

The Mech 5331

Chapter 5331 Gavin Upgrade Plan

The 'first' meeting with Ves and General Axelar Streon ended up being incredibly productive to both sides!

Both Ves and Axelar exited the central chamber with obvious satisfaction.

After bidding the Streons goodbye, Ves, Lucky, Gavin and the rest of their small entourage soon departed from the rented space station.

Axelar, the Ouroboros and the Senechai all watched the Larkinsons teleport away.

"Your thoughts?"

Benny had heard virtually all of the words that Ves and Axelar had said to each other. He most definitely formed his own opinion about the secret agreement that the two had made.

"Professor Larkinson has already done us a great service by 'upgrading' the Ouroboros. While it is best to discreetly invite one of our Master Mech Designers to inspect your ace mech for any surprises, his sincerity is obvious, though I suspect most of it is due to your mech rather than your charming personality."

Axelar smirked. "That is not an issue. Sooner or later, the Ouroboros and I will become one and the same."

"I advise you not to count your chickens before they hatch, Master Axelar. An operation that consists of invading the heart of a serious alien civilization and displacing its home planet is an enormous undertaking. Its scope is too great for any ancient clan. If we want to organize enough forces to assault a highly fortified location, we must gain the cooperation of many other clans. It is best to involve the Terran Alliance as a whole. I can foresee many leaders agreeing to this plan. It is not that difficult to convince them to cooperate. We can allow them to share the credit for success and let them shirk responsibility in case of failure."

"That is a start, Benny, but it will take more than that to convince our more serious rivals to lend their strength to us." General Axelar spoke. "We should begin to form a comprehensive plan to build a Terran-wide coalition. The more forces we can rally under my banner, the greater the chance that I will return victorious."

"You can increase your success rate further if you permit foreign groups to participate in your operation, Master Axelar."

"No." Axelar immediately replied. "This must be a Terran endeavor. The Polymath is not the only leader who regards states such as ours as vestiges of the past. We must fight to protect our identity and strengthen our collective pride. If we want the Terran Alliance to persist in this changing age, we must undertake a unifying action that will show the rest of red humanity that we will not disappear!"

Axelar believed that his planned operation would become so bold and shocking that no other leader could equal his feat!

Aside from that, the greater reward of a successful operation might not be the rise of another Terran god pilot, but the emergence of a new home planet for red humanity!

The general could think of no better way to reinvigorate the Terran people than to give them a home planet!

The fact that they originally stole it from another alien race was not a demerit. It was much more likely for this to become a point of pride!

As Axelar and Benny continued to discuss their plans and schemes, Ves and his entourage eventually returned to their borrowed villa.

Ves dismissed everyone aside from Lucky and Benny,

"Lucky, go hunt for snooping bugs."

"Meow."

While the gem cat performed his familiar routine, Ves and Gavin began to stare at each other.

Gavin had endured far more shocks than Ves during the meeting!

He had been privy to all of the talks, so he had abruptly become exposed to far more secrets and happenings than he could ever imagine!

Given that they were currently in a location that was probably not secure, neither of the two addressed the issue directly.

Ves did not even dare to use the Larkinson Network or other weird means to communicate with his personal assistant. Who knew whether there was a qi cultivator in the vicinity that could intercept spiritual signals?

This was why he decided to keep his explanation vague for the time being.

"I have extended a lot of trust to you today." He said. "I hope that Benny has set an excellent example for you. I don't ask you to become his younger clone, but what I do expect from you is that you will become as loyal as him. Do you understand?"

Gavin firmly nodded. His eyes had gained a bit more steel and determination. His greatest gain aside from earning his superior's trust was to receive the Senechal's advice!

"I will do my utmost to live up to your expectations. I will not speak about what I have learned, nor ask you any questions unless you invite me to do so. However..."

"What is it, B-, Gavin?"

"The Senechai has told me that my augmentations can't keep up with my growing responsibilities. I fear that I am unable to protect all of the confidential information that is stored in my brain. There are still ways for intelligence agencies to capture me and either interrogate me or extract my memories directly from my head."

That was an important concern.

The good news was that most first-class cranial implants and other augmentations offered a lot of protection against this sort of threat by default.

The bad news was that they were never foolproof. The best that anyone could do was to receive a cranial implant that was especially geared towards information security.

Ves could already tell that this was what Gavin was trying to suggest.

"I have developed a friendship with Senechai Benny Smit." Gavin said. "He has offered to upgrade my augmentations to a suite that is comparable to his at no charge. We can consider it repayment of one of the favors that you have given to the general. You can either entrust this job to the Streons or a neutral third party recommended by them. Either way, Benny strongly recommends that we do not solicit the services of either the mechers or the Rubarthans."

That amused Ves. How much of that advice was driven by instinctive Terran disgust towards their rivals, and how much of it was genuine concern that the mechers or the Rubarthans would genuinely tamper with the augmentations?

"Wait." He froze. "Did the Senechai truly offer to give you the same augmentations as his own? As far as I recall, his mind is much more heavily digitized than ordinary people."

"Not exactly, boss. The man was careful and precise in his wording. He offered to give us a similar suite that should perform roughly the same, but we can also make other requests as long as they are reasonable. As far as greater digitization is concerned... I am not opposed to this prospect. It will do me far more good than harm in my position. Forgive me for sounding presumptuous, but you need a more logical sounding board by your side. The Senechai often acts as the voice of reason and common sense towards his own boss. I think it is useful to copy his approach."

Ves was inclined to agree with this assessment. He knew quite well what kind of person he was. It was doubtful that he could have gotten this far without receiving Gavin's input.

There were many times where his personal assistant made good suggestions and pointed out details that he had overlooked. Even if Gavin knew nothing about mech design and didn't master any other field, he was still able to think on his own and voice what needed to be said.

It would be an enormous pity for Ves to replace Gavin for a first-class assistant.

Ves made a decision. "You can respond to this offer. Try to gather more details and carefully weigh your choices. I will leave this up to you. The only condition that I would like to make is that when the augmentation specialists begin to upgrade your body, I want General Axelar and the Ouroboros to inspect all of the implants and supervise the operation in person. We can never be too careful about this. I trust Axelar and his living mech enough that they will make sure that everything will remain honest."

That elicited a gleeful reaction from his assistant!

"Thank you, boss! I shall make certain that everything is done properly! It will likely take a few months to examine my body, formulate an augmentation suite and develop the customized improvements. Only then will I be able to undertake the operations."

"I am familiar with all of the cumbersome steps that need to be made to develop excellent augmentations. We can be patient. It is not as if you urgently need all of the extra internal processing power right away."

Ves wondered how much more helpful Gavin would become once he had received this massive upgrade.

It didn't seem as if a personal assistant had to do more than to schedule meetings and share a few shallow opinions, but Gavin could become so much more.

Just like the famed Senechai, Gavin could expand his responsibilities and make important decisions without needing any additional input from his superior!

As Ves continued to move up in society, he had become increasingly more invested in grander affairs. He lost interest in undertaking more mundane responsibilities such as managing his clan or running a business.

It was better to offload this kind of work to a trusted assistant who knew exactly how he would respond to different matters.

They eventually began to talk about various other topics. None of them were directly related to any of the secrets that Gavin had learned, but they were still important nonetheless.

"If the Rubarthans know that you have concluded a far-reaching cooperation agreement with their archrivals, they will not be pleased to say the least. How do you intend to deal with this consequence?"

Ves shrugged. "I am open to cooperation to anyone who is sincere enough. It is not my fault that the Terrans have taken decisive action. Has the Inferno Spear Prince contacted us as of late?"

"Not that I know of. We believe that the Rubarthans are still quarreling among themselves. The Smokestack Prince and the Inferno Spear Prince both have different preferences for the design spirit of the proposed new kinship network. It is highly likely that the Rubarthans will only be able to make up their mind once their god pilots return."

"Those are my thoughts as well."

This meant that there was no need for Ves to concern himself about the Rubarthans for the time being.

Ves found it rather ironic that the Terrans had concluded a serious deal with him a lot faster.

Then again, General Axelar was hardly an ordinary Terran.

Gavin eventually left the office in order to take care of business that had piled up in the last few hours.

Ves meanwhile looked forward to spending the rest of the afternoon on advancing one of his ongoing design projects.

Yet just as he was about to do so, Veronica just received an important notification from Cynthia Larkinson.

After several weeks of data gathering and puzzling, the True God had finally completed the development of an innovative new Crown-oriented cultivation method!

Though Ves calmly opened a design program and began to adjust the incomplete design of the Supremo Project, his main attention had shifted back to the Milky Way.

He had been waiting for this! Vulcan yearned to obtain a proper cultivation method, especially one that incorporated elements and techniques related to Divine Blacksmiths!

"Myaow-"

Veronica rubbed her silver paws in glee as she looked forward to receiving the fruits of her mother's work.

It was so nice to be able to depend on a parent again!

Veronica did not mind that she had to rely on the work of her mother for the umpteenth time.

She did not want to mess around and bank on his amateurish grasp of cultivation science to transform Vulcan's future.

It was better to rely on a professional given the importance of this matter!

Chapter 5332 The Origin of Artifact Cultivation

Ves had been waiting for this for a long time.

Ever since the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown latched itself onto his Divine Core, he became afraid of how this damn relic of the past intended to contaminate his cognition.

Strangely enough, Ves didn't actually observe any overt signs of influencing.

Sure, his behavior changed a lot since he returned from the Survivalist conference, but that was mostly because his status and circumstances had become completely different from the past.

He acted more assertively, made bolder decisions and took on risks that he did not dare to entertain before not because a weird crown whispered suggestions to his ears, but because he adapted to a whole new environment.

While it was possible that the crown had nudged his decisions here and there, he didn't really feel it was that big of a deal. At most, the remnant of a supposed immortal god encouraged him to take advantage of opportunities that he had already been thinking about.

In other words, Ves already had the intention of taking action, but his prior caution and instinct to remain low key held him back. The crown just forced him out of his comfort zone and facilitated his transition into a member of a first-class society.

Ves actually didn't mind the presence of the crown all that much. If its influence remained subtle enough that he retained his core personality, then what was the harm of hosting it further?

He was also sure that the crown could bring greater benefits to him. He just had to explore it further and see whether he could unlock its other secrets.

If not for his assumption that Vulcan could likely make much better use of the crown, Ves wouldn't have minded it if he carried the crown for a longer period of time.

He frowned and shook his head. "Just because the dangers are invisible doesn't mean they are nonexistent. There's no way the crown is benevolent."

His mother told him that all of the immortal gods were selfish beings without exception. They possessed no concept of morality and were willing to betray anyone in their pursuit of longevity and power.

How could the blood of an immortal god be any different? The case of the Polymath served as a constant reminder that a few wrong turns could easily lead the best of humanity into damnation!

"I need to learn to let go." He convinced himself.

Besides, if his mother had managed to complete this ambitious effort, Ves didn't actually lose out. He would just transfer it to Vulcan.

"If that is the case, then why do I feel as if I am giving up an amazing advantage?"

His intuition vaguely told him that he was making an incredibly consequential decision. His life would take a major turn that would drastically define his future.

He frowned. He already knew that the crown was a big deal. Was shifting it to Vulcan that profound of a decision?

He vaguely felt as if he had come up to a crossroads.

He could either choose to bear the weight of the crown himself or transfer it to Vulcan.

