

Mech 3401

Chapter 3401: Possible Expansion

When Ves convened all of the Journeymen of the Design Department for a meeting, he outlined his plans and thoughts about their future direction.

"...Muuu...wawawawaaaa..."

"...Miew..."

He found it hard to remain on topic while little Aurelia had grown to the point where she became increasingly more active when she was awake. Though she still slept most of the time, Ves distinctly noticed that Aurelia as well as Mana became increasingly more responsive and playful.

Gloriana looked radiant as she happily indulged in her daughter's antics. Alexandria meanwhile allowed the intangible white fuzzball to jump onto her red tail.

"Ahem." Ves coughed as his daughter adorably held onto Gloriana's finger. "As I was saying, our list of design priorities keep growing. Although a part of it is because it took longer for us to complete our most recent round of mech design projects, the fact of the matter is that the rapid growth of our clan has rapidly overtaken the growth of our Design Department. What we need to do is to bring the latter up to speed. Although I hoped to rely on internal promotion to solve our increasing shortage of lead designers, it appears that my assumptions were too optimistic."

"You can't raise Journeymen whenever you want, Ves." Gloriana proudly stated even as Aurelia's tiny fingers clung onto her hair. "What happened to Ketis is the exception rather than the rule. Otherwise, why are people like us who broke through before we reach thirty years old so special? Don't forget that most of our assistants lean on the younger side. They're less talented than us, so it's no surprise that they need more time to make substantial progress. The true situation of the mech industry is mostly like this. Even if you employ hundreds of assistants, it can take decades before one of them breaks through."

Her words described the cold hard truth about how unreliable it was to pin his hopes on internal promotion to fill up the ranks of Journeymen. The design teams were filled with mediocre mech designers who failed to distinguish themselves when they studied their crafts and worked at their initial jobs.

Their hunger for greater opportunities may have led them to the Larkinson Clan, but if they were more talented, capable and successful, they would have turned to much more attractive options!

Truly skilled and ambitious mech designers never thought about becoming assistant to other mech designers. They insisted on leading their own projects and designing mechs based on their own visions!

These were the true Journeyman candidates. As long as they possessed spiritual potential, their chances of breaking through was much higher than any of the drones in the Design Department!

When Ves glanced at himself as well as the other three Journeymen, he realized that none of them were typical mech designers.

Nothing needed to be said about himself. Ves was anything but conventional and he reveled in that. Breaking rules excited him and he never accepted the status quo.

Gloriana may have been raised to exacting standards by her strict mother, but she lived up to the expectations of the Wodin Dynasty. Her existence was proof that funneling a lot of money in someone's upbringing could result in fantastic returns.

Ketis grew up under much worse circumstances than the former Hexer, but she was already talented enough to do decently well in the frontier. Once she joined the Larkinson Clan and received proper tutelage and resources, she grew up at a rapid pace.

With the help of the companion spirit that Ves had gifted to her, she even became one of the most remarkable mech designers in existence due to her dual breakthroughs.

Juliet was the most ordinary Journeyman among this gathering. Although she possessed an unusual history, her trajectory as a mech designer was relatively conventional. Though her personality and design philosophy weren't as exciting as the others, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. She brought a much-needed measure of calm, rationality and sanity to the group meetings.

Even then, Juliet was already remarkable enough for being able to advance to Journeyman at a relatively young age.

If Ves grouped everyone in the room together, then none of them were the sort of people that could easily be found on the job market.

With the expeditionary fleet getting closer and closer to the gate system, it became easier than ever for the Larkinson Clan to fill its job vacancies.

A seemingly endless amount of eager and ambitious Apprentice Mech Designers wanted to catch a ride to the Red Ocean while doing the work that they loved.

The Larkinson Clan even began to receive inquiries from various Journeyman Mech Designers. Each of them were attracted to different aspects of the Larkinson Clan.

Some thought that the clan had a prosperous future. Others were attracted by the short but illustrious track record of the lead designers. A few of the older Journeymen even thought the Larkinson Clan would be lucky if they became the new leaders of the Design Department!

Journeymen tended to be more passionate, colorful and confident in terms of personality, so the group of applicants looked like a circus to Ves. It was hard for him to take any of them seriously, especially when a large proportion of the applications lacked sincerity.

"I don't know, Ves." Ketis commented after a while. "I don't want to work alongside people who haven't fought and bled alongside us. I don't mean that literally, of course, but I respect everyone who joined up when we were much weaker and stuck with us through both the good times and bad times. Now that our clan has grown larger and more stable, it would be too cheap for other Journeymen to swoop in and take everything for granted."

The others frowned as well. This was a shared sentiment among the Larkinson mech designers.

Gloriana embraced Aurelia as she voiced her own opinion.

"We can give the newcomers a lower status than us. They will all have to prove themselves before they can earn sufficient trust to hand over greater responsibility to them. This doesn't have to happen in a hurry. We can observe them for a number of years in order to see whether they are truly committed to our clan or whether they are purely out for themselves."

That was another good suggestion, although Ves already spotted a couple of problems.

"This isn't a risk-free plan." He said. "All of the projects we are working upon such as our recent expert mech design projects are highly sensitive and classified. If an outside Journeyman joins our ranks and works on a dozen or so important projects only for us to deem him unsuitable, what should we do with him? If we kick him out, he'll not only resent us, but also walk away with a lot of internal design secrets."

"We could keep him but reassign him to another function." Gloriana proposed.

Ves shook his head. "That won't work. Journeymen are proud and are used to enjoying a higher status. They won't accept getting marginalized. If I reassign them to less important projects or move them out of the Design Department entirely, then we'll definitely suffer a backlash."

Journeymen couldn't be treated as normal clansmen and employees. They enjoyed a higher status in every part of human society, but they were even more respected in the Larkinson Clan.

Part of the problem was that Ves wasn't a Senior or Master. If he was a higher-ranked mech designer, then it would have been much easier for him to keep Journeymen under his thumb.

After a few more minutes of discussion, Ves came up with a tentative decision.

"I don't think we should give up on internal promotion, but our need for more design capacity is so great that we must be open to alternatives." He slowly said. "I want to try and see what happens if we accept two new Journeymen into our clan. Naturally, they will start off lower on the totem pole and must prove their loyalty, dedication and value over a span of several years until they receive our actual trust. What do you think about this proposal?"

He originally wanted to recruit four extra Journeymen, but that made this batch more difficult to control. By halving the recruitment target, he didn't need to be afraid even if both of the newcomers banded together.

"Two is a good amount." Gloriana concurred. She was the most afraid of losing her power in the Design Department. "It's much easier to supervise the new recruits that way. They better be worth the effort, though."

Juliet was also open to this proposal. "We could certainly use more specialists. Venerable Jannzi will be ecstatic if a Journeyman with a Class III design philosophy can finally bring the defensive capabilities of her Shield of Samar to the next level."

This was one of the most compelling reasons why Ves was so eager to add more Journeymen to his clan. Since he planned to design a lot more specialized mechs for the Larkinson Army, it was essential that the Design Department was able to cover the most essential attributes of a mech.

Aside from a defensive mech specialist, Ves also wanted to recruit a ranged mech specialist so that the Design Department could better serve all of the mech pilots who fought at range.

Although Ves was in the process of grooming Zanthar Larkinson into a future authority on luminar crystal technology, the young man hadn't graduated yet! It took too much time for him to become a Novice, Apprentice and finally a Journeyman.

A lot could change while Zanthar remained irrelevant! Just a single decade was enough to completely alter the circumstances of the Larkinson Clan. The mech legions needed stronger mech designs sooner rather than later in order to make sure the clan survived the upcoming events.

"What do you think, Ketis?"

The young woman shrugged. "I don't know. I'm okay with it I guess, but if the new Journeymen turn out to be bastards, I don't want to work alongside them. They shouldn't even be allowed to play a role in the design of our crucial Larkinson mechs."

"You're not alone in this Ketis." Ves smiled in response. "It's not that easy to earn my trust. I will do my best to screen and filter all of the applications so that only the most earnest and well-meaning Journeymen will join our ranks. I won't hire any older and more experienced ones because it is too likely that they will abuse their seniority in order to obtain more say in how we run the Design Department."

They briefly discussed which criteria they should set to evaluate the possible applicants. Age, design philosophy, background, culture, design library, prior employment and even political stances were all factors that determined whether a new Journeyman was a good fit for the Larkinson Clan.

"I have one more suggestion." Gloriana spoke up. "You should wait until we've entered the Red Ocean before you begin recruitment. The pool of available Journeymen in our current region is fairly limited and boring. We can draw from a much more diverse population of Journeymen in the new frontier. Those that have managed to obtain passage through the beyonder gate aren't average, so you won't have to waste any time with the riff raff."

Ves looked intrigued. "That's a good idea. We'll be delayed for a bit, and we will have to integrate mech designers who are much more different than the people we are accustomed to dealing with, but... the payoff is a lot greater."

Although Ves didn't look down on mech designers who grew up in the galactic rim, he was a lot more keen on diversifying the Design Department by adding mech designers who originated from the galactic heartland to the roster!

As for the mech designers who grew up in the most prosperous part of human space, Ves had no hopes that his piddly little Larkinson Clan could possibly attract such elites.

"Let's settle for this proposal, then. If you have a bit of free time, then do me a favor and look up the Journeymen who are available for hire in the Red Ocean... If we can lock them down early, then we don't have to wait too long to welcome our new colleagues."

Chapter 3402: Trading Favors

After Ves set a plan that would hopefully alleviate the growing manpower problem in the Design Department, he became a lot less worried about the immediate future.

He knew it wouldn't be easy to attract the more talented and capable young Journeymen that had managed to reach the Red Ocean.

The majority of Journeymen who arrived at the dwarf galaxy had already signed long-term employment contracts with various powerful pioneering organizations.

Only a minority of ambitious mech designers entered the new frontier as free passengers rather than part of an existing mech company or other organization.

Despite the limited proportion, a huge amount of humans poured into the Red Ocean every day! Over time, the trickle of available Journeymen continued to grow until there was a healthy supply of them. Ves was not afraid of lacking any choices.

What he was actually worried about was what it took to hire the more promising ones. The Larkinson Clan was weak by second-class pioneering standards, so he would have to make significant concessions to sway someone. This was exactly what Ves didn't want to do. No newcomer should enjoy special privileges.

Ves pressed his fingers against his forehead. "I'll have to figure something out. If I can raise my prestige and make the Larkinson Clan a more attractive destination, then I don't have to make too many compromises to hire better Journeymen."

Much of it would have to wait until the Larkinson Clan reached the Red Ocean, which wasn't too far away.

As Ves and many other Larkinsons made their final preparations before they made the great jump, the expeditionary fleet had already moved on from the port system where they received the Gorgoneion and the Diligent Ovenbird.

Just as promised, the two new capital ships performed well enough. The inexperienced but sufficiently trained crews kept most problems under wraps and made sure not to delay the journey.

All the while, a lot of activity went on in the background. The biggest priority of the Larkinson Clan was hiring enough skilled personnel and transferring as much mechs, goods and personnel over to the capital ships as possible.

The clan had already made a deal with different vendors to offload all of the sub-capital ships and deconstructed mech salvage that couldn't be taken into the Red Ocean.

The Larkinsons had less luck obtaining another capital ship, most notably a mass conveyor that could transport a lot of mechs and other cargo.

Surprisingly enough, the other members of the Golden Skull Alliance managed to expand their own core fleet.

The Glory Seekers happened to meet up with a band of other 'refugees' from the Hexadric Hegemony. The Wodin Dynasty had made a deal with this group that brought them under the fold.

This deal added two more capital ships to the Glory Seekers, and they both happened to be fleet carriers!

Although the fleet carriers were older models by the standards of the Hexadric Hegemony, they both possessed a respectable mech capacity.

The Feminine Grace was a standard fleet carrier with balanced specs. Her six-sided rod-like hull shared many similarities to both the Spirit of Bentheim and the Indigo Tremor. She was capable of carrying 500 combat-capable mechs and double that number when the mechs were packed.

The Dagger Dilettante was a smaller, slimmer and slightly cheaper fleet carrier. She traded a bit of armor for mobility, but otherwise performed similar to the Feminine Grace. She was able to carry 450 mechs and also double that number when packed, as was standard.

