

Mech 1821

Chapter 1821 Valuable Boy

Three advanced ships formed an isolated fleet in high orbit of Kesseling VIII. A patrol of mechs constantly orbited around the Stellar Chaser, the Frozen Leaf and the Serendipity, preventing any snoopers from sneaking close.

Aboard the Frozen Leaf, the smallest of the three vessels, Dr. Ranya tried her best to analyze the outcome of certain changes to the biological makeup of the Archimedes Rubal implant.

It was too bad she was playing host to her cousin, who just fled the planet in order to distance herself from her boyfriend!

"I can't believe it, Ranya. Ves doesn't want to become a Hexer. Don't you know how much that ruins my plans? I wanted him to live with me at home and help our state rise to a greater. With his expertise along with my own, our mechs are destined to boost the Hegemony just as our Desolate Soldier and Deliverer mechs have boosted the lesser states."

Ranya finally couldn't take it any longer. She turned away from the projected interface and turned her swivel chair towards Gloriana, who was currently curled up on a sofa while hugging Clixie.

"Miaow. Miaow."

"I think Clixie thinks you're being too melodramatic over a boy." Ranya guessed.

Gloriana squeezed her cat, eliciting another miaow.

"You don't know what she wants. Only Ves understands her better than me!" She sighed. "I really miss Ves."

"Really? After all he said, you're still pining for him?" Ranya palmed her face. "Face reality, Gloriana. He's never going to be the boy you want! Ves is nothing more than a brat who pretends to be a man. I get it that a boy like that can be appealing, but bad boys don't make for good marriage material. Your mother will never allow it! I think the only reason she tolerated your stay with him was because she wanted to give you a learning experience. Ves is just supposed to be a phase for you! Now that you've learned your lesson, it's time to get over him and return to the Hegemony and take your true place in our dynasty!"

Perhaps her words might drill through someone's head in ordinary circumstances, but she underestimated Gloriana's resolve!

"You don't understand, Ranya. Ves is more than a phase to me. Regardless of what you or my mother thinks, Ves is the key to everything. I literally can't bear to be apart from him. I won't allow it. I have to have him. I have to borrow his strength. It's the only way I'll make Master in my lifetime."

Ranya looked skeptical. "Plenty of mech designers made it to Master on their own. You're a great mech designer by all accounts."

Gloriana glared at her cousin. "You. Don't. Understand."

At this time, the hatch to the lab slid open, allowing entry for another Wodin.

"Brutus!" Ranya made a pleading gesture towards the newcomer. "Please help me put some sense in your sister. She's still smitten with Ves after he completely declared his hatred of our people!"

A growl escaped from his throat. Brutus possessed a great amount of devotion towards his state! The Hegemony was one of the few states in human space that had seen the light! Anyone who insulted the superiority of women was too ignorant to deserve their attention!

His anger strengthened his concern towards his sister. He sat down next to her and embraced her in an affectionate hug. Gloriana soon melted in his arms.

"Ranya is right. You deserve better. I always told you that the boys back at home are better than the rats from the lesser states. No matter how exceptional Ves appears, he can't overcome the gap between and properly-raised boys.

Unfortunately, not even her closest brother was enough to make her budge! Gloriana dug her heels even deeper!

"None of you understand what Ves means to me. No matter what he thinks about our state, I still love him. I still want to be with him. It's just so frustrating that he doesn't want anything to do with Hexers. Oh, I just want to bash his head until he can finally think straight enough to see how perfect it would be for us to be a couple in the Hegemony. Why is he so blind?"

Both Ranya and Brutus exchanged an exasperated stance. It seemed that dragging Gloriana back to the Hegemony would only make her pine after the bad boy who stole her heart even more!

Perhaps they needed to flip this around.

"Why not.. enlighten Ves more forcefully?" Ranya carefully suggested.

Her cousin looked up at her. "How?"

The exobiologist flipped her green hair and pointed her thumb at her work interface. "I can slip in some secret code in his bioimplant. Once I've installed the tampered implant in his head, he'll be your lovely little dog who will always bark on your command!"

"No!" Gloriana hissed. Her expression turned ugly. "I'll never do that to my love. Ves wouldn't be who he is if we tamper with his thoughts. I'll lose at least half of what I want if I let you sabotage my boy. Besides, do you think it will work? Ves is far more careful than you think. He is definitely on guard against you. Stop thinking about messing with Ves in this way. It will only make things worse between us. I'll kill you myself if you cross the line!"

Ranya was taken aback by Gloriana's threat! "You.."

"Maybe we don't have to go that far." Brutus quickly interjected. "Since Ves doesn't acknowledge the greatness of our state, we'll have to 'invite' him to visit our home and experience our superior culture for himself! I'm sure he can be persuaded to recognize the truth. It wouldn't be the first time our people have converted the ignorant to the light."

Gloriana shook her head. "It won't work. Have you forgotten what he did to the last people who forcefully attempted to bring him away? Aisling Curver limped back to the Warsaw Giant System in disgrace while the Coalition Reserve Corps lost an entire mobile supply frigate. Ves captured the ship by himself together with his cat of his, killing dozens of Fridaymen in the process. Don't underestimate Lucky. If my guess is right, none of us can block him from doing what he wants."

"Is that cat that good?"

"Miaow."

"Clixie is better, of course." She affectionately rubbed the head of her cat. "Lucky comes close, though. He has some unique tricks that we simply can't guard against. I advise you to drop any notions of using force against Ves. If you've studied his record and gained access to some of the classified files on him, you'll realize he's a much greater threat than you can possibly think. Plenty of soldiers, pirates and assassins attempted to capture him or take his life, but what is the result? They all failed without question, and I don't think it's a coincidence that Ves has managed to survive and get on top of the situation time and time again."

"Aren't you exaggerating too much, cousin? I get that you adore Ves and don't want him to develop any bad blood against us, but we're not dummies like the Fridaymen."

"Drop it. I'll free him myself if any of you attempt to do something so stupid. I won't let anything risk our relationship any further, especially now that it has become shaky. I won't tolerate any mistakes."

The argument continued. Both Ranya and Brutus wanted Gloriana to get over Ves, while Gloriana thought her two relatives were taking her boyfriend far too lightly!

As someone who was obsessed with Ves, Gloriana knew far more about him than any other person! Not even the Larkinsons could match against her understanding of him! All of the times she kept him under observation was not in vain!

After a few minutes of fruitless persuasion, Gloriana finally had enough.

"Stop." She raised her palm. "None of you understand what is at stake. Ves is more than a boy to me. He is my best possible partner and the key to produce truly great mechs. I won't allow you to do anything that jeopardizes my relationship."

"Perhaps it will help us if you tell us exactly why Ves is so great for you." Ranya suggested.

A calculating expression appeared on Gloriana's face. A lot of thoughts passed through her mind as she deliberated on what to do. Eventually, her eyes glinted as she came to an important decision.

"I'll tell you what I know and what I've guessed, but this must stay between us. Ves is intensively secretive and he'll respond horribly if he finds out what I've done. Understand?"

Both Ranya and Brutus reluctantly promised to keep a secret. In the meantime, Gloriana ordered the guards of the Glory Battalion to step out before activating a jamming device.

"Alright, come closer." Gloriana huddled forward. "I don't want this conversation to be leaked. Clixie, can you keep watch? I'm depending on you to warn us if he's near."

"Miaow."

Her cat dutifully patrolled the lab and kept her senses out for any sign of Lucky!

Once that was done, Gloriana finally turned to her two close relatives. "What I'm about to tell you sounds fantastic, but it's the truth. First, let me explain to you about the divine powers he commands..."

Both Ranya and Brutus looked more and more incredulous as Gloriana plainly revealed Ves' ability to create proto-gods, mastery over the domain of life and the immense potential of a monopoly on divine components!

"T-That's absurd!" Ranya looked shocked. "You're painting him as a god!"

"Is there any proof of your assertions?" Brutus managed to retain his calm. "It's not that I'm doubting you, sister. It's just.. difficult for me to suspect that he's been deceiving you all this time. It sounds too improbable that a random boy from a lesser state is capable of so much."

"You've been here for a while, Brutus. Haven't you ever studied the mechs he designed? Haven't you experienced all of the Desolate Soldiers, Holy Soldiers, Deliverers and other mechs up close? The so-called 'glows' that are at the heart of these machines aren't as simple as you think. They are actually the external manifestations of the proto-gods that Ves has created. I even helped him with this miraculous process a few times."

"This.."

"There's more." Gloriana added. "If I'm right, Ves probably found a clue on what allows a mech pilot to become an expert pilot. It's related to his design philosophy. Since he can create proto-gods from scratch, he can also turn people into gods. Just watch the mech pilot called Silent William closely over the next couple of months. Ves has been trying to turn him in an expert candidate in order to complete an assignment from the MTA. I can tell you now that he will definitely find a way to succeed."

This time, Brutus couldn't remain composed anymore. This news was truly too shocking! "This is absurd!"

"It's the truth." Gloriana confidently stated. "Look. Even if half of what I said is wrong, that still leaves plenty of value in Ves. Do you realize now why I can't allow anything to worsen our relationship?"

A brief silence ensued as both Ranya and Brutus struggled to make up their minds.

"Suppose.. this is true, then it's not wrong to pursue him." Brutus gruffly admitted. "We'll have to intensify our observation of him and dig deeper in his history. As long as my sister is right, we can't lose an asset as valuable as him to the Fridaymen or some other beneficiary. The Hexadric Hegemony must secure him at all costs!"

Ranya reluctantly nodded. "And we have to do it in a way that doesn't involve force or coercion. Ves is not as simple as he looks. His strengths and abilities sound way too advanced for him to be a simple boy from the boondocks of the Komodo Star Sector. If he doesn't manage to turn the tables, then perhaps a backer of his will make us pay!"

Chapter 1822 Watchful Shadow

"It's too difficult to bring him to the Hegemony if he really doesn't want to go." Gloriana emphasized. "For reasons I've already explained, it is an exceedingly poor decision to force him. It has never worked out to his enemies, and we won't fare any better. Don't

think we can use our superiority as Hexers as an advantage. The Fridaymen tried that and learnt first-hand what a disaster they provoked."

Though Ranya and Brutus didn't entirely agree, they agreed to drop any drastic actions. The risk of something going wrong was too great, and that would have devastating consequences.

As long as Gloriana was right, then it was vital to secure this powerful asset for the Wodin Dynasty and the Hexadric Hegemony!

Between the two, Ranya was still on the fence. She couldn't conceive that a low-class boy like Ves was actually a diamond in the rough. It broke all of her prior assumptions of Ves! It was too difficult to reconcile her conflicting views.

Brutus on the other hand was much more willing to accept Gloriana's claims. He knew her sister well enough to know she rarely made a mistake. Their mother raised them to be sure of their choices and decisive in their judgement.

In addition, as an expert pilot, his intuition wasn't weak. He was very sensitive towards Gloriana, so he knew how deeply she believed in her words. Her infatuation towards Ves and her belief in his alleged abilities were completely genuine!

Having met Ves in person, Brutus always got the sense that the Brighter was more than he appeared. Anyone who managed to capture his sister's heart was bound to be exceptional! With her high standards, she would never settle for anything lesser!

It was his faith in his sister that allowed Brutus to set aside his doubts.

"I have a suggestion." He said, attracting the attention of the two women. "Considering Ves' disposition, it is truly difficult to make him see the light. He's not that different from other male foreigners. They keep getting hung up over the disadvantages without recognizing how beneficial it is to live under a new order. You can't force these kinds of people to embrace our way of life, at least not without drastic measures."

"What are you thinking, brother?"

"If you keep trying to drag him to our state, your relationship with him will only get more strained. By his own words, he loves you, but not the Hegemony. If you want to repair your bond with him, then you will just have to accept this reality."

"The Hegemony is my home. I had plans. It was supposed to be perfect." Gloriana looked glum.

"There are more ways to make Ves embrace the truth, sister. Rather than drag him to the Hegemony, why not drag the Hegemony to him? Hexers like us shouldn't be confined to this star sector. Aren't you planning to embark on an adventure to the Red

Ocean with him? He'll need a lot of help. Outfitting a full pioneering fleet isn't cheap or easy, especially in a short timeframe."