Each decision carried an immense amount of weight. The potential advantages of keeping it to his main self should not be inferior to letting Vulcan take over this responsibility instead!

He needed more information, and the best way to do that was to obtain it from his mother.

As such, back in the Milky Way, a certain silvery cyborg cat happily jumped into the arms of her mother when the latter arrived!

"Myaow-! Did you finish it? Did you manage to solve all of the problems that delayed your progress by several weeks?"

Her imperious-looking mother appeared as unassuming but dignified as ever. Her elegant robed figure flew into her meditation chamber and settled down on the center.

A hand gently started to stroke Veronica's head. This caused the cyborg cat to grow so comfortable that she started to purr.

Cynthia conveyed a sense of weariness.

"Let me begin by stating that I am not fully confident in the cultivation method that I have devised. My knowledge reserves are not endless, and I have never undertaken this sort of work. As I have explained before, trying to develop a method to draw power from a powerful object falls into the category of artifact cultivation. Can you guess how this form of cultivation came into existence?"

"I guess... ancient beings started to make powerful tools and weapons for themselves. The cultivators who made use of them wanted to get really good at doing so. I guess that they eventually spent a lot of effort learning how to become stronger with the help of their powerful gear."

Cynthia smiled in amusement. "You are looking at this situation from the perspective of a mech designer. That is fine, but the real answer contains more. Think about this scenario. What will happen if a weak cultivator happens to stumble upon an impressive weapon that originally belonged to a much more powerful cultivator? What if this weapon has been lost by its original owner and is ripe for the picking?"

"I guess the weaker cultivator will try to take it away and harness its amazing power for itself." Veronica replied.

"Even when the weapon is so dangerous that it will kill anyone who is unqualified to harness its might?"

"That has never stopped a lot of people." Veronica snorted. "People have endless greed for power. They will definitely try to study the weapon, decipher its mechanisms and discover exploits that they can use to tap into its power without possessing the proper qualifications to make use of it. Wait... is this the true meaning of artifact cultivation?"

Cynthia nodded. She stretched out her hand and summoned the Golden Laurel Wreath Crown from wherever she had locked this powerful object away.

The stolen crown that had once sparked an uprising looked beautiful and resplendent in a way that Veronica could not describe. Its appearance was a lot more elegant and classy than the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown.

"Remember what cultivation is about. It is about gaining power and longevity. It is usually difficult for most people to make great achievements by relying on their own strength. Those who lack the talent or the patience to become successful will start to look for shortcuts in order to reach their destination faster and with greater ease. Elixirs and more clever cultivation methods are but a few of the many possible means that cultivators have developed to increase their efficiency. Artifact cultivation is another means to gain power faster and more conveniently."

"I see. The implication here is that the efficiency of cultivation is higher if the artifact is more powerful." Veronica analyzed. "The greater the power disparity between the cultivator and the artifact, the greater the results."

"Ah, but that is only one side of the coin, my child. If artifact cultivation is so fantastic, then why doesn't everyone make use of artifacts as powerful as this crown?"

The cyborg cat thought deeper.

"It's too expensive. The resources needed to create more powerful artifacts are too scarce, and the creation cultivators who can convert them into effective products are also limited in number. Aside from that, artifacts with great power are usually the most difficult to control. They can easily produce a backlash if their holders make a mistake."

The Oblivion Empress nodded. She waved her hand, creating a projection of an incredibly powerful artifact that sparked immediate recognition in Veronica's purple optical sensors!

"The Heavensword is one of the most interesting vestiges of the past that has managed to live up to this day. You are already familiar with it. You have even seen it in action, correct?"

Ever since Veronica arrived in the Nyxian Gap, she occasionally shared tales about the events of the past. It was one of the activities that bonded them together and made up for lost time.

Now that Veronica thought about the Heavensword in the context of the current subject, she began to notice a few oddities.

"Wait. The Heavensword is famous for turning the leader of the state that bears its name into a sword saint. No matter what sort of swordmaster that individual used to be, he is forced to put down his old sword and set aside his sword style in order to become a fitting carrier of this ancient weapon artifact. Is this a form of artifact cultivation?"

"Only in the strictest of definitions." Cynthia replied in a contemptuous tone. "The individual that takes on the moniker of Heavensword Saint may have broken through a major cultivation stage by force, but he or she has given up everything in exchange for a direct increase in strength. The sword saint does not control the Heavensword. It is the Heavensword that has taken over control."

The cyborg cat's expression grew more complex. "I already had a feeling that this was the case. No Heavensword Saint has ever made any significant progress after inheriting this powerful artifact. The wielder has completely lost his way, and is unable to make any significant achievements after his transformation because the new weapon is not a good fit."

"This is not an uncommon phenomenon in ancient times. A cultivator who desires to obtain the power of a greater artifact usually becomes enslaved to them instead. The relationship becomes reversed. It is not the individual that exploits the artifact, but it is the artifact that is taking advantage of its own wielder!"

"What!? Is that actually possible?!"

Cynthia smirked. "The pursuit of power and longevity is a universal desire in nature. Why do you assume that this motivation is limited to humans and aliens? Objects can have wants and needs as well as long as they are intelligent enough. Your living mechs exemplify this possibility. As powerful as the Heavensword may be, it is not omnipotent or immortal. Its essence remains a sword, and every sword is designed to be wielded by a person."

"So the Heavensword imposes itself onto a swordmaster because it needs to?" Veronica asked. "Doesn't this imply that this ancient artifact is the true leader of the Heavensword Association all of this time?"

"You can say that. The old communities have a special term for cultivators who have relinquished their agency to their own weapons. They are called sword slaves."

Veronica couldn't help but sympathize with the Heavensword Saint. Everyone considered this impressive figure to be the ultimate authority of the Heavensword Association.

It turned out that he had already been reduced to a meat puppet for a powerful grand work.

She suddenly shifted her artificial eyes towards the golden crown in Cynthia's hands.

The symbols of authority that were paired with the Sacred Scrolls might not look as flashy as the Heavensword on the surface, but these artifacts that usually took on the form of crowns should not be any weaker!

Veronica suddenly became a lot more afraid of the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown. She did not want to be turned into a 'crown slave' or whatever!

Losing control was one of his greatest fears. There was no point in living if she was no longer able to make her own decisions.

Her mother adopted an approving expression when she saw that her child showed proper respect towards dangerous artifacts.

"Artifacts can possess many different properties." Cynthia explained in a gentler tone. "Not all of them are as dangerous. A skilled creation cultivator can make a weapon that is explicitly designed to help its wielder. A mech is a good example of this positive approach. A creation cultivator can also

do the opposite and purposefully develop a weapon that harms and exploits its user, either selectively or indiscriminately."

"Is that common in cultivation societies?"

"More than you can imagine. There are many reasons for this. Artifacts can be bound by tests. Only the holders that prove their worth can make proper use of them. Artifacts can be locked to specific users. Those who are not permitted to use them will suffer a backlash. Artifacts can also be tampered with or become corrupted. In short, a cultivator must always be vigilant towards objects of power. You must treat any of them with utmost caution and respect if you do not possess the strength to suppress them if they pose a threat to you one day."

The Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown definitely fell into this category!

Chapter 5333 Metal God Method

Now that Veronica gained a proper understanding of artifact cultivation, her outlook on this subject had changed.

It was impressive how greater knowledge and understanding could produce a significant shift in cognition.

Artifact cultivation was a double-edged sword. It promised great power and benefits, but could easily bring doom if anything went wrong.

Not all artifacts were benign. Some did not come with any nasty security measures. Others would try their best to drain their holders if they possessed the wrong qualifications!

As Veronica processed all of the information that she received, her mother casually waved the crown in her hands as if it was nothing but a tacky-looking trinket.

"Artifacts are shortcuts to power, no matter whether they were designed for this purpose or not. These objects are ultimately static to a degree. They are made and programmed to fulfill specific purposes, which means that it is always possible to take advantage of them as long as you understand their properties well enough. Who created them? What is their purpose for doing so? Who are their intended users? The more answers that you can obtain, the easier it becomes for you to develop an effective artifact cultivation method."

"I see. I have the feeling that you haven't been able to obtain too many answers relating to the symbols of authority?"

"That is correct." Cynthia sighed. "In order to devise a new cultivation method for your incarnation, I need to obtain a large amount of information. While I am familiar with a number of secrets relating to the symbols of authority, that is far from enough for me to work on them with confidence. The greatest obstacle is the fact that I cannot physically examine the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown. I am only able to proceed based on second-hand information or inferences derived from my own crown."

In other words, Cynthia made use of the Golden Laurel Wreath Crown to make assumptions about the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown.

This was a decent approach, but hardly a perfect one. The two possessed many similarities, but they were not the same. The fact that they originated from the blood of different immortal gods made a massive difference by itself!

"If this is the case, then the cultivation methods might not completely work according to your expectations." Veronica pointed out. "Combined with other shortcomings, your new artifact cultivation method does not sound reliable."

"That is true. I have encountered challenges to tailor this artifact cultivation method to Vulcan. He is most compatible with creation cultivation. He is also dependent on deity cultivation to spread his awareness and further his growth. Both of these aspects are vital to him, so I have sought to create a hybrid cultivation method that preserves them both."

Veronica understood this logic easily enough. She did not want Vulcan to lose either of these traits. Even though Vulcan did not possess a physical body to create any real products, he could still make 'virtual' ones due to his control over the Mental Simulation Training System!

As the host of the MSTS, Vulcan was like a god to this imaginary reality. He composed all of the rules and created all of the active combat scenarios that mech pilots and living mechs used for training.

If this was not creation, then what is? Vulcan already had a habit of creating all kinds of different crafts in order to exercise the craftsmanship that he learned from all of the artisans who came into contact with him. The dwarves who followed the Iron Emperor were especially fanatic about providing spiritual feedback to their supposed god!

Although Vulcan had not made any noticeable accomplishments throughout the years, he still made substantial gains on an iterative basis. Even the fact that he was cultivating the wrong method did not hinder him too much at this stage.

Of course, just because he was doing fine did not mean that his situation was ideal. He could be doing so much better if he wasn't held back by various circumstances!

Now that Veronica not only got started in cultivation science, but also regained full access to her highly knowledgeable mother, Vulcan finally gained an opportunity to go back on the right track!

He could finally ditch the Heart of Steel Mantra that had been provided and modified by the Mech Designer System!

After Cynthia explained how difficult it was to devise a hybrid cultivation method when subjected to so many constraints, she finally introduced her work.

The True God effortlessly utilized her power to project an image of Vulcan.

Of course, it was the version that looked like a stereotypical dwarven blacksmith version of Ves.

"Myaow! Vulcan is a human as well, you know! I look much more handsome that way!" Veronica complained.

A hand softly tapped on the cat's head. "Hush now. Unless a deity cultivator is strong-willed enough, he will always take the shape that is an amalgamation of the expectations of his believers. This is one of the side effects of this approach."

The Lady of the Night did not stop at creating an image of Vulcan. She began to overlay it with four different points of lights that surrendered the incarnation like planets orbiting around a star.

"I call it the Metal God Method. Its name may sound pretentious to your ears, but its harsh requirements and upper limit are so impressive that it is fitting. While this new method is anything but refined, I am proud of what I have been able to make. It was worth it for me to spend several weeks combining so many different factors together."