The Cross Clan didn't have any connections to its former state, so it had to rely on a different source to obtain additional capital ships.

Although the Crossers never explained how they managed to expand their core fleet, Calabast already told Ves that Professor Benedict Cortez likely played a key role. As a powerful Senior, he was able to exert a lot of influence, especially when he was proficient wielding power.

Even so, the difficult market conditions only enabled the Crossers to obtain a pair of non-combat capital vessels.

The first addition was a second-hand ark ship. The Banner Cross — named after an expert pilot that died in the Battle of Reckoning — was a 3.4 kilometer utopia that provided paradisiacal living conditions to any inhabitants lucky enough to live on her. Although some of her aging systems clearly needed attention, the ark ship worked well enough to completely change the situation of the other clan.

The Banner Cross massively increased the comfort and happiness of the civilian Crossers. Many of them previously had to live on combat or industrial vessels that did not offer much in the way of stable and pleasant living.

The Cross Clan did not have a tradition of living in space. Back when they were in power, they held a lot of planets in the Garlen Empire. Those territories used to be the homes of the original Crossers.

Although they had been forced to live on ships after their exile, the addition of the Banner Cross meant that they had taken their first true stride into becoming a spaceborn clan!

The Cyclical Engine was the second capital ship obtained by the Cross Clan. She was another second-hand capital ship, but her role came as a huge surprise to Ves and many Larkinsons.

It turned out that the Cyclical Engine was a factory ship, one that Professor Benedict had taken great effort to procure!

The newest acquisition of the Cross Clan was clearly used but possessed her own merits. With a length of 2.9 kilometers, the Cyclical Engine was significantly larger and more productive than the Spirit of Bentheim.

However, Ves didn't harbor a lot of jealousy towards the Crossers. The Cyclical Engine may be a powerhouse in terms of industrial production, but she was a capital ship that was designed for peaceful purposes. She did not contain any design elements that were expressly optimized for frontier conditions.

As a result, the Cyclical Engine was not only slow and unwieldy in space, but was also clad with thinner hull armor.

Both the Banner Cross and the Cyclical Engine imposed a huge defensive burden on the Crossers. They were still worth it as they both rounded out the Cross fleet and increased the independence of the martial clan.

Ves was gratified that the Golden Skull Alliance became stronger and that his two allies began to carry more weight. With 16 capital ships, the expeditionary fleet came close to reaching the maximum limit of 20 hulls per beyonder ticket!

If the Golden Skull Alliance was no longer able to obtain any further capital ships, then the alliance partners had already agreed to use up the unused ship quota for sub-capital ships.

This was an enormous missed opportunity, of course, but it was better than wasting the remaining quota entirely!

There was a brief discussion about the MTA merits needed to purchase a beyonder ticket, but the Larkinsons brought slightly good news. Ves and his fellow Journeymen were still waiting to receive their earnings for fabricating two successive masterwork expert mechs.

The only problem was that the Glory Seekers still couldn't pay for their own ship quota. It wasn't a big deal when their core fleet only amounted to the Indigo Tremor, but the addition of the Feminine Grace and the Dagger Dilettante significantly added to their debt!

When Ves, Marshal Ariadne and Patriarch Reginald conducted a virtual meeting to discuss these problems, no one was in the mood to quibble over numbers.

"We've fought numerous major battles alongside each other." Ves explained his thoughts. "Admittedly, most of them were provoked by the Larkinson Clan. During each engagement, your Glory Seekers never hesitated to risk your lives to help us fend off our enemies. Your willingness to confront a dwarven ace mech has earned my trust. If you are okay with it, you can cash in the favor that I owe you. We need your fleet carriers anyway. The more we can bring into the Red Ocean, the better we'll be able to defend our fleet."

He made this offer both out of friendship and out of practicality.

"I concur with the last point." Patriarch Reginald Cross spoke. "I'm not an accountant and I don't care for these trivial sums. We are brothers and sisters in arms and we should assist each other. If the Larkinson Clan cannot cover the quota of the Glory Seekers, then our Cross Clan will make up for the shortfall. You'll just owe me another favor, Marshal."

The leader of the Glory Seeker looked gratified. "Thank you for your generosity, patriarchs. To be honest, we have tried our best to solicit Hexers who possess a significant amount of merits, but none of them are open to our conditions."

Ves chuckled. People who were capable and powerful enough to earn millions of MTA credits would not easily agree to subjugate themselves to others. All of these powerful Masters, trade magnates and so on were more than capable of becoming pioneers themselves. They had already formed their own pioneering fleets with their own associates.

"I guess it doesn't really matter how we divide the capital ship quotas among ourselves anymore." He said with a shrug. "We're stuck with sixteen capital ships and I don't think that will change in the time we have left. Each of them is a valuable asset and it's unthinkable for us to leave any of them behind. The only number we need to pay attention to is the total amount of MTA merits that we can muster. We cannot enter the Red Ocean if we are short of 95 million MTA merits."

Although Ves hadn't maintained any contact with the Rim Guardians as of late, his discount was still valid! Even a measly 5 percent reduction off the total price was invaluable in situations like these!

"As far as I am aware, we are still short of meeting this sum." Marshal Ariadne Wodin noted.

The Cross Patriarch didn't look worried. "It will not be an issue. Professor Benedict has never stopped working on this front."

In the end, the meeting ended harmoniously. The growing trust and friendship between the alliance partners had progressed their relations past the point where they let annoying details get in the way of common interests.

Once the expeditionary fleet finally entered the Tarnished Crown Star Sector, the alliance partners completed almost every step they needed to take before passing through the beyonder gate.

Many people were already preparing to bid farewell to the Milky Way. They organized solemn ceremonies and enormous parties to mark their final moments in the old galaxy.

Nobody knew when they would be able to return to the galaxy of their birth. No one was certain whether they would even want to return if given the choice. Many of them had already said goodbye to their old homes and cut ties to their past.

To the Larkinsons, their clan was their only home. Even though it had only been a couple of months or years since they departed from their old states, none of them yearned to go back to them. The Larkinson Clan was so much better that pretty much no one exhibited any homesickness!

Of course, Ves knew that Goldie played a considerable role in helping the new clansmen embrace their new lives. Without the crucial kinship network, it would have been much harder to retain all of these members and prevent them from defecting throughout the lengthy journey to the beyonder gate!

"We're almost there." Ves told his cat.

"Meow."

Lucky didn't appear to pay any attention to the significance of leaving their native galaxy.

"The Bright Republic, the Friday Coalition, the Hexadric Hegemony, the Komodo Star Sector, the Yeina Star Cluster... we'll soon be cutting ourselves off from all of these regions. We'll be leaving the Larkinson Family behind as well."

That was an enormous pity, but the family members led by uncle Ark insisted on leading their own lives... They were still trying to build a new life in Vicious Mountain last he heard.

Chapter 3403: Fulfilled Ves

"...Wuuuu...baababawbuuwu..."

Despite her young age, Aurelia grew remarkably quickly. Though she was still a baby, she was not as tiny as before. She also became a bit more coherent and actually behaved as if she was more aware during her waking hours.

Though it was still a bit stressful to feed her during the night, it was not a big deal now that neither Ves nor Gloriana were occupied with any important work at the moment.

"Oogobababaooooo..."

She also made cute sounds during playtime! Though she couldn't really crawl around by herself yet, it was fun to see her try and grab onto Clixie's soft and furry tail.

"Miaow~"

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat had regained her relevance during this time. Now that Aurelia's immune system had ramped up with the help of artificial treatments, Gloriana was fine with allowing Clixie to keep her baby company.

It was a great solution when both Ves and Gloriana couldn't keep a close eye on their baby. They trusted Clixie and she was already a close part of the family.

Of course, Lucky didn't want to be left out either. The gem cat hovered above Aurelia's head and dangled his metallic tail within the baby's reach.

"Wuuuaaaaa! WUAAAAAA! WHAAAAAA!"

"Meow?!"

"Lucky! Stop scaring my little girl! Get away, you bad boy!"

Gloriana returned to her daughter's side and picked up the crying baby.

"There, there, Aurelia. The scary cat isn't around anymore. Mommy will protect you from all of the bad boys that want you all for themselves once you grow up. Only the best boys are worth your time!"

"Meooowww..."

Lucky looked aggrieved as he flew back to Ves and landed on his shoulder.

"You dummy." Ves reached out and scratched his gem cat between the ears. "You're not as soft and fluffy as Clixie so you need to put more effort into charming Aurelia. Don't approach her so quickly next time. It also helps if you wear some clothes or colorful accessories. You need to look cuter!"

"Meow!"

Aurelia soon lost her fright and got back to giggling when her mother brought out a flashy toy that floated above her eyes. The bond between mother and daughter deepened even further as they continued to play and entertain each other. It was a heartwarming sight.

After twenty minutes, their daughter finally expended all of the energy that kept her awake. As she slowly dozed off, Gloriana kept ahold of her baby as she gently sat next to Ves on the couch.

"I'm so happy." She softly whispered as she kissed the top of Aurelia's head.

"Me too." Ves smiled as he reached out to caress his sleeping child. "This is probably the happiest time of my life so far. Not only did we gain a new daughter, but we've also completed many of our other goals. We've completed our expert mech design projects, made two more masterwork expert mechs in quick succession and we're almost about to begin our true expedition."

Although there were dangers abound and a lot of challenges ahead of him and his clan, Ves felt more alive than at any other point in his life. Much of it came from the sense of fulfillment that had settled into his heart. He had finally reached a point in his life where he could pause and bask in his own success without hateful Fridaymen or murderous dwarves breathing down his neck.

Despite all of the risks he took to get to this point, he was glad he managed to end up at this juncture. Both his professional and personal lives were heading in the right direction, and he could hardly ask for more.

The only changes that could make him happier was if he got his hands on more capital ships or was able to bring more of his family along this trip.

His thoughts continued to wander back to how his parents and the old Larkinson Family were doing. He hated the thought of leaving them behind, but he couldn't do everything.

Cynthia and Ryncol Larkinson had been attracting a lot of mysterious traffic towards the Nyxian Gap. They wouldn't be able to survive outside of this hazardous region. If the Five Scrolls Compact didn't hunt them down first, then the Big Two would have definitely been able to corner them sooner or later with the help of their advanced technology.

As for the old family led by Patriarch Ark Larkinson, those stubborn traditionalists still insisted on achieving success while adhering to their own principles and ideals. They may have become more open to receiving assistance from the Larkinson Clan as of late, but that mostly extended to allowing them to pilot a selection of Larkinson-exclusive mechs.

Aside from that, the old family funded most of its expensive operations by relying on the dividends of their 1 percent ownership in the Living Mech Corporation.

It was rather sad that the Larkinson Family still hadn't been able to stand on its own two feet after so many years. Their departure from the Bright Republic left the traditional Larkinsons completely unprepared to find a new calling and a way to pay the bills through their own efforts.

Ves snorted a bit. The original family members had made their own choice. To him, the old family mainly existed to present a powerful contrast to his own clan.

The differences in values, principles, policies and decision-making had resulted in two completely different organizations. The differences in power, prosperity and success was more than enough proof to show which group of Larkinsons were in the right!

He no longer paid any mind to the old family. Although he did not wish his distant family members any ill, their decision to keep their distance from the clan made it hard for him to hold much affection to other Larkinsons.

Only a couple of individuals such as Ark, Melinda and Benjamin still earned his affection. Sadly, it was harder and harder for him to remember them as the physical distance between the clan and the old family continued to increase.

They no longer even talked with each other all that much over the galactic net. Although Ves had happily introduced Aurelia to the three during a rare call, that was the only time in the entire year when he seriously talked to the old family in a friendly capacity.

Ves realized that it would only grow worse once the clan entered the Red Ocean. Although the existence of the galactic net still allowed them to hold real-time talks, the sheer amount of light-years between the two groups of Larkinsons would only further increase their estrangement from each other.

"What are you thinking about, Ves?" Gloriana curiously asked.

"Oh, nothing important. I'm just thinking about the family I'm leaving behind."

"You're not the only one. It's a pity that I can't bring along my mother and the rest of the Wodin Dynasty."

"The Hexadric Hegemony is on the losing end of the Komodo War, right? What will the Wodin Dynasty do?" He asked.

