

Mech 1791

Chapter 1791 Imaginary Mechs

How should he call this new kind of mechs?

Spiritual mechs?

Technically accurate, but too revealing. If there was any instance where he had to reveal the existence of spiritual mechs, then he shouldn't call it by this name.

Though Ves did not assume he would ever reveal the existence of something so thought-defying, he used to adopt the same thought towards the X-Factor and its manifestations.

Since he had a tendency to reveal some of his capabilities over time, he might as well prepare ahead and have a good name in place to explain his concept.

He weighed several possible suggestions, from false mechs to psionic mechs.

Eventually, he settled for a suitably vague but accurate phrase.

"Imaginary mechs." Ves snapped his fingers. "It fits!"

The reason why he settled on this name was because it described the essence of his latest idea. The work he tried to create would be formed of pure spiritual energy or matter. It did not exist and left no trace in the material dimensions.

Ves created these mechs completely in the realm of mind and spirit, hence why he called them imaginary.

As he silently explored this idea throughout the day, Ves steadily expanded the concept and tried to find a way to translate this innovative idea into a practical creation!

"It's all well and good to come up with great ideas, but if I can't turn them into reality, then what is the point of wasting time on them? Before I develop this idea any further, I have to determine whether it's even feasible!"

After all, Ves had ever heard of creating intangible mechs! The idea was so inconceivable that Ves guessed that he was the only mech designer in the galaxy to even consider it seriously!

The main reason why Ves wanted to turn this idea into fruition at all was because it completely matched his professional inclinations.

Perhaps other spiritual sorcerers developed techniques that allowed them to create spiritual swords and shields, but why should Ves reinvent the wheel?

He was a mech designer! Designing and fabricating mechs was what he did best! Even if creating a complete and functional mech from reality was a thousand times more complicated than forming a primitive spiritual weapon or tool, Ves possessed a clear advantage in this aspect!

The existence of the Grand Dynamo hinted to Ves that spiritual engineering was a flourishing discipline. Plenty of spiritual sorcerers managed to apply advanced techniques to create incredibly wondrous spiritual applications.

Ves yearned to explore spiritual engineering and develop it into one of his strengths, yet he could not devote his entire life to it like other spiritual sorcerers.

"I am NOT my mother." He emphasized to himself.

He was incapable of performing all of the tricks displayed by the likes of his mother and Cassandra Breyer, and he didn't feel any passion in following their ways.

Rather than following in the footsteps of the Five Scrolls Compact, why not leverage his existing strengths and treat spiritual engineering as a minor?

Ves had a hunch that as long as he succeeded in coming up with a method to create an imaginary mech, he might be able to translate his gains in this field back to his main profession!

Whether he could use his imaginary mechs to enhance his design spirits or infuse a mech with an imaginary equivalent, the potential to empower his physical mechs was boundless!

Perhaps this direction was a possible way for him to design and create a true living mech that he had always dreamt about! As long as he combined a physical and an imaginary mech into a single entity, he might be able to create a combination that posed a threat to every possible enemy, whether they were real or spiritual!

He became more excited when he fantasized about these possibilities! This was not only a way to broaden his specialty, but also completely integrate spiritual engineering into his core profession!

Once he developed this field, no mech designer in the galaxy ought to be able to match him! Unless another mech designer existed who specialized in spirituality and possessed his spiritual competences, then Ves would definitely be able to hold a monopoly over spiritually-empowered mechs!

"This is the key to earning lots of MTA merits."

Whenever he thought about the astronomical amount of MTA merits he needed to earn, Ves always felt pained at the burden.

The quantity was too huge!

With his capabilities and growth trajectory, he figured it wasn't a big deal to accumulate 100 million MTA merits in 50 years.

Yet if he waited that long, Ves would miss far too many opportunities! Already, stories about all of the gains the first-movers had gained were spreading all over the galactic net. The Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy was ripe for the picking, but if he came too late, much of the harvest would already be gone!

Therefore, Ves really needed to fulfill this requirement within a decade in order to keep his hopes alive. He did not wish to explore a Red Ocean that was already filled with established states!

"I also can't forget the time it takes to travel to the nearest beyonder gate." He muttered.

Shortly after the Big Two revealed the existence of beyonder gate technology, they immediately formed an ambitious plan to revolutionize space travel in the old galaxy!

As humanity plundered an increasing amount of phasewater from the Red Ocean, the Big Two rapidly started to erect beyonder gates throughout the Milky Way.

Just like with the Comm Consortium, the two most powerful human organizations in the galaxy formed a subsidiary organization to operate and manage these smaller beyonder gates.

So far, the Gate Consortium was only in its infancy, but already its existence shook up human civilization!

The dozen so-called lesser beyonder gates already started to provide an enormous amount of convenience! Space travelers who urgently needed to travel from one end of the galaxy to the other end no longer had to waste decades of their lives to reach their destination!

Unlike the greater beyonder gates which enabled inter-galactic travel between the Milky Way and the Red Ocean, the lesser beyonder gates were not as costly to operate.

In order to access the Milky Way Galactic Gate Network, a passenger could still pay for their trip in MTA or CFA merits.

No one with a shred of sanity in their minds would ever accept this price! Merits were too precious and difficult to earn! Not only did the payer have to earn the merits themselves, they weren't transferable!

This meant that there was no possibility of inheriting them. It was impossible for a group to accumulate them without putting in some actual effort!

The other major issue with merits was that they were essential in redeeming goods and services exclusive to the Big Two, of which life-prolonging treatment was their biggest prize!

If someone had to choose between extending their lifespan for a century or instant travel from the edge of the galaxy to the center of the galaxy, most would choose the former!

Since many people had been conditioned to hoard their merits until they could redeem something truly valuable, the Gate Consortium reluctantly opened up their Galactic Gate Network to passengers who paid in money rather than merits.

Even though the price in fleet or mech credits was rather exorbitant, at the very least it was a lot easier to earn them! Ves himself did not worry as much about this issue as he had a thousand ways to accumulate funds.

For example, aside from earning money by selling mechs, he could also collect fees from rich people eager to reach the Red Ocean or attract investment from a wealthy patron.

As long as the Gate Consortium built a lesser beyonder gate close to the Komodo Star Sector, then Ves would only have to spend a few years to access the network. From there, he could pay for passage to a hub destination which contained a greater beyonder gate.

Only greater beyonder gates were capable of facilitating inter-galactic galactic travel!

In any case, the formation of the Galactic Gate Network already solved one of his most urgent problems. His expeditionary fleet didn't have to waste too much time to reach a greater beyonder gate.

"That's something to consider for the future." He muttered.

For now, he still needed to form a list of issues he needed to solve in order to pave the way for the creation of imaginary mechs.

As the fleet silently entered the territories occupied by the Ylvaine Protectorate, Ves obsessively ignored everything and devoted his complete thoughts to realizing this fantastic concept!

After a lot of consideration and experimentation, he finally ended up with a succinct list of points he needed to address.

Ves activated his spiritual vision and inspected the miniature mech he made out of his own Spirituality.

He wasn't proud of his first attempt.

Outwardly, his very first imaginary mech was an identical copy of the Desolate Soldier, scaled down to the size of his hand.

Yet it was simply a toy in his view. The mech was actually just a spiritual projection that Ves carved into the shape of a mech. He hadn't been able to tinker what lay underneath as his spiritual control wasn't that precise.

This meant that the mech didn't possess any internal components at all! It was just a solid collection of spiritual energy!

Even though his first attempt was an abject failure, Ves learned a lot from this attempt. At the very least, he found out what he had to do to turn this failed product into a working product.

The first step was to find a way to turn spiritual energy into permanent spiritual matter.

To be honest, spiritual energy was not an entirely accurate name for the clouds of energy that powered most spiritual applications.

It actually possessed the properties of both energy and matter.

Not only that, but its state between the two extremes existed on a spectrum! As long as Ves willed it, he could shift the state from one end to the other end, or just settle it in between!

"The problem is that energy is its default state!"

For some reason, it took active effort to sustain the matter state. The more spiritual energy slid towards matter, the more Ves had to work to keep its burdensome state!

As long as Ves withdrew his concentration, his spiritual matter would quickly decay into energy!

This was a frustrating problem, and one that hampered him enormously!

He wanted to create a true imaginary mech. How could he painstakingly reproduce millions of components and put them all together, only for it to devolve into a cloud of spiritual energy the moment Gloriana distracted him? Such a shortcoming was intolerable!

For this reason, Ves thought long and hard to address this perplexing issue. Unless he found a way to form spiritual matter that was able to maintain its state without active support, the whole notion of creating imaginary mechs was moot! He would never waste time on something so inefficient!

He gained some inspiration after watching Lucky munch an exotic for lunch.

"Wait a moment.."

Spiritual matter couldn't sustain its state because there was nothing fixing it in place. It was like trying to build a sandcastle with liquid water. How could water obediently defy the laws of reality and behave like a solid object when its nature compelled it to behave like a fluid?

What if Ves could fix spiritual matter into shape by feeding it or blending it with materials?

While he wasn't sure whether this was doable, he thought this was a viable solution. Certain exotics reacted to spirituality. What if he could take advantage of this property to process spiritual matter?

"I'll have to wait until I get back to explore this idea!"

Ves developed other theories to form permanent spiritual matter, but only this idea gave him the hope of solving this problem!

Chapter 1792 Viability

Discovering a way to create permanent spiritual matter that was able to sustain its state indefinitely was only the starting point.

In order to turn spiritual matter into the building blocks of his imaginary mechs, he needed to develop a means to change its properties.

After all, a real mech consisted of many different materials! From the incredibly hard armor plating to the energy-resistant materials that made up the power reactor, each component needed to take advantage of the properties of different materials to reach a satisfactory level of performance!

If Ves failed to transform the properties of spiritual matter to match with the properties of the materials that made up his real mechs, then his imaginary creations would only have the form of a mech. Like a mech made out of paper, an imaginary mech made out of uniform spiritual matter would not possess any strength!

What Ves sought was a way to turn 'paper' into other materials such as palladium or Breyer alloy!

For now, Ves didn't have a clue how he could accomplish this. He hadn't even been able to form permanent spiritual matter yet. Nonetheless, he was confident he could develop a solution to this problem in time!

A particularly thorny issue related to this problem was how he could translate energy and data transmission to imaginary mechs.

It wasn't as if an imaginary mech would behave exactly like a physical mech. Ves would probably have to make at least some adjustments and develop a spiritual variant to a physical mech design.

Assuming that he found a way to overcome this issue and successfully created an imaginary mech, what then? An imaginary mech was just a spiritual equivalent of a physical mech.

On their own, mechs didn't do anything. They only became operable when a mech pilot entered its cockpit and interfaced with the machine.

This left Ves with a conundrum. Should he operate his imaginary mechs directly, grant them the means to operate autonomously, or find a way to make them ever closer to mechs by providing them with 'spiritual pilots'?

The first option basically meant turning himself into the mech pilots of his own imaginary mechs.

Though the temptation was great, Ves believed it was a very bad idea to pursue this direction.

If his guess was true that genetic aptitude was no longer a hindrance in piloting imaginary mechs, Ves shouldn't immediately hurry up and hop into an imaginary cockpit!

Ves had already committed to the path of a mech designer. He did not possess the training or expertise to become proficient in piloting mechs.

In addition, it was impossible for him to improve himself beyond his mortal limit. Once he advanced to Journeyman, he already committed his spiritual evolution towards developing his design seed.

While he could imitate a force of will due to his extraordinary control over his Spirituality, he could never replicate the strength of a true expert pilot!

"The whole point of doing this is to save time and transfer my existing competences in a new field. Learning how to pilot mechs is a lifelong endeavor! I don't have the time and energy to branch out to such an extent!"

The second option was to bring an imaginary mech pilot to life in order to pilot an imaginary mech.

This was not as impractical as the first option. Ves believed he was already capable of creating an imaginary mech pilot! He already developed a method to create a spiritual product!

As long as he created a spiritual product in the shape of a human and instilled it with fragments taken from expert pilots, then he could possibly create the first imaginary expert pilot in the history of mech design!

"Crazy! This is crazy!"

Ves had no idea whether it was possible to create an artificial expert pilot that consisted of pure spirituality.