Veronica looked awed at the projected image. It did not look simple. Cynthia portrayed Vulcan as if he was a genuine god. The power of metal exuded from his form. The incarnation did not exert too much aggression, but it looked as if he could definitely absorb a lot of blows.

Most notably, the dwarven spirit proudly wore an iron crown above his head. Vulcan carried himself in a manner that clearly showed that he was in charge as opposed to his choice of headwear!

"Is this what Vulcan can become?"

"Yes, but only if Vulcan is able to practice properly without any major complications. I do not consider this to be finished work. I will likely have to make adjustments based on Vulcan's feedback. Only then will I become confident enough that you can practice it safely."

Though Veronica felt a little apprehensive about her mother's lack of confidence, she did let this hold her back. She possessed enough trust in her mother to believe that her work was good despite the fact that it was an experimental product.

So what if Vulcan had to assume the identity as a test subject? She had conducted countless experiments in the past, many of which yielded amazing results!

"So what are these glowing lights?"

"They are the representations of the four major cultivation approaches that I have combined in the Metal God Method. These approaches can be grouped up into two deeply connected pairs."

Cynthia decided to address the simplest pairing first.

"Let us look at the artifact cultivation and qi cultivation aspects first. I have transplanted many elements of the Heart of Steel Mantra to the new method. I have done my utmost to ensure that Vulcan does not have to discard all of his current cultivation results. Instead, the new method should easily assimilate the existing Heart of Steel and continue to develop from this point."

It was like a takeover in this regard. The smoother the process, the less value got lost during the transition.

"I have already explained the advantages and disadvantages of the Heart of Steel Mantra in the past. Suffice to say, I put great effort into removing the latter while preserving the former. I erred on the side of caution, which means that I have cut elements even when that weakens the desired effects. I have tried my best to retain as much of its increase in mental defenses as possible. Vulcan will need it because of the crown."

Cynthia pointed towards another point of light. "The Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown is made from the blood of an immortal god. It may appear to you as a metal object at the moment, but its essence is so much greater than that. Based on my studies of the Golden Laurel Wreath Crown, I have

devised a means for Vulcan to gradually siphon a minute fraction of the vast amount of qi locked inside a symbol of authority. If everything works correctly, Vulcan should be able to accelerate the growth and strengthening of his Heart of Steel."

Veronica looked impressed. "That is brilliant. Using the crown is always a risk, but this way Vulcan will always strengthen his mental defenses. If this scheme works as intended, then the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown will never be able to take control over Vulcan because it is always feeding the defense mechanism that prevents it from exerting any influence!"

If the crown tried to remain subtle, then there was little need for the Heart of Steel to exert its defenses.

If the crown tried to act more overtly, it would increase the resistance produced by the Heart of Steel!

Although there was still a vulnerability at the earlier stages, so long as Vulcan cultivated the Metal God Method long enough, even gradual accumulation should be enough to defend against surprise attacks!

"Growing the Heart of Steel is important for many reasons." Cynthia told Ves. "It not only helps Vulcan defend against the crown, but it will also increase your incarnation's connection to the metal element. This will offer fantastic benefits to the other two modes."

She pointed towards the second pair of cultivation approaches.

"Let us address creation cultivation first. Vulcan is clearly not a being that is suited for combat. While it is possible to change that, I personally do not recommend you do so because he will be wasting his talents. Since he has a high affinity towards craftsmanship, I have tried my best to incorporate elements of this into the Metal God Method. I have even imparted a select amount of techniques related to Divine Blacksmiths when possible, but that does not mean that Vulcan can match all of the capabilities of one. He is much more suited to become a generalist, a god who is able to create many different varieties of products made out of metal. Do you understand?"

"I think so." Veronica replied. "I suppose that Vulcan might eventually be able to forge excellent swords, but nothing at the level of the Heavensword."

"That is not entirely true. It is not impossible for Vulcan to be able to do so, but he must find his own way in order to accomplish this challenge. A Divine Blacksmith is usually able to become one by taking advantage of a full inheritance. Vulcan only has access to some of the basics of this profession. If he wants to improve, then he must either find a way to learn the more advanced theories and techniques, or make use of his own conditions to create a new inheritance for himself. I highly recommend the latter approach. His potential is far greater. The ancient blacksmithing traditions will only hold him back and shackle him to the past."

Veronica possessed a lot of curiosity towards Divine Blacksmiths. She wanted to know how they worked.

Even if Vulcan did not aim to gain all of the capabilities of a Divine Blacksmith, it was still useful to use the techniques of one as reference materials.

"So how can Vulcan seriously engage in creation cultivation when he doesn't have a physical body?" The cyborg cat asked. "Should he continue to create all kinds of stuff within the MSTs?"

"He can do so. I have made express adjustments to the Metal God Method in order to accommodate this activity. The benefits of doing so will not be great, and they will become increasingly less consequential as Vulcan grows stronger. At a certain point, he can only make meaningful progress if he utilizes his craftsmanship to craft a physical object."

"Err, how can we make that happen? Do I have to develop a highly realistic android that Vulcan can control?"

Cynthia chuckled. "No. There is no need to create a new body for your incarnation. He can borrow existing ones instead. This is why deity cultivation plays a vital role in the new method. There are so many eager dwarves who worship Vulcan every day, particularly the makers among them. Why not reward their faith by letting Vulcan descend onto their bodies and use their hands and tools to create the works of a god? The more Vulcan practices his craft through the bodies of his worshipers, the more his capabilities rise. Those who have received the honor of hosting a god will always benefit from this! Not only will they be able to experience the work of a god first-hand, but Vulcan's temporary possession will also leave enduring gifts behind."

Veronica's purple eyes shone brighter.

If Cynthia was correct about this, then everyone benefited from this scheme!

This was not an ordinary application of deity cultivation. By combining it with creation cultivation, Vulcan could not only make all of the physical products that he wanted, but would also reward his worshipers in a more tangible fashion!

Chapter 5334 Four Challenges

The Metal God Method was brilliant!

Its benefits and sophistication were much greater than ordinary cultivation methods!

It not only incorporated four different cultivation approaches, but tied them all together in a way that produced fantastic synergies. Cynthia Larkinson managed to maximize each component and interaction so that they produced as many concrete advantages as possible.

His mother continued to explain more details about the custom cultivation method that she had especially created for her child.

"Every cultivation approach serves a vital purpose. The Metal God Method would never have so much development potential without any of these four key components. Creation cultivation gives full play to Vulcan's talents. Deity cultivation anchors him to the physical realm and retains his connection to a vibrant society. Artifact cultivation supplies Vulcan with considerable quantities of high-quality energy. Qi cultivation increases Vulcan's connection to the metal element and strengthens his defenses. By combining all of these advantages together, the future of your incarnation will be bright."

How could Veronica remain unmoved by all of this? Compared to working as a mech designer, it was much more fun to act like a god and derive power from so many different sources!

Vulcan didn't even have to worry about practical concerns such as learning craftsmanship skills, procuring expensive resources or acquiring expensive production facilities.

The incarnation could borrow much of the skills and knowledge of his worshipers!

Although that did not allow Vulcan to master the most advanced or forbidden crafting applications, it was more than enough to allow the spirit to gain a sufficient amount of mastery in every production field!

Whenever Vulcan devised an interesting new design, he could descend onto one of his willing worshipers and make use of the available materials and workshops to do his work!

All of this sounded much more convenient than slaving away as a mech designer!

A part of Veronica even felt jealous towards Vulcan's special identity and traits.

There had to be a catch.

No, there had to be a lot of catches.

"What are the downsides to this cultivation method, mother? There is no way that it should be this easy."

The Oblivion Empress patted the cyborg cat in encouragement. "It is good to see that you have retained a clear mind. It is far too easy to become seduced by the prospect of gaining so much power. I have already mentioned that the Metal God Method is not mature. It is a prototype that I am unable to develop any further due to lack of actual data. There is a chance that... complications may occur."

Veronica was highly familiar with experiments and knew that unexpected outcomes came with the territory. "That is okay. So long as we are careful enough, we should be able to deal with any issues. Besides, Vulcan is quite hardy already. His Heart of Steel is not for show."

"Another issue is whether Vulcan can attract the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown by practicing the Metal God Method. I have incorporated elements into it that are especially designed to seduce the symbol of authority, but do not forget that it has a mind of its own. It may choose to resist the temptation, which means that Vulcan's cultivation progress will become impaired. It is still possible to practice a lesser variation of the new method, but the results will not be as good."

"It's better than nothing, right?"

"That is true. It is still a far better alternative than continuing to practice the Heart of Steel Mantra."

That was alright to Veronica. From what she had been able to understand, the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown primarily sped up Vulcan's progress. The crown could do more, but there were other ways to compensate for its absence.

"What else, mother?"

"The Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown will remain in constant contact with Vulcan and possibly your other incarnations as well. You should never let your guard down. While the Heart of Steel should be able to block most of the threats, it is not foolproof. The symbol of authority may be able to exploit a hole in the defenses. This is why you should always remain vigilant."

Veronica seriously nodded. "That goes without saying."

Her mother became more solemn. "Finally, there is one more disadvantage that will trouble you greatly later on. If your incarnation makes good use of your crown, then he should be able to

approach the threshold of a True God. That is the point where Vulcan can no longer rely on regular activities and processes to grow any further. He must undergo a transformation in order to transform his life essence and assume his identity as a deity."

This conversation started to sound familiar to Veronica.

"Let me guess. This is not going to be easy, right? Vulcan will probably have to accomplish a legendary deed in order to break past the final bottleneck."

"That is certain. Cultivation methods can be differentiated by many criteria, all of which are interconnected to each other. It is not a universal rule that a more difficult cultivation method will grant greater power in return. It may just be badly designed or a poor fit to its practitioner. However, I have designed the Metal God Method to your incarnation from the ground up, which means that you shouldn't suffer from those problems."

"Then why is the Metal God Method so difficult to complete at the final stage, then?"

There are two primary reasons why the new method will impose harsh demands to become a True God. The first is because of its complexity. It blends four cultivation approaches together. The second is that I have deliberately designed the method to produce the greatest possible outcome that is possible. What I mean by this is that once Vulcan becomes a True God, he will not be average in strength. He shall gain so much strength and capabilities that he will possess ample enough capital to survive and thrive in the times to come. I can already promise you that he will not be inferior to Star Designer once he fully comes into power."

That was impressive, especially because Veronica knew that Star Designers were impressive creation cultivators at their level!

While Veronica had heard that Divine Blacksmiths and other creation cultivators had their own advantages, they were so specialized or outdated that they usually weren't able to contribute as much to society.

Veronica understood that Cynthia was doing her best to look out for her future.

The difficulty was high, but the rewards more than made up for it. Vulcan would definitely not fall behind in the future!

"Okay, then. What does Vulcan need to do in order to pass this threshold?"

"What I am about to say are only guesses. I have extrapolated these answers by relying on my own judgment. The actual situation may be different from my description. In short, the Metal God Method will likely impose at least four major requirements, each of which corresponds to a specific cultivation approach. The first one is simple. You must grow the Heart of Steel to the limit and maybe beyond. You may need to transform it into a higher form that fits Vulcan's needs better."

"Sounds simple enough." The cyborg cat spoke. "What else?"

"Vulcan must act as a proper god and actively guide and nurture the growth of many worshipers. In particular, he must raise many master craftsmen while also making sure that they deeply have him in their hearts."

