITOR!" An angry female voice roared!

As the smoke and devastation of the initial explosion faded, a glowing blue form floated in the middle of the area that was once the top of the temple pyramid.

Daphania looked completely spotless and unaffected. The shackles that managed to imprison the power and control of every grey-robed figure that survived the explosion did not manage to get past the blue corona that surrounded her body.

Her glowing eyes pinned the body of Temple Protector Kravitz.

"WHERE IS THE METAL SCROLL?!"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Kravitz smirked while replying in a female tone.

"IMPUDENCE!"

Daphania did not treat her adversary lightly. She instantly summoned a mind storm that devastated the area around her former minion. With the power of her golden crown, the mind storm was so damaging that not even the prodigious defenses of her temple protector could resist the violence.

Yet even as she eliminated the body, nothing emerged from it, much to her surprise.

The entire flagship shook again as something even more drastic took place!

"Ghohocolabadis is in pain! Its skin is being cut in multiple places! We have already suffered over a dozen major hull breaches!"

It turned out that just before Daphania took action, giant blades of energy had formed up into space. These blades were several kilometers long and covered the entire length of Ghohocolabadis.

After a wordless command, they chopped through the body of Ghohocolabadis!

The space worm elicited a gigantic scream that surpassed the boundaries of the material realm and echoed throughout the other realms! The vortex close to Ghohocolabadis rippled, yet this did not stop its continuous shackling along with the cutting of the gigantic energy blades!

Slowly but surely, the giant blades cut straight through the body of the worm and separated its incredibly tough and prodigious body into multiple pieces!

This shouldn't have been the end of it. Every section of the worm possessed a tenacious amount of vitality and could easily serve as a smaller but fully-functional capital ship by themselves.

It was at this time that the perpetrator of this trap revealed her presence.

Kilometers of space shimmered as a gigantic, dark body of energy materialized next to the partitioned space worm.

Though the dark, elaborately-robed figure of the woman was still small compared to the immense bulk of the Ghohocolabadis, the strange fluctuations in space did not affect her strength in the slightest!

Instead, she seemed to embrace it as if it was her home. The gigantic woman spread her arms and allowed the vortex to flow through her materialized body. Her energy levels increased by the second because of it, but this was far from enough to the gigantic woman's tastes.

Fortunately, there was another source of energy close at hand.

"The weak shall become my nourishment!"

Ghohocolabadis screamed in agony as the gigantic woman approached before breathing in. Vast amounts of energy from the space worm's body as well as the people inside escaped and flowed right into her mouth and nose!

The flow of energy increased as the gigantic woman rapidly grew stronger as she immediately converted the intake into her strength!

The partitioned pieces of Ghohocolabadis grew weaker and more feeble as this process continued without stopping. After just three agonizing minutes, practically every slave or supplicant aboard the flagship of the Five Scrolls Compact had lost all of the energies that the voracious woman took for herself!

Even Ghohocolabadis, a mighty creation of cutting-edge bioengineering that implemented the latest innovations related to phasewater and next-generation FTL travel, was rendered helpless and unable to channel any of its prodigious might due to the trap that had acted upon its gigantic body!

With one mournfully deep scream, Ghohocolabadis died before it got famous!

Only one single entity aboard the dead and broken space worm remained alive.

Daphania looked both livid and hollow as she beheld the devastation around her. All of the dead worm flesh and husky bodies floating around her were clear signs of how negligent she had been!

She directed her acrimonious gaze towards the gigantic energy form that floated a few kilometers away. "You...you..."

"Silence, child."

Before Daphania could do anything, the gigantic woman blinked close and grabbed hold of the Holy Daughter's body!

Even though the blue corona surrounding the red-garbed woman prevented the energy hand from clamping Daphania's physical body, the limb was so large in proportion to a small human body that the Holy Daughter did not have an escape route!

"IMPUDENT!" She screamed as her golden laurel wreath crown shone and a blast of radiant energy emanated from her entire body!

This energy explosion was one of her most powerful attacks. Though it was extremely wasteful, not even the likes of Temple Protector Kravitz could survive it head-on! It could even blast a hole through Ghohocolabadis' incredibly resilient hull!

Yet even as the explosive energy pressed upon the surface of hand, the limb sucked in all of the dangerous and lethal energy without any sign of pressure.

The giant energy woman grew even stronger as a consequence!

Though Daphania utilized numerous secret techniques in the following minute, the hand that imprisoned her in place never broke.

The Holy Daughter quickly started to lose confidence. She had released enough power to destroy the Ruined Temple three times over yet the only result she accomplished was to strengthen her own prison!

The blue corona surrounding her sacred body started to dim as the pressure of the giant grip acting upon her most important protective barrier grew powerful enough to crush moons!