Even if he managed to shape such an abomination to life, what could such a miraculous entity even do? Was it capable of piloting one of his imaginary mechs? What if it could do more?

What if he could take it a step further and make it pilot a real expert mech?

Ves shuddered in place. Such a blasphemous idea shouldn't be possible, yet he did not immediately rule it out! Something within him made him think it was possible!

"This is way too crazy even for me! It shouldn't be possible!"

Though Ves heaved with excitement, he eventually reined in this wild ambition. It sounded a bit too far-fetched for him to be able to mass-produce imaginary expert pilots and have them pilot entire regiments of expert mechs!

Ves could practically conquer the entire galaxy if he gained this ability!

Compared to the second option, the third option was a bit more restrained. Rather than creating his own mech pilots, he might be able to find a way to make other mech pilots pilot his imaginary works.

Of course, this was a bit more complicated than it sounded. First, he didn't even know it was possible.

Should he harvest a spiritual fragment from a mech pilot and deposit it inside the cockpit of an imaginary mech? Would the mech pilot in question still be able to control the imaginary mech through his connection with the fragment, or would the fragment start to behave in an autonomous fashion?

Assuming that it was possible, would he really wish to expose imaginary mechs to his Avatars of Myth and other mech pilots under his employ?

Regardless which one was right, the issue of trust and control still hung over his head!

Though Ves was filled with uncertainties, these questions also made him excited. He couldn't wait to explore the possibilities! Even if the result fell short of his expectation, the entire concept of imaginary mechs was already unprecedented enough to spark a revolution in mech design!

"These ideas are so astounding that Gloriana will probably explode when she hears about them! I wonder what she will think?"

She would probably think he was creating divine soldiers or something. Every god needed a heavenly army after all. Right?

For now, Ves intended to keep these ideas to himself. Gloriana wouldn't be of much help at this premature stage, and he still doubted whether she could contribute at all to the creation of an imaginary mech.

This was something that closely matched his specialty, but the same could not be said for Gloriana.

"This is something I have to explore alone, at least for now." He concluded.

Though all of these fantasies sounded great, Ves still turned his thoughts back to the original reason why he wanted to create an imaginary mech.

"Regardless of its other applications, it at least has to be able to fight!"

Ves needed to protect his mind from external attacks and influencing attempts. He did not have a lot of confidence in the simple spiritual shield he wrapped around his mind.

Such a primitive means of defense was not only inflexible, but also simple to defeat due to its obvious strengths and weaknesses!

Though an imaginary mech did not wrap around his mind like a spiritual shield, it was capable of performing both defensive and offensive actions!

That meant that aside from guarding his mind, he could also actively send it out in order to attack another spiritual entity!

Naturally, Ves had to make a lot of considerations concerning its strength before he became reassured that the imaginary mech stayed alive.

If it turned out that even his best imaginary mechs were too weak to resist the strength of his weaker design spirits, then Ves was better off sticking with a spiritual shield!

As Ves continued to speculate, the Wodin fleet almost reached the Kesseling System.

If Gloriana didn't remind him of their impending arrival, Ves would have remained consumed in his unending calculations for a couple more weeks!

He entered into such a creative daze that he practically ran his life on autopilot during these past few days!

He was lucky his girlfriend understood the preciousness of this state. With all of the enthusiasm and passion bursting out of Ves, this was the best time to formulate his ideas!

"I'm sorry, Gloriana." He spoke when his girlfriend finally decided to shake him out of his fugue. "I guess I got too absorbed into my new ideas."

"Are you willing to tell?" She asked as she cuddled with Clixie while she sat down at a couch placed in his stateroom. "It seems like you've come across something truly exciting this time."

Ves couldn't help but grin. "Oh, if anyone hears what's in my mind, they'll probably think I'm crazy!"

"You're already crazy, Ves." Gloriana stated.

"Jokes aside, I'm truly afraid of the possibilities! I can't help but think my latest notions will cause a huge storm in the mech community once they become known!"

Though Gloriana seemed happy, she did not immediately join in his glee.

Instead, she asked a question that many mech designers asked whenever they came up with a possible new innovation.

"Is it practical?"

"...Maybe." Ves hesitated. "I only have ideas to go on. I still need to perform a lot of research and experimentation before I can determine whether this possible creation is viable. Even if I can get it to work, I'll likely have to invest a lot of resources in order to make use of this new invention!"

Everything had a price! Ves did not believe that something as fantastical as an imaginary mech could be formed out of pure spiritual energy. At the very least, the creation of a permanent imaginary mech likely consumed a huge amount of energy!

This was fine. As long as the benefits outweighed the costs, it was still worthwhile for Ves to exploit this innovation!

A few minutes passed by as Gloriana tried to pry some secrets out of Ves. Even though he found her adorable when she started to beg, Ves held up his hand and stopped her pitiful act.

"This is something I have to do on my own. I'll let you in once I develop a solid framework."

"How long will that take?"

Ves shrugged. "I don't know. Months? Years? Decades? As long as there is a chance I might succeed, I'll continue to explore this direction regardless of the lack of results!"

He wasn't certain whether his current strength and ability was enough to succeed in realizing this idea. Perhaps he needed to advance to Senior before he could create an imaginary mech.

After Ves made it clear that he would keep his mouth shut, Gloriana pouted at him but didn't pursue the topic any longer.

It wasn't as if he was the only one keeping secrets.

"Since we're almost at our destination, I thought it was time to tell you what will happen to the Scarlet Rose." Gloriana moved on. "Originally, our dynasty wanted to claim the Scarlet Rose for its own purposes, but I fought hard to keep it in your possession on your behalf!"

"Did the Wodins agree?"

"Not immediately."

"Was there a problem?"

"Don't worry." She placed her hand on her arm to reassure him. "I succeeded in persuading my mother and my relatives to leave the ship in your care. The fact that you conquered the Scarlet Rose through your own efforts is undeniable! It wouldn't be in good taste to deprive you of your prize after risking so much."

"I take it that not everyone agrees with this decision?"

She sighed. "There are many Wodins who believe that a boy like you shouldn't even be playing around with such an expensive ship. While we are not short on ships or the resources to build our own ships, a mobile supply frigate is not something we would pass over."

"Are there any complications?"

"There shouldn't be. The Scarlet Rose should be yours after we arrive at Kesseling VIII. We won't be able to help you repair or overhaul the ship, nor will we be able to supply her with a competent crew."

That was no big deal for Ves. "Even if you offered, I won't accept. I already planned to take care of these matters myself!"

There was no way he would make himself more dependent on the Hexers! Only by employing his own men would he be able to maintain control!

Chapter 1793 Premature Celebration

The fleet of Wodin ships and captured Fridayman ships entered the Kesseling System, only to encounter a grand celebration!

Even though the Ylvaine Protectorate was still entangled in the later stages of the Sand War, the arrival of the Bright Martyr changed everything!

This was not the Ylvaine Protectorate of the past where the leaders of the three leading dynasties treated Ves with skepticism.

This time, almost every higher up believed in the Bright Martyr! The evidence in the form of the Transcendent Messengers, Holy Soldiers and Deliverers overwhelmingly proved that Ves had definitely been blessed by the Great Prophet!

Only the most bone-headed traditionalists still argued against recognizing Ves as the Bright Martyr. Everyone else, even the staunchest inquisitors of the Poxco Dynasty, fully bought into the myth that Prophet Ylvaine watched out over his flock through the medium of mechs!

Many churches and cathedrals even started adopting his mechs as altars! Compared to cold, unfeeling statues made in the Great Prophet's likeness, a Deliverer mech was fully capable of strengthening the faith of the believers by its ambient glow alone!

In these past several years, the Protectorate had already been inching towards accepting Ves. Yet the outbreak of the Sand War and the pressure exerted towards the state made many Ylvainans yearning for salvation.

While the Kronon Dynasty fought bravely against the sandmen, not a single hero in the war managed to eclipse the Bright Martyr!

While individual heroes won entire battles through their earnest efforts, only Ves managed to swing the war decisively in the Protectorate's favor!

That he managed to do so by releasing a couple of Ylvainan mech designs was incredible!

In less than a year, the lukewarm attitude towards Ves turned into full-throated support! Many Ylvainans, from the grassroots to the very top, believed that Ves was definitely a boon to the faith!

As for minor details such as his foreign origins and his apparent lack of faith, what did it matter? The mechs he designed were so clearly blessed by the Great Prophet himself that he deserved to be recorded into the annals of the Ylvainan Faith!

With such a massive and all-encompassing turnaround, the Ylvainans couldn't possibly treat Ves like a regular foreign guest.

They already prepared a grand parade for his entry!

The moment the Hexer fleet transitioned into the Kesseling System, numerous combat carriers flanked the new arrivals and deployed some of their mechs.

For a moment, the Glory Battalion became perplexed. Had the Hexers succumbed to the pressure exerted by the Fridaymen and switched their support?

"Calm down!" Ves urgently tried to tell the crew. "They're not hostile!"

He didn't need to speak out. The Kronon Dynasty already contacted the commanding officer of the fleet and told them of their upcoming arrangements.

The Hexers soon relaxed, though they still maintained some vigilance. While it was unlikely for the Ylvainans to turn hostile against them, the Glory Battalion still had a duty to uphold! It could never allow third parties to take over its primary mission!

For this reason, the eager Ylvainan honor guard had to escort the fleet to Kesseling VIII from a very healthy distance. In no way were they allowed to get close enough to threaten the Stellar Chaser!

While all of this was going on, celebrations already started to take place on the surface of their destination planet!

Both Ves and Gloriana watched the local news feed with astonishment.

"The sandman invasion hasn't subsided yet." Ves uttered. "Many star systems are still being flooded by sandman fleets. It's too soon to run the victory lap!"

"While the Ylvainans are definitely happy to receive the Bright Martyr, it's partially political theater." Gloriana opined. "The Ylvaine Protectorate is ascendant right now due

to the deals it made with other states. However, the gains it made from the Sand War can all go up in smoke once the Komodo War spills over this region."

"I'm already aware of the threat the Protectorate faces from the Coalition and Coalition-aligned states. What does that have to do with this overblown spectacle, though?"

"The Ylvainans are trying to appeal to their prophet by using you as medium."

"What?"

Gloriana spread her arms. "The Protectorate's geopolitical landscape is highly unfavorable, as you already know. While the states closer to the frontier have all been wiped out, the sandmen are still a threat. In almost every other direction, the Protectorate is surrounded by states that all lean towards the Coalition. What if they are encouraged to attack the only state that is friendly towards the Hexers?"

Though Ves already dismissed this possibility as an act that would do more harm than good for the Friday Coalition, what if it grew desperate? What if the Fridaymen made an impulsive decision?

As long as the Friday Coalition put heavy pressure on the Bright Republic and other nearby states, it might be possible for half-a-dozen nearby states to gang up on the Ylvaine Protectorate!

That would certainly spell the end for the religious state! Though the Kronon Dynasty demonstrated its valiance during the Sand War, it was impossible for them to resist the might of several hostile states!

While Ves understood all of this, he was perplexed by the actions of the Ylvainans.

"The Great Prophet isn't omnipotent. Even if I design some fantastic new Ylvainan mech, I doubt it can defeat entire mech divisions."

"That's why it's not only about appealing to Ylvaine." Gloriana added. "It's partially an appeal to us. The Ylvainans are calling for attention and trying to impress our Hegemony that they are worth investing in. As long as our state becomes impressed with their accomplishments, we might move to guarantee its independence."

"Will the Hegemony do so?"

Gloriana chuckled and shook her head. "How can our state spare any effort to a state that is too far away to reinforce easily? Any forces we send have to pass through the territories of numerous states aligned with the Friday Coalition. While that's not a major problem for now, it will definitely be an issue later on when the Komodo War is in full swing!"

"Then.. your people will just leave the Ylvainans to their own devices?" Ves frowned.

While he was not an Ylvainan, he possessed a definite affection for the Protectorate! He became a lot more grateful to the religious state after the Bright Republic profoundly disappointed him. At least the Ylvainans still offered his shelter in these troubling times!

"Don't be naive, Ves. Hexers don't care about what is going on in third-rate states. The only reason they pay attention to them at all is because of the exotics they supply to us and the trade that flows through their territories. In general, our matriachs look at the overall situation instead of focusing on any specific state. Compared to states that are actually contributing resources to our state, the Ylvaine Protectorate is a useless addition. It doesn't offer the Hegemony anything!"