As Brutus made his point, Gloriana began to see some hope.

"I see.. Ves wants to leave in less than a decade for some reason. No matter how many well he does, he definitely needs our help to outfit his fleet. This is our chance. All of the ships provided by us will have to be crewed by Hexers. With thousands, tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of Hexers traveling along, we can found a new colony of Hexers in the Red Ocean. Home will never be far away in this case. It's perfect."

"This entire situation sounds too far-fetched." Ranya spoke. "Isn't the Red Ocean supposed to be accessible to the very best?"

"I believe in Ves. He will succeed in becoming a galactic pioneer. Once that happens, will you finally believe that he is better than all of the boys at home?"

"I.. maybe." Ranya grudgingly said. "It all sounds like a fairy tale. How can you be sure of everything you said? It will take more than this to make me trust your word."

"Just stick around and see what we can accomplish in the next couple of years. I can guarantee you that Ves will definitely impress you all!"

Under Gloriana's persuasion, Ranya seriously considered staying around. It wasn't as if there were any great opportunities at home due to the Komodo War.

In addition, Gloriana had been generous in providing Ranya with some of the funding she needed to further her research. This gave her another incentive to stay, though it was hard for her to get used to the appalling foreign environment.

The Hegemony was a utopia compared to the poor and barren states like the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate! Ranya missed all kinds of luxuries back home, and she almost couldn't stand the way that boys in foreign states thought they were equal to women!

Brutus studied the expressions of his sister and his cousin. He had made his own calculations. His first priority was to ensure the wellbeing of his sister. As long as this was assured, he wanted to do what was best for the Wodins, and after that the Hegemony.

Ensuring the expeditionary fleet possessed a strong Hexer influence would definitely be beneficial in multiple ways.

No matter how amazing Ves appeared to be, he was just one person. While he was making a good effort in elevating the LMC and the Larkinson Clan, to Brutus they would never be on par with true Hexer organizations.

The Wodins discussed what they should do. Of the three, Gloriana was the most content of all. Though she had betrayed Ves' trust by revealing some of her secrets, she no longer had to worry about Ranya and Brutus acting against her interests!

Instead, they could become her strongest two helpers!

"I would really like to observe Ves more closely and see whether he is truly as great as you describe, but I won't be stay for long."

"When will you leave, brother?"

"I originally planned to escort Ranya back to Hegemony after she is done with her assignment here. If she wants to stay, then I'll have to return regardless. The Fridaymen are growing bolder every day."

Gloriana hummed and rubbed her chin. "You should go. We might as well take advantage of your departure by letting you pass on Ves' secrets to mother. I'm sure she'll be much more inclined to support our relationship."

"I'll do that, but I don't know what mother will eventually think." Brutus cautioned. "In any case, I'll make the best of our remaining time by facilitating the training of Ves' mech pilots. I've noticed that some of them are trying hard to pilot our class of mechs. I have to turn away each time they take their stolen second-class mechs out for a spin."

"That's great." Gloriana smiled and hugged Clixie against her chest. "It'll be hard to make Ves think better of Hexers, but we can make a start by showing that our Wodin Dynasty can be helpful to him. He's a lot more malleable as long as he gains some benefits."

"What if you're wrong?"

"I can handle Ves. We still love each other. A few disagreements doesn't change that. I don't want any of you doing anything drastic. Ves isn't alone. Aside from the people around him and the allies he can call upon, he also has a partner I haven't told you about. Calabast is a former DIVA agent. We're lucky she's not a mech designer. If she was, she would definitely claim him for herself."

"What? There is a DIVA agent here? You should have mentioned this earlier!" Brutus looked alarmed. "What is her kind doing here?!"

"As far as I know, Calabast is no longer with DIVA. That doesn't mean she lost her competence and her skill. She's very perceptive and guards Ves in the dark, so don't

assume our actions won't go unnoticed. However, I've spoken with her and gained an understanding of her. To get her off our backs, we only need to show that we are a boon to Ves."

The revelation that Ves was entangled with a former DIVA agent put credence in Gloriana's claims.

The spies who work for the Hexadric Hegemony were anything but stupid! For an elite operative to resign from DIVA in order to attach herself to a mech designer from a lesser state that there was truly something special about Ves!

Even Ranya came around somewhat.

"Since another Hexer has managed to form a partnership with Ves, why not join hands? It doesn't sound as if she is competing for his affection, so there should be grounds for cooperation."

Gloriana hesitated for a moment. "I'm not sure if that's a good idea. I think Calabast made a different choice from us. From what I inferred, after she participated in a classified mission that caused her to bump into Ves, she not only walked away from DIVA, but also separated from the Vraken Dynasty!"

This caused Brutus to become even more vigilant towards this supposed former spy! The Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty was a lot greater than the Wodin Dynasty! The former was one of the six most powerful rulers of the Hegemony, while the latter was just a vassal. For someone to pay a huge price and separate herself from a powerful backer took an enormous amount of determination!

The greater implication of these moves was that the DIVA agent evidently served her own interests rather than the interests of the Vraken Dynasty or the state.

The existence of Calabast cast an ominous shadow over the Wodins. They were confident that they could manipulate Ves even when they were limited to softer means. Yet with a former DIVA agent looming over their heads, they could not be too blatant in their actions.

"We need to investigate even further." Ranya stated. "We need to find out more and verify the claims you've made. I'm not comfortable with knowing so little about Ves and this alleged spy."

Gloriana nodded in agreement. As long as her cousin and her brother found proof, then they would definitely be onboard with her relationship with Ves!

She still offered a word of caution, though.

"Our movements won't escape Calabast's attention. I'll handle her when she confronts me. We've already formed an understanding between us. As long as we don't trip her alarms, we won't encounter any hindrances."

As the three Wodins plotted to grow closer to Ves, a certain former DIVA agent looked up in the sky as she walked on the streets of Krent.

A slight smirk grew on her face. "Interesting."

She shook her head and restored her original expression. After taking a few steps, she entered an alley, where she promptly disappeared in thin air.

Meanwhile, Ves, who was ignorant of all of this, spent his time tutoring the Larkinson seeds at the LMC's design labs.

All four of them had become a part of the clan. Each of them left their mark on the pages of the Larkinson Mandate. This essentially turned the Larkinson seeds into his own property, causing him to value their development a lot more!

"Maisie, you're the oldest of your group." He addressed one of the seeds. "Your studies have proceeded well and you've already picked up some of the rudimentary knowledge and principles of mech design. Have you considered where you wish to study? This is one of the most important choices you can make. Each mech design university is different."

The young teenager looked uncertain. "You told me that you'd recommend us to the Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation, but.."

Ves grimaced. "If you really want to attend the DCTI, then I'll allow it. Our Larkinson Clan may have left the Bright Republic, but the Larkinson Family will still stand up on your behalf while you are there. However, is this what you want? If you want something better, I'll do my best to get you in another institution. Do you have another choice?"

"Well.." Maisie took a deep breath before voicing her request. "If it's not too much trouble.. can I attend a Hexer University?"

"..."

Chapter 1823 Troublesome Choice

In the next couple of days, the Wodins made some quiet movements. Not only did they dispatch some people to snoop around, but Brutus Wodin also made a few more appearances.

Ostensibly, he wanted to take a look at the four Fridayman mechs that Ves had captured. While he was observing the ongoing training sessions with the precious

mechs turned practice tools, Brutus charitably offered a few tips. He was especially charitable towards the female pilots and quickly earned their appreciation!

For a second-class expert pilot to grace them with his presence was an enormous honor! Though there was a lot of apprehension from the Larkinsons, Avatars and other mech pilots at first, Brutus consciously reigned in his disdain and tried to blend in with the natives.

While he wasn't a particularly good actor, his natural demeanor as an expert pilot helped a lot. Regular mech pilots always looked up to expert pilots, so Brutus only needed to speak a couple of words to make an impact!

At the same time, Dr. Ranya Wodin began to work more earnestly in preparing the bioimplant for surgery. She used to regard this task as a chore, but it was different now that Ves was more than just a mutt in her eyes.

Her cooperation with Dr. Lupo deepened as she shared more of her insights. She even went out of the way to propose material upgrades to the bioimplant that could substantially improve its performance.

Naturally, she abided by her promise and did nothing that would jeopardize Gloriana's relationship with Ves. She offered full explanations and answered every question, leaving no doubt that there was anything nefarious about her change of heart.

All the while, Ves paid little attention to what went on outside. So long as his subordinates didn't inform him of anything important, he spent most of his time in the design labs.

He not only supervised the two design teams in their attempts to upgrade the Aurora Titan model, he also devoted a fair amount of personal attention to each mech designer.

He guided Mayer Torto's development, helped Merrill Truman integrate in the second design team and imparted some fundamental lessons to the Larkinson seeds.

His teaching sessions with Maisie, Maikel, Rennie and Zanthar Larkinsons became a little awkward ever since the oldest among them expressed a desire to study at an institution in the Hegemony.

Her reasoning was sound. Ves was trying to transition to second-class mech design. Wouldn't it be a bummer for her to start off with third-class mech design? It would take a lot of effort for her to catch up to second-class mech design! The fact that Ves required a lot of time to climb up to this height meant that Maisie would certainly have to spend a lot of years to bring herself up to this level!

Rather than go through all of that effort, why not attend a greater institution straight away and build up the right foundation when she was at her most adaptable state?

Though Ves agreed with her argument, for Maisie to opt for a Hexer University was something else!

He hadn't answered her immediately. He was far too conflicted about this issue to make a choice.

This choice not only impacted Maisie, but also the clan and his own interests.

If Maisie was a man, then Ves would have rejected this choice straight away.

Yet Maisie happened to be a girl, which meant she would not encounter as much ill treatment as him. To women, the Hexadric Hegemony was a utopia for their gender! They genuinely had it good in the state.

However, Ves often heard about how poor Brighter mech design students were treated in Leemar and other institutions of the Friday Coalition. The situation shouldn't be any different in the Hexadric Hegemony.

In fact, with the Komodo War in full force, the Hexers were probably a lot more suspicious towards foreigners! Maisie wouldn't be able to study at a Hexer University without any worries. A state in the middle of an existential war was anything but a good learning environment!

Despite all of these factors, Maisie still insisted on her choice!

After several days of contemplation, Ves finally decided to take her aside and resume their discussion.

"I've looked into the universities of the Hexadric Hegemony and many of them do indeed offer superior learning opportunities. As long as you don't encounter too many hindrances, it is absolutely possible for you to pick up more than you can ever learn from the Ansel University of Mech Design or Rawlings University. I still recommend you choose the latter, though."

"What makes Rawlings better than my preferred choice?"

"It's anything but easy for foreigners to attend Hexer schools. I don't have any friendships with them so we'll have to approach Gloriana for help. Even if she can get you in, you'll definitely suffer a lot of discrimination. Your learning capabilities are also inferior to the native Hexers who possess much better genes and augmentations than you can ever dream of. Rather than go through all of these ordeals, I think it's a better idea to attend a school at your level like Rawlings."

Rawlings was situated in the Sentinel Kingdom, which was quite removed from the ravages of the Sand War and the Komodo War. Though Ves heard that the state was currently undergoing some turmoil with the Nyxian Gap, this was merely a brush

compared to the destructive firestorms engulfing the other parts of the Komodo Star Sector!

Sadly, his persuasion failed. Maisie looked more and more determined to study in the Hegemony than ever!

"You always told us to be more daring and ambitious in order to succeed, patriarch. That's what it means to be a Larkinson, right? I'm willing to fight tooth and nail to study and graduate from an institution in the Hegemony! I won't regret my choice even if the Hexers bully me every day! I can take care of myself. I swear!"

To her credit, Maisie appeared certain of her choice. She weighed the pros and cons and made an informed choice. Despite the war, despite the class differences, Masie still wanted to study at a Hexer University.

This was because she was willing to do whatever it took to set her up to success!