Veronica immediately lost a lot of enthusiasm. "That... is going to take a long time. I really don't like to pose as a god, even as an incarnation."

"You do not have much choice, my dear." Cynthia swept aside her child's objections. "Vulcan is regarded as the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship. This is mostly an empty title for now, but one of the requirements to become a True God is to turn falsehood into reality. Names and titles carry power, and the ones that are held by True Gods carry far greater of it than other words."

That was an incredibly significant piece of information!

Veronica had always wondered why god pilots and Star Designers gradually phased out their old human names and started to call themselves by ridiculous and overdramatic names.

The Destroyer of Worlds. The Fist of Defiance. The Xenotechnician. The Lord of Thermodynamics.

It turned out that they were more than fancy nicknames that were used for PR purposes. They actually had a significant influence on the cultivation of high-level figures!

"For better or worse, Vulcan has become a god to many people. It is too difficult to change their acquired assumptions about a deity, so I advise you not to force any changes. The dwarves have already fought one catastrophic war over doctrinal conflicts. It is best if you do not inflict this punishment on them again."

"That's not my fault!" Veronica protested.

"Whatever you say. Let us move on. Creation cultivation is an essential component of the Metal God Method, which means that Vulcan must prove that he has the capability to create an unsurpassed work. At the very least, his magnum opus must be an object that is no less impressive as the Heavensword."

"WHAT?! THAT'S OUTRAGEOUS!"

The Heavensword was one of the most powerful ancient relics that was still in existence in the Milky Way!

It was so powerful that even the Big Two had given up on trying to bring it to heel!

This insane challenge was probably difficult enough for Vulcan to remain stuck for at least a century!

The Oblivion Empress kept her composure while her child tried to come to terms with this requirement.

"This is a test that Vulcan must overcome regardless of what sort of creation cultivator that he aspires to become. It is not as outrageous as you think. First, Vulcan's creation does not have to be a grand work. It must have a comparable amount of power and influence over people, though the better the craftsmanship, the lower the other thresholds."

"Oh. That makes things a bit easier..."

"You have another advantage. While it is important that Vulcan leads this effort, it is not forbidden for him to receive help. In particular, the special relationship between your incarnations means that each of you can collaborate with each other and make the most of your respective advantages."

"Wait, that is allowed?"

"Oh, yes." Cynthia smirked. "Ever since I have become a True God, I am able to accelerate the Superior Mother's cultivation at an enormous rate. Many of the problems that block weaker cultivators have become trivial to True Gods. If Ves happens to become a Star Designer, then Vulcan can take advantage of that to pass this test with greater ease. If Vulcan becomes a True God before Ves, then your incarnation can do the same."

That sounded incredibly useful! This dynamic added another dimension of importance to incarnations.

No matter which of them managed to get ahead, the strongest of them should easily be able to drag the other ones to the same level!

"Do not celebrate so quickly yet. I have yet to explain the fourth test to you." The Lady of the Night spoke as her tone turned graver again. "After making extensive use of the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown, a strong and inescapable relationship should have formed between Vulcan and this artifact. Your incarnation has become weighed down by heavy karma, and he must resolve it one way or another in order to pass this final test."

"How can Vulcan do that, mother?"

"The most direct and ideal way to settle this karma is to merge Vulcan with the symbol of authority."

"WHAAAAAAT??!!!"

Cynthia continued as if her child didn't go crazy all of a sudden. "Once the crown becomes a permanent addition to Vulcan, your incarnation will have attained the ultimate form of artifact cultivation. He will perfectly inherit and master all of the powers and strengths of the crown. The artifact will never pose any threat to you anymore because its will is identical to Vulcan's will."

That... that... that was impossible!

Veronica squirmed like a cat that was forced to take a bath as she tried to think about the sheer danger and impossibility of merging with a powerful crown.

The Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown was a companion to the Metal Scroll!

Even if the crown wasn't a pinnacle work, it should at least be close to it in terms of power and threat!

If Vulcan rashly dared to merge with this dangerous crown, then the latter was liable to destroy the incarnation outright or turn him into its slave!

Chapter 5335 The Temptation Of The Crown

The Metal God Method devised by Cynthia sounded incredible.

It fit Vulcan's conditions and needs to an impressive degree. Even in ancient times, it was a luxury for a True God to expend her full effort into tailoring a cultivation method for a single individual, especially one that had a lot of special needs.

The only truly outrageous part was that Vulcan most likely had to pass four insane challenges in order to complete the final and ultimate stage of the new cultivation method!

Despite Veronica's complaints, Cynthia remained unmoved by them. "A high-end cultivation method like this is rare and very much sought after. The resources and effort needed to succeed in one are higher, but you will thank yourself later for going through this effort. If Vulcan finds it far too difficult to merge himself with the Iron Resonance Crucifix Crown by himself, then maybe he should wait until Ves has advanced to Star Designer. By then, the two of them can pool their efforts together and produce a better result."

She was right. Compared to most other cultivators who could only really practice a single method, Veronica had multiple choices to dedicate herself towards.

Ves, Blinky and Vulcan all pursued their own form of cultivation. Only one of them had to succeed and advance to the rank of True God in order to lift up the other ones.

From that perspective, practicing a difficult and challenging cultivation method did not seem like a big deal.

At worst, Vulcan would remain stuck at the final bottleneck for as long as Ves had yet to become a Star Designer.

Veronica calmed down after this. It was unlikely for Vulcan to remain stuck at the final junction for an excessively long period.

"Okay. I'll do it." The cyborg cat said. "Can you teach me how to practice this method?"

"Very well. Be prepared. The cultivation method that I have made for your incarnation is dense and difficult to digest. Simplicity is not one of its virtues."

Having dabbled in cultivation science himself, Veronica quickly grew dizzy as she attempted to decipher the thick and heavy tome that her mother produced.

The complexity of the Metal God Method was unlike every other method that Veronica had encountered. The necessity of merging four different cultivation approaches together in a way that made sense for Vulcan forced Cynthia to add a lot of elements that responded to specific conditions.

Veronica found that it was much like software programming in a sense.

Fortunately, Vulcan did not need to comprehend and master the entire cultivation method right away. It was conveniently split up into multiple stages that rose in power and sophistication.

In order for Vulcan to get started, all he really needed to do was to attract the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown and reform the Heart of Steel. He could slowly work towards the more complicated creation cultivation and deity cultivation aspects after he had reformed his foundation.

"Do you understand now, my dear?" Cynthia asked after she patiently explained the first couple of chapters.

"Uhm, I think so. The first stage sounds simple enough at least."

"Good. I suggest that Vulcan should begin to practice it right away. I need you to tell me whether Vulcan is able to obtain possession of the crown. I am confident that my solution will work, but if this artifact remains stubborn, then I will have to make corrections."

"I understand. I will get on it right away."

The Metal God Method might sound great, but that did not change the fact that it was experimental in nature. It was better to try it out while Cynthia was available to help at any time.

"Make sure you inspect the condition of all of your incarnations." The mother advised. "As soon as Vulcan starts to practice the new method, many changes will occur. You need to keep track of them in order to minimize the chance of accidents. Do not let the crown take you by surprise."

Veronica seriously nodded. This was sound advice that applied to every scientific endeavor.

"I shall go do that. Once I am done, I will enter my System space and check out whether the crown has messed around inside."

It took a while to make proper measurements of everything.

Once Ves entered the System Space as his normal self, he carefully inspected the various stations and observed no oddities that indicated that the crown had attempted to subvert its new abode.

It wasn't until Ves entered the Sacred Temple and checked his Status by habit that he had noticed a shocking change!

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Senior Mech Designer

Specializations: Mutual Growth

Ascension Points: 172 AP

"What?! Why do I have 172 Ascension Points?! I am pretty sure my balance dropped all the way to 135 Ascension Points after my last big expenditures. I don't think I have done anything to earn so many AP out of the blue. I haven't finished any serious mech design projects and I haven't completed any missions either."

It made no sense for the Mech Designer System to hand out 37 Ascension Points for free. Ves had lived with it for quite a few years, so he knew that it was impossible for it to give him an early birthday present!

It wasn't until he entered the Sacred Hearth and laid eyes on the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown that he deduced the most likely answer.

"It has to be you." Ves accused. "You are the only variable that could have produced this change."

He recalled when he initially obtained the crown.

Ves first gained possession of the powerful artifact on the 95th day of the Age of Dawn.

Today was the 132nd day of the Age of Dawn.

This meant that the crown had rested inside the System Space for 37 standard days.

This was not a coincidence.

Ves narrowed his eyes.

The crown sent a clear and obvious signal with this action. So long as he continued to leave this ancient artifact in place, he could continue to harvest 1 AP per day without doing anything special.

Temptation suddenly overtook his mind.

A single Ascension Point did not hold much value, but it was a different story if it continued to trickle in over time.

Ves could earn 365 AP in a standard year.

It would only take 3 years for him to be able to afford an expensive enlightenment fruit like the one that contained the Divine Blacksmith Records.

Ves could obtain many more benefits out the System if he actively worked to earn additional Ascension Points on top of this new passive income!

However, the premise of earning 1 AP a day was if he allowed the crown to occupy his Divine Core.

He had a feeling that once he transferred the crown to Vulcan, its energies would begin to feed into his incarnation instead.

"Nothing comes for free." He reminded himself. "There is no way the crown is selfless enough to give away this benefit without earning a return on investment."

Ves only had to recall the instance where the Polymath had gone mad to experience a sobering chill.

While it sounded nice to harvest 1 AP a day without doing any effort, Vulcan could make much more effective use of the crown.

This was because unlike Ves, Vulcan's Heart of Steel offered sufficient protection against the nefarious artifact's subversion attempts!

It was not easy to earn a profit. There was no point in chasing after a lucrative reward when Ves wouldn't be able to stay alive and uncorrupted long enough to take advantage of all of the benefits!

Even if Vulcan's ability to exploit the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown was only 10 percent as effective, Ves would still go for this option because the risks were drastically lower!

Despite this logic, it took a lot of determination for Ves to make up his mind.

"I can't... allow myself... to grow complacent."

As much as the Mech Designer System frustrated Ves at times, it had always been fair to him as far as he was aware of. It offered clear prices for every product or service and also established clear rules on how to earn more points.

If Ves was being honest with himself, the rewards offered by the System were much more valuable in relation to the amount of work he needed to do in order to earn them! He would have never been able to make so much progress if the prices accurately reflected market demand!

In short, the Mech Designer System had already been generous enough to Ves. It offered rare and virtually unobtainable rewards in exchange for a relatively modest amount of labor.

It had taught Ves the importance of working hard. It was doubtful that he would have turned into a highly productive workaholic if not for the System spurring him on all of the time!

It was antithetical for the System to suddenly award Ascension Points when Ves had not done any of the work required to earn them. He even felt repulsed by the very concept.

There was a substantial risk that he might grow complacent one day!

Once he had lost so many competences due to growing dependent on the crown, he had little choice but to keep it around in order to sustain a high degree of growth.

"What a nefarious scheme!"

Ves had to hand it to this ancient artifact. It picked the right sort of incentive to tempt him into keeping it around. He had no doubt that the prospect of earning easy APs would have corrupted him to the point of imparting his future as a mech designer!

Though Ves was not completely certain about his judgment, he sensed enough of a threat from the crown to gain a greater sense of urgency.