Certainly, there was still some value in gaining the support of the Protectorate.

The state could act as an advanced Hexer outpost in the Fridayman's sphere of influence.

It could form a potential base where a Hexer raiding force could harass the Friday Coalition from a lightly-guarded flank.

The Protectorate could even serve as a nucleus for a possible wave of defections by the surrounding states!

Yet all of these benefits required substantial investment on the part of the Hexadric Hegemony.

While Ves wasn't entirely clear about the proceedings of the Komodo War, he knew that the Hegemony was truly devoting all of its efforts in the war theaters closer to home.

The Hexadric Hegemony was a rather insular state by nature. Only a few branches of the state devoted any energy towards the rest of the star sector. Their leaders didn't have much say in the decision-making of the government.

All in all, the likelihood that the Hegemony would spare any thought towards the Protectorate was virtually zero!

Once Ves realized this, his expression turned grave. He watched the celebrations taking place at Kesseling VIII and couldn't help but think that they were partying before an impending crash!

"Is there any way the Protectorate can avoid this fate?"

"It's up to the Friday Coalition, I think." Gloriana said.

That did not leave Ves with a lot of confidence. Neither Ves nor the Ylvainans had any way of influencing the decision-making of the Coalition.

Perhaps the people in charge might respect the Protectorate's contribution towards repelling the sandmen. Yet their leaders might also be shameless enough to ignore this merit and wipe out the state because it was an ugly stain on their maps!

Time passed and the fleet slowly reached orbit. The Ylvainan patrols didn't even bother approaching the Wodin ships for inspection.

Only a single ship out of five made landfall. The Stellar Chaser soon landed at a spaceport at the capital city of Krent.

As soon as Ves stepped out, he became buffeted by a wave of cheers and religious fervor!

An entire crowd of Ylvainans gathered at the spaceport! The press was fully present while the Kronons carefully guarded the crowd with their imposing mechs!

Ves was not in the mood to bask in the moment. Knowing that the Ylvainans still had to survive another calamity, he dearly wished to temper their moods.

However, the Ylvainans needed something to celebrate about. Ves also wanted the Ylvainans to continue to hold him in high regard. The chance of betrayal was much less if the entire state continued to adore the Bright Martyr!

For this reason, he eventually decided to play along with all of the pomp and ceremony. He met a number of senior Ylvainans and shook hands with them, he participated in a brief parade and he 'blessed' a number of Deliverers produced by a couple of local mech manufacturers.

Seeing so many Deliverers and Holy Soldiers warmed his heart. Not only that, their glows gave him a deeper impression of their source. Ylvaine's spiritual fragment almost seemed to come alive as its presence touched his mind!

Perhaps the Ylvainans were right on one thing. Their prophet had truly blessed the Bright Martyr!

Ves and Gloriana soon pulled away from the celebration. The Ylvainans did not wish to burden the Bright Martyr and the Hexers too much, and an excessively long victory parade was rather inappropriate since the Kronons still lost many mech pilots to the sandmen every day.

A true victory celebration would only commence when the Sand War finally came to an end!

"Phew. I'm glad that's done." Ves said as he and Gloriana along with their cats arrived at their new if temporary abode.

After riding a shuttle operated by the Glory Battalion, they reached a highly-guarded estate that his subordinates had already bought and renovated on his behalf.

Not a lot of people greeted him during this time. The local star had already dipped below the horizon and no one was in the mood to discuss serious business.

That could wait until tomorrow.

Only a handful of his trusted subordinates met him this time. Gavin, Melkor and Nitaa all welcomed him back.

"I knew you'd find a way to spoil Ghanso's plan." Melkor smirked.

"What if I didn't?"

"Then the LMC would just have to find another lead designer."

"Bastard."

Nitaa approached him next. She looked incredibly remorseful. "Sir.. I'm sorry that—"

"—We'll be having none of that, Nitaa." Ves patted her strong arm. "You couldn't have done anything against an expert mech, let alone the entire Bright Republic. Your only responsibility is to guard me against hostile people. Only the Avatars are meant to fight against other mechs, but even they are limited in what they can do. Ultimately, the fault lies in me. If I was a bit more sensitive towards the scheming of my political opponents, I wouldn't have made myself so vulnerable to official authority."

Now that he experienced it once, Ves would never let down his guard against these kinds of threats! He did not dare to entrust his safety onto any state, including the Ylvaine Protectorate!

Chapter 1794 Petty Kingdom

No ghost haunted Ves on the first night since arriving at Kesseling VIII.

He started off the day with a lot of meetings on the agenda. Immediately after breakfast, he said goodbye to Gloriana and departed to the LMC's headquarters situated in downtown Krent.

Ves looked back at his new residence while holding Lucky. Compared to the Cloud Estate, the Austen Estate was a bit smaller and a lot more quiet.

Aside from that, the architecture of the mansion and the other buildings on the grounds of the estate all bore the touch of Ylvainan architecture.

This was nothing unusual. What irked Ves a lot was that the former owner of the Austen Estate appeared to be an extremely devout believer! In almost every wall or room, Ves encountered numerous statues and miniature altars devoted to the Great Prophet, the Grey Martyr, the Battle Martyr, the Dark Martyr and even himself!

Yes, himself!

Just standing in front of a marble-esque statue of his own likeness but appearing exceptionally heroic was both flattering and disconcerting.

"Are the Ylvainans already worshipping me like I'm a god?" He shivered.

Ves did not believe in gods! At best, they were just supremely powerful spiritual entities who defied the laws of reality to mess with people!

Cassandra Breyer was a typical example of a degenerate ghost who could be mistaken as a god!

"If she's a god, then I'm a devil!"

He decided to take no more note of the religious imaginary of himself. He found the entire practice to be a farce. There was nothing divine about himself!

"I'm just a mech designer."

"Meow."

"Oh shut up, Lucky."

No Larkinsons resided in the solemn estate. His subordinates evidently bought the estate from the state and renovated its security systems in preparation for his arrival.

With reinforced walls, turrets and underground bays for mechs, the Austen Estate was even more secure than the Cloud Estate!

The Avatars of Myth already secured a presence in the underground base. Not only that, the Kronon Dynasty stationed a sizable garrison to protect his home.

That was something that Ves really didn't like. His Avatars ought to be sufficient to protect him, but the Ylvainans were horridly overprotective about his life.

They did not wish the Bright Martyr to suffer the same fate as the Great Prophet when he was still alive!

Rather than appreciating his constant escort of elite Kronon mech guards, Ves continually regarded their presence with caution.

A portion of the Mech Corps with Venerable Ghanso Larkinson at its head had already blindsided him once.

Ves did not rule out that some nutcases within the Kronon Dynasty might be plotting for his life!

After all, even if he managed to gain widespread appreciation and worship from the Ylvainans, they were not a monolithic entity.

There were always crazies, weirdos and radicalists among any population, and when the latter reached hundreds of billions, that amounted to at least millions of mentally unstable threats!

For this reason, no matter how popular he became in the Protectorate, Ves did not allow himself to get caught up in his own hype. He needed to remain as vigilant as possible and he already warned Melkor to keep his Avatars alert.

Not only did his Avatars need to guard against unknown threats, they also had to keep an eye on their Kronon watchers!

Though Ves handed Melkor a burdensome command, the Avatars ought to be up to the task. Otherwise, he might as well discard the Avatars entirely despite all of the effort he put into cultivating them into an elite force!

After reaching downtown Krent, his shuttle along with his guard mechs arrived at the LMC's new headquarters, at least for the moment.

Much to his relief, his company's headquarters was just a modern office building. While its architecture still contained traces of Ylvainan religious iconography, it didn't dominate the workplace.

Perhaps the most welcome discovery was that the headquarters lacked the ridiculous statues and paintings of the Bright Martyr. This was good because Ves did not wish for his own employees to worship the ground he walked upon!

Once he settled down at his new office in the upper level of the headquarters, he began his workday by holding an informal meeting.

Raymond, Gavin and Calsie all gathered at the office to discuss the new trajectory of the LMC.

"From what I've heard so far, you've all done a good job at managing the LMC's sudden departure from the Bright Republic." He spoke to his three closest confidants within his

company. "I'm already aware of broad strokes and I have no objections for the decisions you've made so far. It's fine to invest in another manufacturing complex on this planet, but that will be the extent of the LMC's expansion into this state."

He was glad that Raymond as well as the two native Cloudy Curtainers decided to leave their homes and join him at the start of this new chapter in his life.

He half-expected Gavin and Calsie to remain in the Bright Republic. Now that they decided to continue to work for him no matter where he went, he felt he could lean on them more.

"Why limit our presence in the Ylvaine Protectorate?" Calsie asked.

She appeared genuinely confused, but Raymond didn't look so surprised.

"Ves has probably considered the precarious situation of our current host state." The Chief Operating Officer answered her question. "The Sand War may have ceased to be an existential threat for the time being, but the Komodo War is still ramping up. Whether this enormous conflict will spill in this direction remains to be seen, but it doesn't hurt to be prepared."

"Raymond is right." Ves clasped his hands over his desk. "The entire star sector is in flames. Several wars have erupted, of which two of them have the potential to upend every state. Under these circumstances, sinking more money and resources in real estate that might get wiped out the next day is highly unwise."

In truth, Ves eagerly adopted this argument because it also supported his greater agenda. His future plans rested on his grand expedition, not his petty kingdom in the Komodo Star Sector.

While the four Brighters held their discussion, Lucky explored and sniffed every corner of his office, destroying microscopic spy bugs and listening bugs along the way.

The cat already found quite a lot of suspect devices!

"What exactly is your plan for the medium term?" Gavin couldn't help but ask. "Are we going to expand in other third-rate states? Right now, your reputation and the LMC's brand awareness has reached a new height in this region. Even though many states are economically devastated, we can still take our gains to other parts of the star sector and resume our company's rapid growth."

"That's too risky, Benny."

"You don't seem to let that stop you, boss."

"This is different. I only take risks when the rewards are great enough. This is not an instance where I think we'll have much gain."

"Have you forgotten that we sold over a million mechs ever since the Sand War erupted?! Even now we are still selling a lot of Soldier mechs in many foreign states! As long as we use our successful product line as a springboard, we can establish a strong presence in each of their mech markets!"

Ves shook his head. "I'm not chasing after market dominance anymore. I'm not interested in increasing our revenue. We have plenty of money, and the Soldier product line will ensure our economic prosperity for at least a couple more years. This gives us the luxury to do something different."

"Which is what?"

"Reimagining the Living Mech Corporation."

He outlined his plans and some of his visions for the future. Before he left for the Red Ocean, Ves felt obliged to leave his mark on the Komodo Star Sector. This was something he emotionally desired in order to leave this star sector with no regrets!

While Gavin and Calsie didn't understand his motivation, Raymond was older and wiser. His eyes sparkled as he nodded thoughtfully.

"Ves wants to leave a legacy behind." Raymond explained to the two younger Brighters. "Now that the LMC has secured a solid and stable cash flow, Ves is looking to use the LMC to develop himself in other ways, is that right?"

Ves smiled. At least one of them understood his thoughts. "As a mech designer, my personal development is more important than the concerns of the LMC. My company is always meant to serve my purposes, not the other way around. Now that I've regained some shares and own 59 percent of the company, I can do anything I please!"

That was right. Even though Ves would still retain effective control over the company if the Ylvainans hadn't gifted him with some of their shares, he wouldn't be able to act as unscrupulously as now.

Owning 49 percent was a massive difference from owning 59 percent of the LMC! The former forced him to take at least some of his shareholders into consideration. The latter allowed him to run his company as he pleased without anyone able to hinder his moves!

Of course, the reality was not that absolute. If he was determined to run his company to the ground, the local jurisdictions would certainly move to counteract his ruinous actions!

Therefore, as long as his decisions didn't cross a line, Ves had no reason to pay the other stakeholders any mind.

"So what's in store for us, boss? Will you dedicate yourself completely to designing second-class mechs? Who are we even selling our mechs to? The Friday Coalition hates our guts and the Hexadric Hegemony is a notoriously difficult market to enter."