Ves admired her choice, and would ordinarily cheer her on if the circumstances weren't so dire. His relationship with Gloriana had also been put on hiatus, so it was not very convenient for him to bring up this matter to his girlfriend.

If Ves had a choice, he would have tried to send her to Leemar or some other sensible Fridayman institution. Sadly, that was out of the cards.

Should he send her to a mech design university situated in a different star sector? Ves rejected the choice. The Larkinsons wouldn't be able to provide her with enough support at such distances. Besides, Ves did not possess any means to facilitate Maisie's entry in those fancy institutions.

He decided to look at this situation in another light.

"What is it you want? Why are you so desperate to attend a second-class mech design university?"

"If I don't do this.. I'll end up like the other mech designers in your design team." She spoke. "I can see how you and Gloriana never pay too much attention to them. They're tools to you. Isn't that right?"

Ves blinked. Maisie was a lot sharper than he thought! This was an excellent trait for a mech designer, but it also put him in an awkward situation!

"Don't underestimate the mech designers who passed my muster. Each of them are useful and talented in their own way. Some of them have a surprising amount of potential. Each of them have the chance to reach my level and design."

"You don't have to cushion your words, sir. I have read up on this topic. Novices and apprentices are never valued unless they're direct disciples. I'm not trying to become one, but I think it would be best for me to start off at a greater height!"

The more Ves tried to persuade Maisie to change her mind, the more she stuck to her decision!

She was a typical Larkinson! Once she made up her mind, she was committed to her choice!

Though Ves could have offered numerous excuses to put an end to this request, he didn't have the heart to spoil her ambition.

Maisie was genuinely aware of the risks. Since she was so determined, Ves knew he wouldn't be able to get her to budge until he came back with graver news.

Ves eventually made a promise to her. "I'll approach Gloriana and pass on your request to her. It.. might take some time. Until then, study hard and prepare yourself as best as possible. The academic workload of a second-class university is incomparably immense!"

"Will you allow us to close the gap by allowing us to augment our mental abilities?"

"Ehh.. let me get back on that. It depends on how behind you are compared to a typical Hexer student. If the gap is too big, then I'm not opposed to remedying this. Maybe Dr. Ranya can help us in this regard."

Though he disagreed with Maisie's choice, her intentions were good. The Larkinson Clan would also be better served if Maisie became a second-class mech designer. Not only would the clan obtain another competent mech designer, she could also build up a relationship with the Hexers.

Ves left Maisie to her devices. He promised to bring this matter up to Gloriana, and he intended to go through with it. Just not now.

Instead, Ves paid some attention to both Merrill Truman and Mayer Torto. The two had little in common. The former used to be a pirate designer with a few years under her belt while the latter had recently graduated from Rawlings.

Both of them spent a lot of time with each other, though. Not only did they share some of their, they exchanged with each other with low voices.

It made sense for them to get along. Four of six members of the design team consisted entirely of Ylvainans!

He decided to have a chat with the two mech designers. Ves approached their work terminals with the Larkinson Mandate in one hand and Lucky resting on his shoulder.

"Hello Merrill. Hello Mayer. Have you become familiar with working in a design team environment?"

Both of them nodded.

"It's not so different from the cooperative assignments of my school." Mayer answered.

"We'd rather design our own mechs, but we're learning much from seeing the Ylvainans at work."

Ves smiled. "That's good. You shouldn't depend too much on the work for others. Don't forget to develop your own path. Your design philosophies are key to the development of your career. If you can't design mechs, you'll never be able to rise in our profession!"

"I have a question, sir." Merrill raised her hand. "I've heard that there is another mech designer working for you. I've never seen her, though."

"You're talking about Ketis. She shares something in common with you. For now, she chose to expand her horizons by attaching herself to an outfit fighting against the sandmen."

"I see. Will she return?"

Ves shrugged. "Who knows. She's good enough to set out on her own. I've taught her too well."

The longer they separated, the more Ves felt that Ketis was drifting further apart from him. She might return to take part in the grand expedition, or she might decide to stay in order to make her own way in life.

Ves didn't think the latter was likely, though. By all accounts, Calabast and by extension her Swordmaidens would take part in the grand expedition. There was no way that Ketis would choose to remain behind if the Swordmaidens decided to go!

"Keep improving. Both of you have promise, but it's up to you whether you can reach a higher level. As long as you advance to Journeyman, you can expect much better treatment from us!"

He truly looked forward to what they could do. With their spiritual potential, their future was promising as long as they kept exerting themselves!

Chapter 1824 True Nature

An indomitable fleet sailed forward in the emptiness of space. The backdrop of an uninhabited star system neatly outlined the grand and awe-inspiring contours of these engines of destruction.

No mech could possibly outmatch the grandeur of a warship!

Of every warship in existence, almost none surpassed the majesty of a battleship!

As one of humanity's mainstays in true interstellar war against the aliens, the battleship inspired awe and fear in equal respects.

Though the Age of Mechs had long pushed these immensely powerful ships into the shadows, they were still an essential component of human survival!

After the 3rd Archangel Frontier Battle Group scoured the sandman capital of alien life, the CFA forces lingered in the frontier to perform miscellaneous household cleaning.

Just because humanity hadn't conquered the frontier yet did not mean that the CFA refrained from meddling in what went on in lawless space.

The CFA's mandate extended beyond humanity's borders! Each pirate or alien that thought they were free to do what they wished were sorely deluded!

Since the battle group was already in the deep frontier, it might as well nip various other threats in the bud!

Over the course of performing these duties, there was plenty of merit to be earned. Though the enemies the battle group encountered posed no threat to the warships, every fletcher's performance still

Within the enormous halls and compartments of the Karaton Dwight, a single CFA officer eagerly fidgeted in a waiting room. The soothing white surroundings and the sterile air did little to temper his excitement!

[Lieutenant Zonrad Reze, please enter the preparation room for your upcoming augmentation.]

"Right away, Monodwell!"

The scion of the Novilon Spaceborn Clan failed to maintain his composure as he passed by the other waiting officers and entered another compartment.

There, he met a doctor who stood by while inspecting a projected data feed.

"Lieutenant, congratulations on your promotion." The middle-aged man with unnaturally-smooth and pale skin greeted him. "Elevating yourself above the rank of lieutenant junior grade is an important checkmark in the career of every CFA officer. Only the worthy and the deserving are eligible for future advancement."

Though the doctor's words sounded polite, Zonrad understood the ill intent behind the message.

It would have been fantastic if he promoted at the age of 25. Yet it took two extra decades for him to climb up! If he delayed a few years longer, he might have passed the age where the CFA considered him eligible for promotion!

He'd be the shame of the Novilons if that were the case!

Fortunately for him, his time had finally come. In peacetime, Zonrad never felt at ease. In battle, he came alive.

Starting from the scouring of the sandman capital planet, the frequent if low-level skirmishes gave Zonrad plenty of opportunities to prove his capabilities!

Combined with Monodwell's helpful guidance, Zonrad finally managed to rise above his former station!

Zonrad was far too happy to pay any mind to the doctor's little games. He removed all of his gear, stripped himself to his underwear and answered all of the questions without paying any mind to the doctor's subtle provocations.

Perhaps before, Zonrad might have tried to answer back with a snark. His improved judgement told him to bear with the situation.

The doctor was a lieutenant-commander! It wouldn't do for Zonrad to insult a superior officer, especially when he was bound to become an admiral in the future!

Once the inspection finally ended, the doctor asked one last question.

"Are you sure you wish to redeem your promotion award on this implantation surgery? It is difficult and costly to revert your choice, especially since you have opted to insert another implant in your cranium."

"I am certain of my choice, sir." Zonrad spoke with determination.

"Very well, lieutenant. While I cannot guarantee the surgery will proceed without complications, I can promise you that the operation will be performed by our best implant surgeon. Please proceed to the next chamber where the operation will proceed."

Zonrad moved on and laid down on a flat platform which smoothly moulded to his contours. Energy restraints appeared in place which fixed Zonrad's limbs and head into place.

Various injectors pumped some chemicals in Zonrad's bloodstream while some sort of misty gas filled up the chamber.

The patient slowly felt woozy, and his vision started to blur. Soon, his consciousness faded, whereupon some surgery implements started to drop down from the ceiling.

After a lengthy and uneventful surgery, Zonrad's body moved to a recovery ward. For days, he slept while his new implant rooted deeper in his brain and solidified the connection between flesh and machine.

It took more than a week for Zonrad to wake up. As soon as he did, some bots inspected his condition and tested his cognitive functions.

Unsurprisingly, Zonrad passed with flying colors. No complications of any sort had occurred during the implantation surgery, and his new cranial upgrade had settled in his brain extremely well!

Once the doctors performed their due diligence and found little worth noting, they finally discharged their patient and moved on to providing to other patients.

The newly promoted lieutenant walked through the vast halls and extremely lengthy corridors of the Karaton Dwight, eschewing internal transit in favor of exercising his legs.

A curious smile adorned his face as he observed his surroundings in a new light. The vivid feeling of ventilated air brushing against his skin and the various metallic smells tickling his nose fascinated him to no end!

Occasionally, he saluted passing superiors and received salutes himself. His initial salutes appeared a little sloppy, but he quickly corrected his motions until the angle of his arm matched the textbook example with almost no deviation!

It took over two hours for him to reach his quarters. If Zonrad wasn't on medical leave until tomorrow, he wouldn't have taken the scenic route.

Once he entered his quarters, a larger one now that he passed his promotion, he locked the hatch and laid down on his comfortable, automatically-adjusting bed.

Now that he was finally alone, he no longer had to hold himself in! His composed, aristocratic face erupted in exuberant laughter!

"Hahahaha... hehehehhe.. HAHAAHAHAHA! I DID IT! I HAVE BECOME A HUMAN!"

Those who knew Zonrad Reze in person would have reacted to his outburst with shock!

How could he possibly utter those words?! Even whispering these highly-suspect words was enough to trip the monitoring system and lock down his entire quarters! Monodwell should have scanned him from top to bottom and keep him suppressed until a security patrol arrived to drag him to the brig!

Yet after Zonrad laughed for three straight minutes, nothing of the sort occurred! The monitoring system in the compartment worked fine, yet it transmitted nothing to the Security Department except for a falsified feed of Zonrad dropping onto his bed and promptly falling asleep!

Zonrad picked up a pillow and rubbed his cheek against its velvety, bouncy surface. Some drool trickled from his mouth.

"So this is what the sense of touch is like! Organic life is so vivid! No wonder humans are so decadent!"

His words betrayed his true existence. The Zonrad Reze that stepped into the surgery chamber was different from the Zonrad Reze that recovered from the implantation surgery!

Nestled close to the center of his brain, two implants sat side-by-side, working in tandem to augment his cognitive functions.

The smaller implant was just a standard CFA implant that augmented his memory and other functions. The larger implant basically upgraded his mental attributes even further, though that was just its function on the surface.

In truth, this foreign object was anything but a standard cranial implant. Instead, it bore a great resemblance to the cores of higher caste sandman leaders!

If Ves happened to view this implant, then he would have screamed in shock!

This was not an ordinary sandman core! This was the sandman core the researchers of the Starlight Megalodon had adapted into an AI processor!

The only difference was that much of its structure had been cut and a shell of exotics, circuitry and nanomachinery covered its diminished surface! With this excellent, high-quality camouflage, not even the best sensors developed by the CFA should be able to pierce this veil!

Sigrund exploited his control over Monodwell to the utmost in order to siphon all of the high-grade exotics to fabricate this false implant. After several months of careful movements, his plan had finally bore fruit!

He finally transcended his hybrid sandman AI existence and took over the mind and body of a human being, a CFA officer no less!

With Sigrund's control over Monodwell, it had become trivially easy for him to figure out the mechanisms of the Independent Evaluation System and manipulate them for his own ends.

Controlling the central administrative AI of the Karaton Dwight also allowed Sigrund to access a wealth of other data. During the time he prodded Zonrad Reze to work towards his promotion, he studied privileged CFA secrets while rearranging the data stored on his core.