He had to pry it off his Divine Core right away!

"Vulcan! You know what to do! Get to work!"

A manifestation of a bearded and dwarven version of Ves appeared inside the Sacred Hearth.

The incarnation and design spirit had already studied the first chapter of the Metal God Method.

Much of the processes had been adapted from the Heart of Steel Mantra, so it was not that challenging for Vulcan to comprehend them in a relatively short amount of time.

The bearded design spirit stood before the Hammer of Brilliance, which was the current manifestation of the incarnation's Divine Core.

As soon as Vulcan started to practice the first but most crucial processes of the first chapter, the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown started to shake!

Ves silently observed his dwarven incarnation at work. He never thought about it before, but it turned out that it was possible for him or his incarnations to cultivate while time technically remained frozen outside!

The System Space even produced the exact same amount of exotic radiation as Ves' current position in the Red Ocean.

All of this had many implications, but Ves didn't care about that right now. His only priority at the moment was for Vulcan to succeed in his endeavor.

Numerous changes took place. The incarnation's Divine Core started to shake and pulse as it appeared to undergo a subtle but fundamental transformation.

Woosh.

It happened in an instant.

In one moment, the crown remained firmly attached to the Hand of Creation.

In another moment, the crown lifted itself in the air and rapidly surged towards the Hammer of Brilliant before firmly rooting itself to Vulcan's Divine Core!

Success!

The first chapter had done its job!

Ves didn't exactly know why, but the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown had somehow regarded Vulcan as a much better catch.

Just like a scumbag who abandoned an average girlfriend for a much more attractive woman, the crown did exactly what Ves and Cynthia hoped for! It turned out that luring the crown away was not as difficult as they anticipated.

"I kind of feel insulted." Ves grumbled. "You could have at least shown a bit of reluctance. Am I that bad of a target?"

Oh well. The ancient artifact had become Vulcan's problem now. Ves grew a lot more reassured now that there was a strong layer of separation between himself and the cursed crown.

Chapter 5336 The Devil Is In The Details

Vulcan had officially got started with the Metal God Method.

While the design spirit had a long journey ahead of him, engaging in a risky but highly lucrative form of artifact cultivation should considerably speed up his journey!

Cynthia Larkinson estimated that Vulcan could reach the threshold to True God in as little as 20 years due to the formidable boost provided by the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown.

Of course, if Vulcan seriously wanted to complete his cultivation at record time, he needed to do his utmost to engage in all four cultivation approaches.

Vulcan not only needed to be more active in spreading his 'faith' among a growing group of devout worshippers, he also had to refine his personal craftsmanship skills by possessing the bodies of many willing artisans.

As reluctant as Ves may be in engaging in a form of superstition, he consoled himself with the fact that the Metal God Method was not too exploitative in nature.

Once Ves verified that Vulcan had successfully drawn the crown to his side, he grew reassured that the threat posed by this ancient relic had been contained.

He retreated from the System Space and directed most of his focus towards Veronica.

The cyborg cat happily announced the results!

"Myaow! It worked, mother! Vulcan only started the first chapter of the new cultivation method for a short amount of time before the crown defected to my incarnation. While I am still a bit concerned about the fact that it is still residing inside the System Space, I'm happy now that it is no longer in direct contact with my Divine Core."

Cynthia's expression hardly changed at the news. It was as if she was absolutely certain that this outcome would happen.

"That is good to hear, my dear. The symbols of authority are all made by different immortal gods, but they are ultimately all the same. Selfishness is written into their blood."

"There's one thing I am unclear about," Veronica spoke. "The crown defected to Vulcan awfully quickly. What is it about Vulcan that attracts the crown so much? I thought that it was intelligent to a degree. Surely it should be aware that my incarnation's Heart of Steel will negate its attempts at manipulation."

His mother released a chuckle. "Oh, dear. You still haven't figured it out. I am disappointed in you. For all of your caution and all of your cleverness, you still failed to see beneath the surface."

Her tone took on a slightly darker edge. It caused Veronica to grow concerned to the point where she no longer felt any jubilation about shifting the crown.

"Uh, what do you mean, mother?"

"Think. Think about what the symbol of authority wants. Think about how Vulcan can appeal to the crown. Since we have established that you do not possess the strength to move the artifact away by force, you have no choice aside from giving what it wants. Did you truly think that you could have lured the crown away without offering sufficiently compelling bait?"

"Wait, what?!" Veronica jumped in the air in alarm! "Did you set a trap in the Metal God Method?! Did you turn Vulcan into bait?!"

"Calm down." The Oblivion Empress admonished the unruly cyborg cat. "Your description is not completely accurate. Let me explain what I have done. You do not need to be afraid about compromising the Heart of Steel. It works exactly as I have portrayed. What you have overlooked is that the devil is in the details."

"What are you talking about?!"

"Do you have any conception of how strong a symbol of authority actually is? No matter whether it is the Golden Laurel Wreath Crown or the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown, they are both transformed from the blood of gods that are powerful enough to crush every living being in a star system. Even a single drop of blood retains a significant fraction of that enormous potential. Compare that to the Heart of Steel. As impressive as it may sound, it is not a divine construct. Vulcan must cultivate it to a much greater extent if he wishes to reluctantly block the full brunt of the crown's manipulation."

Veronica looked a lot more sour now that Cynthia had revealed this ugly truth.

Her mother lied!

She had given the impression that the Heart of Steel would become effective at a relatively early stage, but it turned out that Vulcan needed to cultivate for many years before he could properly guard himself against the malicious influence of the crown!

"When?" The upset cat asked.

"The Metal God Method is divided into 10 stages. I anticipate that Vulcan will need to reach the 7th stage in order to strengthen his Heart of Steel to the point where he can adequately handle any overt pressure exerted by the crown. Even then, the crown may still be able to affect some of his cognition."

Veronica became glum after hearing that. The Metal God Method started off simple but became successively more difficult at the later stages. It would take a lot of years to reach the seventh stage!

"What should Vulcan do in the meantime?" The cat helplessly asked. "Is there nothing my incarnation can do aside from letting the crown brainwash him however it likes?"

"It is not as bad as you think." Cynthia consoled her child. "The Heart of Steel already offers partial protection, and it will grow successfully stronger the closer Vulcan has cultivated to the 7th stage. I have also added another safeguard that should offer an additional layer of protection against the crown."

"Huh? You didn't mention anything about that. What exactly did you do, mother?"

"If you have studied the Metal God Method carefully enough, then you should understand that its deity cultivation aspect is not that simple. If Vulcan practices it properly, he should be able form a stronger connection with his worshipers. Once this has occurred, certain forms of harm that have befallen your incarnation can be diverted to his dedicated subjects. They can bear the burden in his stead. I have worked hard to ensure that any manipulation from the crown can easily be shifted to the masses. This is the release valve and the most effective form of protection that I have been able to devise under the circumstances."

The revelation shocked Veronica. She never thought that this could be done. A part of her felt sickened at what her mother had done.

All of those people that had chosen to bare their hearts to the entity they considered a god had secretly been reduced to decoys of sort.

While it was not their only purpose, Cynthia deliberately turned them into literal human shields just so that Vulcan could escape an attack from the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown!

It was immoral!

It went against the principles that Veronica held dear!

It would have been one thing for Vulcan to cultivate the Metal God Method after becoming aware of this exploitative dynamic, but Veronica only found out afterwards!

She felt betrayed by her own mother!

"Why did you do this?" The cat asked.

The True God gently placed her hand on the cyborg cat's head.

"I did it to protect you, my child. Your life and wellbeing are far more important to me than anything else. I admit that I withheld this important piece of information from you in order to teach you a lesson. Cultivation methods can contain traps. The only way you can guard against them is by creating them yourself or by fully deciphering how they work. Do not blindly trust a cultivation method that looks overly complicated and is difficult to interpret. The greater the complexity, the easier it is for the creator to add in elements that are not benign to the practitioner."

Veronica had certainly learned her lesson alright. She would never put her entire trust in someone else's cultivation method again.

Even her mother had proven herself to be unreliable!

Cynthia radiated approval as she observed her child's shift in mentality.

"Always be on guard. The friends and family that surround you may not always be as trustworthy as you think. I highly suggest that Vulcan takes his time to study and comprehend the entire Metal God Method. This will be helpful to his cultivation. The more he understands the principles of the method, the lower the chance that he will go astray."

"Oh, he'll do that alright." Veronica muttered in response.

"I love you. Whether you are my son or my daughter, the fact of the matter is that you are my heir and my continuation. You are the life that I have nurtured when I had regressed to a mortal. I will not allow you to come to harm if I can help it. I may not be able to protect you from every possible threat, but I SHALL NOT LET AN OLD CROWN TAKE AWAY MY OWN CHILD! NO ONE IS MORE IMPORTANT TO ME THAN YOU. THE DWARVES WHO REVERE HIM SHOULD BE HONORED TO OFFER THEMSELVES TO THEIR GOD! I WOULD RATHER SACRIFICE THE LIVES OF TRILLIONS OF DWARVES THAN TO LET YOU SUFFER!"

Power suddenly radiated from the True God!

Cynthia's eyes shone with energy while her robe fluttered as the air began to whip around her form.

Her cruel and heartless domain began to spread from her body and affect the minds of every subject in her expansive fleet inside the Nyxian Gap!

The strong emotions of a True God were difficult to bear for most mortals!

Veronica had jumped away and flew all the way to the furthest side of the meditation chamber. She had grown completely spooked by Cynthia's uncontrollable outburst!

"Myaow! You're sounding kind of scary at the moment! What has happened to you, mother!?"

The cyborg cat's words caused the emotional True God to regain her awareness. Cynthia quickly drew in her presence and retracted her potent domain.

The switch from madness to sanity happened in a matter of seconds. Cynthia seemed so scary at a moment, but she quickly regained the warm and motherly vibe that brought so much peace to Veronica.

"I apologize for that." Cynthia spoke in a much gentler tone. "I did not wish to show this side of me to you. As much as I would like to teach you further, you should leave. I must meditate if I am to calm my restlessness and reinforce my control over myself. We shall speak later."

Before Veronica could get another word in, she felt a strong force grapple her metallic form and quickly toss her through the opened entrance!

As the cyborg cat smacked into the bulkhead on the other hand, the hatch quickly closed shut.

Numerous different energy shields as well as more powerful spiritual barriers came online that completely isolated the Lady of the Night from everyone else, including her own family!

Veronica experienced another chill as she tried to make sense of what just happened.

Her mother's behavior had been... odd, to say the least.

Had Cynthia lost control of her temper, or was all of her theatrics part of another deceptive scheme? The fact that Veronica could no longer trust her mother on an unconditional basis made it difficult to determine the truth.

It would not be a surprise if Cynthia only acted as if she had gone mad. A deep schemer like her would have many possible reasons to act this way towards Ves and other people.

The more frightening possibility was if this was a part of Cynthia's true face. What if her gentle and loving exterior was just a facade for a much colder and cruder personality?

What if Cynthia had failed to repair all of her spiritual injuries when she became a True God again?

What if she had exposed herself to the Golden Laurel Wreath Crown that her protective measures failed to block its influence?

What if... Cynthia had already been mad long before she ever became a mother?

Veronica suddenly realized that for all of the time she spent in the company of her mother, she didn't actually know much about Cynthia Larkinson.

This was a serious problem.