"The former is off the table." Ves immediately answered. "The latter is.. a possible prospect. I'm not sure yet myself. I need to discuss the matter in further detail with Gloriana and.. a partner. For now, there's no reason to be concerned about this issue. I'm confident enough in my mech design abilities that my second-class mechs will find a market somehow."

This was the confidence he gained as a successful mech designer. He possessed an undeniable advantage with his monopoly on spiritual components.

Adding glows to third-class mechs already turned them into valuable machines! Doing the same to second-class mechs would definitely become a sensation!

"What about our third-class mech operations?" Raymond asked. "They are the root of our company. All of our workers and all of our current operations are geared towards the design, production and sale of third-class mechs. Many of them can't be transferred to second-class mech operations."

Mech technicians who were qualified to work on third-class mechs needed to learn all kinds of advanced skills and knowledge to participate in the production of second-class mechs.

Marketing managers who knew the Brighter mech market like the back of their hand would be as blind as a bat if they were tasked with researching the Hegemony's mech market.

The accountants in the employ of the LMC were intimately familiar with the finance-related laws and customs of the Bright Republic and surrounding states, but they would have to start from scratch if they were dumped in a completely foreign state!

And this only accounted for the people who pledged to work for the LMC even as the company left the Bright Republic!

Ves could not abandon them, and he didn't plan to do so! His foundation still lay in third-class mechs, and he never intended to turn his back on them. It was just that his current priorities lay in mastering second-class mechs as fast possible!

He explained this to his confidantes, and they understood his intentions, though they didn't entirely agree.

"Don't worry, guys." He reassured them. "As long as we expand the company's Design Department and add some more design teams, we can maintain several different design projects at once."

Expanding his design teams was his most immediate priority for the LMC! If he wanted his company to expand its mech catalog as fast as possible, Ves urgently needed to address this chronic shortcoming!

Chapter 1795 Second Design Team

He spent two whole hours discussing his short to medium-term goals with his confidantes.

Though Raymond, Gavin and Calsie questioned most of his decisions, Ves did not change his mind. His recent 'vacation' gave him plenty of time to sort out his priorities.

For now, his overarching goals were to keep himself alive and free while doing his best to gain the approval of both Madame Constance Wodin and the Rim Guardian Fraternity.

Both of them formed the keys to enable his grand expedition, especially the latter!

After making sure that his confidantes knew what they had to do, Ves left his office and descended to the underground and highly-secure design labs.

Two design teams as well as a group of Larkinson students greeted his arrival.

Ves noted with surprise that all five Tovar mech designers chose to follow him to the Ylvaine Protectorate rather than stay in the Bright Republic.

"The Tovar Family still wishes to maintain relations with you." Miles Tovar humbly explained. "If you will accept our continued presence, then Senator Tovar and the rest of our Family will keep looking out for your interests in the Bright Republic."

Miles spoke plainly, perhaps aware that Ves had no patience for duplicity.

Though Ves did not really want to tangle with the Tovar Family any further, it wasn't wise to cut off this relationship.

While he no longer depended on the founding family's support, the LMC still possessed a hefty presence in the Bright Republic. Many workers refused the offer to move to the Ylvaine Protectorate, which meant that the Mech Nursery at Cloudy Curtain and the offices and manufacturing complexes at Bentheim were still viable.

As long as the crisis of the Sand War subsided, those facilities could get back in operation and resume the production of silver label LMC mechs.

Since the LMC no longer focused on the Bright Republic, it became even more important to secure backing that could watch over these sites.

Another consideration was the old family. The majority of the Larkinsons declined to join the new family. Most of them were already happy with their current trajectories and had no desire to upend their lives.

In order to protect them against the plots and schemes of the power players in the Bright Republic, Ves wanted the Tovar Family to continue to watch over his ignorant relatives.

Naive and unambitious they might be, they were still family to him. Despite their recent disagreements and separation, he always considered both branches of the family to be tied.

Even if Ves was determined to lead his side of the family in a new direction, he could never shed his affection for his grandfather and the other Larkinsons he was close with or befriended over the years.

He also continued to respect the noble calling that the stubborn traditionalists continued to abide by. Idiots they may be sometimes, Ves could not fault them for their unflinching loyalty and dedication to the state.

It was a shame that some of the Larkinsons he liked such as Melinda and Raella Larkinson decided to stick to their current careers in the Bright Republic.

Perhaps Ves would never see them again once he truly left the Komodo Star Sector.

He turned his attention back to his design teams. After affirming his willingness to continue hosting and guiding Miles and the other Tovar mech designers, Ves moved on to his second design team.

Ketis was absent, which disappointed Ves a bit. His recent preoccupation with Gloriana and other matters left him with too little time to spend on his first student.

He forgot that he was supposed to bring a pet to her. Ves had genuinely been too busy to find a suitable pet.

He swore to make it up to Ketis.

While he missed her company, Ves also felt proud that Ketis was confident enough to branch out and blaze her own trail. He sporadically received reports on her recent activities and he was glad she grew close to Raella Larkinson.

His feisty cousin was definitely a good fit for Ketis! Ves did not have to worry about his student getting into trouble with no one to bail her out.

So why was there a second design team at all? Ves had already instructed the LMC to employ a couple of new mech designers.

Ves inspected each of the newcomers. From the worship and respect in the eyes of four of them, he immediately identified them as Ylvainans.

Considering his popularity in the Ylvaine Protectorate, thousands of mech designers fanatically knocked on the LMC's doors to apply to join its design teams!

Yet Ves had already issued a very firm command back when he was still escaping from the Friday Coalition. The LMC did not need any talented or ambitious mech designers. What the company needed the most were those who were willing to remain loyal to Ves and the LMC regardless if they stayed or left the Ylvaine Protectorate!

For this reason, the LMC slowed down its recruitment and meticulously sorted the applications until they settled for four Ylvainan mech designers who were willing to sign extremely restrictive employment contracts to work under Ves!

While the LMC could have hired hundreds of eager Ylvainan mech designers at once, it would be impossible for Ves to control them all! It was better to adopt a measured pace and integrate the newcomers in batches.

Another reason to restrict the LMC's recruitment pace was to limit the amount of Ylvainan mech designers in its design team. Ves refused to turn his mech company into an Ylvainan organization. If he did not set this limitation, then everyone around him would soon sing the Great Prophet's praises! That was not what Ves wanted to see!

"Please introduce yourselves." Ves curtly instructed. "Start with your names and specialization. I need to know what you are capable of. Since you managed to pass the LMC's recruitment process, I trust that all of you are competent in your own fields. I don't employ useless mech designers."

Despite the ominous warning, the Ylvainan mech designers only had respect in their eyes!

"Oscar DiMartin, Apprentice Mech Designer. Specialized in efficient musculature design, Your Excellency."

The first person who spoke was the oldest of the bunch by far. Ves estimated Oscar's age to be in the mid-forties. He already appeared to be in charge of the second design team, which was a very convenient surprise.

That last bit made Ves frown. Being referred to as 'Your Excellency' sounded awfully close to being called 'Your Holiness', which was the proper way to address a Holy Son of the Five Scrolls Compact!

"We'll be having none of that 'Your Excellency' nonsense here." Ves firmly commanded.

The four Ylvainans looked confused.

"Your Excellency, you are a saint of the Ylvainan Faith! The Poxco Dynasty has already declared—"

"—The Poxco Dynasty doesn't speak on my behalf! Just call me as if I'm a regular mech designer or citizen."

"Then.. Mr. Larkinson?" Oscar apprehensively ventured.

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "That sounds better."

The introductions resumed after this minor interruption.

"Renee Zelin, Apprentice Mech Designer. I excel in programming mech operating systems."

A software specialist! Ves immediately lit up! He recalled the missing and presumably dead Alloc Brandtstad of the 6th Flagrant Vandals. Ves learned first-hand how much value a software specialist could add to a design team.

"I'll be counting on you to optimize the operating systems of our upcoming mech designs."

"I will endeavor to meet your expectations, sir!"

The next woman introduced herself.

"Erica Sprint, Apprentice Mech Designer. I specialize in light mechs."

"That's not specific enough. What exactly about light mechs fascinates you? What value do you bring to my design team?"

"I am good in maximizing mobility." Erica described. "Light mechs embody speed, acceleration and agility. Balancing these aspects while making sure the design doesn't become too fragile is a very interesting challenge to me. My works have always boasted superior mobility compared to some of my peers."

That sounded very interesting to Ves.. if designing light mechs was all he did. This was not the case, however.

"Are you aware that the LMC isn't limited to designing light mechs? Are you still able to contribute to projects centered around more massive mechs?"

"That won't be a problem, sir. I can still leverage my expertise on mobility onto heavy mechs if necessary."

She sounded confident to pass his test, so Ves did not concern himself with her specialty any longer. Since the LMC decided to hire her in the first wave, then she was definitely capable!

The fourth Ylvainan mech designer finally had his turn.

"Pascal Curin. Apprentice Mech Designer. I specialize in heavy armor systems."

Ves wanted to scratch his head. Was it a coincidence that he got both a light mech and a heavy mech specialist?

"Does that mean you work exclusively on heavy mechs?"

"Not exactly, sir." Pascal respectfully replied. "I am capable of working with any armor system of any thickness, but the heavier they are, the more I can do. I am very comfortable with optimizing the armor systems of medium defensive mechs such as your Blackbeak design."

"I see. That sounds satisfactory."

After hearing out the four Ylvainan mech designers, he finally turned to the fifth and only non-Ylvainan in the second design team.

"Mayer Torto. Novice Mech Designer. I intend to specialize in communication and control systems, but I still require more study to flesh out my specialization."

"What a welcome surprise to see you here. It's a long distance away from your home. Did you finally graduate from Rawlings University, or did you drop or something?"

The mild-looking mech designer nodded. "I studied extra hard to finish my semester early. I am still committed to working for you. Even in the Sentinel Kingdom, my former classmates and I have heard of your accomplishments!"

Ves was a pretty famous mech designer in the star sector, now. His Desolate Soldier and Deliverer designs both affected the Sand War to such an extent that it was impossible to leave him out the conversation!

This explained by Mayer Torto decided to take the risk to travel all the way to the Ylvaine Protectorate immediately after he graduated early.

He was shrewd enough to determine that he might be able to ride on Ves' coattails!

Ves respected such determination, though it also indicated that Mayer possessed a strong ambition.

After all, with two wars raging throughout the star sector, it took a lot of courage for an elite Rawlings graduate to leave the safety and comfort of the Sentinel Kingdom for a state that was still under active attack by the sandman race!

"As long as you do your part, I'll take good care of you." Ves spoke gently to Mayer.

Mayer Torto ranked higher than all of the Ylvainan mech designers in his heart. This was because Mayer was the only mech designer in the second design that possessed spiritual potential!

Though Ves found it to be a shame that Oscar and his fellow Ylvainans in the designed lacked the potential to advance to Journeyman and higher, he didn't really require them to grow too much.

The primary responsibility of a design team was to assist the lead designer in completing his design projects. They addressed all of the lesser design issues and solved all of the trivial problems that didn't require the expertise of a high-ranking mech designer.

From this perspective, it made little difference whether a design team contained a Journeyman or not. In fact, Ves deliberately commanded the LMC to reject any applications from Journeymen and Seniors!

If Ves wanted to, he could probably hire at least Senior to join the LMC, but that was not what he wanted to see!

Not only would he not be able to exert enough control on them, but it was an industry standard for high-ranking mech designers to be remunerated with equity!

The last thing Ves wanted to do was to dilute his stock or pass some off to other mech designers!

Even if a devout Ylvainan Senior went on his knees and begged the Bright Martyr to take him on for free, Ves would steadfastly refuse!

To him, maintaining control mattered the most!

Chapter 1796 Training Opportunities

His second design team all consisted of relatively young and junior mech designers. None of them made any exceptional achievements, but all of them bar one were experienced in working in a team environment.

This was exactly what Ves wanted. For a design team tasked with assisting his design activities, he did not need any strong personalities or talented prodigies.

Ves also declined to add any older and more competent mech designers to his design team because he wanted to train his assistant mech designers. It was much easier to indoctrinate and adjust the mentalities of younger mech designers.

If Ves employed a bunch of highly-competent but older Journeymen or Seniors, it would be virtually impossible for him to shape them into his desired forms!