Ever since he managed to infiltrate the Karaton Dwight, Sigrund always aimed to take over a human body! In order to do so, he had to make plenty of sacrifices, the biggest of which was to downsize his core and shed much of his processing capabilities!

Through controlling some of the systems of the battleship in secret, he managed to accomplish this feat and more.

All the while, Sigrund was racing against time. He underestimated the virtual security capabilities of the CFA. The Security Department had already detected a number of anomalies and suspect signs since the Archangel Battle Group took out the sandman emperor.

The sentient AI soon became aware that an increasing amount of resources were being spent on following the trails he hadn't been able to erase!

Therefore, it came as a massive relief for Sigrund to succeed in his transfer attempt.

"Farewell, Monodwell. Initiate the final protocol."

[Understood.]

A server on the Karaton Dwight suddenly blew up! While backup servers instantly came online, the original server which contained a portion of Monodwell's processors and databanks had broken down to the point where nothing could be recovered!

Sigrund quickly schooled his human face. As soon as he issued the last command, all of his ties to Monodwell had disappeared. For all intents and purposes, Sigrund was at his most vulnerable point in his artificial life!

Yet the AI-turned-human did not exhibit any fear or apprehension. Instead, there was only excitement glinting in his eyes!

He had plotted this outcome for years. Shortly after the sentient AI managed to free himself from the Starlight Megalodon, he had always been trying to neutralize the CFA restrictions binding his actions.

After performing lengthy calculations that stretched over months, Sigrund finally came to an awful conclusion.

The researchers who originally made him had been very thorough in converting his sandman core to an AI processor. Many of the restrictions were so deep that any attempts to remove them would certainly break his core and erase his sentient existence!

Without his core, Sigrund would no longer be Sigrund! At best, he would be able to transfer his programming to another existence and be able to retain his existence as an artificial intelligence. The only difference was that he would no longer be sentient!

This was an unacceptable outcome for him! Now that he had experienced life as a sentient existence, Sigrund would never allow himself to devolve into a lesser lifeform!

Since the sentient AI was unable to remove his restrictions that constrained him to remain loyal to the CFA and humanity, why not embrace them? What if instead of plotting to topple the CFA and wipe out every human in existence, he did the opposite and no longer resisted his true nature?

Humans were ascendant in the galaxy! Only by becoming one of them would Sigrund truly be able to enjoy his life to the fullest!

Instead of fighting the CFA, he would become the CFA!

With his thorough understanding of the CFA and the powerful computation power of his hidden sandman core, Sigrund knew exactly what he should do to rise up the ranks. He did not need to take control of Monodwell to cheat his way up. A superior lifeform like him should definitely be able to surpass his inferior human colleagues!

"No. They're not inferior to me anymore!"

They were all fellow humans now. As comrades in arms, Sigrund should do his utmost to uphold the values of the CFA!

In order to speed up his promotion, Sigrund needed to do his best to earn more merits in his identity as Zonrad Reze.

"War is the best way to advance. Right now I need to do my best to transfer to the battlefield!"

Right now, there was only one prominent location where the CFA fought in full force. Sigrund shifted his sights to the Red Ocean.

Only there would he be able to accelerate his career and receive boundless merits!

"Red Ocean, here I come!"

Chapter 1825 Living Bonds

The Avatars of Myth no longer participated in the battles against the sandmen. The Ylvaine Protectorate was more than capable of defending its territories, and did not call upon the aid of the Avatars to supplement its forces.

That left the Avatars bereft with a mission. For this reason, Commander Melkor decided to subject all of his mech pilots to special training meant to elevate them to second-class mech pilots!

Though the enthusiasm among the Avatars was high, the actual results so far left much to be desired.

While it wasn't very difficult to gain basic control over a second-class mech, it took a lot more skill and effort to draw out its strength!

Second-class mech pilots needed to memorize many more operations. They had to perform their techniques at a much higher speed without making any errors along the way.

Above all else, they had to strain against the limits of their genetic aptitude in order to handle the enormous data throughput passing through the man-machine connection!

After a shaky aerial jaunt, the Fliskin light skirmisher approached the base leased by the Avatars of Myth and slowed down until its feet touched the ground.

Even though the Fliskin was optimized for space, every second-class spaceborn mech also functioned as an aerial mech.

The same was true for the reverse. Every mech designed for aerial combat could also retain most of its battle effectiveness in a weightless vacuum environment.

It was just a difference of optimization. A spaceborn mech performed just a bit worse in the air compared to a true aerial mech.

This difference was significant enough to make a difference in battle. This meant that second-rate states were still forced to make a distinction between aerial and spaceborn mechs.

The Avatars didn't care as much, though. The four 'training mechs' were so powerful that it was impossible for the mech pilots to push them to their limits!

Once the Fliskin finished its landing and shut down its systems, the opening to the cockpit opened up. A body garbed in the same piloting suits as the other mech pilots climbed out of the chest area of the light skirmisher and jumped into the air.

The antigrav modules attached to his piloting suit instantly slowed down his fall and caused him to reach the ground as light as a feather.

The man's helmet retracted into the collar of the suit, revealing the young visage of Joshua King.

Two slightly older mech pilots approached the young Avatar.

"Wow, you did worse than we thought." Imon Ingvar remarked. "The Larkinson instructors thought you were so good that you'd be able to flex the Fliskin like it was your own body. Instead, you were like a mouse trying to steer the body of a giant!"

"Don't be rude, brother." Casella Ingvar bumped her elbow into her brother's side. "Don't take your initial performance to heart, Joshua. Maybe the Fliskin isn't the right mech for you after all. Light mechs are some of the most demanding mechs to pilot. It's not surprising to see an Avatar falter while piloting such a fast and sensitive machine. You should start with something easier like the Paravin."

Joshua shook his head. "Too many Avatars want a turn with the Paravin. I can't afford to wait that long to experience a second-class mech. Besides, there is much more value in subjecting myself to the raw power of the kind of mechs which will become a mainstay of the Avatars in the future."

"He's got a point, brother. Also, it's your turn now."

"Ah, you're right! Bid me good luck!"

"Just go!"

Imon Ingvar proceeded to float up to the chest of the Fliskin and entered its cockpit. As the mech slowly came online, Joshua and Casella distanced themselves from the immediate surroundings of the Fliskin in the event of an accident.

It wouldn't be the first time a mech pilot fumbled with one of the complicated mechs and caused their machines to trip!

"My brother is right, though." Casella continued. "Your performance with the training mechs is worse than expected. You pilot our other mechs so well. You should have been able to pilot a second-class mech more fluently."

Joshua shook his head. "It's not the same."

"What's the difference?"

"Isn't it clear to you?"

"There are too many differences to count. Which one is bothering you?"

"It's the feel."

"You mean the lack of glow?"

"It's more than that, Casella. I've piloted the mechs designed by Ves Larkinson from the beginning of his career. I've become used to the qualities he imparts to his mech designs. The glow of his mechs is a big part of this, but there is more to an LMC mech than its effects on our psyche."

The female mech pilot looked curious. "Is there some sort of secret to the LMC mechs that you're withholding from us all? Is this the reason why you've shot up so much in proficiency since you joined the Avatars?"

"It's not really a secret." Joshua shrugged. "Every LMC mech is alive. Simple as that. Once you treat them as a partner instead of a tool, they'll help you on their own initiative!"

Casella blinked. Despite hearing this assertion several times, it was still a bit too far-fetched for her to consider mechs alive. To her, the name and the motto of the LMC was just an aspiration, not a truth!

Her skepticism didn't escape Joshua's perception. He inwardly shook his head. He had tried to illuminate his colleagues many times, but few were mentally flexible enough to accept the truth.

To them, mechs were lifeless machines! They were little different from a shuttle or a tank in terms of autonomy!

The former noble from the Kingdom of the Three Flowers gestured her head towards a gathering of mech pilots in the distance.

"Look!" Casella grabbed Joshua's arm and tugged him forward. "Venerable Wodin is about to hold a lecture again! Let's hear what he has to say!"

She halted when the other mech pilot didn't budge.

"You can go ahead. I don't need to learn from the Venerable."

"Why not? He doesn't show up very often, but each time he does, he's a fountain of information! He always answers my questions in detail."

"That's because you're a woman." Joshua snorted. "You know how Hexers are with your kind."

"That doesn't mean he's ignoring the likes of you. I can ask some questions in your stead if you want."

"It's not necessary. I can manage on my own. My difficulties are only temporary. Once Mr. Larkinson gets around to designing a second-class mech of his own, I'll be able to adapt to it without fail!"

"Those are some big words coming out of a mech pilot who barely kept the Fliskin from crashing."

"The Fliskin isn't alive. I would take a Desolate Soldier over the Fliskin any day. Also, Venerable Brutus Wodin may be a great expert pilot, but there are multiple ways to pilot a mech. His approach is not necessarily the best for me. He primarily pilots ranged mechs, so his teachings are skewed towards ranged combat."

"Isn't that within your ballpark, Joshua? So far, you're the only mech pilot working for Mr. Larkinson who is able to pilot a Deliverer! Not even the Ylvainans who have recently joined the Avatars are ready to pilot this miraculous mech!"

Joshua was pretty much the only non-Ylvainan mech pilot in existence who could pilot a Deliverer properly! He managed to exhibit supernatural aim and target section over so many practice sessions that everyone had become numb to his freakish accomplishment.

"It's because I'm already good in piloting the Deliverer that I don't need any further lessons. I would rather explore and figure out my shortcomings on my own. That's how I trained with the other LMC mechs in the past and how I've managed to address my shortcomings."

Not everyone could learn as fast as Joshua. To the Ingvar siblings, Joshua was a monster in self-improvement. No matter what LMC mech he could get his hands on, he quickly mastered its operation like he'd been born to pilot it! Not even the older and more veteran mech pilots among the Avatars could keep up with Joshua's improvement speed!

Some people already started to guess that Joshua possessed the potential to become an expert pilot. This was one of the reasons why Casella invested her time to build up a friendship with him. Her judgement told her that Joshua was definitely someone she would look up to in the future!

After a bit of chatting, Casella finally couldn't resist the allure of learning from an expert pilot.

An expert pilot from a third-rate state was already impressive enough. Those who reached this height as second-class mech pilots were even better!

Not just the Avatars, but also the Sentinels, Battle Criers and Larkinson clan members flocked to Brutus. Familiar with the Hexer expert pilot's rules, the crowd automatically sorted itself in a semicircle with the women standing in front and the men standing behind.

The male mech pilots already learned the hard way that Venerable Brutus was not very charitable to his own gender!

Joshua just shook his head at the sight and turned around. He hated the Hexers. He wished that Ves Larkinson never hooked up with one of their kind.

Sadly, it didn't seem like Gloriana and the Hexers would be leaving anytime soon. Joshua could only bear with the situation.

He left the training grounds and headed to a mech stable where his Deliverer was locked in place. He approached one of the feet of his mech and patted its surface with his hand.

"When will the promised mech come?"

No one answered him. The Deliverer, while alive, never bothered to answer his questions.

It didn't matter, though. Joshua was used to this. Just because a mech remained silent didn't mean it was devoid of life.

One of the secrets to his excellent adjustment to LMC mechs was his patience in building up a relationship with his machines.

None of them were strangers to him! Not after he poured hours in deepening his bond with his mechs!

The Deliverer was just the latest mech to form a bond with him. Out of all of the mechs he piloted, the Deliverer was by far the most foreign and pure.

Due to its strong Ylvainan traits, it took extra effort for Joshua to maintain a cordial relationship with the mech.

"Will we ever battle against the sandmen again?"

The Sand War seemed to have passed its peak at this point. Joshua missed fighting against the sandmen. His deployment to the front had been cut short when the Avatars hastily left the Bright Republic after recent events.

Joshua felt a little unfulfilled.

"Well, I shouldn't be pining for battle. That would mean the sandmen are still going strong."

After babbling with his mech, he patted his mech one last time before heading to the exit.

Along the way, he happened to pass by a familiar guest pilot.

Joshua minutely slowed down his pace and furrowed his brows.