Chapter 5337 I Am Not My Mother

Ves grew incredibly concerned at what happened today.

While he was glad that Vulcan finally obtained a comprehensive cultivation method that should allow him to unlock his full potential, he was less pleased with a number of its implications.

When Cynthia originally explained deity cultivation to him, she described it as an inherently unequal means of gaining power and longevity.

A lot of cultivators that posed themselves as gods ruthlessly exploited and extracted every possible resource out of their believers.

When one party was much more powerful than the other, the former usually got free reign to do anything he wanted!

Without any effective form of resistance, the ordinary folk could do little aside from hoping that their supposed god would be merciful enough to let them live a decent life.

Ves had expressed a lot of contempt towards deity cultivators at the time. These were beings that gained strength from the suffering and sacrifices of the weak. It took a cruel and selfish heart for them to treat their fellow people as cattle to be butchered as well.

He never expected that he, or at least an incarnation of his, would be put into the exact same position.

Sure, his mother may have hoodwinked Vulcan into cultivating the Metal God Method without fully understanding all of the repercussions of this decision, but that did not change the fact that he had become a potentially exploitative deity cultivator himself!

A part of Ves felt upset that the inadequacies of the Heart of Steel would give Vulcan little choice but to let his subjects become exposed to the machinations of the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown.

Another part of Ves actually felt relieved that his mother had been ingenious enough to implement such an amazingly promising defense mechanism!

When it came down to it, Ves did not want Vulcan to get manipulated by the crown.

Allowing this dangerous artifact to warp the cognition of a bunch of dwarves that he didn't really care about was ultimately better than letting it corrupt Vulcan outright!

Ves tried to soothe his guilty conscience by making excuses for himself.

"It's not as bad as it sounds." He thought after a few minutes. "A bunch of weaklings can hardly do any damage. I would be concerned if it is allowed to whisper in the ear of another Star Designer, but this obviously won't happen."

There was another factor that eased his concerns.

"More people can spread the burden."

A greater quantity of worshipers could dilute the intensity of any attack. Any strike that was fatal to Vulcan could be diverted into so many willing subjects that hardly anyone got harmed in the end.

Of course, this meant that it became imperative for Vulcan to spread his faith as much as possible.

The more followers he gained, the greater his defensive buffer!

The opposite was also true. If enemies purposefully targeted the dwarves and anyone else who believed in Vulcan, his incarnation would quickly be deprived of a lot of layers of protection!

It was in Vulcan's best interest to protect the dwarves and any other worshipers from powerful enemies who sought to undermine his basis of power.

In other words, Vulcan and worshipers had entered into a mutually dependent relationship with each other.

From the moment Vulcan engaged in a proper form of deity cultivation that amounted to more than passively collecting spiritual feedback, he had assumed actual responsibility over the dwarves.

Vulcan had to become the God of Dwarves in truth. He needed to make sure he kept watch over the dwarves and respond to any threat that targeted their lives or faith!

The shepherd could not afford to lose all of his sheep!

Perhaps this was one of the goals that Cynthia tried to accomplish. She knew about his reluctance towards deity cultivation and created this relationship in order to force him to embrace this approach.

It worked.

Now that the deed had been done, Vulcan had little choice but to persist with the Metal God Method and see it through the end.

Only when he reached the 7th stage would he be able to bear the crown by himself.

"Besides, who says that this relationship needs to remain one-sided for the most part?"

His design philosophy was Mutual Growth for a reason. It represented his original aspiration and his ideal.

He would not be a good mech designer if he let his incarnation stray into the wrong path.

As far as he saw it, there was still plenty of room for change.

Currently, Vulcan gained a huge advantage over his worshipers by turning the latter into his human shields.

The best way to compensate the dwarves for their 'service' was for Vulcan to grant them benefits in return!

So long as Vulcan helped out the dwarves enough to bring their relationship back into balance, neither side should have any further reason to feel exploited.

"A fair and equal transaction is better in the long run."

Neither Ves nor Vulcan could ever treat the dwarves as their slaves. These hardy people deserved a lot of respect and appreciation for the help that they could provide.

If Vulcan was destined to become a god, then Ves would make damn sure that he became a stellar example of a proper deity!

In no way should Vulcan ever be allowed to become a stereotypically evil god who usually got defeated by a band of brave adventurers or whatever!

Ves ultimately felt a lot better about himself. The weight on his heart had disappeared once he resolved to keep his incarnation on the right path.

"I am not my mother." He affirmed to himself.

He had already spent enough time among his mother to determine that she was not a product of a modern human society.

She possessed norms and values that were not that typical in different states. Her perspective on cultivation, power, hierarchy and the Big Two showed that much of her cognition had been shaped by a society outside of conventional human society in the Milky Way.

No matter what society she used to belong to, she had her values, and Ves had his own values.

Even if he inherited a part of her talents and so on, Ves always considered himself to be a member of a modern human society.

There were times where strayed from this belief, but he needed to stand fast in front of his mother and resist all of her attempts to drag him into her world!

"I should tell her to stop making decisions on my behalf next time I talk to her." He muttered. "She needs to stop screwing me around."

Ves no longer spent any further thought on this issue and went back to monitoring Vulcan's condition.

The design spirit had become engrossed in comprehending the Metal God Method. It was not acceptable for Vulcan to blindly cultivate it when Cynthia could have buried other nasty traps within its dense and complicated instructions.

The problem was that his mother's work was so advanced and esoteric that only a cultivation master who possessed nearly equal understanding as her could fully break it down!

This meant that unless Ves managed to capture a powerful Compact sorcerer, he could forget about deciphering the entire Metal God Method!

Ves had already made this determination, which was why Vulcan continued to practice the first chapter despite all of his misgivings.

He wasn't sure how long it would take to complete the first stage, but he estimated that it should only take a few weeks due to the low demands.

The second stage was where the Metal God Method truly came online. Once the Heart of Steel completed its conversion, it was time for Vulcan to engage in creation cultivation by descending into the bodies of a few devout artisans.

"Wait a second." Ves straightened his back as realization struck his mind. "Can I possess my own body?!"

The notion sounded absurd on the surface, but he saw no reason why it shouldn't work.

What mattered was that Vulcan got hands-on by borrowing a willing body to craft his desired products.

Who said that the body couldn't belong to Ves?

His eyes suddenly lit up! This was a great idea! If Ves ever wanted to create a special trinket that was different from a mech, Vulcan could just descend on his body and use his workshop to do his work!

"So long as Vulcan is at the helm, it will be his work for the most part!"

Another advantage to doing this was that Ves and Vulcan could impart both of their advantages to their products.

It was as if Ves was collaborating with another part of himself!

There were just enough differences between Ves and Vulcan to make this weird form of self-collaboration fruitful. Their domains were different from each other which meant that they could add features to a product that their other selves could not replicate by themselves.

The potential to create exquisite products was great!

Ves knew he could test it out as soon as Vulcan hit the 2nd stage of the Metal God Method!

"I can make an excellent set of handbags for my wife!"

If he did a good enough job, then his gifts might convince Gloriana to stop her search for a 5 million MTA credit handbag. It was brilliant!

"Of course, I can't forget about all of the other artisans either."

Though Ves hadn't paid too much attention to the Creation Association as of late, Vulcan had kept much better track of this growing religious organization.

Under the leadership of Director Samandra Avikon, the Creation Association had founded more and more branches in many different middle zones as well as lower zones.

Ves believed that it would only be a matter of time before the Creation Association set foot in the upper zones!

More and more craftsmen of many different industries had come to appreciate Vulcan for various different reasons.

The fact that the Creation Association sold various types of totems that could actively inspire craftsmen after receiving fair remuneration had done much to promote its popularity!

This was the sort of transactional and equitable relationship that Ves wanted to preserve.

Vulcan might not be generous enough to give away his help for free, but he would never steal from his own worshipers!

In any case, Vulcan needed to make use of all of those craftsmen in order to further his cultivation.

Even if Vulcan could borrow Ves' body to engage in creation cultivation, the opportunity cost of doing so was too great.

Ves had better things to do with his time than to let his own incarnation pilot his body like a miniature biomech!

His workload was already huge. It made little sense to give up his time for Vulcan when the latter could easily borrow the body of another willing person.

In any case, Vulcan should do fine for now. The Metal God Method was ultimately better than the Heart of Steel Mantra, so he should continue to cultivate it with an appropriate level of caution.

"This reminds me that I still need to make a bunch of cultivation methods for my kids." Ves recalled.

He originally planned to compose a basic draft before showing it to his mother.

Recent events prompted him to scrap the latter step.

Even if his comprehension of cultivation science was a lot more shallow, Ves possessed enough confidence that he could devise simple cultivation methods that should still be sound enough to work.

There was nothing wrong with adhering to simplicity. His children were all young so it was not as if they needed a huge power boost right away. They might not even be able to control themselves if they grew too rapidly when they were young!

"I can't let them follow the footsteps of their grandmother!"

Ves could not allow his children to inherit whatever caused Cynthia to lose her grip on herself.

Control and stability were paramount. Ves wanted his children to remain just as sane and sober just like their father!

Chapter 5338 Joan Devos Elementary School

Ves settled into a new routine.

With Vulcan's business taken care of, he no longer felt as much urgency as before.

Even if the Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown was up to mischief again, Ves no longer became directly exposed to its nefarious plots.

With that concern out of the way, Ves put his mind on more relevant matters.

From negotiating with various first-class powers to beginning his studies on first-class mech design, Ves began to live a busy life.

His wife also started to settle down in New Constantinople VIII. She had become extra driven to fit in and become a part of the local community, but she knew that her qualifications were wholly inadequate compared to her husband.

This was why she tried to work extra hard!

The process of developing a custom first-class cranial implant could not be rushed, but Gloriana could still invest much of her time on completing her ongoing mech design projects.

The Jupiter Project and the Bloodripper Project continued to progress at an accelerated rate due to her eagerness to clear her old obligations.

Ves possessed the same intention. Both of them made sure to schedule their work sessions at the same time slots so that they could collaborate with each other to the best possible effect.

The design network created by Blinky or Alexandria enabled the pair to maximize their productivity and minimize any friction.

In fact, the pair already cooperated pretty well due to working alongside each other for many years. This would remain a constant regardless if they worked on second-class or first-class mech designs.

Aside from that, Ves and Gloriana still had to handle their own responsibilities.

Ves regularly needed to keep in touch with his clan as well as the various Terran authorities.

Gloriana oversaw most of the issues relating to their household. She spent considerably more time with the children and made sure that their brats did not spend most of their time with their nannies and guards.

One occasion that Ves did not want to miss was the enrollment of his children to their new school.

The Joan Devos Elementary School was located in a central and highly secure district of Sandan.

It was one of the elite schools attended by children up to 10 years of age. In order to maintain its exclusivity and quality standards, Joan Devos only enrolled children that could afford the extravagant tuition fees or possessed a solid connection to a Terran clan.

In short, only the descendents of the upper layer of society could get into this exclusive school!

This meant that this educational institution was an excellent place for the future movers and shakers of Terran society to befriend each other and build networks that would serve them well in the future.

There was nothing childish about this. The bigshots played by different rules. Who knew whether the camaraderie these kids forged today could form the basis of a highly consequential business alliance in a few decades!

Ves and Gloriana actually had different opinions about enrolling their children to Joan Devos.