"I'm not too sure." She replied as she continued to hug her sleeping baby. "My relatives will be fine. They should have already prepared for contingencies together with other Hexers. Matriarch Xiaphna is a strong loyalist and has good relations with the Evern Matriarchal Dynasty. I can see them all working together on a backup plan."

"I recall that we still owe the Hexers three mech designs. Should we work on them in the next round of mech designs?"

Although Ves did not like the original deal he made with the Hexadric Hegemony, it wasn't in his nature to break his promises, especially when they related to his profession. Credibility was important to a mech designer. If the expert mech design

projects didn't take so long to complete, he would have been able to address this matter sooner.

Gloriana shook her head. "If the demand was more urgent, I would have brought it to your attention. For now, the Blessed Squire and the Valkyrie product line are sufficient as both of them are able to spread the Superior Mother's glow on land, in the air and in space. They are still relevant and don't need any help. The Cherub, the Bright Boy and the Devious are also helping out, but there is only so much auxiliary mechs can accomplish."

"It's too bad the MTA doesn't want us to spread our most up-to-date luminar crystal tech to the public." Ves sighed. "If I can update the Bright Boy design, I can turn it into a much stronger impediment against expert mechs. Hell, just giving the Hex Army a license to produce my crystal luminar rifles will definitely stop the Friday Coalition's momentum."

It couldn't be done. This move went against the MTA's policies and direction. The mechers didn't want anyone to spread around alien technology and they loathed any tech that made it much more efficient to kill expert pilots. Ves simply couldn't defy such a powerful organization over this issue, and his wife knew that as well.

She sighed. "It's okay. For now, the Hex Army has adopted a full defensive posture. The earlier stages of the Komodo War have already inflicted a lot of attrition on the Fridayman mech troops. They can't easily overrun every defensive star system that is defended by a stubborn core of Hexer soldiers."

"That doesn't sound like a good way to win a war."

"It isn't, but at least the Hex Army is buying time for the rest of the Hegemony to prepare for solutions. More Hexers are able to evacuate in advance, and new solutions are being developed as well. It's just..."

"What is it, honey?"

"This war would have proceeded a lot differently if the Red Ocean hadn't opened up." Gloriana remarked. "Whenever I get in touch with my mother or other Hexers back in the Komodo Star Sector, all I'm hearing lately are plans to pack up their belongings and head over to the new frontier to start anew. I'm increasingly getting the feeling that the same thing that is happening in the Vulcan Empire is happening in the Hexadric Hegemony as well."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "You mean the poor soldiers and commoners are fighting and dying on the frontlines just so that the wealthy elites at the rear can run away with as much wealth, starships, mechs and manpower that they can carry along, right?"

"Yes..."

Gloriana obviously felt conflicted about this. On the one hand, she grew up as a loyal Hexer and always believed in the strength and righteousness of the Hegemony. On the other hand, her family was part of the ruling class that possessed wealth and connections to make it out and start anew in another corner of space.

Ordinarily, this would have been a difficult choice as most regions of human space were already occupied. Yet the recent opening of the Red ocean gave all of the exiles a much more attractive option.

If the Hexers weren't welcome in the Komodo Star Sector anymore, then they might as well leave while they possessed enough means and see if they could reconstruct their state in a less structured and crowded galaxy!

In this circumstance, the only people who lost out were the trillions of average Hexer citizens who couldn't obtain any passage on the ships that were leaving. They had no choice but to suffer under the occupation of the Fridaymen, who would certainly force original inhabitants to put aside their female supremacist tendencies and start treating men as equals! How cruel!

"You don't need to feel guilty about this." Ves patted his wife's arm. "Family matters more than a mob of random strangers. So what if your fellow Wodins are leaving a lot of ordinary Hexers behind to the tender mercies of the Fridaymen? You can't save them from their lot. Only winners have the luxury to care about ideals."

"I know, Ves. It's just... frustrating. I think one of the reasons why the Hexers haven't requested us to design the final three Hexer mechs is because they want to use our obligation for a better purpose."

"Like what?"

"Like designing mechs for their future frontier army in the Red Ocean..." Gloriana guessed.

Chapter 3404: Dangerous Contraband

Part of the steps that the expeditionary fleet needed to take before entering the Red Ocean was to clean up all of the skeletons in its closet.

The Larkinsons weren't too worried. They belonged to an honorable clan and always acted in good conscience. They hadn't engaged in piracy or launched any unprovoked attacks.

There was one exception, though.

Although no one pinned any solid crimes onto their patriarch's feet, Ves was definitely feeling the heat as his fleet got closer to the sector headquarters of the MTA.

Unlike the rest of his clan, he was anything but clean! Although he usually put in a lot of effort to hide his misdeeds or exploit the rules to excuse his reprehensible acts, who knew what the MTA might dig up once his fleet entered the Opalis System.

Ves had already read up on the procedures that his fleet needed to go through in order to pass through the beyonder gate.

Due to the threat of the Crown Uprising as well as the well-founded concerns about smuggling dangerous contraband into the Red Ocean, the MTA imposed a huge amount of restrictions.

Alongside locking down every mech and many different starship systems, the MTA also conducted deep inspections in order to sniff out any potential risk factor.

Ves had already heard stories about how aspiring pioneers suddenly had to abort their dreams because the MTA discovered incriminating evidence that seriously offended the Association's sensibilities!

Of course, regular crimes such as stealing candy from a shop or neglecting to pay the bill after filling up the fuel tank of a starship did not warrant the Big Two's attention.

What did set off alarms at the highest authorities were major violations such as owning slaves, cultivating lethal viruses and weaponizing starships.

Although most pioneers were smart enough to leave all of their dirty laundry at home, the sheer amount of people looking to colonize the new dwarf galaxy inevitably meant that at least a fraction of them would drop the ball!

Hence the extremely strict security procedures that started even before incoming fleets reached the crucial Opalis System.

As every other Larkinson in the fleet spent their time on other preparations, Ves took Lucky along an extensive tour through several starships in order to clean up even the tiniest amount of trace evidence of his more ignoble deeds.

For example, he spent a few days aboard the Blinding Banshee to check how well Calabast had been able to sanitize any evidence about performing fatal experiments on dwarven captives.

The spymaster looked disgruntled as Ves checked the internal ship network. "Do I look like an amateur to you? I've already removed all of the data storage units and made sure to physically melt them all down to slag. Our budget has taken a significant hit with all of the money I had to spend on replacing potentially incriminating evidence. My crew and I have completely renewed the holding cells and many other compartments down to the decks, the bulkheads and the electronics."

Her confidence was not misplaced. Ves hadn't been able to find anything that looked wrong to him. Though he should have taken Calabast at his word, he still thought that it was best to be thorough.

"Thank you for your efforts. You indeed do a thorough job." He eventually said after a long day of monotonous searching.

"No, you're right to feel concerned. You're not exactly the most subtle mech designer and patriarch in human space. Anyone who takes a single look at your record will immediately find out that you're a trouble magnet. The MTA will definitely perform a more thorough search on our fleet. Fortunately for you, I've already anticipated that and made preparations in advance. We've not only cleaned up the Blinding Banshee, but also our other starships such as the Spirit of the Bentheim and the Dragon's Den."

The two continued to talk about security issues. Though Calabast had thought of almost every possible scenario, Ves did not feel completely relieved. There were also sensitive matters that she probably didn't know about such as his vials of high-grade life-prolonging serum.

Getting that past the MTA inspections would be a serious challenge. Perhaps a part of the MTA already knew he left the Life Research Association with a mountain of controversial research data as well as the aforementioned vials, but it would be incredibly inconvenient to be caught with them while he was undergoing some of the strictest inspections in his life.

All of this needed to be handled carefully. Though Calabast had numerous ways to hide sensitive information and data from the MTA, she couldn't solve his contraband problem.

"Don't underestimate the MTA's deep scanning methods." She told him. "No matter what corner you hide your secret stash, the inspectors will sniff it out sooner or later. Even if you make use of a way to block their scans, their advanced systems will immediately register an anomaly, which will prompt the mechers to take a look in person."

The MTA rarely brought its full resources to bear to perform a given task, but inspecting the pioneering fleets that were about to enter the Red Ocean was one of the few occasions where the organization pulled out all of the stops!

Ves felt rather frustrated after learning about this. He had witnessed many instances where the MTA only did the bare minimum or didn't even live up to its promises at all. He had become so accustomed to dealing with an inattentive Association that he had been slacking in his own precautions.

This was different.

The mechers assigned to guard the Opalis System were incredibly attentive and did not accept any excuses. Ves could forget about smuggling his shady possessions past their sights!

Although Ves was willing to offload a lot of problematic goods, he could not accept giving up his remaining vials of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum.

Whether they were made from ingredients extracted from the brains of expert pilots or not, their worth and value to Ves was inestimable! He did not want to lose his remaining serum when he still had so much use for all of that universal life energy.

When Ves obliquely mentioned this problem to Calabast, she couldn't give him a good answer.

"I'm sorry, Ves, but I can't help you there. The only way you can solve this issue is if you make a deal with the mechers. They hold all of the power, so you can only choose to compromise with them. Aren't you friendly with Master Willix? Perhaps you should call her and request a favor."

Ves did not look happy. Although this was a workable solution, it entailed entangling himself even further with the organization that he had been trying to maintain his distance.

Yet... how the hell was he supposed to smuggle his bounty from the Life Research Association, his gem cat, his P-stones, his Xona Communication Crystal and his Four Aspects of Lufa past the inspections?

Not only did he have to bring those suspicious and problematic items through the beyonder gate, he also had to do something about the source of all of the Breyer alloy in the fleet.

"Oh, damn."

"What is it, Ves?"

"I almost forgot about one of the old skeletons in my closet. I would have been in deep trouble if I brought that particular skeleton into the Opalis System!"

Ves was no longer in the mood to talk with Calabast. He quickly ended his conversation with her and immediately returned to his armored shuttle.

"Head over to the Scarlet Rose!" He instructed.

Only Lucky and his loyal bodyguard Nitaa had an idea of the issue he wanted to address.

They spent a quiet trip to the vessel that used to serve as his flagship. Ves never really paid attention to her anymore ever since he got his hands on the Spirit of Bentheim, but that did not mean he discarded the ship at will.

The mobile supply frigate that Ves had managed to hijack from Lady Aisling Curver several years ago managed to remain relevant for mostly one reason.

She was the home to a certain woman that Ves had taken to calling Casssandra Breyer.

This was most definitely not her real name. Yet that did not change the fact that she was arguably one of the top contributors to the Larkinson Clan. Her endless generosity allowed the Larkinson Clan to obtain a continuous supply of Breyer alloy.

The material that was responsible for helping the clan accelerate its transition from a third-class organization to a second-class organization. The Larkinson Clan would have lost a lot more clansmen if not for its relatively abundant supply.

"I should take to calling her Cassandra Breyer-Larkinson for everything she has done so far." Ves muttered as he entered compartment G-13 inside the Scarlet Rose.

He rarely visited this secret compartment after moving to the Spirit of Bentheim. He only went back a few times a year to see whether Cassandra Breyer hadn't gone out of control. It would be extremely bad if the ever-regenerating body and escape pod reappeared in a more public space.

Ves didn't know why Cassandra Breyer initially sought him out and why it stuck to him, but ever since he put her in this endless production loop where her escape pod was being melted down into molten metal, she never reappeared anywhere else.

This was quite fortunate as Ves didn't want to get jumped by a creepy escape pod while he was in the middle of a conversation with Master Willix!

"This can't go on, though."

Ves didn't want to answer any uncomfortable questions if the MTA's inspectors happen to stumble on this obvious red flag. There was no way that Ves could provide a reasonable excuse why he was not only haunted by a constantly rematerializing corpse and escape pod, but saw fit to exploit this condition in order to produce a lot of Breyer alloy!

"Back when I first got you, I had no idea what I was dealing with." He said to the escape pod that had just reappeared once again and was being automatically moved to the red-hot forging machine. "I tried several ways to break or decipher your strong spiritual defenses, but never managed to make any progress."

He had a feeling it was different this time. Though much of Cassandra's mysterious spiritual barrier was out of his league, all of the progress he had made in spiritual engineering had made a huge difference.

When he extended his senses towards her, he perceived a few elements that looked familiar to him. He obtained even more results when he let Blinky loose.

Mrow.