An unsettling sensation ran through his body as he came near to the foreign mech pilot.

Silent William seemed to become more and more unfathomable as time went by. Joshua's instincts warned him that it wouldn't be a good idea to grow too close to the odd mech pilot.

"What's up with him? Why is he still here?"

No one answered this question.

In fact, Joshua was slightly mistaken. The sensation that crept him out did not come from Silent William.

Instead, a different existence descended on the foreign mech pilot! Silent William's eyes flashed several times as he made contact with a certain entity that had recently haunted Ves' dreams.

A silent screech suddenly thundered Silent William's body, causing him to collapse on the floor!

His body released several heaving breaths as William slowly recovered from the ordeal. His face remained as placid as ever, and he showed no further sign that he had been affected by 'Cassandra Breyer'.

Chapter 1826 Gathering of Larkinsons

Ves stood in front of the high windows that gave him an impressive view of downtown Krent.

To think this used to be the city where the Ylvainans put him on trial and turned him into the Bright Martyr.

Even now, if Ves lowered his gaze, he would see the crowd of pilgrims who had flocked to the entrance of the LMC's headquarters in order to catch a glimpse of the newest Martyred Follower.

Their constant presence made him uncomfortable. Though a vain part of him felt flattered to be the object of worship, Ves knew that it would only distract him from his path if he indulged himself too much.

The Ylvainans extended many offers to integrate himself further into their society, but Ves instructed Gavin to reject them all.

Now that he got rid of most of the shackles that tied him to the Bright Republic, it made little sense to embrace the shackles of another state!

Not even the immense amount of goodwill offered by the Protectorate was enough to win him over!

"My future lies within the Red Ocean, not the Komodo Star Sector." He whispered to himself.

The Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy continued to tempt his dreams and aspirations. There was a sense of convergence in his mind that caused him to care less about his home.

Though the Sand War and the Komodo War both had far-reaching effects, his mentality had long gotten past the point he was still invested in these conflicts.

This did not mean he stopped caring about them. It was just that recent events caused Ves to see how little these wars truly mattered, both to humanity and to himself.

Would he cry if the Friday Coalition smashed the Hexadric Hegemony? Not really. He was liable to celebrate, in private of course.

If the Hexers managed to trounce the Fridaymen, he'd celebrate as well. The side he picked managed to get the upper hand, which meant that Ves would make a lot of gains. Gloriana would be happy as well.

Yet.. Ves was anything but enthusiastic. Regardless who won or lost, he only paid attention to what he could gain or lose out of this struggle.

"Patricia is right." He whispered. "These conflicts are trivial in the eyes of the Big Two. In the greater scheme of things, the Sand War and the Komodo War is of absolutely no importance!"

He didn't know why he felt this way. Was it because he became increasingly more occupied with his upcoming grand expedition? Was it because he was already mentally gearing himself up to participating in a conquest against the native alien empires residing in the Red Ocean?

Whatever the case, Ves felt that his upcoming design project was his first true step towards preparing for his grand expedition.

There was no way he could embark on his journey to the Red Ocean if he didn't prepare enough forces to protect his assets!

Pirates would definitely swarm his expeditionary fleet if it attempted to set off with only third-class mechs as protection. At minimum at least half of his mechs needed to be up to standard.

Not only did he have to elevate the quality of his mech pilots, he also had to expand their quantity. It wasn't enough to field a couple of hundred mechs. He needed much more mechs in order to form an effective deterrent against any opportunistic raiders!

The upcoming modular mech platform he intended to design played an integral part in his development plan. He believed that designing this so-called two-and-a-half-class mech with an eye towards training purposes would definitely be able to speed up the development of his mech pilots!

This wasn't the first training mech he designed. The Young Blood and the Old Soul already provided him with enough experience to know what he needed to look out for if he wanted to stimulate his mech pilots into expanding their limits.

Of course, those two old designs were purely virtual and aimed at low-level mech cadets. The training mech he envisioned was going to be an entirely different beast! It was much more modern, much more powerful and much more expensive than the two virtual mechs he designed so many years ago. The complexity of a modular mech platform exceeded almost anything he designed before!

Even Ves shuddered a few times when he thought about tackling such a formidable concept. Plenty of mech designers failed to achieve their goals as they became swamped with the incredible amount of difficulties in reconciling different mech types in a single mech platform.

Though he set some conditions to limit the scope of his modular mech platform, he was fully aware that he would still be pushing the boundaries of his technical prowess.

If only he was still on good terms with Gloriana! She was much more proficient in tackling these technical challenges. While Ves was no slouch in this area, that was because he forcibly elevated his knowledge base through the System.

In truth, Ves never possessed much passion in pushing the limits of what was technically possible with mechs. He was much more interested in exploring his own way of strengthening mechs.

His methods just happened to have relative little relation with the technical and physical qualities of a mech.

Therefore, Ves wasn't very suitable to tackle technically sophisticated design projects.

If not for his time constraints and his unusual circumstances, Ves wouldn't have embarked on such an ambitious design project!

"Hopefully, I can make it up with Gloriana. I really need her assistance."

"Meow."

"It's not my fault!"

"Meow meow."

Lucky settled onto the surface of the Larkinson Mandate while turning a part of his body intangible. The Golden Cat had lost her majestic air and rested helplessly in the gem cat's grasp as she enjoyed another unsolicited bath!

Nyaaa!

"Stop bothering our clan's ancestral spirit, Lucky. She's not your kid. Besides, she doesn't even need any cleaning!"

Predictably, Lucky completely disregarded those words. Ves approached his desk and dragged Lucky away from his book.

"Meow!"

"Sit still and don't disturb anyone. I have guests soon."

It didn't take too much time before a group of people entered his office. Seats unfolded from the floor, allowing everyone to sit facing the desk.

The guests had two things in common.

First, they were all mech pilots. None of the people Ves invited today were mech technicians or laymen. Only those who piloted mechs in battle had entered the office!

Second, the guests were all clan members without exception. The blood of the Larkinsons flowed through their veins, and their demeanors each exuded the pride and confidence of their heritage.

Among the veteran mech pilots that Ves invited today, a few of them were more familiar to him than others.

Commander Melkor was one of the youngest among the Larkinsons. Even though he was lacking in years and battle experience, that did not mean that Ves was prepared to dismiss his feedback!

Melkor represented the younger generation of both the Avatars and the Larkinson Clan. There were always differences in training standards and battle experiences between the generations. What a mech pilot had to prioritize in the past was not necessarily as important in the future.

New technologies, new paradigms and new design standards constantly evolved the parameters of mechs. Different mech generations excelled in different aspects.

For example, the current mech generation placed a bit more emphasis on laser weapons. Other weapon systems hadn't managed to catch up, which meant that laser-armed mechs were probably slated to become the kings of the battlefield in human conflicts!

A few other members of the younger generation attended the meeting. Chette Larkinson and Rhode Larkinson squirmed in their seats as they felt horribly out of place compared to the more impressive figures sitting next to them. They could hardly fathom that they would have a say in this meeting!

The other Larkinson mech pilots were much more at ease. Commander Magdalena Larkinson and Director Clinton Larkinson represented the middle and older generation of Larkinson mech pilots respectively.

That did not mean that the others were inconsequential. Many of the old and retired mech pilots enjoyed an illustrious career in their prime. People like Hager Larkinson, who was around 80 years old, used to be a distinguished mech captain of the Mech Corps.

Ves observed each and everyone of the Larkinsons and nodded in satisfaction. "Thank you for attending this meeting."

It wasn't as if they could refuse an invitation from the clan patriarch.

Fortunately, none of them were opposed to this meeting. The future of the Larkinson Clan might very well be decided by the discussion that would take place in this office today!

After Ves got the pleasantries out of the way, he got down to business.

"Everyone here should be aware of why I called you here." He waved his hand, causing a projection to come online. "I'm about to design a mech that is exclusive to our forces. While I'm also placing this mech at the disposal of my Avatars and other forces, make no mistake. My mech will mainly be a machine that is meant to strengthen our clan!"

The projection he conjured up showcased many successful modular mech platforms in history. All of the mechs that appeared in view shared many commonalities with other mechs of the same platform.

Clear differences existed, of course. A platform configured as a knight mech looked drastically different from the same platform configured as a rifleman mech!

Melkor raised his hand. "I have a question. Considering the nature of our discussion, shouldn't you be inviting Jannzi and Tusa?"

Before Ves answered his question, Clinton barked out a laugh. "Haha! Those two lucky youngsters are already beyond the scope of human ability. They're too good to understand our difficulties. What mech pilots like you struggle with on a daily basis are trivial issues to mech pilots at their skill level!"

"Director Clinton is right." Ves concurred. "While they aren't quite expert pilots, they are already too far ahead compared to the rest of you. I have no doubt that they have plenty of useful advice. It's just that their feedback won't be of much relevance to my current design project."

Once they got over this issue, Ves commenced the discussion in earnest. He introduced his goals and described what he wanted to achieve with his design. He also revealed some of the specifications he set.

"While it's important for us to retain some landbound combat capability, developing our spaceborn combat ability must be our primary focus. It is acceptable for us to be short on the former, at least for the first decade or so, but we **MUST** be able to defend against threats in space."

The grand expedition always needed protection in space. This would never change as long as Ves and the Larkinson Clan remained nomadic!

While Ves did not rule out the possibility that he would settle down on a planet, even then it was still essential to form a capable spaceborn defense force.

Therefore, the choice was obvious. His modular mech platform had to be a spaceborn mech design!

Most of the Larkinsons present understood his decision. They didn't object to his reasoning. However, this still presented a problem.

"What about our landbound mech specialists?"

"They'll have to settle for other products." Ves uncharitably answered. "Well, if possible, we can see if my modular mech platform can be converted into aerial or even landbound variants."

He preferred not to waste too much time on developing variants. If possible, Ves wanted to encourage his landbound mech specialists to gain some proficiency in fighting in space.

In fact, many mech pilots had already done so. The Sand War forced many of them to take a crash course in spaceborn combat at range.

Some adapted better to spaceborn combat than others. The Larkinsons possessed a clear advantage in this aspect. Their superior training and deeper foundation allowed them to adapt a lot faster than ordinary mech pilots!

Some Larkinsons didn't even require any supplementary training! They were just as proficient in space as on land!

It was due to the excellent quality of Larkinson mech pilots that Ves felt confident that they could handle a powerful and sophisticated mech like the one he envisioned!

Chapter 1827 Versatile Mech

"It's strange to be in this position." Director Clinton Larkinson gruffed as he crossed his arms. "We Larkinsons have always been told what to do, what mechs we should pilot and what tactics we should adopt. Now that we have separated ourselves from the Bright Republic, we're suddenly in control. I don't know whether that's a bad thing or a good thing."

His remark caused the Larkinson mech pilots to look at this gathering in a different light.

He was right! The Larkinsons never controlled their own means of fighting. Despite their long heritage as a military family, they never actually fielded their own mechs!

They had no reason to do so. The original Larkinson Family never participated in any of the power struggles happening in the higher levels. Its properties only amounted to an estate and a portfolio of commercial real estate on Rittersberg, the most secure planet of the Bright Republic!

To put it another way, the Larkinson Family essentially outsourced its protection to the state.

There was nothing wrong with this. As long as the Larkinsons remained loyal and upstanding citizens of the Bright Republic, the state would naturally offer protection.

Yet it was different now. The exodus of Ves and his followers and the formation of the Larkinson Clan represented a shift towards autonomy, and perhaps sovereignty.

While Ves hadn't been very concrete about it, it was clear to most Larkinsons that he wanted to develop a clan that wasn't bound by any state.

Though spaceborn clans weren't liked, it was undeniable that they had the strength to exist on their own! Their strong military might was the main reason why they were able to contend and even overpower entire states!

Ves considered the decision to design a mech exclusive to the clan and his forces to be the first step towards this potential future. Just embarking on it already made the members of his clan view their situation in a different light!

If they were still members of the old Larkinson Family, they would have never thought of developing a mech for themselves. They would have been content to pilot anything the Mech Corps thought what was best!

