

Mech 1851

Chapter 1851 Exploitation

After Lieutenant Ferct finished her introduction of the services available to associates, she soon bid him goodbye.

"Let me reiterate. It is a great privilege to become our associate. Some of the best and brightest people of the galactic rim are connected to us. In addition, there are many associates who have proven themselves to be exceptional enough to meet our high standards. We never waste our time with useless bums who are only able to get far by spending. You are in good company, Ves. Remember, MTA merits are everything to us. Be sure to work hard and make the most out of your remaining youth!"

With that, her projection disappeared in a blink, leaving Ves alone with Lucky and the Larkinson Mandate.

He turned to his cat. "What do you think. Was she sincere?"

"Meow."

"I agree." He turned to the Larkinson Mandate. "What about you? What is your judgement?"

The Golden Cat tilted her head, making her big eyes look even more adorable!

Nyaaaaaaa.

"You have a point. Lieutenant Ferct doesn't care about me. To the Rim Guardians, associates like me are just a bunch cheap labor. As long as they throw enough MTA merits at us, we won't hesitate to bark on command!"

On the surface, the relation between the Rim Guardians and its associates was one of equal exchange. The Rim Guardians did not force the associates to do anything. As long as Ves remained useful and did not act directly against their interests, they wouldn't revoke his associate status!

Just like Leemar's Clifford Society, the Rim Exchange ostensibly served as an elaborate portal where associates could gain a lot of benefits in exchange for trading something valuable such as a rare good or their valuable expertise. Each transaction was completely voluntary, allowing the associates to pick and choose the deals at their leisure.

However, underneath the surface, the game was rigged from the start.

Throughout her introduction, Lieutenant Ferct emphasized the value and importance of MTA merits multiple times. She plainly said that he wouldn't be able to do anything without any merits under his belt!

Furthermore, she also dismissed the utility of transferable currencies such as mech credits, hex credits or coalition credits.

Money was still valuable. That was no doubt. It was just that many of the most valued goods and services provided by the Rim Exchange and the MTA were priced in merits!

The crucial difference between mech credits and MTA merits was that the latter couldn't be transferred, inherited, exchanged or obtained in any way or than to earn them directly from the MTA!

As the sole provider of MTA merits, the MTA and its underlying organizations held a stranglehold on both sides of a transaction!

For Ves to buy something from the Rim Exchange, he needed merits.

How could he obtain merits? By completing missions issued by the Rim Exchange!

"It's like a circle!" He uttered. "All of the merits issued by the Rim Guardians eventually end up back in their hands!"

Of course, Ves got something in return, but he had no doubt the Rim Exchange charged huge premiums for their goods and services! There was no reason for them to be generous and lower their prices out of the good of their hearts. Ves bet that the Rim Guardians earned a profit every step of the way!

"It's too bad that I have no choice but to play along." He sighed.

Just because the Rim Guardians wanted to exploit him didn't mean he should turn away. The MTA's monopoly on MTA merits meant that Ves couldn't go anywhere else!

Well, if Ves was really desperate, he could approach the CFA instead and try to earn CFA merits, but that was a complete non-starter.

There was no way the CFA would treat mech designers like Ves well! He might as well commit suicide right away if he wanted to get screwed even harder!

In short, Ves should never hold the illusion that the Rim Guardians were looking out for their associates. Their own interests always came first!

That said, it wasn't all that bad to build up a relationship with the Rim Guardians. Exploitative they might be, they were light on commitments. They did not demand his allegiance like states and neither did they impose any further obligations.

This sounded great to someone who pursued independence such as him. Since he sought to turn the Larkinson Clan into a sovereign entity, he could dearly use the services and backing that a powerful organization like the Rim Guardians could provide!

He just had to pay the right price.

"In terms of value, I can provide a lot of unique services!" He realized.

He could design mechs that possessed glows. As far as he knew, not a single mech designer in human space could do the same!

He could turn ordinary mech pilots into expert candidates. This was just a wanted transition that the 'market price' for this service was priceless!

"It's too bad I can't do it again."

It would be too suspicious if Ves kept accepting missions that required him to turn average mech pilots into expert candidates. Even a six-year old kid could tell that he mastered some kind of hidden method to promote mech pilots!

Ves felt a bit constrained by his situation. Using his specialty and his spiritual expertise, he could perform all kinds of feats considered impossible. Yet if he used too much, then he would inevitably get exposed, thereby drawing the interests of the MTA and other immensely powerful entities!

Once he landed in their crosshairs, he could kiss his ambitions and freedom goodbye!

Therefore, he needed to hold something back. The risk was that if he constrained himself too much, he probably wouldn't be able to earn 100 million MTA merits in time for the planned launch of his grand expedition!

"Damnit! This is an impossible dilemma!"

He would have to visit the Rim Exchange and browse the missions at the merit hall to be sure, but he already suspected that none of them were easy.

The Rim Guardians only recruited a select amount of excellent people from the galactic rim. None of them were incapable or incompetent! The missions issued to them should definitely give them all a challenge, as MTA merits should never be obtained with ease!

Though Ves was tempted to input the address of the Rim Exchange into his comm in order to visit the virtual portal, he held himself back.

Right now, he had enough on his plate as it is. His most important priority right now was to design his upcoming Larkinson mech.

Since he intended to treat it as a passion project, he had to ignore as many distractions as possible. Anything that pulled him away from his design project would inevitably affect the quality of the end product!

Since the Larkinson mech was of supreme importance to the clan and his ambitions, this would have huge implications for his future!

When Ves returned to the main lab, Gloriana immediately moved to his side.

"How is it? Did you get in? Are they satisfied?"

"It went fine." He smiled. "The Rim Guardians accepted me in the ranks of their associates. I can now enter something called the Rim Exchange."

"I see. You're very fortunate you managed to get in. In the years I've spent at Centerpoint, I only encountered a few mech designers who managed to do the same. Most mech designers who linger at Centerpoint can only dream of becoming an associate like you! I'm so proud of you, Ves!"

She leaned close and pecked him on the cheek with a giggle.

Though Ves enjoyed her affection, he found her reaction to be a little off. "What about you, Gloriana. Are you envious?"

She lightly shook her head. "Hexers don't have a habit of interacting with the MTA anymore than is necessary. It's fine if the Rim Guardians passed me over. They don't really like Hexers in general."

"Oh."

"In addition, I don't necessarily need their support. From what a professor once told me, the Rim Guardians mostly target talented individuals with weak or moderate backing. They want to build up relationships with those who are most prone to work hard to achieve something by themselves."

In other words, the Rim Guardians vastly preferred patsies like Ves as opposed to someone spoiled like Gloriana!

"How do you Hexer manage to earn MTA merits then?"

"Oh, we don't need to befriend the Rim Guardians to earn merits." She answered with a smile. "The main MTA organization also provides missions. Working with the MTA is something every Hexer mech designer has to learn."

"And they're not repelled by you people's... Hexer-ness?"