For example, he had a potential explanation of where Cassandra kept drawing all of the energy needed to replenish her material form over and over again.

"What a wondrous display of spiritual engineering, or should I say spiritual sorcery?"

While Ves wasn't able to sense it, Blinky's incredible sensitivity towards energy allowed the companion spirit to catch the hidden flows that constantly poured into Cassandra Breyer.

Even when her material form was being burnt into ash, her spiritual existence remained strong. With the energy she drew with her own ability or with the help of a mechanism similar to the Grand Dynamo, she was able to reestablish her physical presence in the material realm on a continuous basis.

This crucial interaction caused Ves to come up with a possible solution that could permanently free him from this ghost.

"I just need to block the influx of energy."

It would be trivially easy for him to do so. He just had to put Blinky to intercept all of the energy flow. As long as Cassandra Breyer kept burning over and over again, her total energy reserves would slowly dwindle as she could no longer compensate for the losses she suffered.

Once her energy reserves nearly dried up, she would no longer be able to materialize her physical anchor anymore. She would be dead and gone for good.

The only question was whether he should even kill her at all. He felt rather bad about ending her existence when he didn't even know her true identity.

What if she was more important to his life than he realized?

What if there was a greater purpose to her appearance in his life?

If he starved to death right away, then he would never be able to answer these questions.

"What should I do...?"

Chapter 3405: Death By Starvation

Though Ves felt incredibly conflicted about how he should resolve the Cassandra Breyer situation, there was no way he could maintain the status quo.

If he had a choice, he would have chosen to retain the current arrangement. Although Breyer alloy had largely become dispensable to the current Larkinson Clan, no one said no to a free and convenient source of second-class materials.

By choosing to change nothing, Ves would not have to bear any risks either. He did not have to resolve a difficult dilemma where he could either learn the truth about Cassandra Breyer or kill her without ever discovering her true identity and motives.

Over the years, Ves had come up with a lot of possible theories about who she was and how she was connected to him. Some of them were more favorable than others.

For example, Cassandra could have been his aunt on his mother's side. Perhaps she sought Ves out in order to save her from her current state of half-death or get in touch with Cynthia again.

Cassandra could also be a former Holy Daughter of the Five Scrolls Compact. Perhaps she might have been the previous controller of the System before she lost it. The reason why she came back from the dead was because she wanted to take back her former possession!

Perhaps Cassandra belonged to an ancient witch coven that had developed spiritual powers since before humanity ascended to the stars. These powerful ancient witches had spent millenia developing and refining their spiritual applications, but possessed harsh requirements for spiritual perception and talent.

For this reason, the ancient witch sought out a successor that could help her come back to life and the only one in this corner of space who was suitable happened to be Ves. This was why she stuck to him like a barnacle on a sea-faring hull.

Cassandra Breyer could also be an illegitimate Rubarthan princess who fled from the galactic rim because she developed powers that were traditionally associated with the New Rubarth Empire's enemies. She spent decades if not centuries to flee all the way to the galactic rim in order to escape the overbearing reach of her father and emperor and start a peaceful new life alongside someone who could understand her powers but had no relations with the Five Scrolls Compact.

"Maybe I'm just letting my fantasies go wild and none of this reflects the truth."

The fact of the matter was that Ves never figured out anything that was important about Cassandra Breyer. He could speculate on her identity based on her spiritual powers, the design and providence of her Breyer alloy escape pod and her insistence on sticking to him.

Properly speaking, he should have put more effort into obtaining actual answers instead of letting Cassandra remain stuck in this endless cyclical purgatory.

By letting this situation linger on like this for several years, Ves believed he had exhausted all of the goodwill that Cassandra held towards him, assuming that her disposition towards him was initially benign.

"If she's a friend or a relative of mine, then she certainly hates my guts after treating her like this for so many cycles." Ves muttered.

"Meow." Lucky nodded his head in agreement.

He realized that he was stalling for time. He had already made a decision on how to handle Cassandra Breyer a long time ago. It was why he never thought to get any answers from her even if he possessed the means to do so. He was afraid of opening this dangerous box.

"Whether she is family or not, friendly or hostile, helpful or harmful, I can't take any risks. It would be nice if she's my long-lost grandmother or something, but if she's an enemy... I don't know if I can handle her once she is able to unleash her full might."

Cassandra Breyer was definitely a formidable spiritual sorcerer. Though it was difficult to estimate her strength, her methods and sophisticated application of spiritual energy left him with little doubt that she was a true master in the mysterious arts!

Compared to his primitive development in spiritual engineering, Cassandra's spiritual sorcery was at least a hundred times more advanced!

Although Ves temporarily held the upper hand due to Cassandra's current troubled state, that could easily change once he freed her or allowed her to restore her strength.

Could she beat him in a straight fight? Ves wasn't sure. In the past, he had no confidence in his chances. These days, he has grown a lot stronger. Not only did he gain Blinky, he could also call upon a host of powerful design spirits.

That said, did Ves even want to take the chance of confronting a potentially-hostile spiritual sorceress?

"Nope."

Ves had tempered his curiosity as of late. After dealing with several life-threatening disasters including surviving an encounter with a dwarf that he should have killed more thoroughly, he became a lot more sensitive towards the potential consequences of his actions.

Cassandra Breyer could easily become his next Sigrund or Rion if he decided to play with fire and gave in to his curiosity.

"I can't afford to make another enemy and start another incident when I'm this close to the beyonder gate!" He was determined.

His appetite for risk was usually generous, but just thinking about waking up this witch sent shivers through his spine. He could intuitively feel how strong she could be and how little it would take to allow her to become free again.

Ves couldn't control the situation at all if that happened, and that was why he resolved to never let this scenario come true.

Instead of playing russian roulette by putting a revolver on his head, he would rather point the gun at Cassandra Breyer and pull the trigger enough times to remove a permanent threat!

His urge for safety successfully overcame his guilty conscience.

Even if he ended up killing a potential friend or relative by mistake, he would not feel any regret about his choice.

"I'm working on a limited amount of information here." He said, as if justifying his decision to the woman that had been burned so many times that she must hate fire with a vengeance. "It doesn't really help that you initially intruded on my life by pretending to be a scary ghost. If you truly wanted help, then you should have approached nicely."

Ves grasped at any chance to shift the blame away from him. He did not want to feel as if he made the wrong choice. He had made up his mind, so any further procrastination and excuses only hindered him from what he must do to remove a risk factor from his life.

In his perspective, Cassandra Breyer was as malevolent as Nyxie to him. If Ves hadn't gotten rid of this ancient alien tyrant, the former source of spiritual fragments would have gotten free before lashing out against the mech designers who exploited his strength!

He lowered his head for a moment before he gathered his courage. "Blinky?"

Mrow?

"Do it. When she and her escape pod reappears again, do your best to intercept all of the energy that she is drawing from an unknown source. It doesn't matter whether you digest it or not, but don't give this woman any sustenance!"

Mrow mrow!

Ves settled in for a brief wait as he waited for the escape pod and its undying occupant to reappear again.

He only told Lucky and Nitaa to be ready for anything, but they would most likely be unable to play a role in any hostilities that might ensue.

This was a battle that only certain entities could take part in. If Blinky wasn't enough to resolve this potential threat, then Ves would immediately call on his design spirits starting with the Superior Mother to bail him out!

For safety's sake, he preemptively donned his Unending Regalia. Its thin layer of B-stone provided him with a limited amount of protection against spiritual attacks, which might be useful if Cassandra managed to launch an attack.

He did not have to wait long for Blinky to perform his role. When the escape pod finally reappeared again, it was easy enough for the cat to find the flow of energy and take it all for himself.

As a result of all of this absorption, Blinky began to generate a lot of converted spiritual energy!

Although this energy was all compatible with Ves, there was currently no way he could hold or make use of so much excess spiritual energy.

Blinky had no choice but to dump out all of the excess spiritual energy he produced and let it go to waste.

Ves kept a careful eye on what was taking place as the automated systems began to recycle the escape pod once again.

"Will this be enough or will she reappear again?"

It turned out that the latter was the case. Despite destroying the Breyer alloy escape pod, a new one reappeared once again.

However, Ves noticed a difference this time! He carefully sensed the amount of energy that Cassandra Breyer contained and noticed that it had dropped to an extent!

"Yes! It's working!"

He estimated that her energy levels dropped by around 5 to 8 percent, which meant that Cassandra could only restore her condition for a maximum of 20 times before she completely ran out of juice.

"I guess I'm in for a long wait."

He had plenty of time. Ves merely settled down and distracted himself by thinking about his upcoming mech designs or performing routine paperwork.

All the while, Blinky attentively performed his job and made sure that no matter where Cassandra Breyer drew her energy from, the cat would always be there to steal her food!

This cycle repeated over and over again. Each time the corpse and the escape pod reappeared again, the total energy that Cassandra possessed dropped a bit more.

Although Ves acted casually at this time, he was actually tightly wound. If the woman attempted a violent breakout attempt, he would be ready to step in right away.

Yet... she never moved. Ves already theorized that she lacked the energy to do so. If she could have extricated herself from this cycle, she should have done it a long time ago. There was no logical reason to believe she possessed an even greater chance of freeing herself when she had less spiritual energy at her disposal!

He smirked. "I don't know whether you call yourself a priestess, a sorceress or a goddess, but the almighty law of conservation of energy is inescapable. I won't fall for your superstitious act. Without energy, you can't do anything."

Her energy levels steadily dropped to around 20 percent before Ves sensed a change.

Cassandra Breyer's spiritual barrier had grown a lot feebler and less stable. This caused him to stand on his feet and ready himself for any unanticipated changes.

Yet despite her increasingly more wobbly state, Cassandra's barrier never broke. It simply grew weaker alongside the rest of her. Perhaps it functioned as a prison rather than a protection mechanism. Ves didn't know and he wasn't interested in finding out the answer.

Slowly but surely, Cassandra's total energy weakened until it had reached around 5 percent or less. When her escape pod burned for a final time, Ves could already sense that her Breyer alloy escape pod would never reappear again.

"A pity."

It was also a relief. An invisible weight was lifted off his shoulder. The worst-case scenario had not occurred. Cassandra Breyer died with a whimper rather than with a bang. The epic spiritual duel that he feared so much had not materialized.

Ves let out a deep and relieved breath. "Goodbye and good riddance."

That was all the thought he was willing to spare for Cassandra Breyer's passing.

He turned around and began to think about what he needed to do to clean up the remaining incriminating evidence. He needed to get rid of the Scarlet Rose. The entire ship was tainted and should never fall into the hands of others.

"Meow!"

"What?!"

When Ves turned around, he realized to his horror that the same escape pod that he thought was gone forever had actually materialized once again!

There was a difference, though.

The escape pod cover had slid open and a single mummified hand poked out! More spiritual energy than Ves had ever sensed from Cassandra Breyer accumulated from this limb!

"What the hell is going on?!" Ves screamed in panic!

Chapter 3406: Frightening Identity

A disaster occurred!

Ves just wanted to clean up one of the old skeletons in his closet. Who knew that his method of starving this ghost of all of her spiritual sustenance would result in such an illogical outcome?

When a mech no longer received energy from its power reactor, the machine demanding systems inevitably shut down. It didn't matter whether it was a bottom-tier third-class mech or a cutting-edge first-class multipurpose mech. Every single war weapon could only unleash its destructive potential when it was sustained with a sufficient amount of juice.

The same went for starships. It took an incredible amount of energy to propel millions if not billions of tons of metal and composites from one location to another. It also took even more energy to power their artificial gravity, life support systems, energy shielding and potentially warship-grade weapon systems.

Even organic beings sustained their lives by taking in energy from the environment. Whether they derived energy from solar radiation or digesting food, without any input they would assuredly shut down like any exhausted device!

Ves treated Cassandra Breyer the same way. There was no way that reconstructing an entire material form from energy was cheap!

The mass-energy equivalence should apply to any form of energy, including spiritual energy.

Einstein's famous formula, $E = mc^2$, simply described that it took a huge amount of energy just to convert it into solid matter.

The letter 'c' in the formula stood for the speed of light, which was a huge number. When this figure was multiplied with itself, that number grew stupendously greater!

As such, many laymen who learned that energy and mass could be exchanged with each other didn't always realize how disproportionate this relationship became due to the effect of multiplying mass with the square of the speed of light.