Even if every Ylvainan mech designer worshipped him as the Bright Martyr, they were still mech designers, and it was genuinely hard for older and better mech designers to follow the instructions of a younger upstart!

By keeping his design teams young, Ves might not get as much immediate value out of them, but they would slowly grow over time and become more suitable for his needs!

Not only that, but the mech designers here would predominantly stick with him for many decades!

Younger employees possessed a much longer lifespan than older ones. As long as Ves kept investing in them, they would continue to provide him with value over a very lengthy period of time until they finally neared their expiration dates!

It was safe to say that Ves opted for a strategy that pursued long-term prosperity over short-term benefits. The two design teams the LMC employed so far were just the beginnings of a formidable design operation that solely worked for Ves and Gloriana!

After getting to know the new mech designers some more, Ves handed over a couple of assignments and routine work to them. Just because he hadn't started any design projects didn't mean that his design teams could slack off!

Aside from keeping his bees busy, he also wanted to take their measure. Ves would be able to make much better use of his new mech designers when he learned what they were actually capable of in a new design environment.

If they failed to meet his standards, then Ves would not hesitate to kick them out! There were thousands of mech designers eager to take their place!

Of course, Mayer Torto required special consideration. As a freshly-graduate Novice, Mayer might possess an excellent foundation due to his elite education, but just because he possessed spiritual potential didn't mean he had what it took to become a Journeyman!

While Ves treated the other mech designers as disposable assistants, he wanted to cultivate at least a couple of talents to handle the more important design responsibilities in the future.

Whether they eventually set off on their own or continued to remain in his employ, Ves needed to develop a network of loyal and aligned mech designers eventually. Every Senior and Master appeared to do the same, and for good reasons.

Once Ves settled his design teams, he returned to his office to meet with the commanders of his three mech forces.

Commander Melkor Larkinson, Commander Magdalena Larkinson and Commander Cinnabar all gathered together in the same room.

While Melkor and Magdalena were already familiar with each other, they hadn't interacted at all with Commander Hugin Cinnabar.

Fortunately, the mood between them wasn't as awkward as Ves feared. Commander Magdalena was an old dog while Commander Cinnabar was an experienced mercenary commander. Both of them soon got along like comrades.

Ves took his seat while Lucky started dozing on his desk.

"Well, commanders. We're all finally here. Welcome back, Commander Cinnabar. I've heard you've made fruitful gains in your last excursion."

"We completed your assignments as best as possible, Mr. Larkinson, though I'm sorry to say we failed to track down some of the people you wanted to find."

"That's okay. It's unrealistic to obtain everything on my wishlist. Let's discuss this matter later in private. For now, we have to discuss the future of all of your troops."

He met the gazes of each of his mech commanders until he finally settled on Magdalena.

"We haven't been able to discuss this issue over the comm, but now that I'm here, I'd like for you to speak frankly. Are you willing to commit to me and take part in my grand expedition?"

Commander Magdalena shrugged. "Why not, sir? While I still have family, my children are all grown up now. They can take care of themselves. While I'm not as young as the more eager Larkinsons in the new family, I think you need a steady hand like me to keep them in line."

"Thank you." Ves sincerely said. "I am truly grateful for your continued support."

He turned to the youngest commander next. "How are you, Melkor?"

"I'm.. okay." He said as he shifted the visor over his face. "I have been having some.. doubts, lately."

"Is it anything serious?"

"It shouldn't affect my ability to do my job, sir. Magdalena and the other veteran Larkinsons have already offered me plenty of advice."

Since Melkor seemed reluctant to voice his doubts, Ves dropped the matter. If the commander said his issues didn't impact his productivity, then it wasn't worth pursuing.

Now that Ves became responsible for hundreds of Larkinsons and thousands of employees, he was too busy to manage the lives of his subordinates.

"The reason I've called you here is to make it clear what I am seeking from each of your three forces in the future."

He turned to Melkor again. "I've already made it clear that my Avatars of Myth are supposed to be my elites. I've also said that I intend to turn every Avatar in a second-class mech pilot."

"That.. is very difficult."

"I know, but I believe it's doable as long as I supply enough funding and resources. It helps that none of the Avatars are average mech pilots. Each of them should not only be skilled or elite, but also battle hardened. With their excellent foundation, my Avatars ought to be able pass this challenge."

Though Melkor didn't appear as confident, Ves revealed a welcome piece of news.

"One of the biggest hurdles in this kind of training is the lack of real mech piloting experience. Let me tell you that your men will each be able to pilot a real second-class mech and accrue valuable experience!"

"Do you mean..?"

"It's exactly what you think! The Scarlet Rose I've captured from the Fridaymen also come with a quartet of four premier second-class mechs! If footage of my battles in the Great Zona Republic have leaked, then you should know how powerful they are. The fact that they can already crush hundreds of third-class mechs despite lacking mech pilots should give my Avatars a very exhilarating piloting moment!"

"Will these 'practice' mechs be exclusive to the Avatars, sir?" Magdalena asked.

"The Avatars deserved this privilege." Ves emphatically stated. "As far as I know, the Living Sentinels all declined to meet the demands I've imposed on the Avatars. Since your men are unwilling to step up or commit to my grand expedition, then they should accept the circumstances."

"I've been discussing and considering the security needs of your grand expedition with Commander Melkor." The veteran mech officer pressed on. "Since you are planning to cultivate the Avatars of Myth into an elite mech troop, then they are not suitable to perform every security need. For ordinary guard duty, it is more suitable to deploy a large amount of mechs that can stall any potential hostile while your Avatars launch a counterattack."

Her argument had merit, but Ves did not immediately bought into it. "Will they even take part in my grand expedition?"

"Many will. I have already sounded out my Sentinels and many of them have started to change their minds. Give them some time, and they will definitely choose to join your expedition rather than stay behind."

"That still doesn't address the strength disparity between the Sentinels and all of the threats we might possibly face in the Red Ocean. One of the reasons I'm so insistent on upgrading every mech pilot I bring is because we'll be facing forces from the entire galaxy. While there are rules in place to prevent bullying from superior forces, it's best to rely on our strength! As a second-class fleet, our grand expedition will at least be able to explore most of the zones in the Red Ocean!"

Not only that, but second-class fleets were also considerably faster than third-class fleets. Ves did not wish to waste too much time in accessing the Galactic Gate Network or remain in the outskirts of the Red Ocean for several decades.

"How will you take care of the need for guards for your grand expedition, sir? If you truly intend to form a fleet numbering 20 valuable ships, then you will need at least several hundred mechs to guard such valuable assets!"

This was a conundrum that Ves admittedly hadn't considered very much. He initially passed on this responsibility to the Avatars, but due to their arduous standards and customs, Ves did not expect to be able to expand them quickly enough in the next couple of years.

Apparently, Magdalena already had an answer.

"What is your proposal?" Ves asked directly.

"Let some of the Living Sentinels who are willing to join your expedition join the second-class training program. As long as you don't hold them to the highest standards, they

won't fail. Remember that many of the Larkinsons in the new family have opted to join the Living Sentinels over the Avatars. They will definitely be able to pass this hurdle."

"Then what?"

"You supply my Living Sentinels with enough second-class mechs to allow them to perform their duties. Because of their lower training standards, you don't have to supply them with top second-class mech models. Just a midrange or budget equivalent of the mechs we are already familiar with are fine. Not only does this allow you to expand the number of mechs that can guard your valuable fleet, but also avoid burdening your finances."

He had to admit that Commander Magdalena offered him a sensible proposal. Ves weighed it in his mind and decided to take a small step in this direction.

"I'm not fully onboard with this plan, but I'm willing to see how well your Sentinels can transition to second-class mech designers. Mind you, the Avatars of Myth have priority access to the four second-class training mechs. As long as they aren't currently using the training mechs, then your Sentinels are allowed to make use of them. Of course, every training session will be supervised and I'll make sure to install some control systems in the mechs to prevent abuse. The last thing I want to see is someone trying to drive these expensive machines to ruin!"

Both Melkor and Magdalena nodded in understanding.

Ordinarily, they would have objected to such an insulting proposal. Installing kill switches or backdoors in mechs was a considerable taboo in the mech community!

This was because any killswitch could always be taken over by adversaries!

However, this was not that big of a deal when it came to training mechs. They weren't meant to participate in actual battles, so they were never at risk of destruction as soon as the mech lost power or something.

In this case, the matter was ten times more sensitive due to the insane value of the Kravon, Selzer, Paravin and Fliskin! Each of Aisling's former bodyguard mechs was worth a fortune even in a second-rate state!

Theft prevention should be a top priority to the Avatars and Sentinels tasked with keeping them safe!

Ves continued to outline his plans for his mech troops. All three had to serve a distinctive purpose, and none of them were redundant!

After a good talk with the three commanders, he eventually dismissed Melkor and Magdalena.

Only Commander Cinnabar was left. The bearded Kinner was finally ready to report on his activities while he was on assignment during the Sand War!

Chapter 1797 Trusted Customer

A virtual member card hovered in front of Ves just after he activated a jamming field. The card looked almost identical to the invitation card that Ves won from the Church of Haatumak years ago. He remembered the competition where he competed against Mayra, Ketis' mentor. Even though he lost, he still proved himself worthy to receive the card.

Of course, Ves had no good feelings for the weird and abnormal cult. Their strange powers and ability to make themselves undetectable through spiritual means almost caused the downfall of Lydia's Swordmaidens and the Flagrant Vandals!

Afterwards, he always intended to make use of the invitation card to get initiated in the so-called Angel's Wing Foundation, yet he never found the time to make an excursion.

The virtual invitation card not only acted as a means of entry, but also transmitted the moving coordinates where the powerful black market organization gathered.

According to several sources, the Angel's Wing Foundation was one of the biggest and most expansive black market organizations in the galactic rim.

In order to avoid stepping too much on the toes of other competitors, the AWF almost exclusively dealt in biotech-related goods and services.

It might not be the best place to obtain the best illicit mechs or hire the best assassins, but when it came to purchasing extremely valuable exobeasts and bioimplants, there was no other underground marketplace that could compare!

"It took us a long time to reach the site where the Angel's Wing Foundation opened for business." Commander Cinnabar calmly explained. "The organization set its gathering point in the frontier, which forced us to cross into unregulated space."

"What?! Did you enter sandman territory?!"

"Rest assured, we didn't encounter too many sandmen. The AWF set up shop well outside the sphere of influence of the sandmen. Aside from some sporadic sandman fleets that went astray, the space we traveled through was fairly safe."

Since nothing went wrong during the round trip, Ves put down his worries and instead focused on the gains.

"What did you accomplish while you were at their place?"

"We encountered a large fleet, including a capital ship that served as their main trading hub. The experience was.. Incredible. The Angel's Wing Foundation is truly powerful enough to be able extend their reach throughout the entire galactic rim."

Commander Cinnabar explained the procedures he went through. The invitation card wasn't locked to Ves' identity, so the mercenary commander managed to become a registered member without any problem.

Rather than risking his own life and reputation, Ves was fine with allowing his Kinner cash in the invitation card. If he needed anything from the AWF, then he could just dispatch Commander Cinnabar in his stead!

"So what's it like to be a member?"

"It's not that special, sir. Inside the massive trading ship are countless rare and lucrative trading opportunities. Every member who enters dons a cloak or employs other means of obscuring their identities, so no one knows anyone there. It would have taken too much time for us to explore them all, so we placed all of our efforts into obtaining the items on your list."

Ves leaned forward. "Did you..?"

"I'm sorry to say we only obtained some samples of just one item on your list. The trading vessel only offers scattered trading opportunities for exotics. They're mostly offered by members and clients who are in urgent need to raise hard currency to purchase or bid on the biotech goods they want."

Just like any other true black market organization, the AWF did not accept or deal with regular currencies such as bright credits or coalition credits. Instead, the use of Kavenit coins and other forms of bartering governed most transactions.

When Commander Cinnabar passed on the list to Ves, he erupted into a smile!

This was because the Battle Criers obtained one of the materials he needed the most!

"Thirteen P-Stones!"

Though the P-stone was one of the most basic spiritually-reactive materials he discovered, its uses were myriad! He could use them as spiritual energy batteries to capture his excess output or he could use them as makeshift containers for spiritual entities.