Gloriana felt it was important for their children to learn how to get along with peers that belonged to the highest layer of society. Since they were all destined to become leaders of their own, it was best if they knew how to blend in with other powerful figures from the beginning.

Ves did not want his children to spend all of their time among rich and entitled snobs. He had seen plenty of people grow up in an insular society to the point where they no longer understood the common folk.

Even Ves was not immune to this effect. His abrupt rise in status and the need to limit his movements for his own protection meant that he could no longer interact too much with ordinary people anymore.

Of course, it was not as if the Terrans were normal from his perspective. They were all prideful and lived fairly well-off lives due to their prosperous society.

The Terran Alliance as a whole may be embroiled in a crisis that would only grow more severe over time, but it was still no problem for most colonies to guarantee the health and wellbeing of its citizens.

The average living standards of ordinary Terrans was above the level of a normal first-rater and far above a typical second-rater!

If not for the fact that the truly meaningful jobs often required insanely high educational qualifications, many of these Terrans would have been able to gain a much higher standing in their society!

After finding this out, Ves no longer insisted that his children should attend a more inclusive school.

"Yay! We can go to an actual school again!" Andraste cheered! "I can play real sports again. I hate the Hyper Chamber. I can never go to my friends or invite them over."

"Meow meow!" Lucky sounded happy for her as he rested on her lap.

The shuttle ride was short since the Joan Devos Elementary School was not located too far away from the main campus of the Eden Institute.

"It is regrettable that we are not allowed to bring our pets." Aurelia sighed in regret as she stroked Clixie's furry back.

"Miaow-"

"You are never too far away from cats." Gloriana spoke as she held Marvaine in her arms. "You always have Mana by your side, and the Golden Cat will always respond if you are in need."

Ves coughed after he heard that. "It is best not to parade our spirits in front of other people. While their existence is not exactly a secret, the supply of companion spirits is restricted due to their vital importance to the Deep Strike Plan. People covet what they cannot possess, and they can easily grow resentful to those that own a treasure that they cannot attain for themselves. While I don't think the pupils of Joan Devos are that stupid, it is best not to give them an opening. Try and keep your companion spirits out of sight, okay?"

He gave a few more tips to his children before their shuttle finally touched down at the landing zone of the elementary school.

As soon as they exited the RA shuttle, the Larkinsons already attracted a lot of attention from other Terrans.

Parents as well as children had all heard about the famous guests. None of them looked down on Ves and his family because of their inferior backgrounds. Accomplishments trumped everything in human society, and the fact that Ves had reached a citizenship tier that they could never reach in their lifetimes was a big deal in Terran space!

The school grounds possessed plenty of greenery, though not as much as the Eden Institute.

Instead of trying to recreate the mythical Garden of Eden, Joan Devos instead tried to provide an active playing ground to its students.

The school had built a lot of fields and facilities dedicated to sports, arts and other activities. No matter what their age may be, there was always something fun and meaningful for them to do once they completed their mandatory classes.

As the children immediately became enamored by all of the playing fields, their parents met with the principal of the school.

"It is a great honor for us to host and educate your children." The elderly Devos clansman spoke with great enthusiasm. "We have already made the necessary adjustments in the lesson plans for each of your offspring. They are remarkably clever and quick to learn, but their lack of augmentations that is considered standard among Terrans will mean that they will likely need additional hours to learn certain subjects."

"We understand." Gloriana spoke. "Please inform us if our children are struggling to keep up in some of their classes."

They talked a bit more about the special arrangements that Joan Devos had made for their newest students.

It was actually really troublesome that Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine were designer babies from different and unfamiliar strains.

The Terrans had their own approach to augmentation, and that meant that their children became good at some subjects at an early age.

Their schools were all geared towards the common characteristics of Terran designer babies, so it was unavoidable for foreign students to fall slightly out of lockstep with the rest of the crowd.

This was a relatively minor problem, though. Ves possessed enough confidence in his children to believe that they were unlikely to fall behind.

The older they grew, the more their nature as partial primordial humans became evident!

In addition to that, their companion spirits also became a lot more capable of independent action after they started to mature.

Once they dealt with this necessary topic, the conversation finally took a more interesting turn.

The principal beamed as he waved his arm around the campus. Pleasant-looking school buildings were either rooted to the ground or floated above in the air.

A combination of security bots and lightly armed guards patrolled the perimeter without looking too aggressive. Their beige colorations did much to lower their perceived threat level, but their compact loadouts were no joke!

"You should have no concerns about security. Our first-class multipurpose mechs may not be visible from here, but they are on standby right beneath the surface. We have also made arrangements with your RA escort force to accommodate their forces on our grounds whenever any of your children are in attendance."

That provided a lot of relief to Ves.

Though he didn't entirely trust the mechers, he could say the same for the Terrans.

With both groups working to keep his children safe, they could check and balance each other.

"Here in Joan Devos, we pride ourselves for raising well-rounded individuals who have more than textbooks in their mind." The principal continued on after he explained the security arrangements. "We have invested greatly into our extracurricular activities. Your children can not only learn more skills, but also develop deeper relationships with classmates who share the same interests. Have you decided the extracurricular activities for your two daughters already, or do you wish for them to explore their available options and allow them to make their own decisions?"

"We have already made their choices for them." Gloriana immediately said. "Aurelia shall take on dancing and join the debating society. Andraste will participate in zero-g hockey and archery."

"Good choices. Our teachers and instructors are among the best in the Riston Territory. They shall make certain that your children will learn the skills they need to excel in their respective activities."

Joan Devos encouraged its students to engage in at least one extracurricular activity, but also gave them the option to pursue two at the same time.

Marvaine was still too young for this, so there was no need to make any choices for him at this junction.

Gloriana had chosen the activities for Aurelia while Ves had picked the ones for Andraste.

Aurelia had already invested a lot of practice in both dancing and debating, so she should be able to adapt quickly. This was despite the fact that she would be joining other Terran students who already had years of practice under their belt.

Andraste was younger, so she had a chance to learn from scratch.

Ves wanted his rambunctious daughter to hone her control over her body and learn how to navigate a chaotic battlefield. Zero-g hockey was a popular sport, and it was one that served future mech pilots extremely well as it helped to increase their combat literacy in space.

As for archery, this had been a tentative choice on his part. His daughter had already started to learn a lot about marksmanship from Saintess Ulrika Vraken. This was an extremely luxurious treatment that could not be matched by any other school in New Constantinople VIII.

Since that was the case, Ves encouraged his daughter to take on archery instead. This would hopefully add a bit of variety in her life while also growing familiar with ranged combat from another angle.

If archery turned out to be a poor fit for his little girl, she could always switch to another activity.

Chapter 5339 Diandi Base

Sending their children to an actual school as opposed to virtual tutoring classes significantly changed the family dynamic.

Gloriana no longer had to accompany her children as much as before.

Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine were already having a blast at their new schools!

The differences between virtual schooling and physical schooling were greater than Ves expected.

Their children became a lot happier now that they could make friends for real. They were no longer as lonely as before and already started to live more active lives now that they could engage in real extracurricular activities.

These were conditions that no Hyper Chamber could provide.

Seeing how his children became a lot more invigorated than before, Ves began to lean towards staying in New Constantinople VIII for a longer period of time.

On the one hand, he wanted his children to stay in a community long enough to form deeper friendships and endure less disruptions in their lives.

On the other hand, Ves did not want his family to become inextricably tangled with the Terrans.

Perhaps it might be better to postpone a move until years later. He could balance out the Terran influence by enrolling his children into Rubarthan schools.

Of course, the premise of this happening was that he and the Larkinson Clan developed a good relationship with the Rubarthan Pact.

Talks with the Rubarthans were still ongoing. Due to the magnitude of the decision combined with the deep divisions between the two leading princes, the matter had ended into a deadlock.

This completely upended the Inferno Spear Prince's intention to give the Rubarthan Pact a decisive lead on this matter.

So long as the Smokestack Prince and other significant Rubarthan factions continued their opposition, there was no way to make any serious progress.

This was the deficiency of a centralized state that had just lost access to their ultimate decision maker.

It looked as if the only way for the Rubarthans to make up their minds was for their god pilots to return.

While Ves grew a little disappointed by this, he did care all that much. It was only a matter of time before the Rubarthans concluded a deal with him. The advantages of kinship networks were too great to ignore.

As Ves continued to split his time between designing mechs, studying advanced knowledge and playing with his children when they returned from school, a major development had finally taken place.

The Larkinson Clan finally managed to establish its own base in New Constantinople VIII!

This was the first piece of wholly owned real estate that the Larkinsons had acquired in an upper zone. Its significance was great as it signified that the Larkinson Clan had established a permanent footing in first-class society!

This event was of great significance to the Devos Ancient Clan and the Terran Alliance as a whole.

Master Laila Devos accompanied Ves and the other Larkinsons as they moved out of the rented villa and settled down in their new homes.

While the Devosans had put considerable effort into making the living environment more pleasant, they could not change the fact that all of the walls and other structures were originally used to form a small military outpost in dangerous space.

This meant that the decorations were rather sparse. The furniture lacked refinement and there was a serious shortage of windows and gardens.

The Larkinsons actually did not mind this all that much. They had gone through so many dangers that they took greater comfort in extra security.

Few compromises had been made in terms of defense. Useless aesthetics made way for practical and efficient architecture. It even reminded the Larkinsons of the years they spent in space.

At this moment, contractors were still in the process of shipping in furniture and installing lots of fixtures.

The place would slowly lose its sharpest edges over time.

The Bluejay Fleet had already dispatched its mechs and other guard troops to man the defenses and patrol the perimeter.

The Devos Ancient Clan had given Ves the choice on where he wanted to establish his first first-class base.

He could have chosen to place it in the outskirts of Sandan, but that made it too easy for threats to blend in the city and attack the base by surprise.

Ves had opted to place his base in an isolated region that was still within shuttle distance of the capital city.

The transit time was not too long considering how fast first-class shuttles could fly. His children could even travel to school and back in an instant by utilizing teleportation technology, though Ves was far too paranoid to employ it on a regular basis.

"We have taken the liberty to cooperate with the mechers to upgrade the defenses of Diandi Base." Master Laila Devos explained to Ves as they briefly toured the relatively small site. "Our main effort was to reinforce the surrounding underground terrain. This does not prevent enemies from tunneling into your base from below, but it will hinder anyone who attempts to do so. Seismic

sensors along with other monitoring systems will detect any approaches no matter how careful the intruders may be. It only takes one titan shield to blockade them long enough to evacuate the base or to call in reinforcements."

Ves looked pleased at this. It was quite easy for first-class mechs to tunnel underground if they had been equipped with the right modules.

However, first-raters had already developed extensive countermeasures against this. The most direct way to frustrate tunnelers was to strengthen and reinforce the underground landscape to such an extent that it made underground incursions impractical!

The Devosans had already done this for Sandan in its entirety. The fact that all of this underground reinforcement also provided strong protection against orbital bombardment and the discharge of powerful weapons made this investment worthwhile.

Diandi Base was situated tens of kilometers away from Sandan, so it had initially settled on softer ground.

The cost to reinforce the ground was expensive, but it was a trivial matter for an ancient clan to cover this expense. The base wasn't even all that big.