The entire reason why relatively small nuclear bombs and anti-matter bombs could easily possess the power to destroy entire cities, continents and even planets!

By converting a part or even all of their mass into energy in a small interval of time, a huge amount of energy in the form of heat and radiation blasted out all at once!

Of course, the transformation of mass to energy didn't have to be so violent. A lot of large power reactors relied on a much more gradual process to output a steady and more controllable amount of energy that could be used to power a lot of useful objects such as mechs and starships.

Naturally, if mass could be transformed into energy, the same could be done in reverse.

It was a lot more difficult to pull off in a controlled and deliberate manner. Materialization technology was partially or entirely capable of creating entire objects from nothing.

However, it wasn't always worth it. The cost to materialize a simple coffee cup was probably at least a million times more expensive than just producing it out of basic materials in a simple factory!

A mech was much more massive than a coffee cup, and the cost to materialize an entire war machine could bankrupt entire companies!

Forget about materializing a single mech, but materializing enough of them to equip an entire mech regiment was already insanely expensive!

This was why most materialization applications did not conjure up matter from thin air but instead derived them from existing stockpiles. It was a lot cheaper and more efficient to draw out individual atoms and molecules from a reservoir and individually arrange them together in order to produce a complete mech.

This was why Ves always harbored an incredible vigilance towards Cassandra Breyer.

The fact that she was able to rely on her own sophisticated spiritual techniques to materialize not just her body but also her hefty escape pod out of pure energy was incredibly scary!

Nothing had ever gone missing around Cassandra Breyer. The Breyer alloy that he obtained from melting down the escape pod didn't disappear to recreate the escape pod. Instead, the produced materials permanently remained in existence, which meant that Cassandra materialized her mummified body and escape pod through the most energy-intensive method possible!

Just thinking about the amount of energy it took to pull off this trick once was enough to make Ves sweat. If all of this energy wasn't used to materialize physical matter but instead exploded outwards all at once, then the effect would be no different from detonating an anti-matter bomb!

In other words, each time she materialized her form, she expended enough energy to destroy the entire expeditionary fleet!

This happened not once, not twice, but tens of thousands of times!

If all of that energy was released in the form of explosions, then they would have been enough to wipe out every planet and population center of a powerful second-rate state!

Was it any surprise that Ves feared how much Cassandra Breyer could do if she was unleashed?

The only strange part about this was that Blinky didn't perceive that her intake of spiritual energy was that exaggerated. Either she relied on a much more impressive internal power source to make up for the shortfall, or spiritual energy was much more energetic than other forms of energy.

Ves was initially inclined to believe in the latter. He always felt that spiritual energy was impressive and much higher quality than heat, light and other more conventional forms of energy.

Yet that didn't change the fact that he was in big trouble at the moment!

Although Ves was still certain that Cassandra Breyer's energy reserves had depleted over the course of repeated instances of materializing another copy of her body and escape pod, what just happened completely defied his expectations!

"My assumptions were wrong!"

Cassandra Breyer's state was a lot different than before. Her spiritual barrier that prevented Ves from inspecting her true state was gone. What he sensed instead was an unstable outpouring of violent spiritual energy that possessed a strange mix of attributes!

The spiritual pressure the revived mummified corpse emanated ramped up so quickly that Ves had trouble maintaining his focus.

"Meow!"

"Sir!"

Before Lucky and Nitaa could attack the dangerous corpse, they both dropped onto the deck. They couldn't withstand the increasingly more magnified pressure that Cassandra Breyer unleashed!

"I should have outfitted Lucky with his Misfortune Harness!" Ves lamented as he tried to stay on his feet.

He was able to withstand the pressure with the help of his Unending Regalia. After his experiences with the dark gods, he realized that he needed more defenses against hostile spiritual entities. This was why he designed a new suit of combat armor that protected him against both material as well as spiritual enemies!

Now, this layer of protection was enough to partially shield Ves from the escalating spiritual pressure unleashed by this difficult-to-extinguish woman!

"My B-stone layer is too thin, though!"

A significant amount of unleashed spiritual energy still passed through his suit and impacted his mind. Ves came directly in touch with the spiritual energy of a human who was even more adept at wielding it than himself!

Even as he tried to ready a countermeasure, his exposure to Cassandra's spiritual energy caused him to perceive a lot of new sensations, much of which he didn't understand!

He was able to figure out a couple of points, though.

First, Cassandra Breyer didn't appear to be in control of her current state. A lot of spiritual energy from an unknown source was leaking out into the environment in a turbulent manner that did not look purposeful in the slightest!

Second, despite releasing a huge quantity of spiritual energy from her current form, it wasn't slowing down at all. Instead, it ramped up even further!

Third, the mummified hand that was poking out of the opened escape pod was gathering some of the energy unleashed by Cassandra's form. Ves sensed the hand was forming an increasingly more powerful ball that mixed numerous spiritual attributes together.

He had a really bad feeling about this energy ball. Whatever Cassandra was doing, there was a considerable chance that it was not to his benefit!

There was one more observation that absolutely made him even more afraid of this resurrected ghost.

When Ves parsed the different flavors of the powerful waves of spiritual energy she unleashed, he began to get a vague impression of how they 'tasted'.

One tasted like tree bark. Another tasted like coppery blood. The third tasted like a mouthful of dirt. The fourth burned his spiritual senses, which was one of the reasons why he had difficulty perceiving what was taking place.

The fifth flavor tasted disturbingly familiar to him. The spiritual attribute it was associated with was highly similar to one of his own spiritual attributes!

"Is she a mech designer?!"

How else could Cassandra Breyer possess a spiritual attribute that was a close match to his own spiritual attribute of mechs?

Only high-ranking mech designers developed domains that were partially related to mechs. For a moment, Ves paled at the thought he had been imprisoning and exploiting an extremely powerful mech designer for several years!

Although Ves didn't know how powerful a Master Mech Designer could be, the power displayed by Cassandra Breyer definitely surpassed that of Master Willix and other comparable figures.

"Is Cassandra... a Star Designer?!"

His mind was completely blanked out at the moment!

The MTA would definitely crucify him if they discovered what he had been doing to one of their most honored and august figures!

If he ignorantly tried to smuggle Cassandra Breyer in her old state through the beyonder gate, then that would have been no different from throwing his body into the local star!

"Wait, my judgment is wrong! The flavor is similar, but the tones are different!"

As a passionate and dedicated mech designer, Ves was most sensitive towards mechs and anything related to them. This was especially the case when his affinity for mechs increased multiple times with each masterwork mech he brought into existence.

One of Cassandra's five powerful spiritual attributes was similar but different from his mech-oriented spiritual attribute. It did not convey an impression of modern engineering, but instead conveyed something more primitive but powerful in a different manner.

"It's... metal!"

Everything about Cassandra's spiritual energy signature fell into place. The woman's background was terrifying and already leaned towards the worst-case scenario!

Ves not only suspected that Cassandra Breyer's existence or heritage preceded the Age of Mechs, but also possessed an extremely close connection to the Five Scrolls Compact!

How else could one woman develop five spiritual attributes corresponding to wood, water, earth, fire and metal at the same time!?

What was even more impressive to Ves was that she managed to contain all of these powerful and disparate elements together without getting troubled by incompatibility!

Her spiritual attribute mixture, her insane power level and her extremely sophisticated techniques caused Ves to conclude that Cassandra Breyer must definitely have been a top figure in the past!

Whether she was one of the leaders of the Five Scrolls Compact or one of its main dissidents, Ves didn't know. He was in no mood to wait until Cassandra woke up so that she could explain her origin.

"Besides, with everything she has gone through, I doubt she is willing to sit down and talk to her tormentor!"

Although Ves wasn't able to sense any emotions such as rage, elation, humiliation or relief from her powerful spirituality, he would be a fool to assume that she would be glad that he unlocked her from her previous state!

"Blinky! Attack!"

Mrow?!

"Just gobble up that energy ball or something! Don't let her work her magic!"

Mrow!

Though Blinky looked reluctant, he moved into action. As a spiritual entity that was highly adept at manipulating spiritual energy, the pressure exerted by Cassandra Breyer did not pose much of a hindrance.

The cat quickly appeared above the open escape pod and tried not to look in the direction of the mummified female corpse. Instead, Blinky nibbled at the accumulating spiritual energy, causing it to weaken and destabilize!

MROOOOWW!

As Blinky absorbed a portion of Cassandra's powerful spiritual energy, his digestion system experienced a lot of difficulties in trying to digest the five elements.

Mrow mrow mrow!

Blinky had no choice but to separate them. The wood energy, water energy, earth energy and fire energy exploded out of his form in four different directions, causing the cat to look as if he had become an elemental god!

However, the metal energy was different. Blinky was able to digest it with ease, allowing him to raise his own energy levels and sustain his increasingly more laborious digestion processes!

Ves had no idea what was going on at this point. Whether Blinky's current action was helpful or harmful remained to be seen. All he knew was that he better put an end to this outburst!

"Keep siphoning away all of that energy! Don't let her wield her massive power!"

MROW!

He could see that the different energies that Blinky deconstructed from Cassandra Breyer did not feed back into the woman anymore. Whether it was because she couldn't recycle her own output or because the lack of metal energy left her unable to balance the remaining four elements, Ves didn't care as long as she grew weaker!

"It's working!"

Chapter 3407: High-End Energies

MROWWW!

Blinky's efforts were bearing fruit, though he had to endure far more strain than he had ever experienced up until this point. The digestion system he inherited from the Unending One not only had to process a huge quantity of spiritual energy, but also had to cope with five powerful elements!

The companion spirit's inability to quickly and efficiently digest four out of the five spiritual attributes of Cassandra Breyer left Blinky with little choice but to discharge much of what he absorbed.

This was why his body was surrounded by a growing windmill of four different energies. Though Ves was grateful that the separate spiritual energy outflows didn't interact with the material realm and destroy the Scarlet Rose, they increased the spiritual pressure in Compartment G-13 and made it a lot harder for everyone to remain cognizant!

"Meow..."

While Lucky was barely able to remain conscious, Nitaa had already been knocked out. Ves clenched his teeth and stretched out his hand.

The Larkinson Mandate that was attached to Nitaa's heavy combat armor flew out and fell into his grasp.

Fortunately, the antigrav mechanism built into the brace that protected the precious heirloom was unaffected by all of the spiritual pressure.

"Goldie! Lend me your strength!"

Nyaaaaa!

There was no way that the Golden Cat was oblivious to what was going on. While she was too weak to resist Cassandra Breyer directly, she could still channel a portion of her strength into Ves, allowing him to better resist the pressure.

His entire form glowed in gold, which caused him to form a powerful contrast with Blinky, who was surrounded with a shifting corona of green, blue, brown and red.

"Not enough! The pressure is still too strong!"

Ves needed to borrow more strength, and he knew just where he could obtain an extra boost.

"Vulcan, help me out!" He called as he used his other armored hand to grasp the handle of the Hammer of Brilliance.

His glowing form gained a more bronze tint as Vulcan readily mobilized his own power.

The total protection that Ves gained was just enough for him to move closer to the rampant spiritual sorceress. He cautiously stepped forward, his pace slowing as the pressure continued to increase as he approached the source of the current outbreak.

His spiritual senses became overloaded with different stimuli as different forms of spiritual energy assaulted him despite his borrowed protection.

Cassandra's spiritual energy was more potent and powerful than anything else that Ves had encountered!

Not even his mother or the dark gods could match the power released by this presumed spiritual sorceress!

The more Ves became exposed to the qualities of Cassandra's might, the more he discovered her depth.

Different from other spiritual entities, Cassandra not only maintained numerous powerful elements without any of them conflicting with each other, but also combined them in a way that resulted in incredible synergies!

Ves knew a thing or two about synergies, so he quickly managed to ascertain that Cassandra's power output was disproportionate to the amount of energy she contained.

In other words, she was able to exert far more power than she should! Ves estimated that her power output was at least a hundred times greater!

The reason for this was because of how she combined the five elements in a way that caused them to reinforce each other in an extremely complicated fashion that Ves couldn't even begin to explain, let alone observe in its entirety.

It was all a spinning mess to him, and the current circumstances didn't afford him the time to observe all of the new phenomena.

What he was able to figure out was that Blinky was somehow able to deconstruct Cassandra's amalgamated energies. This made her chaotic energy release a lot less dangerous and a lot more manageable.