She giggled. "It's not as difficult as you think. We just have to stick to written communication as much as possible. That way, we can control what we say. In any case, the MTA is supposed to be neutral. The moment they pick and choose which states can enjoy their service, they'll definitely make everyone else suspicious that they're aiming to lead human civilization directly! That will spark countless rebellions!"

Though she was right to an extent, it did not preclude subtler actions.

"Well, I'm glad you're fine with my entry into the Rim Guardians. I think I can truly begin to earn a lot of merits soon. The Larkinson mech comes first, though."

She nodded in agreement. "Our project comes first, yes. By the way, have you thought of a more suitable name for your mech design? Calling it the Larkinson mech isn't good enough."

"I'm still mulling over it. To be honest, I don't have any good ideas now, but that's not a big deal. I have plenty of time to think while I'm fleshing the design."

They looked over the central projection which displayed the current state of the design.

Around a third of the base platform and the four configurations had already been defined. This provided the mech designers with a good impression of how the final versions would look like. This was because Ves and Gloriana tackled the biggest issues first and worked their way down to the smallest of details.

So far, Ves was pretty pleased with how the design was turning out. Though they had to overcome countless technical challenges, the estimated performance of his incomplete mech was already dazzling for a third-class mech!

At the very least, in terms of defense, his Larkinson mech all surpassed anything that was common to mass-produced third-class mechs!

Providing such luxurious protection to his mech pilots ensured that they wouldn't die so easily! Even if an enemy managed to pierce through the Larkinson mech's prodigious armor, the cockpit itself was a veritable bunker!

"There's one thing that's bothering me more and more, though." She told him. "The defensive power of the configurations of the modular mech platform is amazing, but their offensive parameters are rather weak."

"It's not all that bad. At the very least, we can employ a variation of the standard Breyer alloy to form extremely powerful swords and spears. We can also use it to clad the exterior of the laser or ballistic rifle, thereby making them less prone to break when hit by enemy fire."

"You know those are only marginal benefits. The mechs simply lack punch."

Ves shrugged. "We can't have everything. It's too expensive to upgrade the weapon systems, musculature systems and other aspects needed to strengthen the offensive power of our design. Our mech pilots won't be able to keep up, thereby wasting much of its potential."

Both of them were aware of this argument. Ves was able to accept it without a fuss, but Gloriana still took issue with the lack of effort in improving the Larkinson mech's offensive performance.

Unlike Ves who regarded their current project as an improved third-class mech design, Gloriana viewed it as a crippled second-class mech design!

Still, she didn't let her annoyance get in the way of doing her best. She was always as invested in this project as Ves!

Chapter 1852 The Mech With Clothes

After hearing back from the Rim Guardians, Ves soon put the new development aside and went back to designing his mech.

Progress on the Larkinson mech design barely kept up with the schedule they set. With only three months in total to design a mech that actually consisted of four mechs, Ves could only devote a couple of weeks on each of the configurations!

This was a very brutal pace, now that Ves thought about it. Even with his enhanced productivity upon reaching Journeyman, Ves still required at least two months to design a good mech!

The only reason why their short timetable worked was because of how many aspects the configurations shared in common.

Rather than see it as designing four mechs as one, Ves was truly just designing a single mech with four light variants.

Of course, 'light' being relative here.

It was as if they were designing a naked mech with four different outfits. Each set of clothes altered the properties of the mech in a drastic fashion.

This was anything but usual in mech design. Ves and Gloriana had to overcome so many problems relating to balance, implementation and integration.

Making the clothes 'fit' to the frame was one of the biggest difficulties they faced. If the fit was too tight, then the clothes became a burden to the underlying frame. A tight fit also increased the difficulty of repairing the mech and switching to another configuration.

The other extreme was no better. Making the fit too loose or small weakened the 'clothes'. If they were too light and flimsy, then it wouldn't take much effort for an enemy to render the mechs harmless!

Designing a mech with accompanying clothes was difficult. The unique problems that emerged from designing a modular mech platform presented Ves and Gloriana with plenty of headaches. They never encountered these issues before, and trying to work out solutions for the very first time was a huge burden.

Even as Ves became immersed in the design process, he always made sure to keep an eye on the passage of time. He always had to push his subordinate mech designers to work harder while expecting more from himself. The moment any of them slacked off, the project would definitely fall behind schedule!

Despite the constant worries, Ves never lost confidence. Instead, his passion burned even hotter as the pressure piled up on his shoulders. The deadline that he had set became a goal and an obsession to him. It was not in his nature to break his promises, especially when it came to mech design!

Even though he wouldn't suffer any actual penalties if he exceeded his self-imposed deadline, his mentality would definitely suffer a severe blow if he was late!

With a potential masterwork mech at stake, Ves could only push himself to toil harder and make the most of his design sessions!

Currently, Ves preoccupied himself with the space knight configuration. Though much of its planned design elements had been set in stone, Ves still hesitated over its secondary features.

In spaceborn battles, space battles mostly served as punching bags. They blocked damage so that more vulnerable mechs and assets didn't have to get hit.

This was something the Larkinson mech's space knight configuration already excelled at by virtue of the Breyer alloy integrated in its armor system and internal support structure!

The extra armor cladding affixed to the base platform at many points vastly increased the damage resistance of the resulting mech. The ease of attaching and detaching these modular sections of external armor also resulted in further advantages in battle.

As long as the base layer of armor belonging to the base platform wasn't affected, a space knight could continuously rotate in and out of the battlefield and replace its consumed external armor section!

While it required a lot of training and planning to set up such a rotation, it would definitely extend the space knight configuration's role in battle during extended engagements!

They would just have to fabricate a lot of spare external armor plating and keep them in reserve until it was time to draw upon them. This was something that Ves could easily sustain. Even if his supply of Breyer alloy was cut off, he could always resort to other materials to form different sets of external armor cladding.

This kind of adaptability was very important to forces that might have a reason to head to a place where there weren't any opportunities to resupply like the deep frontier!

Only someone who personally experienced the difficulties of repairing or maintaining mechs under extreme conditions would even think of such a benefit!

Among all of the mech designers, only Ves and Merrill Truman lived through such times. That gave them a shared camaraderie that they didn't have with other mech designers.

Merrill was an interesting mech designer to Ves. Despite her unwilling stay in the frontier, she quickly adjusted back to life as a proper, orthodox mech designer.

With the Komodo Star Sector in great chaos, it hadn't been difficult to arrange a new identity for her. She now went by Merrill O'Brian and underwent a moderate amount of cosmetic surgery to alter her face and adjust her body profile.

This was enough for her to say goodbye to her previous identity!

Ever since she turned back into a proper mech designer, she became completely at ease with her new arrangements. Despite the invisible shackles that bound her to the LMC, she didn't mind working for Ves at all! She recognized what a great opportunity she received and never showed any intention to regain her full freedom.

For his part, Ves stopped regarding her as a pirate designer after a while. She didn't fit the stereotype of a pirate designer anyway.