Yet that only scratched the surface of their possible uses! He suspected that he could employ the P-stones to other ends. If one of his hypotheses were correct, then perhaps the P-stone was an essential component in making permanent spiritual matter!

With thirteen chunks of minerals that Commander Cinnabar tentatively identified as P-stones, Ves did not have to be so stingy with their use! Though Ves still planned to stash most of them in his vault, he could afford to experiment with a handful of them without feeling pained over their loss!

"Make sure to move all of the P-stones in my vault. They're very precious and I don't want anyone else to touch them, including my own girlfriend." Ves commanded.

"We'll take care of it, sir."

"Now what are your other gains?"

"After we departed from the AWF, we attempted to search the people on your bounty list. It was.. difficult. While the Sand War allowed us to move anywhere without attracting too much attention by blending in with the refugee ships, the lack of tracking makes it almost impossible to locate specific people!"

"How did you solve this problem?"

The red-haired mercenary commander smiled. "We employed the use of an underground intelligence broker. We had to go through a significant amount of our remaining budget to obtain the coordinates of some of your targets."

"Who did you get?"

Cinnabar passed him another data pad.

The pad only contained a single list, which Ves silently read.

'Ronnie Blast'

'Merril Truman'

'The Alloy Sculptor'

'The Hand of Sin'

'Timothy Moriarty'

The moment his eyes spotted the first name, they grew red.

Of all the people on the list, Ves hated the first one the most!

After all of those years, this pirate designer finally fell into his hands!

"Hahahaha!" Ves erupted into laughter. "I bet you never expected me to nab you! I can finally repay the indignity you've subjected to me! I can't stand almost getting killed by my own design!"

His fury became especially heated when he recalled he'd been threatened by a plagiarized version of his own work!

If someone wanted to kill him using his own designs, then they better use his authentic works! This was what his professionalism demanded!

"Good! Keep the prisoners secured somewhere secret. Don't let anyone else find out!"

"We have the prisoners secured in the brig of the Ion Tracker for the time being, sir. Since we've parked our ship in orbit of Kesseling VIII, no one ought to be able to enter our ship without permission."

"Make sure to guard against infiltrators and other hidden troublemakers. I'm way too high profile these days. My reputation with the Ylvainans has reached an insane height, but that also means that lots of people will desperately want to investigate me. We can't rule out the possibility that someone will want to sneak onto your ships since you work directly for me. Remain alert and stay cautious. Don't let the friendly attitude of the Ylvainans fool you into letting down your guard."

As a Kinner bondsman, Commander Cinnabar was programmed to obey any instruction. He took Ves' orders seriously.

The Battle Criers made some other gains during their time away, but Ves didn't care about them anymore. After discussing everything else the Kinnars encountered during their travels, Ves issued some new orders.

"For now, I want your Battle Criers to remain close and act in coordination with the Avatars and Sentinels to guard my life and property. Since we are in unfamiliar territory, we can't take anything for granted, and the sandmen are still a threat."

"Understood."

"Aside from that, I'd also like you to take over control of the Scarlet Rose. This is an extremely important second-class ship for multiple reasons. I want you to pick out your most trustworthy ship crew and take control of the vessel. After that, I want you to coordinate with Michael Crindon in overhauling the ship. There is probably an orbital drydock in the Kesseling System that we can hire to perform the necessary repairs and renovations. I'll tell Crindon to cordon off the mech workshop and some other compartments. I have something special in mind for those sections."

"Crewing your new ship will be a problem." Commander Cinnabar warned. "I'm not a naval expert, but second-class vessels are a lot more difficult to operate."

"You can seek help from the crew of the Barracuda. Captain Silvestra and her subordinates have extensive experience in operating a Fridayman vessel. I believe their insights will be exceptionally useful. The only reason why I didn't reassign them to the Scarlet Rose is because I don't want anyone but Kinner bondsmen on my new personal ship."

The mercenary commander studied the projection of the Scarlet Rose and shook his head. "We can do that, but that means pulling essential crew away from our existing vessels. If the Scarlet Rose is as complex as she appears to be, then I can only draw from my best and most senior spacers. That will leave my Ion Tracker and other vessels shorthanded of competent officers and crew."

"Bear with it for now." Ves commanded. "If possible, I'd like you to expand the Battle Criers by supplementing it with more Kinner bondsmen. Is there a way to buy more Kinnners without traveling all the way to the Kinner Tribe?"

If he had to travel to the Kinner Tribe, then he would have to cross through the entire length of the Friday Coalition! That was not only a massive waste of time, but also an extremely perilous journey!

Of course, he could always take a lengthy detour, but such a trip would probably take at least half a year!

Fortunately, the Kinnners weren't as unreasonable as he feared.

"Ordinary customers of the Kinner Tribe aren't allowed to buyout our Kinnners remotely." Cinnabar explained. "This is because the parties buying our Kinnners may not be as trustworthy as they advertised, or withheld crucial information. This is one of the main reasons our Kinner Tribe highly values face-to-face meetings. Any Kinner bondsmen bought remotely will be facing a difficult dilemma if their new owners turn out to be different from that they expected."

Ves understood the nature of this problem. He had no doubt that the Kinner Tribe had been burned many times in the past. Even if the Kinner bondsmen were allowed to break away from a partner who transacted with their tribe in bad faith, the reputation of the Kinnners would still take a substantial hit!

In order to avoid such regrettable reversals, the Kinnners paid careful attention to the people who wanted to buy a permanent Kinner bondsman. Either a client or a trusted representative had to visit the tribe in person in order to buy the coveted human products offered by the tribe!

However, once some level of trust had been established, the Kinnners were much more accommodating to existing clients.

"Normally, you aren't eligible for this service, but you're a special case." Cinnabar pointed out. "As the famous Ves Larkinson who designed the two greatest mechs of the Sand War, your reputation and fame has skyrocketed. Our Kinner Tribe is always interested in maintaining relationships with notable people. I'll have to contact the tribe to be sure, but I can virtually guarantee you that it's no problem to order more Kinnners."

"Good." Ves nodded as if he half-expected this response. "I'll inform Benny to release the needed funds to expand the Battle Criers and secure more crew. Is it possible to triple your numbers?"

The mercenary commander grimaced. "I would not advise that, sir. Even though we share much in common with other Kinnners, the Battle Criers are still distinct. Expanding too quickly will dilute our martial tradition. I suggest doubling our number of mech pilots and other crew at most. While this expansion will still put us under strain, I'm confident we can integrate the new Kinnners in our outfit over time."

"Acceptable. Make sure you hire the best you can obtain. I'm not lacking for funds these days."

After discussing some of the details, both of them came to an agreement on how to expand the Battle Criers. This small former mercenary corps needed to expand and grow in strength in order to keep up with Ves' growing ambitions!

Chapter 1798 Great Preparation

After a lengthy and confidential chat with Commander Cinnabar, the Kinner left his office, leaving Ves alone for a time.

He leaned back against his office chair and noted with pleasure that it was even more comfortable than the one in his office at the Mech Nursery.

Automatic settings came online and firmly massaged his back. His entire body vibrated in a peculiar rhythm that almost lulled him to sleep.

"Meow?"

"Heh, don't even think about it! This is my chair! It's not suitable for cats!"

"Meow!"

Ves picked Lucky up and inspected his pet from every angle.

"Meow meow meow!"

"You've been eating really well lately. Where have you been putting all of it?! You haven't given me any crystals lately, and besides these tiger stripes, you don't look any stronger!"

"Meow~!"

"If you want to continue to enjoy your share Breyer alloy, then you better start working! Stop pumping everything into upgrades and start working your rear end!"

"Meow meow.."

Ves placed his deflated-looking cat down on his lap and stared at the ceiling for a time.

He had plenty of meetings to go through before he could go back to his core activities.

He longed to go back to his studies or begin his research on imaginary mechs.

He deeply desired to start a new ambitious design project with massive implications for his future design direction.

Yet Ves was long past the time he was all alone. He carried too many responsibilities. As a leader, he needed to set directions and move his pieces in order to advance his goals.

Right now, he was far from ready to set off for the Red Ocean! A huge gap remained, and it would take a monumental effort for Ves to overcome it! Ordinary Journeymen couldn't even dream of making so much progress, but he never doubted his ability to overcome the odds!

"I have to get back to making progress as soon as possible!"

For the rest of the day, Ves met with various people such as Crindon, the Ylvainans and so on. Each of the meetings proceeded briskly as he was not in the mood to waste any time.

One of the more notable meetings he held was with Dr. Lupo. Ves tasked the exobiologist to work together with Dr. Ranya Wodin to prepare for the upcoming implantation surgery.

"The Archimedes Rubal is essential to some of my upcoming plans." He spoke to his pet exobiologist. "Drop every unnecessary assignment for now and spend most of your efforts on preparing the implant as best as possible. How is the cranial implant, by the way?"

"I've studied and carefully formed a patch to update the firmware of the implant." The doctor confidently said. "I'll hand you a report later so you can view my suggestions. I've

been very conservative and made sure to draw from the most trustworthy-looking source code. There shouldn't be any hidden exploits or backdoors according to Mr. Crindon. Please keep in mind that it is only possible to alter the source code when the bioimplant is inactive. Once it is integrated into your brain, it is incredibly difficult to change its bioprogramming!"

That sounded concerning. An installed bioimplant often grew into such an indispensable part of the human body that altering or changing its programming essentially changed the person it was attached to! This was why they needed to do everything possible before the implantation procedure!

"I'll review your suggestions later. If you want, you can work together with Dr. Ranya to improve the firmware and possibly the cell structure of the Archimedes Rubal. I don't want any hidden dangers in the bioimplant, but seeing that it will form an essential component to my improvement, it needs to be as powerful as possible. CFA implant or not, it's undeniable that it is 300 years out of date."

Though it was true that a product like the Archimedes Rubal would only evoke disdain from the fleters who were used to enjoying the best, to someone like Ves it was still a great treasure that surpassed anything the Fridaymen and the Hexers could possibly offer!

None of their bioimplants matched the sheer data storage capacity of this three-hundred year old implant that Ves scavenged from an old wreck!

Since the Archimedes Rubal represented a powerful upgrade to his cognitive abilities and couldn't easily be changed or removed after it settled in his head, Ves needed to give Lupo and Ranya plenty of time!

"I understand, sir." Dr. Lupo said, though he didn't seem pleased at being pulled away from his more interesting assignments. "I will endeavor to complete the preparation within two months."

"Good."

After talking to Dr. Lupo, Ves held another important meeting.

Calabast had come.

This time, she chose to adopt the guise of Madame Cecily Curin yet again. When she entered his office, Ves instantly recognized that the new entrant wasn't the decoy that Calabast put in place.

Oh, her act was perfect. The Cecily who appeared in his office just as noble, dignified and reserved as one could expect of a Curin.

However, Ves became more sensitive to identifying people through their spiritual signature. Though Calabast did not possess spiritual potential, Ves nonetheless made sure to memorize her tiny spirituality as best as possible in order to avoid getting hoodwinked by her again!

The existence of Calabast proved that humans didn't necessarily have to possess spiritual potential to be an extremely fearsome existence! There were plenty of ways to stand out and be capable without relying on extraordinary means!

Once a jamming field came online again, Ves addressed her directly.

"Let's cut the games and speak plainly. I'm in no mood to waste any time."

Lady Cecily's expression turned ugly as Calabast straightforwardly dropped her act. "You're no fun."

"You know I'm not very pleased with you right now."

"You're expecting too much from me. Intelligence gathering is inherently difficult and unreliable. I've already told you how difficult it is to infiltrate the state apparatus. Though I admit that I have not been on guard against the machinations of the Mech Corps, it takes an immense amount of effort to infiltrate its headquarters."

Though it sounded like an excuse, Ves knew he couldn't fault her too much. "It is still a very significant failure."

"I made it up to you, didn't I?" Calabast leaned on the chair opposite of the desk and grinned. "You would have never been able to astound your attackers with your remote-controlled mechs if it wasn't for me supplying you with all of the essential software and instruction guides. In any case, I've expanded my network and made sure to insert more eyes in the local states. While I haven't penetrated the entire Ylvaine Protectorate, my agents are currently keeping tabs on all three leading dynasties. If any of them are about to move against you, I'll be able to warn you in advance this time."