The segregated elemental energies released by Blinky were far weaker and much more tame than if they were combined together. They posed much less harm to Ves or the surrounding environment so Ves didn't consider them a threat.

What was also important was that Cassandra somehow lost control of the energy passing through Blinky. The cat was apparently capable of wiping out her spiritual imprint, thereby preventing her from misusing the processed spiritual energy.

Mrow!

Ves initially thought that Blinky wouldn't be able to hang on for long, yet his companion spirit was actually growing a little stronger over time!

Since Blinky was based around Ves' spiritual attributes, the cat was incredibly proficient at handling metal-attributed spiritual energy. It was similar enough to mech-attributed spiritual energy that the cat only needed a small amount of adjustment to get used to the raw energy.

In fact, from his connection to his companion spirit, Ves was even able to learn more about this new and interesting flavor.

"It's... a higher-level spiritual attribute!"

Ves had the feeling that he had always been eating the same monotonous dish like rice for most of his life. This normally didn't bother him as long as he loved to eat rice. He even became more proficient in preparing it in different ways so that he could maximize the variety of his meals.

Yet no matter how much he was able to improve his preparation of rice, it was only a single food!

The metal-attributed spiritual energy from Cassandra Breyer was much more comprehensive in comparison. It encompassed more aspects and possessed a greater breath. It was as if it encompassed an entire food warehouse worth of ingredients!

His exposure to it made Ves realize that his own specialty was actually painfully narrow. Though he improved his ability to design mechs to an extreme, he gained no special improvement in terms of developing starships, infantry gear and other objects.

Normally, this didn't bother him that much. He dedicated his life towards designing mechs, so why should he distract himself by branching out into other fields? Though he dabbled a bit by creating personal gear such as his Unending Regalia, he had no illusions that he could compete against true armorers.

Yet now, Ves had a feeling that if he upgraded his mech domain into a metal domain, he would be able to excel in any productive field!

"Wait a minute, is this what is needed to become a Star Designer?!"

Everyone knew that Star Designers were good at designing everything. They no longer focused solely on designing mechs but put their amazing expertise to use in many other fields for the benefit of humanity.

Ves never really thought how Star Designers were able to do that, but now he suspected that he had inadvertently stumbled upon a possible answer.

His contact with different Master Mech Designers let him know that these powerful figures possessed the strongest and most exuberant mech domains that he knew of. It was hard to imagine that it could become any stronger once they advanced to Star Designer.

"Perhaps... the true answer isn't that their domains became stronger, but that their affinity for mechs transformed into affinity for all metallic creations!"

Ves couldn't even begin to understand how that was possible. It was no wonder that there were so few Star Designers in human civilization! Such a radical transformation was virtually impossible to accomplish!

Yet as long as any Master was able to make the jump, the strength and benefits they gained from such a miraculous change was absolutely amazing!

"What if..."

For a moment, a huge wave of greed overcame Ves. If he was able to absorb and integrate Cassandra's metal-attributed spiritual energy, he could comprehensively upgrade his mech domain and get a headstart on becoming a Star Designer!

His outlook towards Cassandra Breyer changed. His eyes grew hotter as he gazed at the mummified, blackened corpse garbed in an advanced vacsuit.

Before, he was scared out of his wits at confronting such an insanely powerful and most definitely a hostile ghost.

Now, he had the illusion that he was looking at the biggest vault in the galaxy!

"You're a treasure!"

As far as he was concerned, Cassandra Breyer was more valuable than an entire swimming pool filled with high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum! Despite possessing not one, but five powerful spiritual attributes, each of which was equivalent to the energy of a Star Designer!

Certainly, this realization underscored Cassandra Breyer's exceptional identity and threat level even more, but what of it? Greed could make anyone fearless, and Ves felt as if he had become a fearless god pilot at the moment!

"For all of your power, you're still a disabled zombie." He smirked even as the spiritual pressure released by the woman still strained his defenses.

Goldie and Vulcan were constantly expending their own energies in order to protect him, but that was okay. Ves could still call upon more design spirits such as Qilanxo to take over their jobs.

What was important right now was that Ves needed to figure out a way to take advantage of this unique situation while it still lasted!

"Of course, I also need to ensure my own safety." He muttered.

He closely inspected Cassandra Breyer's state in order to make sure that the woman didn't pull off any other tricks as she was trying to accumulate a lot of energy with her mummified hand.

He confirmed that her state was not that good and that she was continuing to leak a lot of spiritual energy as if she was a bursting dam. The uncontrolled nature of this turbulent outpouring reassured Ves that this was not an intentional process.

The lack of change was highly encouraging. Even though Blinky was obviously sabotaging Cassandra's attempt to pull off a big move, she never thought to cut off her energy ball or switch to performing another spiritual technique.

Ves suspected that she wasn't even conscious in the conventional sense at all. It was as if she was acting on instinct or some kind of sub-intelligence was in control of her spiritual existence.

This was great news!

What Ves feared the most was a conscious, sentient and intelligent opponent. Since Cassandra Breyer's behavior did not conform to these traits, it was a lot easier for him to take advantage of her current state!

"Blinky!"

Mrow?

"Feed some of that delicious metal energy to me. Let me try and absorb this delicious flavor!"

Mrow mrow!

"Ahhhh!"

Ves felt as if Blinky had stabbed his Spirituality with thousands of swords! Though the cat was able to tame the foreign energy, its quality and energy level was still far too high!

Metal-attributed spiritual energy turned out to be too high-end for the likes of a mere Journeyman!

He intuitively determined that he needed to be a lot stronger and more developed in order to harness this metal energy properly. As it was, Ves quickly reached his limits after just a few seconds of painful contact!

"I can't integrate this energy at all! I'm not ready!"

While Blinky quickly cut off the poisonous energy transfer, Ves quickly tried to recover. He breathed deeply as he felt as if he had run a marathon. His body wasn't tired but his mind and Spirituality were already worn!

A growing sense of unwillingness surged from his heart. He could see that while Blinky was able to cope with the metal energy better, the spiritual cat couldn't really absorb it. He could only harness it to fuel his own ongoing digestion process.

Did Ves have no other choice but to let all of this delicious high-end energy go to waste?

He should have brought his P-stones!

"Wait a minute, Unending alloy can also hold spiritual energy!"

An interesting glint shone in his eyes as he looked down at his own combat armor. He sent a mental command to Blinky, who cautiously transferred some of the purified metal energy.

The Unending Regalia soon began to absorb a vast quantity of high-quality metal energy, so much so that it had quickly reached its maximum capacity!

"Damn, that fast? I should have brought my P-stones!"

Maybe he should call over his expert mechs. Their larger size meant that they possessed a much larger capacity.

However, Ves quickly rejected this risky notion. Metal energy at those quantities was way too dangerous and would certainly produce a negative influence on both the expert mechs and their expert pilots.

Already, Ves felt increasingly more uncomfortable and stuffy now that his Unending Regalia became charged with so much powerful metal energy.

"I still have one more object!"

Chapter 3408: Ves the Energy Thief

Ves stretched out his Hammer of Brilliance and commanded Blinky to charge it up as well.

Surprisingly enough, the Hammer shone a lot brighter and gained a more silvery corona after getting filled!

He discovered that Vulcan got along with metal-attributed spiritual energy a lot better than himself.

Vulcan was not a human, but a pure spiritual energy that started off at a much stronger footing. As an existence whose strength level was analogous to an ace pilot or a Master Mech Designer, his tolerance towards high-end spiritual energy was a lot higher!

In addition, as the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship, two of his domains were directly or indirectly related to metal. The design spirit was definitely compatible with the element of metal.

"Feed Vulcan with that metal energy!"

Mrow!

Through his direct connection, Ves could sense that Vulcan actually exhibited the same reaction as himself. It turned out that his expectations were too optimistic and that Vulcan was far from ready to absorb the powerful metal energy!

However, different from Ves, Vulcan did not completely reject Cassandra Breyer's energy. The design spirit's much higher tolerance allowed him to absorb a trace of metal energy even as he was forced to reject most of the input!

Although the efficiency of this dangerous process was abysmal, Ves was still glad that at least some of the energy didn't go to waste.

Vulcan was slowly changing as he absorbed a tiny bit more metal energy. Though it didn't appear that he was evolving towards a higher state or anything, the tiny proportion of high-end energy that he managed to absorb already strengthened him in an unknown way!

"There's a limit, though." Ves regretfully ascertained.

He could feel that even though Vulcan was able to gain a little benefit from the influx of metal energy, the strain he had to endure was rapidly becoming more unbearable to the design spirit!

Eventually, Vulcan would become so exhausted that he simply couldn't force himself to absorb Cassandra's purified metal energy any longer!

"Ah well, this is already an incredible harvest."

He thought about feeding his other design spirits with Cassandra's high-quality elemental energy. He successively called upon Goldie, Qilaxo, the Superior Mother, Trisk, Arnold and so on to see whether they could take advantage of this situation as well.

They didn't necessarily have to absorb the metal-attributed energy.

He figured that the Illustrious One might have a higher compatibility towards fire-attributed spiritual energy and that the Superior Mother was able to cope with wood or water-attributed spiritual energy.

None of them succeeded in replicating Vulcan's success. Each and every other design spirit failed to absorb even a trace of high-end elemental energy. Not even the Superior Mother, whom Ves thought had the greatest chance due to Cynthia's influence, was able to integrate any of the five elements!

"A pity."

Interestingly enough, the Superior Mother did not exhibit any odd reactions towards Cassandra Breyer. Ves was afraid that there were some relations between the two, but it turned out that he was thinking too much.

If the Superior Mother disapproved of what he was doing to Cassandra Breyer, his mother's avatar would have stepped in a long time ago.

Later on, Ves made a more unpleasant discovery. While his Unending Regalia was able to store a small quantity of metal energy, that didn't mean it remained stable.

He could sense that the stored energy was slowly decaying as if it was unable to maintain its existence in its current environment.

This behavior was a lot like how a hot cup of coffee released more heat into the air than a lukewarm cup of coffee. The greater difference in temperature resulted in a higher rate of heat dispersal.

Although Ves had never encountered this phenomenon with spiritual energy before, it was a pretty major setback now that he gained an endless greed towards this powerful energy type.

"It's use it or lose it, I guess."

The good news was that the rate of decay was not that fast. As Ves continued to observe the rate of energy decay, he estimated that it would take about sixteen to twenty hours before all of the stored metal energy disappeared.

That was enough time for Ves to perform a number of quick experiments with this ultra-precious ingredient!

"I need more!"

Unfortunately, Cassandra Breyer was not an endless faucet of elemental energies. Just as Ves was thinking about commanding Ketis to bring over his entire stockpile of P-stones and ordering all of his expert pilots to bring over their expert mechs, the pressure in the secret compartment gradually weakened.

After outputting a huge amount of spiritual energy, Cassandra Breyer was already starting to bottom out her reserves!

Ves breathed a little easier as the mummified corpse released less and less spiritual energy. Blinky had a much easier time with siphoning energy away from the energy ball that Cassandra attempted to strengthen.

"Don't suck up too much energy, Blinky. I'm not sure what Cassandra will do if you devour it whole. Control your absorption and make sure to keep it weak without collapsing it entirely."

Although the recent developments led to an unexpectedly huge bounty, Ves did not forget that the source of all of this power originally belonged to an extremely dangerous spiritual sorceress!

Ves wouldn't be able to derive any of his rich gains if Cassandra managed to liberate herself from her crippled state and took revenge on the little thief who attempted to suck her dry!

He did not want to take any more risks, and the best way to do that was to maintain the current status quo. With Blinky foiling her only effort at performing an unknown spiritual technique, Ves didn't have to do anything aside from staying out of the way.

As Cassandra's apparent threat level slowly dropped, Ves even had time to appreciate the impressive light show thrown up by the release of so many different energies.

His closed helmet filtered out a lot of the brightness, enabling him to observe the differently-colored glows released by Blinky and the more balanced coronas leaking out of Cassandra's form.

Minutes passed by as Cassandra's spiritual existence continued to deflate. Ves felt the urge to relax once she grew weaker than a typical design spirit, but he had learned his lesson from last time.

"I can't let down my guard. Spiritual sorceresses like my mother and this mysterious witch are much harder to get rid of than normal!"