"Your new base can only accommodate up to 120 mechs for the time being, but there is abundant room for expansion." Master Laila Devos continued to explain as they walked past a mech hangar. "The workshops and other production facilities here are limited in capacity as they are mainly used to facilitate repairs and engage in small-scale construction. You can expand them as you wish if you ever want to set up a proper manufacturing complex."

The Cat Nest used to be the iconic base and production complex of the Larkinson Clan. The Devosans would welcome a more upscale version of such a place on one of their most important planets.

Ves shook his head. "I do not intend to expand this base for the time being. We have a serious shortage of first-class personnel. While we have begun to retrain thousands of my clansmen, it will take years before they become qualified to work in the Terran Alliance. This base will remain severely underutilized for a while."

This was not new to the Devos Ancient Clan.

"Have you put thought into recruiting our local talents?" Master Laila asked. "Now that you have begun to settle into Terran space, it is necessary for you to quickly build an organization that can navigate the intricacies of a first-class society. The sooner you establish your new administration, the less you need to rely on your tier 3 galactic citizenship to convince others to work around your inadequacies."

He knew that she was right about that. Ves had been struggling over this decision for weeks.

Personally, he felt it was too soon to recruit a bunch of first-raters who were strongly attached to the Terran Alliance.

These sorts of people were bound to become much harder to integrate into the Larkinson Clan than other people.

The more elite and qualified they were, the harder it was for them to forget their original loyalties!

Ves greatly valued the unity of his current clansmen. Many of the second-raters who applied to join the Larkinson Clan did not have strong loyalties to their old states and organizations to begin with, so they easily accepted the identity of a Larkinson.

He predicted that it would become a lot more difficult for a Terran citizen to do the same.

To them, joining the Larkinson Clan was not mutually exclusive with being a proud Terran citizen.

Every first-class state was a prosperous and well-run state by default. None of them were terrible. This meant that its citizens were much happier and prouder with their current identities.

"I do not want to rush this process." Ves replied. "I admire the competence of the Terrans, but my clan has a history of picking up people who are discontented with their old lives. You Terrans happen to run your territories so well that hardly anyone here meets our recruitment criteria."

"Life is different in Terran space." The dean of the Eden Institute acknowledged. "I advise you to be more flexible and open-minded when it comes to recruitment. There are still many decent Terrans that can become an excellent addition to your clan. With your reputation and contributions, there will be no shortage in demand."

Ves pressed his lips. "I know, Master, but... one of the conditions to joining the Larkinson Clan is to sever all existing ties and loyalties to other states and organizations. We prize our independence and autonomy, as you should know. Our exclusive kinship network is good at determining whether a new recruit is truly committed to start a new life in our clan. I believe that most Terrans will not be able to pass this essential test."

His tone already made it clear that he did not intend to compromise on this matter. It was out of the question for him to drop this requirement.

"I think you would be surprised how many Terrans are willing to embrace a change in their lives." Master Laila eventually spoke. "Our society is not perfect. There are many Terrans that believe that they deserve to take on greater responsibilities, but there are only so many mid to high-level positions available in the Terran Alliance. There are also Terrans who have suffered failure in their careers. Their employers went into the background. Their projects failed to produce satisfactory results. They have made serious errors that ruined their reputations. There are still outcasts in our society that are looking for a second chance. If you wish, we can help you seek them out and refer them to your recruitment office."

That actually sounded a bit more promising than before.

Though Ves did not want the Terrans to meddle too much in this matter, The Premier Branch could not go on without recruiting at least a small staff of decently qualified first-raters.

"Our clan will not drop any of our loyalty requirements." He finally said. "So long as an applicant can meet these standards and more, I have no problem with hiring them on principle."

"That is good to hear. We shall embark on a search right away. It may take time to bring them to your clan as the more eligible Terrans are much more likely to reside in our smaller colonies."

"I am in no hurry." He repeated. "Our Premier Branch won't be doing much at the start."

Ves was sure that the Devosans would do their utmost to exploit this opportunity.

Any eligible Terran recruit would probably retain a high degree of affection towards the Devos Ancient Clan and the Terran Alliance.

This was fine. Ves believed in Goldie's judgment. The ancestral spirit had been doing this job for years and learned many lessons along the way.

"We have noticed that you have begun to familiarize yourself with several of your students." Master Laila Devos brought up. "If any of them are to your liking, you can reserve them at any point so that they will be ready to join and work at your clan as soon as they have graduated. You do not need to be concerned about their existing obligations and commitments. Their contracts can be bought with cash, favors or other forms of remuneration."

"Well, I admit that I have my eye on a few students. It will take at least a year for them to graduate, though. They won't be able to work with me right away."

"That is not exactly the case. There are internships. The students may also choose to work on their graduation projects at their future employers. The Eden Institute is happy to accommodate your Premier Branch in this regard."

Chapter 5340 My Property

The establishment of Diandi Base comforted Ves a lot.

He no longer felt as if he was a guest in another person's home.

The rented villa at the Eden Institute may have been convenient for Ves to move to the classrooms where he performed his teaching duties, but it was too Terran for his liking.

The advantage to owning his own base was that Ves and the Larkinsons could change it however they liked.

It was their own piece of property, and while it suffered from a serious shortage of personnel, it was located relatively far away from other Terran settlements.

This helped to make Ves feel at ease in this different and foreign environment.

He did not hate the Terrans. He liked them a lot. They had always been friendly, courteous and accommodating towards him since his arrival. They were genuinely interested in cooperating with him and did not attempt to resort to pressure tactics even once.

This enabled him to make substantial gains in diplomacy.

His biggest coup was the rather extensive secret agreement with General Axelar Streon and the Streon Ancient Clan.

From the moment the Renewer of Terra had begun to plan for an ambitious heist on an alien home planet, there was no way Ves wanted to be left out of the party!

This was an operation that could define the early years of the Age of Dawn. Ves could actively contribute to the emergence of a potential new god pilot.

Aside from gaining a huge amount of fulfillment as a mech designer for seeing one of his clients succeed, Ves would also gain a powerful backer in the process!

The Devos Ancient Clan was also worth his time.

Having spent a decent amount of time on New Constantinople VIII, Ves gained a more thorough understanding of the ancient clan's difficulties in the new frontier.

It was a pity that Ves could not offer too many services to the Devosans. He needed to become a proper first-class mech designer first before he could use his mech designs to strengthen their armed forces.

For now, Ves had already agreed to open up his Premier Branch for limited recruitment.

The relatively new branch of the Larkinson Clan did not advertise this in public. Ves was afraid that his staff would get swamped with an excessive amount of applications.

Ves decided to entrust the Devosans to seek out the right candidates and selectively issue invitations to them. They were much more clever and sophisticated in this kind of stuff and could easily save the Larkinsons a lot of work.

Unfortunately, it was not easy to find any Terrans who were sincerely willing to abandon their old identities.

They might claim that they were completely willing to abandon their old citizenships, but when it was time for them to bare themselves to the Golden Cat, they ultimately failed this crucial test.

"I knew this would happen." Ves muttered.

"Nyaaaa..." Goldie glumly responded as her manifestation floated at his side.

Gavin meanwhile struck another name off the list. "This is the 26th potential recruit so far that has failed the loyalty test. These Terrans are tough cases. I wonder how many of them are spies sent by other organizations."

The failed candidate had already stepped away from the totem of the Golden Cat and left the chamber. The Larkinsons had already explained that there was no future for them here if they could not gain the approval of a strange and glowing entity.

"It's not their fault, Gavin." Ves spoke in a subdued tone. "I have paid attention to the recruitment processes. The interviews and other examinations show that these Terrans are sincere about starting anew. They all have their own reasons to throw themselves to our clan. I can feel their sincerity from here. It is just that they are still way too reluctant to completely break with the Terran Alliance. They don't harbor any significant hate or resentment towards their current superstate. As long as that is the case, I don't think that these fellows can fully bring themselves to make a clean break with their past."

The current display was a testament of the strength of Terran pride and culture.

The Terrans were already extremely loyal to the Terran Alliance. The successor state had inherited all of the virtues of the Greater Terran United Confederation and completely replaced it in everyone's hearts.

Ves was actually quite impressed that the Terrans were so strongly committed to their own identity, culture, state and values. The fact that they managed to instill so much loyalty among themselves without resorting to an artificial solution such as a kinship network showcased the national strength of the Terrans.

No wonder the ancient clans weren't in a hurry to make a deal about acquiring their own kinship network!

Their urgency was much lighter because they did not fear that their own citizens would commit treason anytime soon.

The Terrans were more interested in the other benefits that a kinship network could introduce to their society, but there was no need to rush the negotiations for these reasons.

In any case, now that he had taken his measure of the first batch of Terran applicants, Ves had seen enough.

"I will leave all of the matters relating to recruitment to you, Gavin." Ves spoke as he turned around. "It will probably take a while to find a handful of Terrans that meet all of our requirements. We may even need to extend our search outside of the territories of the Terran Alliance."

"The locals won't like that, boss."

"The Premier Branch can't afford too many delays. If the Terrans are unable to supply the manpower that we require, then we will go looking elsewhere no matter what they think. You can go tell them that. The Devos Ancient Clan will probably intensify their efforts to meet our needs."

After Ves had issued his verdict on the matter, he left the chamber and went back to his new design lab.

The transplanted base originally did not come with a design lab, but it was easy enough to convert a few office spaces into a workplace that was suitable for mech designers to do their work.

The truly important part was the workshop facilities that came with the base. Not only did the Larkinsons gain another set of first-class production machines, but they also gained their first materializer!

Yes, a materializer!

Unfortunately, the original owners of the outpost had not invested too much in this expensive gadget.

The materializer was among the smaller and cheaper variations on the market. It was slow and consumed enormous amounts of energy. It was decent enough at producing smaller parts so long as they did not incorporate any difficult first-class materials.

While it was adequate enough to materialize most advanced first-class components, this high-tech gadget was completely unsuitable for industrial production.

Only the most desperate first-raters would use this small materializer to produce a complete first-class mech!

When Ves and Gloriana initially familiarized themselves with their latest toy, their enthusiasm quickly cooled when they discovered all of the limitations of this budget-tier materializer.

"It is much faster and more effective at fabricating second-class parts." Ves remarked as he pressed a conspicuous button.

On the other side of a transparent wall, various thin but incredibly precise particle beams and laser beams had begun to materialize a totem of Vulcan that he had just uploaded to the control system.

The simple design and material choice made it so that the materializer quickly completed its job within half a minute.

"Wow. That's slower than I expected. This model is worse than I thought." Ves frowned.

Once the freshly materialized totem cooled down and went through an automated inspection routine, it eventually fell onto a large output tray.

Ves casually picked up the metal totem and inspected it from every side.

"Let me see as well." Gloriana came closer and snatched the totem out of her husband's grasp. "I see that your prediction was true. The lack of a human touch has indeed deprived "Ugh! I can't afford to remain stuck at this level! I need an upgrade!"

Ves already determined that it was impossible for him to install a new cranial implant. His body had mutated beyond the scope of conventional human understanding, so he could only resort to cultivation science to go further down this deviating path.

He became so fixated on this priority that he began to put serious thought on how to solve his current problem.

"How can I turn myself into a better mech designer?" He asked himself. "If I don't do something about this, then my wife will most certainly overtake me half a year later when she finally gets to obtain her own customized first-class cranial implant!"

That put a lot of extra pressure on his back. He could not allow his wife to overtake him in their shared profession!