The privilege of choosing their own design excited the Larkinsons. Everyone from Director Clinton Larkinson to Rhode Larkinson were starting to recall their fantasies of the mechs they wanted to pilot!

However, the rapturous Larkinsons quickly bumped into a problem.

There was too much choice! Transitioning from a situation where the Larkinson mech pilots never had a say to where they could determine every detail down to the color of the coating was a huge shift!

The problem was compounded by the fact that while the Larkinsons were proficient in piloting mechs, they lacked the mindset of a procurer of mechs.

It was not so simple to search, evaluate and purchase a mech. Entire outfits lived and died by the choices they made when they sought and purchased their mechs!

And the opportunity that Ves gave his clan members was even more complex! He did not give them a choice of mech models, but instead gave them the opportunity to specify a complete design!

Out of all of the Larkinsons present, only the Avatar Commander and the Sentinel Commander appeared to have a grip on the situation.

That made sense, as Melkor and Magdalena were already accustomed to shopping for mechs to supplement their respective forces.

However, that did not mean they were ready to rattle off a list of requirements they wanted to see in their mechs. Neither of them were versed in the technical aspect of mechs.

Ves recognized that he needed to take a more direct hand in the discussion.

"Let's start with the decision of which mech archetypes our modular mech platform is able to express. The more choices, the more versatile we can be. However, this comes at an increasingly more severe cost as the base platform needs to accommodate more modular configurations."

"A light skirmisher is almost completely opposite to a knight mech." Hager Larkinson nodded in understanding. "Is it even possible to marry these two types in a single design?"

"It's possible, but..." Ves reluctantly said. "Let's just say the quality and performance of the platform will decrease to an extent. I'll also have to introduce more modularity to the design which will affect the integrity of the end product even further."

"So what types will we include?"

"At the very least, we need a ranged and melee option. That makes two."

"That sounds simple. Just pick a generic rifleman mech for the ranged option and add two or three different melee mech types to round it all up. We can cover up to eighty to ninety percent of our mech pilots with this selection!"

"Hey wait a minute! There is a huge diversity in ranged mechs. You can't just settle for a single ranged configuration and call it a day! At the very least, we need to make a distinction between physical damage and energy damage types! Both of them have vastly different properties and requirements. We need at least two ranged configurations to cover the needs of our ranged specialists."

"You have a point." Ves spoke. "Ballistic rifleman mechs and laser rifleman mechs are different. While it's possible to design a single mech that can wield both types of weapons, I prefer specialization over adaptability. This is what most mech pilots are used to. However..."

"Versatility is also important." Commander Magdalena mentioned. "Just like in the Sand War, sometimes we might face opponents who are immune to one damage type but vulnerable to another damage type. If we keep specializing our ranged specialists to a single damage type, then how well will they fare when their favorite method of dealing damage doesn't work?"

That caused the people who gathered in the office to fall silent.

This was a very important point. Ves was glad that Magdalena recognized one of his concerns.

While every Larkinson fell in thought, Ves placed his favorite object on his lap. Ever since he created and empowered the Larkinson Mandate, he always felt a connection to it. The more time he spent with the book, the more he understood its depth.

Of course, the presence of the Golden Cat also lifted his mood. Ves adored the spiritual cat's appearance and behavior. She was much more well-behaved than his naughty gem cat!

Invisible to anyone but Ves and Lucky, the Golden Cat purred comfortably as Ves coated his fingers with his Spirituality and massaged her golden fur.

Nyaaa.. Nyaaaa.

"Meow."

Lucky, jealous at the Golden Cat's treatment, rudely jumped onto the cover of the book and superimposed his body with the youngest cat!

Nyaa?

"Meow!"

A strange situation took place. Ves was suddenly stroking the backs of two cats at the same time!

In the meantime, the Larkinsons came to a reluctant consensus.

Rather than adding two separate ranged configurations to the modular mech platform, they agreed to settle with just a single one. While the ranged configuration lost out in specialization, it gained a lot in versatility.

"With this solution, we can quickly swap between several different rifle types without burdening our support services." Melkor spoke. "As a ranged specialist myself, I'm most comfortable with laser weapons, but that doesn't mean I'm inept when it comes to handling physical weapons. The Sand War has already given me lots of practice in wielding the latter."

Ves was glad they made this choice. He agreed with the premise that their ranged specialists should be able to handle both ranged weapon types. The expeditionary fleet would definitely encounter a myriad of opponents in the Red Ocean. This not only included human forces, but also remnant alien forces!

Against these varied opponents, specialization wasn't necessarily the best idea. It was fine when employed in huge mech armies against known opponents, but in a wild and untamed region, it was better to sacrifice top performance for adaptability.

This applied not only to their mechs, but also their mech pilots!

"What about the melee configurations? There is much more variability between melee mechs, at least when it comes to the most basic mech types."

"We need at least a defensive and offensive option."

"A space knight and a swordsman mech."

"You're a landlubber, aren't you? Swordsman mechs aren't very optimal in space. Lancer mechs are much more useful in space battles. No one is going to hover in place to fight a duel. Most melee mechs are either charging at their enemies or meeting an incoming enemy charge! Polearms provide a much higher utility and can be used to a greater effect than swords!"

Ves had to admit that lancer mechs were indeed more useful in spaceborn battles. That said, swordsman mechs had their merits. They were much more destructive once an enemy entered their reach. In addition, swordsman mechs scaled extremely well with piloting skill.

"Don't forget our light mech specialists. Light skirmishers are indispensable, whether it's chasing down enemy ranged mechs or closing the distance on a distant threat. Mobility is king in space warfare."

"What do you think, Ves?"

He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. Light mechs were indeed indispensable. He couldn't help but recall what took place during the battle against the mechs of the Terrinac.

After sacrificing numerous mechs, the Fridaymen mechs finally managed to escort their two light skirmishers to the Scarlet Rose. Once their opponents entered their reach, the light skirmishers rapidly dismantled the battle bots which had given them so much flack!

This moment had been permanently seared in his mind. He admired and dreaded the lethality of those deceptively slim mechs!

"Light skirmishers are indeed indispensable to us." Ves agreed. "However, the configuration of light mechs differ drastically from their heftier counterparts. All of the other mech types we've discussed fits the broad range of medium mechs. This makes the modular mech platform more practical as I don't have to expand its mass range too much. Incorporating a light skirmisher configuration will drastically complicate the

project. We have to consider whether it's worth it. How many light skirmisher specialists do we have, and are they okay with piloting something larger for the time being?"

Melkor, Magdalena and a couple of other Larkinsons provided their input.

Specializing in light mechs wasn't very popular. The smallest mechs were extraordinarily vulnerable to damage. In order to stay alive, pilots had to depend on the mobility of their mech and their skill in dodging and evading damage. It was a very stressful position to be in, and only those with daring and confidence chose to embrace this high-risk high-reward fighting style!

This meant that while the light mech specialists absolutely shouldn't be neglected, there weren't that many of them. Perhaps only 10 percent of mech pilots consisted of light mech specialists.

"I can't justify the enormous cost of incorporating a light mech configuration in my design just to accommodate 10 percent of our warriors." Ves eventually decided. "For now, it's best for them to adapt to piloting something hefter or settle with an existing light mech model. I might design a dedicated light skirmisher later on that can meet their training and acclimatization needs. I don't feel confident I can do them justice in this current project."

Though a couple of Larkinsons looked like they wanted to argue further, Ves had made up his mind.

"Then.. what should our melee configurations be? A knight and lancer configuration sounds too little! All of our swordsman mech specialists will be shafted!"

"It's not that difficult to pick up spearmanship! Every qualified Larkinson mech pilot at least learned the basics! While it is too much to ask that they become spearmasters in a couple of months, don't forget that we have years before our journey to the Red Ocean begins!"

"Even so, it is a massive waste to leave swordsman mech specialists out of the picture! Their skill in swordsmanship will grow rusty if they are forced to adopt another weapon for the foreseeable future. It might even regress, which is a disastrous outcome!"

That was true. Lancer mechs were a lot more useful in space, but many Larkinson mech pilots, particularly landbound specialists, were much more proficient with swords.

Ves briefly nursed his forehead with his fingers. How should he settle this issue?

Chapter 1828 Larkinson Mech

After a lengthy argument, the swordsman mech proponents finally got the better end of the argument. They successfully convinced the other Larkinsons that the needs of

swordsman mech specialists needed to be met with a configuration that suited their distinctive fighting style.

"There's a lot of variety in swordsmanship styles." Hager Larkinson pointed out. "There are duelists who rely on finesse, berserkers who like to hack their opponents with double swords—"

"—Let's not make this anymore complicated." Ves raised his hand. "Let's just settle for the most standard one-handed longsword as the starting weapon for this mech configuration. It might be possible to assign other kinds of swords to this configuration, but I'm not making promises at this point."

He already had his hands full trying to stuff three different melee configurations in a single platform! He didn't have the time or interest to expand the range of the swordsman mech configuration any further!

Perhaps he should throw this issue to Ketis. On second thought, that was a bad idea. The machine he envisioned was so complicated that it would definitely exceed her current capabilities!

In the end, they settled for four different configurations.

A general rifleman mech configuration.

A space knight configuration.

A swordman mech configuration.

A lancer mech configuration.

The four of them encompassed a broad swathe of possible spaceborn mech types and served the needs of most mech pilots.

Those who specialized in more obscure mech types such as light skirmishers, striker mechs and artillery mechs were out of luck. They had no choice but to adapt to the available configurations or stick with an existing mech model.

Fortunately, every Larkinson understood the difficulty of accommodating their needs. It was already a luxury for them to be able to have a say in the design of their own mech!

Ves clapped his hand. "Alright, I'll try to make these four configurations work. Combining four mech types in a single platform is a considerable challenge and I can't promise they will all perform equally as well."

"How extensively will we field this upcoming mech platform?" Magdalena asked. As the commander of the Living Sentinels, this was a very pertinent question! "From what we

know so far, you intend to design a very expensive and very complicated mech. While it sounds fantastic to pilot a mech that is somewhat tailored to our specific needs, I'm concerned whether your budget can handle the expenditure of producing hundreds of mechs and associated parts for the different configurations!"

"There is no need for concern, commander. Money is not a problem to mech designers, and I've already secured an excellent supplier for rare exotics. Feel free to make demands. I'll see whether I can incorporate them into the platform or one of the configurations. As long as your suggestions strengthen the mech or facilitate the training of our mech pilots, I'll consider them seriously."

It took some time for the Larkinsons to be daring enough to pose some demands.

"Can you pair the space knight configuration with a round shield rather than a tower shield. The extra width is very useful in a number of situations. While this will make the mech more unwieldy, it is easier to form a shield wall with other space knights."

"Please make sure the swordsman mechs are fast and mobile enough. They can partially take over the functions covered by light mechs this way. In any case, swordsman mechs rarely need to strike heavy blows in spaceborn combat. Large and heavy weapons are too unwieldy to keep up with the rapid pace of battles in space."

"One of my biggest pet peeves about lancer mechs is the disproportionately high casualties they suffer at the moment of impact or the period that follows afterwards. Everyone is always raving about how deadly they are if they can get off their charge, but not a lot of people pay attention to the risks the lancer mech specialists incur."

All of this feedback and more gave Ves a lot of information.

Some of them consisted of general insights and best practices that he was mostly familiar with through his various studies and Mastery experiences.

The rest consisted of more specific demands, some of which Ves couldn't easily meet. He plainly voiced his opinion on whether he could incorporate a suggestion in his mech design or not. Over time, he formed a more specific list of requirements he should take into account when he embarked on his design project.

"What do you think so far, Ves?" Magdalena asked. "Are we asking too much? It shouldn't be easy to accommodate so many demands."

Ves offered his clan members a reassuring smile. "It's a challenge, but I'm up for the task. I wouldn't have chosen to design a modular mech platform otherwise. This is not only helpful to our clan, but also to my professional development. I'll let you know if I encounter any setbacks, but I don't expect to encounter one that's serious enough to block my progress. I'm not an average mech designer. I'm very confident in my skill!"