He remained ready to whack his hammer against Cassandra's ancient corpse or call upon the help of his design spirits to fend off a surprise assault.

It felt rather strange that nothing drastic ended up happening. He expected Cassandra to exhibit more reactions, but she continued to lose energy even as she tried and failed to perform a single technique.

Once her corpse no longer contained any spiritual energy that Ves could perceive, the energy ball that she was trying to strengthen dissipated entirely.

Ves grew more nervous than ever as he gripped the handle of his hammer tighter. Would Cassandra magically burst out a huge amount of spiritual energy from yet another source, or was she really dead this time?

Several seconds passed as utter silence dominated the room. Everything seemed to have become still as Cassandra Breyer did not show the resilience and tenacity that he expected from a figure that should have been one of the top figures of human civilization at one time.

When an entire minute passed without any other changes, Ves slowly became more relieved. Blinky did not sense any other active energy sources inside Cassandra Breyer, so it became increasingly more likely that she was truly... gone.

Ves slowly stretched out his arm and tapped the sharp end of the hammer against Cassandra's dry, outstretched hand.

Woosh.

"What the?!"

It was as if a silent wind blew through the compartment. Ves watched on with astonishment as Cassandra's mummified corpse as well as her escape pod fractured from existence as if they were both made out of ash!

Strangely enough, the particles that made up the physical matter disappeared from the material realm as they sank into the imaginary realm.

Ves couldn't do anything to stop it, not that he wanted to. What happened was an incredibly encouraging sign. Seeing that Cassandra Breyer's physical form had broken

down on its own suggested that she was finally unable to maintain her existence and her anchor to reality!

"Are you... truly dead this time?"

Though Ves couldn't help but relax a bit, he still acted as if he was being stalked by a powerful predator.

Thirty minutes went by as Cassandra never made another appearance. Ves remained tense throughout this period, but when Nita, Lucky and the remaining crew of the Scarlet Rose regained their wits, he finally accepted the outcome of this event.

"She's dead. I'm finally rid of her presence."

He felt a lot more ambivalent towards her departure than he initially thought.

Who knew that this unassuming ghost was such a powerful font of high-end elemental energy? The value of all of that energy that spilled out and disappeared from the material realm was worth as much as several star clusters put together!

Just the thought that Ves had been unable to capture or absorb any more of it due to his lack of preparation and inadequate means gave him a lot of pain!

"Luckily, I still saved a bunch." He reluctantly smiled as he tapped the side of his hammer against his chest plate.

All of the metal energy that he managed to stuff inside his Unending Regalia and the Hammer of Brilliance increased his own spiritual pressure, making it hard for others to approach him. He didn't care about that, though. Even as he observed their states, he could clearly sense that the metal energy was gradually decaying over time.

"I can't waste any time!"

He could reflect on what happened later on. Right now, he needed to find a way to make the most out of his remaining booty!

After making a final, thorough sweep of Compartment G-13, Ves stepped out and began to issue numerous instructions to his personnel.

Although the Larkinson Clan detected the strong activity from the Scarlet Rose, it hadn't led to any negative outcomes other than knocking out the skeleton crew serving aboard the mobile supply frigate.

This was a relatively trivial event as far as the Larkinsons were concerned so Ves was easily able to suppress the incident.

Once he addressed this chore, he hopped onto his armored shuttle which hurried back to the Spirit of Bentheim.

Once Ves reached his personal workshop, he quickly removed his Unending Regalia and placed it on top of a work table.

During the journey back to his flagship, he already came up with numerous ideas on how to experiment on the metal energy.

He initially thought of a way to stop its decay by using it as an ingredient to create or upgrade a design spirit.

"As long as the energy is part of a living energy, it shouldn't decay any further."

However, Ves quickly had to drop this promising idea after he discovered that the potent metal energy simply didn't behave like any other spiritual ingredient.

He couldn't solidify it into a spiritual fragment.

His attempts to merge it with other forms of spiritual energy didn't yield any favorable results either. It was so powerful that it burned or destroyed anything weaker, which happened to be pretty much every type of spiritual energy that Ves was able to draw upon.

This was also the reason why his own mind and Spirituality was unable to cope with it at all. The difference in energy states was too big. It was like trying to store hot plasma in a paper cup. The flimsy container simply didn't stand any chance!

Vulcan was the exception to the rule due to his special circumstances, but even he was like a dwarf standing before a biojuggernaut. Just because they were both organic didn't mean that they were at the same level!

When Ves inspected his design spirit incarnation's ragged and injured condition, he noticed that only around 0.01 percent of Vulcan current spiritual composition consisted of recently-absorbed high-end metal-attributed spiritual energy.

Even so, this merger was only tentative. It was way too powerful and volatile for Vulcan to absorb completely. The design spirit needed a lot of time to slowly digest and integrate the bounty stolen from Cassandra Breyer.

That meant that Vulcan was unlikely to be able to absorb any further metal energy."

"Oh well." Ves shrugged.

He had to find another use for his decaying haul.

As Ves kept trying to rack his mind for new ideas, elsewhere on the Spirit of Bentheim Gloriana briefly frowned as she fed Aurelia with a custom nutrient solution.

She thought she felt a chill blowing against her back.

"Are the temperature regulators malfunctioning?"

"Miaow?"

Clixie twitched her tufted ears as she also sensed a cold sensation. She gazed around in order to find the source of this strange wind, only to discover nothing unusual.

"Miaow."

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat settled down again and relaxed... She was completely oblivious to the subtle five-colored light shining the gem socketed in the middle of her ornate necklace.

Chapter 3409: Unfriendly Energy

Ves looked exasperated at his gear. After performing dozens of hasty experiments, he failed to accomplish anything productive.

By now, the high-end elemental energy locked inside the Unending Regalia and the Hammer of Brilliance had dropped by more than 40 percent. The metal energy was as powerful if not more than universal life energy, but possessed much harsher properties.

Whereas universal life energy got along with anything and was extremely easy to merge with other forms of spiritual energy, metal energy was the opposite.

It was like a raging bull and could not be controlled at all. Whether it was because of Ves and Blinky's insufficient strength or lack of familiarity, the metal energy siphoned from Cassandra Breyer acted like a prisoner who would rather die than submit!

"How the hell can humans even harness this powerful and unruly energy?" Ves wondered.

He never took a good rest after confronting Cassandra Breyer, so his mental and spiritual condition had not yet restored to their peak. This limited his possible choices and forced him to perform rather tame experiments.

He first tried to prevent the metal energy from decaying. He put a portion of it into different containers such as P-stones, luminar crystals and even his own mind.

Nothing worked. The metal energy was so energetic that it required a powerful environment to support its existence. A highly evolved transcendent such as Cassandra

Breyer was able to maintain not just one, but five different types of high-end energies at once, which spoke volumes about how powerful she was back when she was in her prime.

It was unfortunate that she had not only turned into a decrepit corpse, but also bumped into a thief like Ves. Who told her to harass him and put up such a spooky act? She got exactly what she deserved!

Now, she was completely dead and gone while Ves managed to salvage a portion of her bounty.

Although Ves still felt uncomfortable about skipping the opportunity to speak to her and decipher her mysterious and profound background, it would have been extremely stupid for him to take the chance.

Just the fact that Cassandra wielded the five elements so proficiently signified that she was definitely a bigshot from the Five Scrolls Compact! Given his hostile relations to this crazy cult, Ves simply couldn't take the risk of letting her regain her full strength.

He shook his head. "I've made the right choice. I enjoy a gamble every now and then, but it is the height of foolishness to play around with anyone who wields so much personal might."

Power was the foundation of survival. If Ves was the stronger party, he would have been more open to hearing what Cassandra had to say. Since he was the weaker party in this instance, he simply did not feel secure enough to maintain his own safety.

Given such a circumstance, it was far more prudent for him to set aside his curiosity and be happy that he managed to get away with his life intact.

The metal energy that he managed to steal from her was just a bonus, and a temporary one at that. There was no need for him to feel distressed about its passing.

As his mood stabilized a bit, he thought about what he could do to get at least something useful out of the metal energy before it dissipated.

He already tried to absorb it several times without yielding any useful results. Vulcan was in a similar position as he had already reached his limits after absorbing a trace amount of high-end energy at the start.

Blinky's special nature allowed him to endure and even digest the powerful metal energy, but he wasn't a storage container. Any metal energy stored inside his body continued to decay without interruption.

Seeing that Ves couldn't keep the metal energy anywhere, his thoughts went towards using it up in a useful fashion.

"I've already tried to merge it with my design spirits, but none of them can handle this powerful and exclusionary energy. It's too violent to absorb and no one else aside from Vulcan possesses a high compatibility with metal."

Surprisingly enough, Zeigra came fairly close. The former Crown Cat and the embodiment of anger among the design spirits used to be famed for crunching and devouring mechs.

As such, when he was exposed to metal energy, his tolerance was considerably greater.

Unfortunately, his foundation was too weak to contain even a pinch of high-end metal energy.

Ves even tried to feed it to Lucky.

"C'mon, you're a cat who likes eating metallic exotics, right? Try to take a nibble of this. It's like taking a sip of an energy drink!"

"Meow!"

The gem cat didn't want anything to do with metal spiritual energy. When Ves forced Lucky to try out a tiny sample, his pet exhibited the same violent rejection reaction!

"MEOWWWW!"

"Okay, okay, I'll stop it! Sheesh! How can your compatibility with metal energy be so poor when metal is practically your only diet?"

"Meow..." Lucky looked aggrieved as he floated away.

Out of desperation, Ves tried several ways to create a new spiritual product, but he simply couldn't come close to creating a new metal-based life form due to several hindrances.

First, he couldn't compact metal energy into a stable spiritual fragment. He lacked the strength to compress it and transform it into a more controllable state.

Second, metal energy attacked and destroyed other forms of spiritual energy, especially when they were weaker. This prevented Ves from using his own life-oriented spiritual energy to infuse life into Cassandra's elemental energy.

Third,

"It's like an incorrigibly poorly-behaved teenager." Ves let out his frustration. "You simply won't do as I ask!"

Throughout his life and career, he had become exposed to many different kinds of spiritual energy and spiritual applications. No matter what kind of weirdness he encountered, he slowly managed to figure them out and harness them for his own use. He even created new possibilities where none existed before.

Inventions such as kinship networks, battle networks, companion spirits, totems and most notably high order living mechs fully showcased his competence in harnessing the phenomenon known as spiritual power!

Yet for all of his prior successes, Ves had little choice but to admit defeat this time. Even if his entire being hungered to absorb and harness this upgraded and expanded version of mech-attributed spiritual energy, he could not do anything about the fact that he was just a low-level mech designer at this time.

Ves eventually sighed and shook his head. "Forget it. I'll just use the remainder of the time on getting a better feel for this metal energy."

Ultimately, he decided to sit down and cautiously extend his spiritual senses towards his dwindling prize.

Now that he wasn't trying to squeeze ideas out of his mind, was able to appreciate the metal energy in a different fashion.

Just getting exposed to it for an instant was invaluable to a mech designer and spiritual engineer like Ves. Ever since he guessed that Star Designers all converted their lower-level mech domains into higher-level metal domains, he believed that generating this powerful energy type was the key to his own future breakthrough!

"This is what I'll be working towards!" Ves grinned as he deepened his familiarity with the flavor and properties of this potent energy type. "It might take a century or two, but once I can directly embark on the road to Star Designer, I'll enjoy an advantage over my peers because I already know where my journey ends!"

Even if all of this metal energy dissipated, it was not a great loss. Vulcan still managed to integrate a minute amount of metal energy. As long as the design spirit expended a bit of effort, that metal energy remained stable enough to prevent it from decaying. This was enough for Ves to revisit it and deepen his familiarity with this powerful spiritual energy attribute for a long time!

The only downside was that Vulcan only took in a small amount, which made it a lot more difficult to study this metal energy, especially when there was so much other activity taking place inside the design spirit.

Ves was much better able to perceive the metal energy's character and traits when it was concentrated and isolated from other influences. This was why this opportunity to study a larger quantity of purified metal energy was so precious.

As the hours went by, Ves only managed to obtain a couple of subtle gains.

His increased familiarity towards metal energy would allow him to detect its presence immediately as long as even a little bit leaked into the environment.