In fact, her inclusion in the second design team was a major benefit to the project. Her specialty dealt with leveraging imbalances to achieve specific advantages in a mech design.

This was a very vague description, but it essentially meant that she could find ingenious ways to increase the performance of a mech! The larger and more complicated the mech, the more she was able to increase the force of a sword swing or the thrust of a lance!

"Mechs are composed of a large amount of interconnected components." She described to Ves one day. "The mech engine provides the motive power to manipulate the artificial

musculature system, which in itself is a huge collection of parts in the form of flexible strands."

"What does that have to do with your specialty?"

"Newton's third law of motion states that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Any force acting from a mech puts stress on a component due to the opposite force acting on it when it makes an exertion. Multiply that a thousand times and you have a mech that is constantly beating itself up on the inside due to all of the recoil it has to endure inside its frame."

Though Ves possessed a deep understanding of Mechanics in relation to mech design, he never viewed mechs from this perspective! It sounded very novel to him even though it was based on a very basic premise!

"So.. does that mean you are trying to find some way to utilize the reactions acting within a mech?"

The young woman nodded. "It's more complicated than that, but in essence you are correct. Trying to get some use out of these reactions and attempting to recycle these forces for other uses has always been of great interest to me. It's a way of achieving greater efficiency that few mech designers have thought of. As long as I'm able to expand upon my ideas and applications, I can make a significant difference in any mechanical design!"

Though her design philosophy sounded promising, her idea sounded very difficult to realize!

"Well, good luck on your advancement. I suggest you keep studying and accumulating more knowledge in the free time you can spare. My virtual library is largely open to you as long as you remain productive. Don't hesitate to browse my textbooks."

Technically, the library belonged to Lady Curver, but Ves claimed it as his spoils of war! It didn't matter to him if he didn't have the right to read or peddle in the exclusive textbooks of Clarion University. It wasn't as if the Friday Coalition would send a raiding force after him to punish his illegal access to its intellectual property!

The conversation soon turned away from her specialty. Merrill didn't know Ves very well, and Ves only possessed a shallow understanding of what she went through.

"How did you survive in the frontier for so long? How did you manage to regain your freedom?"

"I had help." She smiled. "Not every pirate gang in the frontier are brutes. I managed to reach out to Omen of Misfortune who assisted me in parting from my old outfit and set me up as an independent!"

The Omen of Misfortune! Now that was a name that Ves hadn't heard in a while!

"I've had... dealings with the Omen of Misfortune in the past." He said. "I don't know much about them other than that they're friendly with Lydia's Swordmaidens."

Her eyes grew wistful. "I always wanted to join the Swordmaidens. They were everything a woman in the frontier aspired to join! Sadly, I never intersected with their fleet during my stay in the frontier. I wouldn't have been able to join anyway. I heard they only pick up teenage girls and train them up into powerful Swordmaidens. I was too old to be worthy of their notice."

Ves blinked. It seemed like the reputation of the Swordmaidens was a lot more resounding than he thought!

"Do you know what happened to the Omen of Misfortune?"

She shrugged. "I think the Omen was caught off-guard by the sandman invasion like anyone else. They like to act mysterious and claim they can divine the future, but I'm sure they were blindsided. Last I heard, they fled into civilized space like every other outfit with ships. I don't know where to find them. No one bothers to maintain their existing contact methods after entering civilized space. Here, the old alliances and customs of the frontier don't matter anymore. Everyone has received a new start!"

That was true. There was little left of the Dragon Alliance and the Ravienne Alliance that terrorized the Faris Star Region for so many years. They might have been powerful enough to throw their weight around in the desolate regions of the frontier, but they were just easy fodder to the established powers of the Komodo Star Sector!

There was no reason to maintain existing pirate bonds and connections in civilized space. Just like the Swordmaidens had done, many pirate organizations took advantage of the chaos to abandon their tainted identities and start anew as mercenaries!

Ves was sure that the MTA and everyone else knew quite well what was going on. The fact that they didn't do much to plug such an obvious hole was rather curious. Perhaps they didn't think the scattered pirates posed a threat to the established order of the Komodo Star Sector. Perhaps they were too preoccupied with the Sand War and the Komodo War to chase after some trivial pirates.

Whatever the case, their complacency was good for Merrill and the Swordmaidens! Soon enough, everyone would take their new identities for granted!

Before they returned to work, Merrill made an odd remark.

"I miss the frontier, sometimes. It was dangerous, but it was also liberating. There is no MTA watching over your head, no states who wanted to dominate the territories, no rules to tell you what you can and cannot do. There are so few mech designers in the

frontier that competition is much more relaxed. If not for how difficult it was to procure materials, I might prefer the freedom of the frontier over the order of civilized space."

"Me too." Ves idly said. "Me too."

Chapter 1853 External Stimuli

The days continued to pass one after another as Ves and Gloriana kept the project going. The pair invested an increasing amount of attention to the project, to the point where they began to lose track of what was happening in the rest of the galaxy!

Even though the two liked to pretend they put the galaxy on pause, current events were still progressing at their own pace.

The sandmen fleets that halted their mindless charge into human-occupied planets still converged to a location within the territory of the former Coman Federation. It was difficult for the Bright Republic and other forces to know for sure because the density of sandmen constantly increased the closer they tried to sneak their scout ships into this exceedingly perilous space!

Due to the extensive amount of time needed for the sandmen to complete their mass convergence, the MTA had plenty of time to form a response.

The MTA's Compliance Department finally dispatched a small warfleet to Bentheim. There, the fleet would either wait for the sandman planet to arrive at the port system, or move out to intercept the cataclysmically powerful sandman amalgamation before it came any close to crowded population centers!

The arrival of the warfleet finally pressed down much of the panic that had formed in the Bright Republic in recent weeks. If not for their presence, Bentheim would have probably been engulfed by chaos and rioting!

The only issue of concern was that the Compliance Department dispatched less assets than everyone thought.

Unlike the CFA's formidable Archangel Battle Group, the small fleet anchored in the Bentheim System mostly consisted of a couple of warships and carriers.

In the space warfare doctrine adopted by the Compliance Department, mechs played a much greater role. Even though deploying spaceborn mechs in a battle between warships was like taking a knife to a gunfight, the MTA never gave up the practice. Its mech designers worked hard to turn mechs into a serious contender against warships!

In any case, the mechs fielded by the MTA were a far cry from the Desolate Soldiers and Dawnbreakers that flooded the Bentheim System. The MTA utilized the same kind of first-class multipurpose mechs adopted by the first-rate states!

Naturally, their mechs were even better! Designed to pose a serious threat to warships and the worst weapons employed by the most advanced alien empires known to humanity, the mechs of the MTA were true engines of destruction!

Many of them were able to output so much damage that they could devastate several major cities on Bentheim! Some could even unleash ordnance that could wipe out a small continent!

With so many powerful mechs brought by the Compliance Department, many optimism began to believe the Sand War was as good as over! As long as the sandmen bumped into the impressive mechs of the MTA, even an entire planet couldn't stand a chance!