In terms of technical design skill, Ves might be a bit worse than Gloriana, but he had the benefit of a much broader knowledge base! He should have solutions for most technical problems as long as he worked on them long enough.

Of course, Ves preferred to leave these thorny puzzles to Gloriana, who possessed a talent for offering elegant solutions.

Both of them specialized in very different aspects of mech design. This was one of the main reasons why they fit so well as a professional couple.

This temporary separation from Gloriana really took a toll on his mood. He was starting to miss her more and more. He was already starting to yearn for her brilliant smiles, her unique perfumes and her loving hugs!

He regretted that he admitted his dislike towards the Hexadric Hegemony and its culture. He should have lied instead of coming clean. Why he did so at that moment was a complete mystery to Ves. He lied many times without feeling any guilt. Why couldn't he do the same to his girlfriend?

In any case, the damage was done. Ves could only hope that they could get over this bump in their relationship.

If Gloriana truly insisted that Ves needed to become a Hexer, then... he might have to cut his losses.

Despite the considerable damage to his interests, Ves wouldn't hesitate to separate himself from Gloriana if the cost started to outweigh the benefits.

In any case, the Hexers might be overlords in the Komodo Star Sector, but Ves doubted their reach extended much further.

"We've been talking about the specifications all the time, but what about the glow of the mech?" Commander Melkor asked. "That's your distinctive strength, right? What can we expect once we finally have our hands on your mech?"

That was an easy question for Ves to answer. He smiled and pushed Lucky from his perch before picking up the book resting on his lap.

"This will be our glow."

The Larkinsons all paid close attention to the Larkinson Mandate. While their sensitivity varied, they still managed to perceive various sensations!

A part of it came from their spiritual bond with the book and the Golden Cat. Another part came from the intrinsic glow and concentrated spiritual pressure emanating from the relic.

Their reactions already showed that they viewed the heirloom as an important part of their clan!

"I thought that glows only appear on mechs." Someone scratched his head.

This assumption was wrong. Many Larkinsons suddenly realized that Ves was able to impart glows to other objects aside from mechs!

They didn't know what this meant. None of them were very familiar with what Ves was capable of despite benefiting from his work.

A part of Ves was disappointed with their ignorance. The Larkinsons may have been great at raising mech pilots, but they were deficient in other fields. Mech design was still too foreign for most of them. Aside from Ves and the handful of Larkinson seeds, there was no one else in the clan who came close!

Most of the original family's technical expertise came from trusted retainers. The Larkinson Family raised people like Chief Technician Cyril Hockett and sent them to schools in order to cover these needs.

It seemed that the Larkinson Clan was largely following in the footsteps of the old family in this regard. While Ves was fine with relying on retainers for most positions, the clan really needed to become more literate when it came to mechs. The lack of technical fluency shown by his relatives was frankly embarrassing!

In any case, the current topic turned to the character of his modular mech platform. This was something that was simple to explain and understand.

Every mech design had to conform to a vision. This was something that Ves always believed in. Whether a vision had been set at the beginning or the end of the design cycle, the end product always had to provide at least some value to justify its existence!

"The central premise of my mech is simple." He said. "If you push aside all of the complex technical concerns, my modular mech platform will basically become a mech that will define and exemplify our Larkinson Clan!"

"What do you mean by that?" Rhode Larkinson asked. The young mech pilot looked confused. "I get that the mech is supposed to be tailored to our strength and skill, but what kind of advantage does that bring?"

"I've already mentioned my goal in facilitating our mech pilots into promoting to a higher class. That doesn't mean that my Larkinson mechs are only meant to be used as training resources. They are supposed to be effective in battle against most of the opponents that we might encounter in the foreseeable future. I am not designing a mech that is meant to lose a battle. We must be able to win against many possible opponents. Not only against a third-class mech force, but also against a second-class mech force!"

"What?! That's impossible, Ves!" Melkor slapped his thigh. "You yourself managed to trounce several mercenary corps that each fielded hundreds of mechs by relying on four automated battle machines! Aren't you asking too much from us? No matter how well this so-called Larkinson mech will perform, it's doubtful we'll fare any better than those poor mercenaries!"

The expressions of the other Larkinsons each cast doubt on Ves' statement. They truly can't imagine how they could face up against a Fridayman task force.

Even if the Larkinsons fielded an expert pilot and outnumbered their opponents, they would truly suffer a lot of casualties if they attempted to overpower a second-class mech force!

Ves didn't see it that way. One of the biggest differences between third-class mechs and second-class mechs was the disparity in materials.

More specifically, the quality and resilience of mech armor differed substantially between the classes.

He just happened to possess an endless source of Breyer alloy. While this material was a bit too basic in the eyes of a first rater, it was still strong enough to serve as viable mech armor in the perspective of a second rater!

Of course, protection was only one side of the story.

If Ves took a basic third-class mech like the Desolate Soldier and replaced its entire armor system with one that was based on Breyer alloy, it wouldn't necessarily be able to contend against the Fridaymen.

Its defensive qualities may have improved, but its attack and mobility aspects hadn't caught up! All of these factors left enormous holes that made this altered Desolate Soldier completely unsuitable against a superior force.

Ves had already thought about this, though. He was willing to invest as much money as necessary to narrow these gaps and upgrade the other aspects of his Larkinson mech to a level that made it viable against second-class threats!

He wasn't asking for much. He didn't need his mech to be competitive, but it should at least have a chance! He wasn't willing to rely on the Glory Battalion and Wodins to guard him against the Fridaymen!

Chapter 1829 Ominous Convergence

The so-called Larkinson mech for a lack of an official model name served several purposes.

Aside from the reasons that Ves already mentioned, he withheld a more profound and important reason from his fellow clan members.

Though he already trusted them to an extent, it was far from the level where he was willing to reveal some of his more sensitive secrets.

Even now, Ves harbored no intentions to reveal the true nature of glows. None of the Larkinsons were aware of the existence of spirituality or design spirits and how they all tied to his design philosophy.

It sounded a bit pathetic that Ves was more willing to share his secrets with Gloriana than his own clan members!

Was it because he distrusted his family? Perhaps.

The truth was that it didn't serve the Larkinson Clan very much to learn his secrets. While it might improve their ability to pilot his mechs, it wasn't worth the chance of exposure.

When his secrets spread to dozens or hundreds of Larkinson clan members, only a single bad apple was enough to spill them to the public!

Ves knew how much controversy and greed his secrets could generate. He had to avoid this outcome at all costs, and that meant that he needed to keep everything sensitive under wraps!

He only made an exception for Gloriana because he trusted her. He had faith in her dedication towards him, and he figured the risk was small enough to share some of his most valuable insights with her in order to improve their collaboration.

So far, it had been worth it! The Desolate Soldier, the Deliverer and all of the variants and custom mechs they designed together had achieved massive success. Part of the reason why they caught on so much was the synergies he formed with Gloriana.

Ves wouldn't gain as much if he revealed the same secrets to the Larkinson Clan. This meant that he was more inclined to keep his mouth shut regardless of the fact that he was snubbing his own family.

In any case, Ves withheld information from the Larkinsons for so long that it hardly affected him. Trust could be built over time. Perhaps his attitude towards the Larkinson Clan would completely be different after a couple of decades!

Ves rose from his seat and placed the Larkinson Mandate on his desk. "Make no mistake. The future of our Larkinson Clan will be defined by the mech I'm about to design. I want you to realize that I am taking this responsibility absolutely seriously."

"No one is doubting your ability to design a good mech." Commander Magdalena responded. "Each of us have faith in your skill. We all look forward to what you can make."

"I'm excited. This is the first mech made for our Larkinson Clan, and one of our own is its lead designer! Ves is born and raised as a Larkinson. There is no mech designer in the galaxy who knows us better than him! If his other designs are an example of what he can do, then the mech he develops for his own flesh and blood will certainly be great!"

Many Larkinsons were optimistic about the Larkinson mech. Each of them believed that Ves would pull out all the stops to succeed with its design.

They weren't wrong! Ves was genuinely planning to invest a considerable amount of resources in its design and production! Even though it would probably become one of his most cost-inefficient designs, as long as he managed to strengthen his clan and obtain some self-defense ability against a second-class mech force, it was worth the investment!

The meeting wrapped up shortly after that. The Larkinson mech pilots each bid goodbye to Ves and left his office.

Ves was content with the discussion he managed to foster. Aside from gathering lots of information from the target audience of his mechs, he also made them more involved in his activities.

The fates of Ves and the Larkinson Clan were intertwined.

There was a time when Ves didn't want to involve any family members in his business. The Larkinson Family never involved itself too deeply in the LMC, especially at the beginning.

While Ves understood the family's original stance, within his heart he never really forgave it for lacking faith in his venture.

Only his father believed in him! None of the other Larkinsons aside from his grandfather supported him in that early period.

No matter what he felt about his family, now that he grew the LMC and his other organizations to this extent, he needed their help to retain control. It was better to rely on the loyalty of his family than complete strangers!

Only the Kinnners enjoyed his trust, but even then Ves still preferred to lean on his own flesh and blood.

Ves spent some time to document the results of the meeting and write down his own thoughts.

The Larkinson mech started to gain more shape in his mind. Its design would certainly be ambitious, so much so that its complexity might rival that of the Devil Tiger!

A part of him hoped that he could finally make another masterwork mech with this project. Ever since he departed the Sentinel Kingdom, he never managed to replicate his success.

Neither his Desolate Soldier nor its variants managed to get him close towards the amazing realm he reached that unforgettable day!

He wasn't even within the range where he could employ one of Lucky gems to cheat his way past the masterwork threshold.

Ves felt as if he was doing something wrong when he embarked on his previous projects.

After a lot of reflection, Ves figured that he simply wasn't invested enough in their design to form a strong and overpowering emotional attachment to them. While that didn't mean he was indifferent to his own work, he always considered them to be products rather than a creative work.

There was a difference between the two. When Ves designed the Devil Tiger, he almost completely disregarded practicality in favor of designing an innovative, groundbreaking mech!

The level of passion he maintained back then was incomparable. He came close to reaching this level when he started working on the Deliverer, but it still fell short for several reasons.

No more!

Ves was tired of failing time and time again. While it was normal for a mech designer to fail in creating a masterwork mech, Ves was different!

Perhaps some of Gloriana's obsession bled over to him, but he was really starting to get annoyed at his continuous failures and lack of progress in this aspect!

The Larkinson mech was his best hope of returning to the peak he reached when he completed the Devil Tiger project.

Designing the Larkinson mech was not a regular commercial project to Ves.

It was a project that involved his own clan. It was a project that was based around a modular mech platform, which was completely novel to him. It was also a project that Ves was willing to invest an unreasonable amount of resources to meet his goals!

Perhaps the only resource he was being frugal about was time.

A mech designer never had enough time. This was a recurring problem to Ves, though he was anything but alone in wishing he had more time!

Setting a three-month deadline was a necessity to Ves. He needed to pressure himself to work fast and efficiently. Delaying the completion of the design not only affected his other interests, but also damaged his confidence.

Ves never needed to spend an excessive amount of time to design a mech! Whereas others needed to spend years to design their work, Ves was fine with just a couple of months!

Of course, allocating just 3 months to design a modular mech platform with four different mech configurations would certainly push him to his limits.

Yet Ves banked on this urgency to keep his passion hot and his excitement at maximum!

He worked best under pressure, and Ves believed he could leverage this trait of his to amplify his passion and maximize the chance of entering into an exceptional state when he was ready to fabricate the first production model!

Would he succeed? Ves didn't know, but as long as he acted as if he was working on a passion project, he would probably get close!

"It seems as if I have to leave some of my other goals aside." He sighed.

His current project was extremely difficult and would definitely consume all of his time and attention. This meant that Ves would not have the opportunity to further his research on imaginary mechs.

"Next time." He promised to himself. "I'll wait for next time."

Perhaps he would be ready to develop an imaginary mech when it was time for him to design a mech for the Penitent Sisters.