Hearing that relieved Ves a bit. Both of them had learned from the previous incident. They'd be stupid if they got caught with their pants down!

They spent some time to discuss some security and spying arrangements before moving on to the next topic on the agenda.

"When we communicated a month ago, you said that there would be an opportunity for me to design a second-class mechs for the Hexers."

"That's correct." Calabast said. "I worked together with Gloriana to make the arrangements. You can view it as a commission, one that is rather sensitive and.. controversial."

Uh oh. Ves smelled trouble. When Calabast said that something was fishy, then she was definitely not exaggerating!

His eyes narrowed at her. "What is going on?"

"Let me begin by explaining the Hex Army. What is your impression of the Hegemony's main military branch?"

She smiled coyly at Ves while she waited for his answer.

"I've heard that the Hex Army is the most powerful force of the Hegemony. It's led collectively by the six matriarchal dynasties and is an expression of their might. Unlike the Fridaymen whose partners each operate their own mech militaries as their own entities, the Hex Army fights on behalf of the Hegemony as a whole, and is highly centralized and uniform."

"That's a good textbook answer." Calabast nodded in satisfaction as if she was a teacher who was pleased with a juvenile pupil. "The Hex Army is capable of fighting the collective might of the Friday Coalition. None of the six matriarchal dynasties have held back in investing in its strength. However, do you think that the Hex Army is the only military branch that is participating in the Komodo War on our side?"

Ves shook his head. "It shouldn't be. That would be too simple. At the very least, there are many intelligence agencies fighting in the dark, including DIVA that you used to be a part of. Am I correct?"

"You're right again. The Hexadric Hegemony is arguably the biggest state in the Komodo Star Sector. While the Hex Army is capable of fending off the main forces of the Friday Coalition doesn't mean it is universally good at anything. We are well aware that its high degree of uniformity and the lack of diversity and versatility means that its strengths can be countered and its weaknesses can be exploited."

"Then how do you solve this problem?"

"Mostly, we just trust in our strength. We know our strengths and we have trained all of our lives to become good at what we do best!" Calabast confidently grinned.

"That's all?"

"Of course not. Though we don't advertise it, we also employ auxiliary forces and irregular forces from time to time. Don't look down on the latter. Hexer mercenary corps are Hexers first and mercenaries second. They're not as cowardly and craven as the mercenaries you are accustomed to. None of the outfits in our state are incompetent!"

"So the commission you are referring to is related to one of these private sector outfits?"

She nodded. "That's true, but it would be a mistake to think that every outfit is truly private. The Hegemony abhors chaos and unregulated freedom. We don't allow any outfit that operates in our space to be independent. Behind each mercenary corps is at least one Hexer in good standing. This keeps them under control, because the backer must always pay for the misdeeds of the offending outfit."

Ves had to admit that this was a viable way to contain the damage these outfits could do when they fought. However, only a state as strong and unified as the Hexadric Hegemony could impose such restrictive conditions.

There was no way the Bright Republic could enforce such rules, especially when its space hosted a significant amount of foreign outfits!

"So tell me about the commission."

"It's not the time yet to discuss the nature of the commission. We're still fine-tuning the details. It will take some time for us to finalize the contract."

"What can you tell me then?"

"I am free to tell you about our client. First, do you think Hexers are all the same?"

"Of course not." Ves immediately shook his head. "Even if you Hexers have a strong culture, none of you are the same. There is still a lot of diversity between Hexers. Even the Wodins such as Gloriana, Brutus and Ranya are far apart from each other. In addition, the larger the state, the greater the differences between subpopulations. I can imagine that the Vrakens such as you are distinctly different from the Everbs."

"Since you understand this, then you should understand that there are always outcasts within a population. The Hegemony is no different. Due to the.. complications regarding your identity, it's not possible to offer your mechs to conventional Hexer organizations. It's also difficult to enter our market."

"Because I'm a 'boy'."

"Quite." Calabast sniggered. "So the only Hexers that are willing to make use of your products are those who are desperate and under special restrictions. After a lot of searching, Gloriana and I managed to find a Hexer outfit that is willing to pilot a mech designed by a male, foreign mech designer."

When she described him in this manner, Ves did not feel appreciated at all. Which Hexer outfit was desperate enough to resort to him for mechs?!

"What are they called?"

"The Penitent Sisters."

Chapter 1799 Religious Doctrine

Calabast gave Ves the time to process the name of his future client.

The name of an outfit often revealed their essence. It described their values, their history or their aspirations.

Ves suspected there was a remarkable story behind the formation of the Penitent Sisters. If their names accurately reflected their history, then it was impossible for it to be an ordinary mercenary corps from the Hegemony!

"The word sister sounds ordinary in most contexts, but when combined with a word like penitent, it sounds like there is a religious connotation." Ves threw out his guess.

Calabast nodded. "You're on the right track. Go on. What else can you figure out?"

"Penitent is a word that is related to feeling remorseful and seeking forgiveness. Someone who is penitent wishes to repent for their sins, whatever they may be. This makes it distinct from general guilt. All of this leads me to conclude that the Penitent Sisters have something to do with religion. Are they related to hexism?"

"The Temple of Hexism founded the Penitent Sisters, but to say they are backing them is not entirely accurate."

"Because the Sisters are guilty of something, right?"

"Right. The Penitent Sisters are basically made up of devout followers of hexism who went astray. All of them consist of Hexers who believed in deviant interpretations of hexism. They're extremists, basically. Not only that, but every Sister believed in the same radical doctrine that made them run afoul with the Temple of Hexism!"

This sounded rather thorny to Ves. He really didn't want to participate in another religious dispute!

"What is so serious that caused these Sisters to run afoul with what passes for your state's religion?"

"Did Goriana tell you about the six phases of existence?"

"She did, though it makes no sense to me. It sounds too much like a fabrication!"

Ves couldn't determine from Calabast's vague expression whether she bought into this nonsense or not. He believed her to be a secularist like him, but who could tell with women and Hexers.

"Well, to many Hexers, the six phases of existence is an inviolable truth. I highly advise you to never mention your true feelings about it to Gloriana or other Hexers. I can assure you they will go absolutely mad if they hear you disparage their beliefs."

"I know." Ves sighed. "I'm not so cautious in your company because I know you aren't like the other Hexers."

He never dared to question Gloriana's beliefs. She would probably turn into a terrifying monster if he pushed her buttons!

"Maybe I am, maybe I'm not." Calabast chuckled and tapped her finger against her forearm. "The point is that the concept of the six phases of existence is so accepted within our state that it is a very touchy subject to suggest any changes to any one of the phases! This is important because the Penitent Sisters all belonged to a cult that once dared to suggest a 'correction!'"

"What's the controversy?"

"List out the six phases of existence."

Calabast adopted a school teacher tone again.

Ves recalled the so-called phases from the back of his mind.

"The six phases are life, death, godhood, damnation, dust and.. woman, right?"

His school teacher nodded in satisfaction. "Good boy! At least your memory is better than your apparent age. Now what Gloriana probably didn't tell you is that the order of the phases is important. It describes the cycle of life, death and transcendence, with women as the penultimate phase that is the reward of all living entities. To become a woman is to become a top existence in life, death and the beyond!"

How could Ves accept such a self-serving explanation? Only Hexers could come up with this stupid belief!

He predictably grew sour. "Hexism didn't even bother including males."

"That's right, and there are several different interpretations why that is so. The orthodox belief is that the initial phase, meaning life, is essentially a euphemism for boy. Accepting this interpretation means that every human life starts off as a boy. Only after they pass through some of the other phases will they shed their inadequacies and become a woman!"

"This.."

"The reason why this is the most widely-accepted interpretation is because it explains why boys deserve to be treated the way they are in the Hegemony. They are newborns who have not experienced any waves or winds in their short existences. Boys are too immature and incapable because they haven't grown up, as it were. A woman has gone through at least several lifetimes that has slowly sublimated their existence to the peak form. Compared to the majesty of the superior gender, a boy will always be a juvenile no matter how old they grow in their initial lifetimes!"

What a creative story! Ves widened his eyes as he took in some of the implications of this interpretation.

Believing in it basically excused all of the derogatory behavior of female Hexers towards their male counterparts!

Men were boys, and each of them were toddlers compared to the wise and mature women who had already gone through several different evolutions!

This twisted logic gave no room for boys to gain any measure of equality in Hexer society!

Since Gloriana was a devout follower of hexism, Ves finally learned why she could never stop regarding him as a boy no matter how impressed she was at him! Even if he did his best to prove he was a man, he was still a couple of eons too young to match her status!

A strange thought flitted through his mind. Didn't this mean that Gloriana was a pedophile?

Despair struck his eyes for a moment before he quickly shook himself out of it. No matter what Gloriana believed, she genuinely respected him and always treated him more than just a 'boy'.

Perhaps in the future, Ves could slowly wean her away from the more extreme beliefs of hexism. As long as he kept her out of the Hegemony and away from other Hexers, Ves was confident he could temper some of her more undesirable Hexer traits!

His inner thoughts didn't escape the keen perception of Calabast. A twinkle appeared in her eyes. It was as if she looked forward to a show in the future!

She quickly recovered. "Regarding the phase of life as the initial form of existence that every human has to go through at the start is a very fitting narrative that neatly explains why boys are boys. They are young because they never grew up. They are irresponsible because they haven't been tempered. They are incapable because what could you expect from a bunch of brats? They are in need of care, guidance and protection because we women are older and wiser."

"That explains your attitude to me." Ves snorted.

"I don't need to resort to hexism to justify my treatment towards you." Calabast snarked back. "Let's get back on track. Now, since it's possible to infer that one of the six phases stands for boys, what if you apply it to the other phases?"

This threw Ves for a loop. "I take it there are a lot of implications and symbolism involved with equating or substituting the other phases with boys. If boys stand for death... doesn't that mean that every male must die?"

"There are indeed Hexers who believe in this deviant strain of thought. Even then, it's not necessarily the case that all boys must die. It's complicated and involves a lot of scripture, so I won't bore you with the details."

"Get to the point, then. What phase did the Penitent Sisters mess around with that caused them to be punished this way?"

"It's the fourth phase." Calabast finally answered. "The Penitent Sisters believed that the phase of damnation is equivalent to boys. The basic premise of this train of thought is that boys aren't young, innocent and deserving of care and protection. Instead, boys are a malignant existence, a cancer to life and a threat to society! Boys aren't dangerous and prone to brutality because they weren't raised right. They're outright evil and corrupted! The Penitent Sisters essentially regard every boy as an irredeemably evil demon who needs to be strangled in the cradle before they grow powerful enough to cause untold suffering! The latter half of the Age of Conquest is the clearest example of what could happen if boys are allowed to grow in strength!"

How brutal! From the way Calabast described these deviant Hexers, he had no doubt that they would truly kill babies just because of their extra appendages!

"Is this really an unorthodox belief?"

Calabast glanced at Ves as if he affronted her personally.

"We Hexers don't exactly have the best reputation, but we aren't mass murderers. Not only does that lower us to the same level as boys, we're quite aware our beliefs will never be tolerated by the male-dominant power structure of human civilization."

Ves already understood this argument. The Hexers aren't totally insane. At least they knew how to moderate their values and beliefs to avoid getting squashed by the Big Two.

"Then.. what is the matter with the Penitent Sisters? If their beliefs are so dangerous when spread, then why doesn't the Hexer equivalent of an inquisition lock them away or put them to death?"

"These punishments are too straightforward." She replied and crossed her legs, showing off her smooth, bare legs that shone like glass. "While death or imprisonment are heavy punishments, the Temple of Hexism is not satisfied with letting the cultists off. No. They deserve a harsher punishment. They must undergo the cruelest punishment for their temerity for challenging established doctrine!"

Ves grew confused. "Gloriana said that belief in hexism is rather relaxed."

"Oh, it's fine for Hexers to be relaxed or outright dismissive of hexism. The Temple of Hexism never bothers too much with them. It's when strong believers think they know better that touches their bottom line!"

"Okay.."

"Now, the members that now make up the Penitent Sisters riled up the Temple of Hexism so much that they have been issued with one of the cruelest punishments that they have come up with! It is so abhorrent that the very idea is incredibly repulsive to any Hexer!"