The movements of the MTA also provided some reassurance to the Larkinsons residing in the Bright Republic. The evacuation of Larkinson family members slowed down. Those who were bound by duty never contemplated leaving in the first place. They only sent out some of their spouses and children to the Larkinson Clan as a precaution.

The influx of Larkinsons just started to arrive. Some of the groups of evacuees even turned around and traveled back to their homes! The prospect of living in the Ylvaine Protectorate was too scary or fraught with uncertainty.

In addition, residing with the Larkinson Clan as guests rather than clan members was rather awkward. Those who never had any intentions of joining the clan weren't interested in spending time with those they regarded as traitors in their hearts.

Fortunately, those who arrived and settled down in the Friedhold Estate soon began to fall under the charm of the upbeat clan. The Larkinson Clan, despite being only a month old, already exhibited the cohesion of a tight-knight family organization!

In fact, compared to the old family, the clan featured so many new opportunities and improvements that it was hard for anyone to resist the allure!

Unlike the old family that strongly emphasized the collective over the individual, the Larkinson Clan explicitly directed some care to individual Larkinsons!

Those who wanted an easy, well-paying job could accept one of the many cozy job offers from the LMC.

The Larkinsons who wanted to have a say in how the clan was being run could apply to join the Larkinson Assembly or the Executive Council.

The Larkinson mech pilots who wanted to put their skills to use could apply to join several different forces.

Those with ambition and wanted to become the best opted to apply for the Avatars of Myth. This was an especially attractive choice for those who missed the military life and

wanted to be part of an elite outfit. They always felt right at home with the strict regime of the Avatars!

The ones who wanted to take a step back and spend more time with their families opted to join the Living Sentinels. Though they weren't as prestigious as the Avatars, the Sentinels weren't weak or complacent by any means.

Each of these organizations provided favorable employment terms to Larkinson clansmen. They not only received much more pay, but also a bit more consideration for promotions and other opportunities.

Though Ves disliked nepotism, he didn't really have a choice. The Larkinson clan members expected better treatment compared to retainers and ordinary employees. Since all of those organizations belonged to the Larkinson Clan, why shouldn't they serve its interests?

In addition, in the perspective of Ves, nepotism was not universally bad. The family members placed into important positions due to their bloodline rather than their competence might not do a good job, but at least their loyalty was not in question!

To someone who was tired of getting betrayed, Ves gladly sacrificed efficiency and productivity in order to secure his control over his enterprise. The Larkinson Clan was highly unlikely to betray him! Not only were they dependent on his ability as a mech designer, they had also formed a bond with the Larkinson Mandate!

Though Ves wasn't sure of what these spiritual connections actually did, he had a vague idea that it was already acting as a pseudo-spiritual network.

While the network did not facilitate peer-to-peer connections and two-way communication, it already served as a subliminal broadcast and feedback network.

Each Larkinson connected to the network fed their thoughts and emotions to the Golden Cat. This made the young ancestral spirit embody the collective will of the Larkinson Clan even more!

In return, the Golden Cat fed back her impression of what it meant to be a Larkinson to the clansmen who formed a bond with her. Each of the Larkinsons, including the members of the old family to a lesser degree, all became exposed to the influence of their ancestral spirit!

Someone people might consider this influencing cycle to be nefarious. Some people might accuse Ves for creating a means to brainwash the Larkinsons.

"That's not true at all!" Ves yelled at Lucky while he held his cat with his hands.

"Meow?"

"I'm not evil! I only have good intentions in mind!"

"Meow meow!"

"Just think about it! With the Larkinson Mandate, our clan will become more united in will and purpose! The chance of betrayal decreases as those who are thinking about acting against the interests of the clan will certainly suffer!"

"Meow meow meow!"

"Not only that, the Golden Cat will definitely warn me if a Larkinson is up to no good! With my control over the Larkinson Mandate, I can track down each and every traitor who thought they could get away and make an example out of them. Treachery will be a thing of the past in my clan!"

"MEEEEOW!"

A gem suddenly shot against his forehead!

"Ouch! Lucky! What the hell was that?! Did you just relieve yourself?!"

"Meeeeeeoow!"

Lucky took advantage of his owner's distraction and turned intangible before diving headfirst through the floor!

Ves nursed his forehead and wiped it with the sleeve of his business suit. He then bent down in order to pick up a purple gem that looked very familiar to him for some reason.

[Mother's Love]

The love of a mother towards her offspring resides within this royal gem. Increases the allure of a mech by 100 percent to females.

"..."

What the heck? After gorging on exotics for months and eating enough Breyer alloy to fabricate the toughest shuttle in his possession, all his cat managed to produce was a gem with a property that was just as useless as the one he received before?

Even though the Mother's Love was stronger than the Maiden's Affection, both of them were completely useless in battle!

"LUUUUCKKKKYYYYY!"

His cat was nowhere to be found, of course. Lucky knew better than to be around Ves at this time!

Ves grumbled a bit more before tossing the purple gem in his pouch of other gems. No matter how useless it seemed, each of them could still be used as a cheat by elevating a high-quality mech to the level of a masterwork.

In that regard, receiving one gem was better than receiving no gem!

"Why did Lucky develop this weak and pointless attribute anyway?" Ves frowned.

He thought the properties of Lucky's gems were determined by the nature of his diet sprinkled with a dose of random chance.

Perhaps that was the case for Lucky's earlier gems, but now Ves started to develop another suspicion.

"Could it be.. that the properties are determined by another variable?"

According to this theory in his mind, the quality of the gems was still related to the quality of the materials that Lucky ingested.

More potent exotics resulted in more powerful gems!

Ves was already familiar with this rule. This was the main reason why he never seriously stopped Lucky from eating a fortune's worth of exotics.

"There's a second rule maybe."

The properties of a gem might not be set by the distinctive attributes of the exotics eaten by Lucky. Instead, the deciding factor might be external stimuli!

For example, if Lucky had to sneak around all the time, he would probably create a gem that decreased a mech's energy signature or increased the effectiveness of active stealth systems.

If Lucky got kicked around by Ves all the time, he would probably produce gems that increased the damage resistance of a mech or amplified the strength of its armor.

If Lucky killed a lot of people with his claws, then he might develop some sort of gem that made bladed weapons sharper or increased the output of a laser rifle!

"Then.. if Lucky is getting pampered by Hexers every day, does that mean he'll keep producing gems like the Maiden's Affection and the Mother's Love?"

An awkward silence ensued.

"LUCKYYYYY! STOP HANGING OUT WITH WOMEN!"

Elsewhere at the Austen Estate, Lucky appeared in Gloriana's room. He leisurely passed by the guards of the Glory Battalion and booped his nose against Clixie.

"Miaow."

"Meow!"

"Miaow~"

"Lucky? Why are you here again?" Gloriana asked as she turned from a mirror projection.

A beauty bot was brushing her hair and applying makeup on her face.

"Meow~"

The mechanical cat floated in front of her. Gloriana couldn't resist and held Lucky as if she was holding a baby.