He also learned a bit of its character and what kind of traits were associated with metal energy. Ves knew what he had to work towards in order to become more compatible with it. He understood a little more why his incarnation spirit was able to harness a minute portion of this energy while his original self exhibited a stronger rejection reaction.

"It's not just the difference in strength." Ves muttered. "Vulcan is a powerful design spirit but there are also others who are comparable in strength. What makes him different from the likes of the Superior Mother is that his character and traits are more compatible with metal-attributed spiritual energy!"

This was actually a significant discovery! Ves noted that Vulcan's mech domain wasn't the only reason why the design spirit was reluctantly able to get along with metal energy.

The design spirit's craftsmanship domain also played a significant role!

Craftsmanship came in many forms and was not exclusive to metal shaping. Yet craftsmanship-attributed spiritual attributes happened to possess a high compatibility towards metal energy. The two acted as if they were distantly related to each other.

"Craftsmanship is like a nephew and metal is like an uncle. They're not particularly close, but the uncle won't reject the presence of family."

It helped that Vulcan's interpretation of craftsmanship was heavily grounded towards mechs and metal products. This was a limitation that originated from his creator. As a mech designer, Ves didn't know much about other forms of craftsmanship such as woodworking or flesh sculpting.

Yet this close relationship also built a bridge where Vulcan gained enough tolerance for metal energy that he was able to host a bit of it without getting burned from within!

"Interesting."

Ves began to develop numerous theories after learning about this relationship.

One of his boldest and most speculative theories was that a Master might be able to form a high-level metal domain by combining several lower-level domains, most notably ones centered around mechs and craftsmanship!

Metal energy was broad, profound and encompassed many different aspects. Mastering these aspects separately before combining them together made a lot of sense!

"Perhaps this is the way for weak humans to work towards becoming a Star Designer step by step. There is no need to harness metal energy right away."

If this was the case, Ves had just deduced an unimaginably valuable secret!

Although knowing about these matters didn't provide him with an immediate boost in capabilities, his future road might become a lot smoother now that he gained a better sense of his direction.

The value of knowing about these secrets in advance would fully play out once he became a Master!

Ves already felt a lot more satisfied than before. He was more than satisfied with his profits today. Cassandra Breyer was truly a generous spiritual witch for donating a portion of her strength to smooth out his future progression.

It was a major pity that he wasn't able to make use of her other high-end elemental energies.

What insights could he have derived from studying Cassandra's wood energy, water energy, earth energy or fire energy?

"Maybe I missed an opportunity to evolve my life domain."

Ves did not feel much loss, though. Metal energy was much more closely related to his profession. It most likely served as the key to his ultimate ascension.

He could find other ways to advance his life domain. As someone who was passionate about his work, he did not lack the confidence to develop this aspect of his power by himself!

"I don't need Cassandra Breyer to school me about something that I'm already good at! I'm practically a pioneer in my own field of expertise!"

Chapter 3410: Selfish Witch

"It was good while it lasted." Ves tiredly said.

All of the metal energy that he managed to capture from Cassandra Breyer had fully dissipated after a long day of excitement and exploration.

Though Ves was grateful for the opportunity to deepen his familiarity with metal energy, he was only able to grasp the surface aspects of this new high-end spiritual attribute.

"I'm just a Journeyman. I'm three steps away from being qualified to harness this energy properly."

He suspected that his results wouldn't be much better if he was a Senior. Only when he became a Master and a strong one at that would he truly be able to peer into the essence of this primordial and multi-dimensional spiritual attribute!

That said, his meager harvest left Ves with plenty of food for thought. He didn't need to understand everything right away. It was enough for him to be able to obtain hints of greater truths.

As long as he continued to explore and progress his design philosophy, he would eventually reach a point where he could explore those hints further. There was no need for him to feel impatient and waste his limited time on matters above his competence.

There was one more observation that Ves had to think about.

"Spiritual attributes are derived from individual people. Even if they center around the same concepts, different sources develop different interpretations of them. Their perspectives are all colored in different ways."

It was similar to how every mech designer interpreted mechs in different ways.

Ves judged them by how much life they possessed while Ketis paid attention to whether they sang to her. Someone like Gloriana paid attention to fit and perfection while Professor Benedict mainly looked at efficiency.

They all agreed on the basic definition of mechs, but the way in which they judged how good they were and what criteria were important was all different!

Something similar applied to life domains.

Ves was biased towards the creation of new life as he dedicated his career towards creating mechs.

Joshua leaned more towards cooperating and synergising with life.

Cynthia emphasized the predatory side of life.

Each of them shared a common basis, but they all developed it in different directions.

The same should apply to Cassandra. Ves did not believe that she was a completely neutral and unbiased individual. The metal-attributed spiritual energy that she managed to form had to be colored by her personality, outlook, specialties and experiences.

Discovering the personal nuances of someone's spiritual attributes and domains was one of the most reliable ways for Ves to figure out a person's true character!

Although it was hard to distinguish anything personal about Cassandra's metal energy, after numerous hours of observation, he managed to form a couple of guesses.

"I don't know about her other elemental attributes, but as far as metal is concerned, she's highly personal and only believes in her own might."

The fundamental creed of mech designers was that they existed to serve others.

This was not a mere mantra that mech designers said to each other in order to market themselves better to humanity. This was a creed that every mech university hammered into the heads of orthodox mech designers.

The result of this was that mech designers became accustomed to dedicating their work to other people rather than themselves.

Even if Ves was designing a Larkinson-exclusive mech for his own benefit, he always had to take the humans that needed to pilot them into account.

This was why every successful mech designer's domain was inevitably oriented to service and cooperation. Mech designers learned early on that they belonged to a greater society and that they only needed to dedicate themselves towards designing mechs.

Others would take these mechs and use them to do the actual fighting.

When Ves slowly familiarized himself with Cassandra's metal energy, he did not get the impression that she was willing to work on behalf of others. There was not a single hint that suggested that Cassandra possessed the character of a service provider!

"She's selfish." He concluded. "The environment she grew up in and came into power is a lot more brutal than normal human society. There are fewer opportunities for cooperation and self-sufficiency is a stronger virtue than providing a service."

Cassandra Breyer obviously succeeded with this mentality, otherwise she wouldn't have been able to harness five different types of high-end elemental energies at once.

All of this indirectly proved that designing mechs wasn't the only method for extraordinary people to generate metal-attributed spiritual energy.

People like this spiritual witch must have dedicated herself towards a more personal pursuit related to metal.

This was not his path. Ves did not go through all of the trouble of forming a clan and building relationships with people like Gloriana and Venerable Joshua just so that he could become an all-powerful spiritual sorcerer like Cassandra Breyer.

Those Five Scrolls Compact maniacs obsessed so much over personal power that this was probably the root of their failure!

As someone whose design philosophy centered around synergy and forming greater power through cooperation, Ves looked down on a personal philosophy like that of Cassandra Breyer.

Despite her formidable power and sophisticated techniques, she ended up in a crippled state where she was forced to wander to the galactic rim on a wandering escape pod.

No friend or ally had ever sought her out and rescued her from her predicament. Ves even guessed that should Cassandra ever bump into her former Compact colleagues, they would definitely take advantage of her weakened state and exploit her until she was drained of all of her value!

Perhaps this was why someone as selfish and self-reliant as Cassandra Breyer sought out Ves of all people.

Maybe she figured out that he was a Holy Son yet simultaneously hostile towards the Five Scrolls Compact. Perhaps she wanted to take refuge under him, believing that a mech designer who regularly served other customers would help her recover.

A despicable grin appeared on his face. "Hehehe. It's too bad you picked the wrong mech designer!"

Ves quickly reined in his emotions and controlled his expression. It wouldn't let others know about what he had done. Though he didn't feel guilty about screwing Cassandra over, someone who used to possess enough power to become a peak figure in human civilization should not be an obscure figure!

Ves had to make sure that he left no evidence behind.

As he performed his checks, he noticed that his Unending Regalia and his Hammer of Brilliance were both different from before.

"Huh?"

He was highly familiar with both of their properties. He designed and made them with his own hands and used them on a regular basis. He could easily detect minor changes, and the differences he sensed were significantly greater.

He frowned as he knocked his knuckle against the breastplate of his Unending Regalia.

"That's strange."

He began to develop a couple of suspicions. He decided to whip out his Vulcaneye in order to scan the physical properties of the possessions he used as temporary containers for purified metal energy.

As his scanner went to work, Ves soon obtained solid data that confirmed one of his guesses.

"It's stronger!"

Although the difference wasn't revolutionary, Ves was able to ascertain that his Unending Regalia could withstand considerably more damage than before!

The same applied to the Hammer of Brilliance. Its structural strength had grown as its metal composition had become a lot more resilient!

Ves' eyes lit up. "So this is what high-end metal energy can do! Just a moderate amount of exposure is enough to make my gear more remarkable!"

He wondered whether this process would continue if the metal energy lasted longer. How much stronger and more resilient would his combat armor become if it was soaked in metal energy day and night?

Did other high-end elemental energy produce similar effects on material objects?

Perhaps plants grew more vigorous when exposed to wood energy, human bodies became stronger when exposed to water energy, land grew more fertile when exposed to earth energy and flames burned hotter when exposed to fire energy.

"These are just the most basic ways to utilize elemental energy!"

Ves hungered for the power of metal energy even more after he discovered this additional surprise. Forget about empowering his personal gear. What if he used metal energy to augment the defenses and potentially other properties of his mechs?

His most powerful products such as the Shield of Samar and the Everchanger would turn into absolute monsters if they were reinforced with metal energy!

"It's a pity I don't have any at my disposal anymore." He sighed yet again.

Though Vulcan managed to integrate a trace of metal energy, the design spirit wasn't able to make more of it. He only reluctantly contained it and kept it into place. Making more of it was too far away, so Ves couldn't afford to squander this limited resource.

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "If every Star Designer can channel enough metal energy to augment their mechs and other products this way, then that would explain why they are absolutely revered."

Just this strengthening capability alone was of immense value! From what Ves could observe, although metal energy was prickly and hard to handle, it was also able to empower any metallic or solid object with ease.

The best part of it was that exerting this effect did not come at a cost. His combat armor and hammer did not grow weaker in any other way and could still be used as before.

Ves even guessed that hosting all of that powerful metal energy also produced other beneficial effects, but he lacked the means to detect them as neither his poor Vulcaneye or his other industrial scanners could detect any other changes.

He scratched his head. "Oh well. They were already quite good before, so every little bit helps."

Once he was finished with summarizing all of his gains, he wrapped up this little side activity and went back in order to enjoy a good rest.

After he woke up the next day, he played with his baby daughter for an hour before he resumed his preparations for his clan's upcoming passage through the beyonder gate.

The Tarnished Crown Star Sector was a lot livelier than the other star sectors the expeditionary fleet passed through.

There were thrice as many ships and fleets in any star system on average. The amount of traffic passing through the star systems on the popular trading routes was even worse!

In one instance, the Larkinsons even entered a star system that was occupied by a superfleet consisting of over 180 capital ships!

Suffice to say, not just the Larkinsons, but everyone else in the star system was deadly afraid of bumping into this major alliance!

Fortunately, star systems were so huge that every fleet was separated by enormous distances.

As long as one fleet did not deliberately chase after others, it was pretty unlikely for different groups to come close enough to threaten each other.

The Golden Skull Alliance was not weak. Not only that, but the expeditionary fleet was still accompanied by a sizable escort of mercenaries. This was enough to travel along the trading routes with confidence.

Soon, the expeditionary fleet came tantalizingly close to their main destination. According to the current schedule, it would take only less than a week to reach the coveted Opalis System!

However, before the Golden Skull Alliance was allowed to enter this highly-guarded star system, it first had to stop at another destination in order to undergo a mandatory inspection.

Anyone who directly attempted to enter the Opalis System without passing an inspection would be destroyed on appearance!

This was not an empty threat. Different people and organizations made dozens of attempts to bypass the first round of inspections. Whether they were ignorant or malicious, it didn't matter.

The MTA's powerful first-class multipurpose mechs blasted any unknown element that intruded in the gate system without permission!

With this threat hanging over every prospective pioneer's head, people like Ves had no choice but to line up in front of the checkpoint and obediently allow the MTA to look at his stuff.

"Let's hope the inspectors don't find any fault."