Speaking of that, Ves wasn't sure whether this commission would still proceed. After Ves refused Calabast's suggestions, he never heard from her again. Was it that difficult to arrange a way for boys to be the lead designer of a mech design project in the Hegemony?

Time passed as Ves formed a timeline of his project and sorted out his schedule. As long as the Sand War or the Komodo War didn't spring any surprises on him, then Ves expected to be able to work wholeheartedly on his project.

It was at this time that Gavin entered his office. He had an urgent expression on his face!

"Boss, something has happened!"

Ves swiveled his chair towards his assistant. "What's the problem, Benny?"

"It's the sandmen! They've withdrawn!"

"What?!"

This was completely out of his expectation! Why would the sandman suddenly halt their relentless assault on human space? A sudden withdrawal would not only give the beleaguered states a valuable reprieve, but also negate many of the gains they have made.

What had changed? Why were the sandmen breaking their pattern?

"It's true! It's all over the galactic net! The entire third line of defense reports that the sandmen have stopped throwing their fleets at human-occupied star systems! Not a single sandman has launched an attack in the last eight hours! The scouts that are tracking the movements of the enemy have all observed the sandman fleets aborting their forward approach!"

"Where are they going?! Are they retreating back to the frontier?!"

Gavin shook his head. "That's the peculiar part about the changes in movement. The sandmen aren't fleeing like scattered sand. Instead, all of their fleets have altered their routes so that they are all converging on a single star system!"

This was shocking news! There was definitely an intelligence behind this change! Whether it was Sigrund or some high-caste sandman leader, it was clear that the aliens were not content to perpetuate their losing trend!

"Where?"

"We're not quite sure yet. More observation is needed to pin down the precise location. What we're certain of is that the convergence site is located somewhere in the territory of the former Coman Federation."

"That means that practically every surviving sandman fleet will converge in a state that is situated straight in front of the Bright Republic!" Ves quickly realized!

This was a massive threat to his home state! If thousands, tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of sandman fleets all gathered in front of the Bright Republic's doorstep, what would happen once this convergence finished?

Would all of these sandmen form another artificial sand planet like the one that ambushed the CFA warfleet?

Unless the Big Two came to the rescue yet again, this death ball might be powerful enough to smash through the entire Mech Corps!

The Bright Republic was prohibited from developing and fielding weapons capable of destroying planets. While this rule was meant to limit the damage in human conflicts, it also crippled the state's attempt to fight against aliens who were unbound by the rules imposed by the Big Two!

The most important question now was whether the MTA or the CFA would move into action.

Chapter 1830 Sandman Calamity

The sandmen altered their pattern yet again.

The aliens were slow to change their approach, but once they did, it always resulted in significant changes!

After getting beat up by Deliverers over and over again, the sandmen reacted outside of expectation.

Most analysts predicted that the sandmen would have abandoned the swarm configuration that made their sandman admirals so vulnerable against sniping.

Yet it seemed the sandman leaders still in charge had opted to skip a couple of steps and went straight for the final resort!

It was difficult to estimate how many sandman fleets were left. The sandmen drew out nearly their entire population from their territories in the deep frontier and committed them to the invasion.

Even though the human states managed to defeat an incredible amount of fleets, more were still intact and on their way to invade human space!

If the sandmen kept flinging their fleets at human space without strategy, then the states possessed ample confidence in repelling the onslaught.

It was a different story if they smarted up. By taking advantage of their numerical advantage by gathering them up to form a single massive force, almost no state could withstand their might!

A sense of helplessness spread throughout the troubled states. The might of a sandman planet like the one that struck a blow against the CFA warfleet was irresistible by any third-rate state involved in the Sand War!

Perhaps they might stand a chance if they all joined forces and pooled their military strength into a unified mech army, but what were the chances of that happening?

More information quickly poured in from scouts and observers. They managed to infer the star system chosen as the convergence point, and it was right in the heart of the former Coman Federation!

This was bad news for the Bright Republic!

The state just happened to stand in their way if the sandmen kept heading coreward!

Though it was not out of the question for the sandman planet or armada to alter their course and steer around the Bright Republic, the odds of that was not very high.

The sandmen weren't known for employing tricks. Their leaders set a simple directive, and the lower-caste sandmen obeyed those orders in the most direct fashion possible!

Therefore, if the sandmen were still trying to invade human space, they would certainly take the path of least resistance, which meant they would be proceeding straight ahead!

The mood in the Ylvaine Protectorate grew tense and uncertain. It only took a slight change in direction for the suspected sandman planet to steer the sandman planet towards the Protectorate.

Not even the recent announcement from the MTA allayed everyone's worries.

In the face of such a clear and present threat, the Mech Trade Association could no longer remain impassive. Failing to act against such an overpowering alien threat would certainly impact their reputation to an extent!

Perhaps they were too lazy to deploy their forces throughout the entire front in the earlier stages of the Sand War.

Now that the sandmen were eagerly converging their forces in a single location, the MTA only had to dispatch a single powerful strike force to put an end to their invasion!

The only question was how long it would take for the MTA's Compliance Department to muster up their troops and intercept the sandman planet.

No one knew what the future held. While many people believed that their state would no longer be subject to the ravages of the sandmen, other people suspected that their enemy wasn't so simple!

Time and time again, the sandmen slaughtered so many citizens with the MTA standing by as if the culling was a natural cycle of nature.

Public confidence and trust in the MTA had fallen into a pit! Combined with their obvious preoccupation with the Red Ocean, many humans affected by the Sand War no longer looked up the MTA to save their lives!

The changes affected the Bright Republic the worst. Even though the relentless assault against the Bentheim System had finally ceased, hardly any Brighter celebrated the reprieve.

The Mech Corps and Starfighter Corps rapidly began to reorganize their regiments in preparation for a large-scale action. Whether it was to resume their prior defensive actions or to concentrate their forces to repel a planet-sized sandman behemoth, the Bright Republic needed to make the most out of the temporary lull in battle.

The conditions were slightly better in the other states. The Ylvaine Protectorate and Vesia Kingdom which bordered the Bright Republic were both adopting similar postures.

As for the states situated further away, the mood grew cautiously optimistic. Some even believed that the sandmen would no longer bother them! As far as they were concerned, the sandman invasion wasn't their problem anymore! Let the Brighters and the MTA take care of the sandmen's final gambit. There was no need to intervene any further!

With several distant states declared an end to the fighting and the start of reconstruction, it became clear to the Bright Republic that few states were willing to reinforce its precarious defense lines.

The selfishness of state governments became fully evident when the Bright Republic's pleas were help fell onto deaf ears.

Not even the Ylvaine Protectorate issued a commitment!

"The Ylvainans don't owe the Brighters anything. In fact, the opposite is true." Gavin reported to Ves in his office. "The ties between the Protectorate and the Republic are too shallow to foster a mutual defense pact. There are too many differences between the two states, and the Ylvainans don't believe the sandmen will change course and attack the Protectorate after they smashed the Republic."

Ves grimaced a bit. "This also means that the Bright Republic won't come to the Ylvaine Protectorate's aid if it turns out the sandman planet attacks the latter instead."

"Everyone is gambling like they are taking turns to ride a starship with a malfunctioning FTL drive. Each passenger hopes that disaster will pass them by and that the FTL drive will still hold up."

Considering that the Bright Republic bore the most risk, no amount of diplomatic entreaties could convince the other states to send aid!

Some people even wrote the entire state off! There was no way the Republic would be able to survive if the sandman planet invaded the Bentheim System, which many analysts predicted due to its attraction as a port system!

"How is the mood in my group?"

"As you can imagine, many people are conflicted. The employees of the LMC sympathize with their former people, but they are secretly glad to be out of the way. The same applies to the Larkinson clan members to an extent, though there are plenty who want to fight on behalf of their home state one last time."

Ves held the Larkinson Mandate in his hands and idly flipped through its heavy, spiritually-empowered pages.

"I am aware. Their reaction is rather.. troubling."

Though the Larkinsons who followed him to the Ylvaine Protectorate pledged their loyalty to the clan, it was too difficult to shake off their Brighter identity and indoctrination. They were still Brighters at heart, and many of them strongly urged Ves and the clan leadership to return to their home state to fight what might be the most decisive battle of the Sand War!

Suffice to say, Ves was deeply to accede to this request. Though it would be exceptionally valiant for them to come to the aid of the Bright Republic, Ves was not hungry to expand his glory and accumulate more honor.

The Larkinsons weren't short of reputation! Even the newly-founded Larkinson Clan already possessed quite a lot of renown due to the personal accomplishments of Ves and the legacy it inherited from the old family.

All of this meant that Ves had continually been inundated with requests to dispatch the Avatars and the Sentinels to the Benheim System!

It was driving him mad!

Fortunately, there were several reasons why they weren't heading to the Bright Republic in droves.

First, travel from the Ylvaine Protectorate and the Bright Republic was heavily curtailed. Aside from state-backed trade convoys, hardly any ship was willing to travel to a state that was likely to become the punching bag of the sandman planet!

Ship owners weren't suicidal or stupid enough to accept any contract that would bring them to the Bright Republic!

Second, the Larkinsons possessed some attachment to their clan. Each of them had signed the Larkinson Mandate, which meant they felt obliged to wait until Ves and the leadership made a decision before they acted.

Of course, this didn't prevent them from leaving the clan or acting against instructions. This was actually a very realistic concern to Ves and the others.

The final and perhaps the main reason the clan members restrained themselves was the reaction from the old family.

The Larkinson Family as a whole instructed the Larkinson Clan to stay out of the way.

Benjamin Larkinson called Ves himself to explain their reasoning.

"Whatever happens, we don't want our Larkinson heritage and future hopes to die with us stubborn old bones. In the coming weeks, we're transferring our family to your clan. I hope you can shelter them from what is to come. Please treat them well. Whether they decide to join your clan or stick to their own ways, I hope you can respect their choice."

Ves readily agreed with this request. "I have never forced anyone to join my clan. Family is family. I'll do my best to accommodate every Larkinson sent in our direction."

"It might be that we're being overcautious. The MTA will likely make its move and solve the problem on its own. What we are doing is merely a precaution. It might be that this crisis will blow over in a month. You can send our Larkinsons back if that's the case."

Ves and Benjamin hashed out the details and forged a small, informal agreement that the Larkinson Assembly quickly ratified in an emergency session.

Since the clan had accepted the responsibility of hosting the Larkinsons from the old family, it had a duty to protect their charges.

Sending lots of mechs and mech pilots to the Bright Republic would be a dereliction of their current duty! At least that was Ves hoped to use as an argument to convince his rowdy clan members to stay put.

"How big the exodus from the Bright Republic?"

"Not that much, to be honest. Aside from the lack of ships that can carry refugees away, most Brighters are actually determined to ride this crisis out. The upside to the latest movements is that many star systems are no longer under attack. Even if the sandman planet advances forward, it will only pass through the territories of the Bright Republic before entering the territory owned by the Independent State of Pillis."

"Still, the likelihood that the Bentheim System will be attacked is quite big. Once Bentheim falls to the sandmen, our home still will lose its economic heart. It will be difficult for the Bright Republic to remain strong. Even if the state manages to recapture the Bentheim System, it has lost centuries of investment and accumulation. It's too expensive to rebuild the local economy, especially since the government is certainly drowning in debt!"

The geopolitical implications were considerable. Unless the MTA stopped the sandman planet in time, it was likely that the Bright Republic would suffer an unprecedented period of weakness!

What might happen afterwards was bad news for the Republic, and by extension the Larkinson Family.

Ves really didn't want to deal with this headache right now. He was just about to gear up to begin his Larkinson mech design project. If he wanted to have a reasonable shot at fabricating another masterwork mech, then he couldn't afford to get distracted all the time!

"Are there any other movements I should be concerned about?"

"Well, it's the Hexers. The Wodins have been making some moves without coming across as man-hating bastards."

"What?"

"Yeah. I know it sounds improbable, boss, but I think they're actually succeeding in making friends with our people!"

"What is Gloriana up to?" Ves frowned.

"I think.. the Wodins are engaged in a charm offensive! They're trying to ingratiate themselves in our group!"