"You poor boy. Is Ves treating you wrong? I'll tell him to be nicer to you. I really don't understand why he bullies you sometimes. You're too cute!"

"Meow..."

Lucky squinted his eyes and started to purr as Gloriana scratched his head and stroked his back. His tail swished left and right in complete relaxation.

"Are you hungry?"

"Meow!"

Gloriana giggled and approached a table where she stashed some raw exotic minerals. She always kept a stash at hand to feed one of her favorite cats!

"Here you go!"

Lucky nibbled on the exotic while radiating pure bliss. Now this was how a cat ought to live!

Chapter 1854 Bad Timing

Over the course of designing the Larkinson mech, Ves pushed every possible distraction from his mind. He continued to invest his heart and soul into his work, trying

his best to make the modular mech platform and its four configurations viable against as many threats as possible!

Though difficult, Ves and Gloriana both rose to the challenge. They did not let a setback stop them for long. They frequently exchanged with each other and came up with ideas that neither of them were able to conceive on their own. Their synergy reached a higher level as they became more in tune with the design and their fellow partner.

The cooperation between the pair had already been built up over the course of previous projects. Ves felt as if all of those prior collaborations were practice runs for the current project.

Every possible issue had been explored and all of the problems resulting from lack of familiarity and mistaken assumptions had been dealt with! Both of them became intimately familiar with each other's strengths and weaknesses and automatically divided work to the mech designer who was best suited to tackle the specific issue.

In general, Gloriana did better with detail work and complicated technical puzzles. Her design philosophy lent herself well to spotting faults as they showed up. She also excelled in optimizing a rough implementation so that they did not cause any further issues down the line.

That did not mean that Ves was completely useless on this front. His breadth and wealth of theoretical and practical knowledge exceeded that of his girlfriend. The only downside of accumulating all of his System-granted knowledge was that his utilization couldn't keep up. For every problem, he could come up with dozens of solutions, but he wasn't able to make the most out of them in the more difficult cases.

Mech design was both an art and a science.

Ever since he embarked on his career, Ves always thought he would lean towards the latter. Science and engineering was the foundation of his craft. How could a mech designer ever design something complicated with up to millions of different parts all working in unison?

Yet it was only when Ves started working with Gloriana that he became aware of his true passion and strength.

Ves preferred to see himself as an artist.

He was an artist of mechs and spirits!

He was a sketcher of mechs and a weaver of life. A mech design served as the canvas of his creative energies, both figuratively and literally!

Technology was just a means to an end to Ves. He never developed the insane passion that other mech designers possessed with regards to technology.

Whereas most mech designers devoted their passion towards flight systems, light mechs, laser rifles, energy efficiency and so on, Ves chose a completely different direction!

There was a reason why the MTA threw his so-called 'metaphysical man-machine symbiosis' specialization in the Class IX design philosophy bucket.

His focus towards mechs was completely out of the conventional norms of his profession. Neither the MTA nor his colleagues were able to wrap their heads around his logic and his approach.

Mechs were alive? Nonsense! They were simply machines! Everyone who wasn't steeped with superstition could tell you that! There is not a single aspect about mechs that proved that they were alive!

Even though Ves increasingly proved the validity of his odd framework by developing his characteristic glows, most high-ranking mech designers simply passed it off as an unknown psionic phenomenon. Like a blind cat bumping into a mouse, they believed that Ves was just flailing around randomly and just managed to hit the jackpot by discovering a strange psionic interaction!

To make a mech designer truly believe that mechs had the potential to come alive was incredibly hard. Ves tried over and over to convince his subordinates that it was best to treat mechs as if they were alive and needed to be treated as such.

Few people actually became convinced. Even if they paid lip service to him because he was the owner of the LMC and the clan patriarch, in their hearts they were still bound to their limited view on reality.

Still, there were some people who got it. Joshua King was a fantastic example of a mech pilot who truly understood the essence of his mechs.

Yet people like Joshua were very rare, especially among the highly secularist Brighters and Larkinsons who made up the core of his enterprise.

To his frustration, the people who were actually prone to accepting his eccentric views on mechs were always those who he considered to be deficient in critical thinking.

This description was a common euphemism in the Bright Republic. It was a polite way of describing people enthralled by superstition.

In other words, religious nuts!

Gloriana believed in all of his claims without ever questioning whether he was spouting nonsense. She simply believed in him at such a whole-hearted degree that Ves felt kind of guilty for treating her as a gullible idiot.

The same went for the Ylvainans in the second design team. Ves noted that the work submitted by Oscar DiMartin, Renee Zelin, Erica Sprint and Pascal Curin all carried a sense of harmony that allowed them to mesh well with the ongoing design.

From a spiritual level, their sincere respect and worshipful attitude towards the incomplete mech design was much more beneficial than a neutral attitude!

This meant that the other assistant mech designers such as the Tovars left much bigger spiritual messes behind.

The difference was so stark and obvious that Ves felt somewhat conflicted over Gloriana and the Ylvainans.

He always seemed to do better with people of faith and belief. Whether he collaborated with them on a mech design or tried to get his mechs accepted by them, religious people always seemed to resonate with him more.

The irony of this situation was that he didn't consider his own views to be superstition at all! In his eyes, he was simply exploring an obscure and controversial field of science.

For some reason, the MTA limited its research on psionic power and kept it buried in their vaults. As for the CFA, their fetish for big guns, big ships and superior technology somehow led them to pretend that psionic power didn't exist!

"Is it really so difficult to believe in both science and something that sounds a little odd like the premise of my design philosophy?"

Having been raised as a Brighter, Ves simply solved the dilemma by keeping an open mind.

He did not keep his mind closed to unnatural phenomena like most secularists, but neither did he blindly take outlandish assumptions and claims for granted like the Ylvainans.

"Why can't other people take this approach towards the unknowable?" He puzzled.

He felt as if he was the only sane person in a galaxy filled with mad people. Everyone was biased except him as far as he was concerned!

The sad reality of his situation was that he would encounter much less hindrance if he continued to interact with people who were 'deficient in critical thinking'.

The Ylvainans basically treated all of his words like gospel, while Gloriana was so devoted to him that she didn't hesitate to alter her design philosophy to incorporate his views on spirituality!

What Gloriana had done was very exceptional and very rare. The main reason why Ves had so much difficulty in getting other mech designers to accept his viewpoints was because they already formed their own framework on mechs.

The more a mech designer developed their own framework, the more guarded they became against other influences.

Novices and Apprentices learned that it was often a bad idea to get too enamoured in someone else's design philosophy.

Journeyman and higher solidified their perspectives on mech design by forming their design seeds.

Once this occurred, it took superhuman effort to accept something drastic that conflicted with their existing views!

"What are you thinking about?" Gloriana asked as she glanced at Ves sitting besides her. "You've been staring at the same projection for over ten minutes."

Ves sighed and swiped the projection away. "I need a break."

"Oh. Is that all?"

"To be honest, no. I have a lot of thoughts on my mind. Some of them aren't very helpful to the project."