Even if Daphania was one of the most individually powerful existences in the entire galaxy, the mastermind who set a trap for her and her men was utterly crushing her to a degree that beggared her belief!

"How!? Why are you so strong, traitor?!"

The gigantic woman's grinned. "To be honest, you and your interesting space worm could have easily squashed me like a bug if you caught me anywhere else in space. I wouldn't have even stood a chance against your slavish Temple Protector in an even battle."

"You refused to answer for your sins! You had the temerity to set a trap! This is not how everything is supposed to happen! I am too strong!"

"Hahahahahahaha!" The dark woman laughed. "That is funny! Who told you that I have to fight fair? The worst mistake you ever made was to leave your decrepit little temple. You could have avoided the worst if you stayed away from the Nyxian Gap, but now that you have entered my territory, you have literally fallen into the palm of my hand! What a Holy Daughter you are! I just knew you would underestimate the perils of my new homeground!"

The giant woman had become the dark goddess of the Nyxian Gap! She not only assimilated much of the gathered power locked within this ancient region, but also mastered a portion of the secrets buried within the relics of the past!

As the glowing blue corona came close to failure, Daphania finally felt the threat of death for the first time since her ascension. No matter how much she borrowed the power of her golden crown, she failed to summon enough strength to break past her current predicament!

"Do you realize what an utter crime you are committing? Killing me will not be the end of it! Another Holy Son or Daughter shall emerge to hunt down!"

"Then so be it! I shall gladly accept whatever the Compact will throw at me. Everyone who enters the Nyxian Gap shall become my nourishment. My hunger is endless. I am already hungering to devour your soul!"

Daphania had never heard such blatant affronts to her life! Yet the situation she faced had deteriorated so quickly and suddenly that she failed her mentality.

"Why... why are you doing this traitor? Why are you calling death and damnation upon yourself? The Compact shall never forgive you. The Compact shall never rest until my death is avenged."

The giant woman glared at the Holy Daughter. "Do you want to know why I went to these extremes? Do you want to know why I have invested so much effort into laying this elaborate trap?"

Daphania's eyes shook as she felt that her blue corona was on the verge of failure."

"It's because I want to save my son."

"IT'S BECAUSE I WANT TO SAVE MY SON!"

"IT'S BECAUSE I WANT TO SAVE MY SON!"

The entire space around the giant shook as her violent emotions resonated with the supreme amount of power she absorbed!

Daphania let out a wordless cry as the giant woman's voice broke through her protective barrier and rippled through her unprotected body!

Instantly, the giant crushed her flesh from every direction! Flesh that was as tough as the armor of a first-class multipurpose mech squeezed into bloody matter and bones that were as resilient as the hull of a CFA battleship cracked!

Yet even as the Holy Daughter's body got crushed, Daphania had not yet died!

Freed from the constraints of her corporeal body, her incorporeal existence tried to squeeze out of the giant hand and escape the confines of the trap as much as possible.

Yet for some reason, she failed to slip away! No matter where she tried to escape, the gigantic hand did not present any holes that she could squirm past!

"No!"

"Hahahahaha!" Cynthia Larkinson directed a cruel smile at her prisoner. "I know your methods. I know what you are capable of. Did you really think I would have made insufficient precautions? I already told you, Holy Daughter. From the moment you entered my territory, you forfeited any chance of freeing yourself! Now perish!"

Cynthia squeezed once again, causing the incorporeal prisoner to scream until she shattered entirely!

Before any of the broken pieces could slip away, she rapidly absorbed all of the pieces and broke it down as quickly as possible, not even caring to preserve any knowledge or memories. Only by shredding each and every aspect that belonged to Daphania would the dark goddess be able to ensure that the Sacred Speaker was utterly dead and gone!

Once she had completed a deed that would assuredly ripple throughout human space and upend human civilization in ways that she did not care to contemplate, she slowly opened her giant hand to reveal a golden laurel wreath crown that thrummed with power.

Though the crown rapidly tried to escape, Cynthia already enacted a solution. A thread of power pierced through the center of the crown and caused the solidified blood to still.

Its connection to the Water Scroll and its defiant consciousness seemed to have faltered all of a sudden, though there were signs that it could easily regain its rebellious nature!

Though holding onto this crown was incredibly dangerous and would almost certainly invite furious reprisal from the Five Scrolls Compact, Cynthia could not afford to let go of this priceless treasure.

For the sake of diverting the attention of the cult she used to be apart of, she had to attract as much of the Compact's animosity as possible.

Only by attracting her former compatriots into the quagmire of the Nyxian Gap would she be able to give her precious son the opportunity to live his life free from persecution.

"I just want to save my son."

"I just want to save my son."

"I just want to save my son."