"What is the punishment?"

"The Penitent Sisters.. are forced to form a mercenary corps and wash their sins in battle. Only until they have made sufficient accomplishments in the Komodo War are they considered absolved!"

"That doesn't sound so bad." Ves blinked.

Wasn't this basically conscription? The mech pilots among the Penitent Sisters would have fought in the war regardless of what had happened.

Of course, it was never as simple as that. Calabast grinned.

"That is not the extent of their punishment. You see, the Temple of Hexism has imposed a cruel restriction for the Penitent Sisters. They are only allowed to pilot mechs designed by boys!"

"What!?" Ves practically jumped in surprise. "That's considered to be a punishment?!"

"Oh, to a Hexer mech pilot, it is a great shame to pilot a mech designed by a boy, because how competent can they be compared to august women? Mechs designed by boys are considered shoddy, cursed or inferior compared to mechs designed by the superior gender!"

Ves continually felt more and more insulted. This was ridiculous!

"I suppose it's especially 'cruel' for the Penitent Sisters, right?"

Calabast chuckled. "This is the brilliance of the Temple of Hexism! The Penitent Sisters, who used to believe that boys are unredeemable, are forced to pilot mechs that are designed by those very same demons!"

Sure enough, if the Hexers truly believed in this nonsense, then they genuinely preferred to die rather than to work with a mech designed by a boy!

"Where do I fit in? Why come to me instead of some random male Hexer mech designer?"

"Well, when the Temple of Hexism came up with this punishment, it didn't take the laws, customs and traditions of the Hegemony's mech industry into account. Boys are forbidden by law to design their own mechs. They're not even allowed to be the lead designer! In addition, the only mechs that Hexers are allowed to pilot are those approved by a panel of matriarchs! However, it is a great shame for any panel to approve the use of a mech designed by a boy!"

"I see."

That really sounded like a messy situation! Though the Temple of Hexism could have revised its punishment for the Penitent Sisters, it would only humiliate itself in the process!

"Then what makes me eligible?"

"If the Temple of Hexism wants to solve this conundrum, some rules need to be bent." She said. "You just happen to fit in the picture!"

Chapter 1800 Female Supremacy

Women reigned supreme in the Hexadric Hegemony. Founded by an extremist group exiled from the more prosperous parts of the galaxy, the Hegemony stood strong as a testament to the indomitable will of its citizens!

Each woman in the state lifted their heads with pride, believing themselves to be the superior gender and the most supreme form of life!

Unlike the rest of the galaxy, the Hexers believed that their state was the only one that was governed properly! With only the wisest matriarchs at the helm, the Hegemony was infinitely greater than the states where 'equality' reigned.

True equality didn't exist! Males and females were undeniably different, and of the two, the latter were clearly better suited to rule the galaxy!

What happened when boys gained power without restraint?

They abused their might like children shooting a gun for fun! Boys were too young, stupid and inexperienced to know what was best!

In the long history of the human race, males always played an indispensable role.

Though human civilization had reached a new apex in the Age of Mechs, the Hexers believed that their race would have swept the entire galaxy were it not for all of the idiotic decisions made by boys!

If humanity were to ascend and reach its true potential, then something must change!

The Hexers had been raised and taught to believe that only women were suited to guide their race to its maximum potential!

"It's a wonder how humanity hasn't gone extinct yet with all of the blunders made by the boys in charge. No more! We must stand up and stop these irresponsible children from leading us to ruin!"

The Hexers dreamt of ruling the galaxy. Their ambitions ran deep as they each believed that women were destined to take over the galaxy!

"We shall thrust our boots against the necks of the MTA and CFA and force them to step aside!"

"We will smash the alien empires and turn all of their territories over to our race!"

"We must bring the boys to heel and put them in their proper place!"

Such slogans invigorated the Hexers and drove them to aspire for more!

The Komodo Star Sector was one of the most trivial star sectors in the Milky Way Galaxy. The density of stars close to the edge of the galaxy was very low, and many of these stars possessed so little energy and matter that humans disdained occupying them. This was not the stage where Hexers should embark on their ambitious takeover of human civilization!

Defeating the Friday Coalition and taking full control of the star sector was a necessary test!

If the Hexers couldn't even defeat the weak and divided Fridaymen, then what capital did they possess to conquer the rest of the galaxy?

If Ves heard what many Hexers dreamt of, he would have labeled them all as hopping mad!

How could these women ever think of taking over human civilization? The countless states in their way would never agree to adopt their warped ideology!

The first-rate superstates could squash the Hegemony a million times over without putting any strain on their war-making potential!

The Big Two were so mighty that their leaders wouldn't even be aware of the existence of Hegemony from beginning to end!

Clearly that didn't bother the Hexers. They were so confident and assured of their eventual victory that they did not hesitate to bring forth the war that had the potential to shatter their entire state!

"We must not falter, sisters! We are Hexers! We are superior!"

"The Fridaymen are weak, divided and cruel. Through espousing false notions such as gender equality and respect for diversity, their boys keep their women shackled! Do not be fooled by their utopian facade! Once we break into the Coalition, we must liberate their women and teach our freed sisters their true birthright!"

The Komodo War began with Operation K as a declaration of Hexer resolve! The female supremacists did not hesitate to start the conflict with a strong punch in order to unbalance the Fridaymen and widen the cracks between their partners!

Unfortunately, reality did not proceed as they envisioned. The Friday Coalition showed some surprising resolve and banded together more rapidly than the Hexers initially predicted.

By all accounts, the Komodo War that was ramping up was about to turn into a giant slugfest!

In this backdrop, the Penitent Sisters came into being. Rounded up by the Temple of Hexism and other authorities, the militants among the cultists who believed that boys were irredeemably damned were sentenced to a crime that they considered to be worse than death!

The cruel followers of hexism damned the deviants into participating in the war while fielding mechs designed by a boy!

It was said that when the cultists received this verdict, the distressed women all kneeled and cried out in anguish!

It was said that when the Penitent Sisters came into being, each of their members slit their palms and let the blood drop onto the deck of their flagship, a century-old relic mothballed by the Hex Army, and swore to wash the shame of piloting a mech made by boys by seeking death on the battlefield!

None of the Penitent Sisters wanted to survive the war! All they wished for was to kill as many Fridaymen as possible until they died!

When Calabast described the character of the Penitent Sisters to her partner, Ves frowned in confusion.

"This doesn't sound like a mercenary corps at all. It's a religious death corps!"

"That's an apt way to describe them." The former spy nodded. "The combatants of the Penitent Sisters all consist of radical followers of hexism. Think Gloriana, but much more fierce and trained for combat."

"And they're all willing to accept this 'punishment'?" Ves asked skeptically.

"It's a matter of honor and belief, Ves. Their names, their legacy and their pride are at stake! It might surprise you, but there are some things worth dying for! I thought you of all would understand since you are a Larkinson."

Ves twitched his mouth. "There's a difference between fighting for a cause and dying for a cause. I would rather stay alive, thank you very much. Can you get back to the topic? How many mechs do I need to design? Must they be landbound, spaceborn or both? How many copies of my designs will the Penitent Sisters field? How will my designs be able to pass the panel of matriarchs who are allergic to mechs designed by males?"

"You only need to design one second-class spaceborn mech with Gloriana. It must be fairly versatile, capable of attacking up close and from afar, and be useful in multiple different combat scenarios."

"That.."

"Second-class mechs and second-class mech pilots are different from the inferior mechs and mech pilots you are used to. Don't mistake the mech pilots of the Penitent Sisters as the dregs of the Hegemony. Each of them are highly trained and possess at least basic competences in both melee combat and ranged combat!"

That made things a lot easier for Ves. It sounded as if the mech pilots of the Penitent Sisters were close to meeting the elite standard in their state.

Still, her requirements sounded a bit thorny, and suspicious as well.

"Why must I design a single mech? An outfit must field at least several different mech models to form a balanced makeup."

Calabast shook her head. "The Penitent Sisters is a punishment outfit. Its purpose is to grant their members a shot of redemption. That doesn't mean that absolution should

come easily. From what I can gather, the Penitent Sisters will be thrown in a variety of high-intensity battles and be made to perform dangerous and vital tasks."

"Those are some very steep demands! What is my budget?"

"The mechs can't be too expensive, so you can assume your mech must cost around the same as a midrange mech."

He winced.

If they were talking about third-class mechs, then Ves would have rejected this commission without hearing Calabast out.

The demands issued by the client were too much!

Not only did the client expect the mech to be able to fight at various ranges, but also wanted the mech to be versatile enough to fight in many different settings. In addition, since the Penitent Sisters were expected to be employed in many desperate situations, the mech had to be robust as well!

Ves might have found this commission to be tolerable if he was given a generous budget, but he seriously doubted if he could check all of the boxes if he could only design a midrange mech!

"You're misunderstanding something, Ves." Calabast smirked and tapped her cheek with her finger. "The Hegemony doesn't expect you to design a good mech. Both the Temple of Hexism and the Penitent Sisters expect little from a male mech designer! In their eyes, it's impossible for a boy like you to understand the essence of proper Hexer mech design!"

In other words, the client didn't even want him to succeed!

Ves became indignant. How could his professionalism be tarnished by such low expectations? He couldn't stand the thought of Hexers ridiculing his mech design and disparaging it as a failed product!

It should never be a punishment to pilot his mechs!

Each and every mech pilot fortunate enough to experience his mechs all submitted positive feedback. His mechs were a joy to pilot and trustworthy enough to depend on their performance.

Throughout his entire career, Ves never encountered a situation where the majority of his customers became dissatisfied with his products!

He clenched his fists. This entire commission insulted him and he hadn't even heard the final details!

"What is the point of designing such a mech? What do I get out of it, exactly?"

"Ah, you will gain some favor from the Wodin Dynasty, who will take some credit for the success of this commission. This will help offset some of the debts and favors that Gloriana accrued to assist you." Calabast smiled. "You don't want her to owe too much to the Wodins, do you?"

Ves sighed. Calabast knew him too well. "I see. So I won't be able to gain market access to the Hegemony?"

"I advise you to dispense with such fantasies. Even if you designed the best mech in the star sector, the Hegemony will still reject your work because you are a boy! Not every Hexer deserves to be punished as harshly as the Penitent Sisters."

"Since you Hexers are so repelled towards mechs designed by males, then how will my mech even be approved?"

"A lot of lawyers in the employ of the Temple of Hexism poured over this problem. They finally found a way to pass your work. First, the commission must be designed as a classified design project. Second, the initial lead designer must be a female Hexer in good standing. Third, the project must have an opening for a contributing mech designer that is potentially open to foreigners under strict conditions. This last point is a bit difficult to work with, as Hexer mech designers generally don't collaborate with foreigners on classified design projects."

"How will the Hexers overcome this rule?"

"We'll be taking advantage of an obscure substitution rule. The lead designer will initially appoint Gloriana as a contributing designer of the project. The agreement she must sign will include a rare benefit as one of its clauses. It grants her the privilege to bring on any partner, student or apprentice to the project as an assistant designer. That will be you, if you can't tell."

Ves frowned. "Will it be a problem to bring me aboard when I'm a man?"

"It's not a big deal if you are just supposed to work as an inconsequential assistant designer. Plenty of female mech designers employ male mech designers to perform all of the grunt work."

"What about my status as a foreigner?"

Calabast grinned. "This is one of the brilliant parts about this plan. The privilege that Gloriana will receive just happens to be devoid of any mention about the origin of the

assistant mech designer! This is a tiny oversight due to the addition of new rules over the years. It's never been a problem because no lead designer will carelly allow foreigners to take part in a classified design project."

"And it's okay this time?"

She nodded. "Once you come onboard as an assistant, the lead designer will find some way to be elsewhere and indisposed. If she is absent for too long, Gloriana will automatically be promoted to lead designer. Since her old position is empty, the project urgently needs a new contributing mech designer. This will certainly be you as long as you are the only assisting mech designer on hand!"

"And that's allowed as well?!"

"What can I say? The Hexers who wrote and amended the rules never took such an abnormality into account. They simply assumed that any meaningful mech designer involved in a project will only consist of female Hexers."

"So how will I get all the way up to lead designer, then?"

"That's another interesting part..."