"Do you want to talk about it, Ves?"

He looked in her affectionate eyes. "Forget it. I'm just being melodramatic."

"Okay. Do you want to eat lunch or something?"

"Alright."

It was during their lunch break that they received an important message. Dr. Lupo Guernica called Ves directly.

"Good news, Mr. Larkinson!" He said with an enthused grin. "Dr. Ranya and I have finally completed our preparations for your implant surgery! We have thoroughly inspected and updated your bioimplant from top to bottom. We have modernized its bioprogramming and we have added several more security precautions as per your

request. We have also prepared the surgery procedure to account for your abnormal physical and brain structure. The chances of complications should be minimal!"

That sounded like very good news to Ves! If it was any other time, he would immediately drop all of his work and head to the treatment center as soon as possible!

As it was.. he was almost halfway through his current design project. With all of the momentum he accumulated, Ves couldn't afford to stop or pause midway!

The passion he built up and the mentality he shaped over the weeks since he started working on the modular mech platform were exceedingly precious. It was difficult to describe the concrete benefits of these intangible moods.

All Ves knew was that as long as he stopped providing them with fuel, they would eventually deflate and disappear!

Once lost, it was practically impossible to regain these moods!

Ves would have to scrap the entire project and start anew if he wanted to experience the unique build-up that led to the formation of those distinctive moods. That was a massive waste of time!

Of course, an ordinary mech designer wouldn't fuss about this issue all that much. To them, a mech design was simply a technical schematic. They didn't put much stock in the role of meaning and emotions of their work.

A conflicting expression appeared in his face. "Tell me your projections on how much time the surgery and recovery process will take. How much time will I be under, and how long will I be able to go back to work?"

"The surgery won't take long, sir. The actual procedure is not that time-consuming as long as complications don't arise. It is the recovery period that is a bit more complex. Cranial implants are different from other implants in that they need to integrate with the brain of the recipient. I believe you are well aware of how sensitive such a process can be. Inserting a foreign object in the brain is easy. Making that foreign object blend in with someone's mind is vastly more intricate."

"How long, Lupo?"

"It varies, sir. For baseline humans, it typically takes a week to a month. Outliers can take years to adjust, and if any incompatibility occurs, we may need to pull out your implant lest your entire head burns up. This is substantially more likely to occur with humans who have augmented and altered their genes and body extensively."

In other words, the chance that something could go wrong was vastly higher due to his freakish physical state! There was a good reason why it took several months for the pair

of exobiologists to prepare for the upcoming operation! Ordinary humans didn't require so much attention and effort!

Being delayed by a week was intolerable. Being delayed by more than a month was unacceptable!

"Right now is not a good time to perform the implantation procedure." He ordered.
"Please postpone it by a month or two. I need to finish my current design project first before I can afford to go under the knife."

It pained him to delay something he was looking forward to for years, but the timing was too inconvenient.

Dr. Lupo looked disappointed as well. "Very well. I shall inform Dr. Ranya of the change in plans. She won't be happy."

"Look on the bright side. I've granted you a lot more time to tweak and optimize the bioimplant even further. Try and see if you can add some advanced functionality to the Archimedes Rubal, particularly on the security front."

"We will try our best, though we have already done as much as we could."

The call eventually ended. Ves soon decided to put this issue off his mind and turn his attention back to his project. He needed to complete the Larkinson mech design as soon as possible if he wanted to boost his memory and upgrade his cognitive functions! Hearing Gloriana espouse some of the features of her Erestal-015 implant made him jealous!

Chapter 1855 The Lancer Problem

As the Larkinson mech project continued to draw closer to its final form, Ves and Gloriana currently turned their focus towards the lancer mech configuration.

Lancer mechs were basically spearman mechs specialized for assault.

Spears in mech combat played a curious role. Their longer reach and ease in penetrating armor turned them into excellent weapons against armored mechs.

Mechs rarely attacked with the haft of their spears. On land, it was practically impossible for a spearman mech to trip an enemy machine by sweeping its legs, for example! The sturdiness of its legs and the immense weight pressed upon them made them very resistant against outside applications of force.

Using the spear like a staff was also ineffective in most cases. Slamming the haft or the flat end of a spear against an enemy mech would only hammer its armor plating. The

stricken mech would always be able to absorb much of the shock and force of such attacks!

There was a reason why staff-wielding mechs weren't even a thing. Mace-wielding mechs were a bit more common, but even then their numbers paled in comparison to mechs wielding sharper weapons.

For this reason, most spearman mechs resorted to stabbing to defeat their opponents.

Mech pilots who excelled in spearmanship could even take their utilization of this seemingly simple weapon even further. Their control over their weapon became so good that they could precisely target all of the weak points of an opposing mech!

Lancer mechs could technically fight like a spearman mech, but they were a bit worse in brawls and dogfighting. This was because their structure and configuration was heavily adapted to charging attacks!

Charging attacks were just as simple and brutish as they sounded. They were employed in situations where the lancer mechs needed to run down fleeing ranged mechs or punch through a formation of sturdy and beefy mechs.

Though it took a lot of effort to build up a charge, once a lancer mech got going, a successful impact against a relatively slower target resulted in a huge amount of damage right off the bat!

Strong, overwhelming attacks that were strong enough to destroy or cripple entire mechs were fairly rare. The nature of mechs was that their defensive or evasive capabilities were always reasonably on par with the offensive capabilities of their opposition.

What this basically meant was that it always took at least several minutes for a mech to defeat another mech!

Only after overcoming another mech's defense would the clash finally conclude!

In many cases, the amount of time it took to take out a mech, especially a defensive one, was unacceptable. People started demanding solutions that could take out key mechs faster before they could inflict too much damage, and the mech industry obliged.

Marksman mechs armed with powerful, single-shot weapons were designed to assassinate key targets from afar.

Light skirmishers became more ubiquitous due to their ability to run circles around their larger and more sluggish counterparts. As long as they managed to reach the rear of an enemy mech, the softer armor was no match against their surgical strikes!

Compared to marksman mechs which sought to take out key targets at range and light skirmishers that were extremely fragile and relied entirely on superior mobility, lancer mechs solved the problem in a simpler fashion.

Not much skill was required to make effective use of a lancer mech. The mech pilot simply had to pick a target and fly or run his mech forward until it built up a scary amount of momentum.

After that, they simply had to maintain control of their course and make sure their lance hit the target upon the moment of impact!

Of course, this crucial moment took a lot of skill to pull off correctly. The mech pilot had to keep the lance and the trajectory of his mech on target while his enemy tried his best to evade or defend. This became increasingly harder as the distance narrowed. A single last-second jump to the side was often the reason for charges to miss their mark!

Even if the lancer mech managed to hit the mark, that was not the end of the story. A collision between one multi-ton war machine against another multi-ton war machine was incredibly violent! The sheer impact would definitely devastate the target for certain.

The problem was that the lancer mech itself also came under a huge amount of stress!

Just as Merrill Truman, now O'Brian, stated a few days ago, for every action there was an equal and opposite reaction!

The tighter a lancer mech gripped its weapon and the more the mech transferred its momentum to its opposition, the greater the reaction force exerted onto its frame!

The stresses were unimaginably huge. It was said that pretty much every standard lancer mech accumulated at least some stress and internal damage for every charge they performed. Their wear and tear was some of the worst out of all of the mech types.

Not even defensive knights endured so many forceful shocks on a frequent basis!

This led to the central problem that Ves and Gloriana faced with the lancer mech configuration.

Ves let out a sigh and scratched his head after studying the projection over and over.

"It isn't difficult to turn this configuration into a hard-hitting machine that can crack open a heavy space knight. The downside of that is that our mech will almost certainly suffer almost just as much!"

If they designed an specialized lancer mech, then they would have been able to resort to many of the solutions developed by the mech industry over several centuries.

The simplest way to mitigate the damage to the lancer mech was by designing its structure and internal architecture in a way that best dispersed the force throughout the entire frame.

Whereas the target got hit at one concentrated point, the lancer mech was able to mitigate the reaction force by spreading it around. This was how most interaction between physical weapons and mechs worked, but lancer mechs took this one step further by excelling at force dispersion.

A lancer mech could also resort to various technological solutions such as shock absorbers and components made to defend a mech against the impacts of their own attacks.

"They take up way too much space, though. It's not something you can casually tack onto a design. The internal architecture has to be designed to accommodate these systems from the ground up! It's too difficult to implement them in a modular mech platform!"

Not even Gloriana could conceive of a way to solve this dilemma. She scratched her head just as often as Ves when faced with this seemingly insurmountable issue!

"How do other modular mech platforms solve this problem?" Ves asked.

"They do the best they can stuff inside their lancer mech configurations, which isn't all that much." Gloriana answered. "Then, they put soft limits on the lancer mech and recommend the mech pilots of their products to hold back."

In effect, the mech pilots were told to treat their mechs like fragile porcelain. This was detrimental to the mentality of lancer mech pilots. Ves could almost foresee the deep dissatisfaction from the lancer mech specialists from the Larkinson Clan!

Though Ves never gained a Mastery in lancer mechs, he still knew enough about them that every lancer mech enthusiast was a fanatic about charges!

The faster, the better! The greater the impact, the better! Only by building up a formidable amount of momentum did these mech pilots feel alive!

Anything that caused them to dim their enthusiasm and constrain their charge would severely affect their mindset. This was something that Ves always wanted to avoid. Aside from glows, his mechs were also famous for their high degree of accommodation towards their mech pilots.

He did not wish to break this feature. It was against his nature to spoil the piloting experience of his customers!

"These half-baked solutions are essentially admissions of defeat." Ves told her. "Telling our mech pilots to charge less violently because their mechs are prone to breaking is the last thing I want to hear. We need a real solution!"

Gloriana frowned. "Well, I don't see a way we can achieve what we want. Strengthening the shell of our mech by cladding it with Breyer alloy only ensures the solid parts remain intact. It won't protect the internals from all of the shock without a huge amount of inertial dampeners and other adjustments."

All of those solutions required a lot of space, which wasn't possible with their current design. The point of a modular mech platform was that it shared as much as possible with all of its configurations.

Optimizing the base platform for charge attacks and shock absorption would take away its other strengths.

What Ves needed was a way to mitigate the reaction force without taking too much space.

What exacerbated this problem was the fact that the Larkinson mech was designed to straddle the line between third-class and second-class mechs. This meant that some aspects were on par with superior mechs while other aspects remained inferior.

To describe the situation in a simple way, it was as if Ves mounted an extremely strong suit of armor on a human being. He then instructed the armor-clad human to run straight at a wall!

Anyone would easily be able to imagine that the suit of armor survived the collision unscathed. It didn't even suffer a single dent!

It was different for the fragile human residing inside the suit! The individual's flesh and bone took full brunt of the reaction force. The consequences ranged from bruises, broken bones and damaged internal organs. The armored human could barely participate in a battle after enduring so much suffering!

After half an hour of exchanging fruitless ideas, Gloriana eventually drew back and noted something important.

"Doesn't Breyer alloy contain a trace of Amris? If I recall, this high-grade exotic is used to dampen the shock acting on the alloy!"

"That's true." Ves uttered in surprise. "Yet.. it's not an ideal solution. Amris is very rare and expensive. While it's possible for me to obtain a supply of it, it's extremely costly."

Obtaining Amris was not very difficult for Ves. He just had to take some Breyer alloy and break it down into its constituent materials. He could take away the separated Amris that was still salvageable while dumping the other exotics elsewhere.

The downside of this course of action was that Ves had to waste a lot of Breyer alloy if he wished to recoup a significant amount of Amris! He could have built another mech to extract enough Amris to fabricate another mech!

Ves recalled his study on the materials. "The full name of the formula of the materials we obtain is 235-C Breyer Alloy. This is the standard, low-cost version of a large family of alloy formulas. I think there are several other variations which are much stronger in the shock-absorbing aspect by increasing the proportion of Amris in the alloy formula."

"That sounds great! Why don't we adopt this solution?"

"It's not so simple, Gloriana. Increasing the proportion of Amris does make the resulting Breyer alloy more capable of absorbing strong forces, but that comes at the cost of the toughness of the material."

It was like turning something hard and rigid into something softer and bouncier. This was rather bad analogy, but it succinctly described the tradeoff.

"In other words, we can strengthen our lancer mech's offensive power in exchange for weakening its defensive capabilities." She summarized. "I think we should go for it. Didn't you complain earlier that our Larkinson mech lacks a punch? This is exactly what we need to threaten enemy second-class mechs!"

"It comes at a hefty cost. Amris doesn't fall down from trees!"

"Isn't this your passion project? Why are you letting cost get in the way of your design? Just go for it! This is the only viable solution to turn the lancer configuration into something we can be proud of. Who cares about weaker defense? Breyer alloy is still tough no matter how its formula has been tweaked!"

She had a point. Cost efficiency didn't matter when Ves only planned to build a few hundred lancer mech configurations. He didn't have to pay any money to obtain Breyer alloy and Amris either. He would just have to push back his other uses for those valuable materials!

Chapter 1856 Design Challenges

Just like several other problems Ves encountered, he eventually solved the Lancer problem by resorting to superior materials.

After deciding on this approach, Ves and Gloriana worked for days to plan this solution out. They explored countless proportions and settled for one that tripled the proportion of Amris in the alloy formula.

They then applied this modified Breyer alloy in various places in both the base platform and the internal and external structural braces that was specific to the lancer configuration.

The most drastic implementation of modified Breyer alloy lay in the arms of the mech. Meant to hold the lance, they incorporated a bunch of elements that beefed them up and secured an effective grip on the weapon.

The lance itself was not just a very sharp and long metal stick. Its shape became more complex as its design was tailored to maximize the grip and transfer of momentum.

All of these adjustments coincided in a lancer configuration that was able to match or exceed the offensive power of a traditional lancer mech!

The defense of the lancer configuration was weaker than that of the other melee configurations. Capacity that could have been utilized to bulk up the mech was instead allocated to modified Breyer alloy that mainly served to bleed away the recoil of a collision.

Fortunately, it worked. The rudimentary simulations that Ves performed all indicated that the lancer configuration could indeed shrug off the impact of a powerful collision!

The mech did not fare as well as the other configurations in terms of absorbing hits, though. It was still substantially better than the rifleman mech configuration on this front, but it fell far short of the swordsman mech and space knight configurations.

The amount of work needed to make the lancer configuration viable and effective was incredible. Ves had to revise the time table for the project several times to accommodate for the sheer design burden the lancer configuration presented.

Fortunately, the other configurations did not present them with so many insurmountable challenges.

The space knight configuration needed to gain at least some shock-absorbing protection, but not as much as the lancer mech. Designing it was a simple manner of finding every possible opportunity to pile more armor onto the base platform.

The swordsman mech configuration was a bit more delicate. While it still needed a decent amount of protection, it also had to retain a sufficient amount of mobility.

The most important aspect of a swordsman mech was its ability to apply force and its range motion. More advanced swordsman mechs featured an incredibly exaggerated

range of motion of all of its limbs. Even their torsos were able to rotate 180 or even 360 degrees in order to make the mech launch attacks at surprising angles!

This was not an option this time due to all of the compromises imposed by the modular mech platform approach. It wasn't that big of a deal anyway since only the most skilled and dedicated swordsman mech pilots made effective use of those advanced features.

What Ves aimed for was not a mech that won its duels and battles through skill, finesse and technique. Instead, he wanted to take full advantage of the high defense afforded by the use of Breyer alloy to turn the swordsman mech configuration into brawler!

Its mech pilots had to muster as much courage as possible and dive their mechs head-first into an enemy!

No matter how many hits they absorbed, the best way of winning battle was by trading blows!

Instead of trying to parry and block enemy attacks, the swordsman mech configuration should just take the hits and seek to launch as many blows as possible!

Certainly, his swordsman mech configuration to fight in a more conservative fashion if the mech pilot was skilled enough. Ves just wanted to lower the skill ceiling of this configuration in order to accommodate less focused or skilled mech pilots.

"That said, the skill floor of this configuration should still be fairly high."

Swordsman mechs were regarded as offensive powerhouses that had the potential to reverse any disadvantageous situations! As long as a skilled and talented mech pilot drew out the full potential of a sword-wielding mech, it was not impossible for it to defeat an entire mech company!

Ves wanted to preserve this capacity for his swordsman mech configuration, so he made sure to leave as much room as possible for skill expression without compromising its primary properties.

Compared to the melee configurations, the ranged configuration was an entirely separate beast.

Every mech designer had to switch their mindsets before they began working on the rifleman mech configuration.

To be honest, it wasn't very difficult to design a decent rifleman mech. Ves designed several ranged mechs over the course of his short career, and he exchanged a large amount of skills related to laser and ballistic rifles.

He possessed an extensive theoretical grasp towards both types of weapons. He managed to make use of this advantage to design the broad strokes of a rifleman mech that could wield either weapon when the situation called for a specific choice.

The problematic aspect about this configuration was that ballistic rifles and laser rifles imposed different demands on a mech.

It wasn't particularly problematic to throw a rifle with a self-contained magazine or battery to random humanoid mech.

As long as that mech possessed articulating hands that could grip the rifle, it could easily fire the weapon until it ran dry.

Yet why didn't mech forces deploy spare rifles to their melee mechs?

There were several reasons behind this pattern of behavior.

First, it wasn't worth it for third-class mechs. The capacity of the rifles wasn't much if the mech didn't allocate any capacity towards replenishing their energy or ammunition.

Second, melee mechs were built differently from ranged mechs. Just like how humans undergoing archery training developed different physiques from humans undergoing swordsmanship training, a melee mech would have to weaken its primary function in order to strengthen its secondary function.

Since specialization was the established doctrine in third-class mech design, most mech designers simply opted to leave it out entirely. At best, they would just pair their swordsman mechs and knight mechs with backup pistols that hardly burdened their frames.

Ranged mechs needed extensive accommodations to strengthen their functions to a competitive level. From designing their arms and upper structure to increase their accuracy and precision as much as possible, to devoting a substantial amount of capacity towards stuffing as much ammunition, energy cells or heatsinks as a mech designer could get away with, pretty much the entire frame had to be dedicated towards ranged combat!

This was also the reason why most ranged mechs didn't bother carrying anything more than a pitiful knife as a final resort. A typical melee mech could just overpower a ranged mech wielding a sword by leveraging their abundant amount of physical strength!

In any case, Ves didn't attempt to address this weakness this time. What he wanted to do instead wanted to do was to make his rifleman mech compatible with both physical and energy rifles.

This was very troublesome.

Ballistic rifleman mechs didn't consume a lot of energy. Most of it was spent on keeping the core systems active and to power the propulsion or locomotion system.

Instead, their burden was much more simple. The rounds they fired took up space. A lot of space.

Mechs were pretty tough. Aside from light mechs, most mechs featured at least some armor.

As a consequence, ranged mechs needed to pack a formidable punch in order to punch through their armor and inflict serious internal damage.

This was not easy!

In the early days of the Age of Mechs, rifles and cannons came in all shapes and sizes. Only after several generations of refinement did the mech industry manage to settle for a set of universal standards.

A ballistic rifle was quite big. They were often bigger than laser rifles, in fact. Much of this had to do with the caliber of the rounds they fired. They had to be big enough to pack enough of a punch or payload to crack the armor of a sturdy mech!

A ballistic rifleman mech had to carry enough rounds to last a while on the battlefield. Whether they stored their ammunition internally, externally or both, the sad reality was that ballistic rifleman mechs could never carry enough rounds to satisfy the needs of their mech pilots.

The mechs had to ration their ammunition and make their shots count in order to maximize their effectiveness on the battlefield!

"This problem is ever greater for my rifleman mech configuration." Ves sighed.

Due to revolving his rifleman mech configuration around a base platform that wasn't optimized for ranged combat, he had less capacity to work with than he wanted.

In order to expand the capacity of this configuration, he had to add a modular storage module that fit right under the flight system of the mech.

This only just extended the ammunition capacity of his rifleman mech to an adequate level. It wasn't as bad as Ves feared, but his Desolate Soldier and Deliverer mechs handily beat the Larkinson mech on this front!

"My new mech will have to resupply frequently in order to remain relevant in long-duration engagements."

As for arming his rifleman mech configuration with a laser weapon, Ves had to tackle different challenges.

Energy cells generally took up much less space than physical ammunition for the amount of damage they could offer.

The more energy cells, the longer it took for the laser rifleman mech to drain its energy reserves.

Yet that did not mean that laser rifleman mechs made ballistic rifleman mechs obsolete!

One of the most persistent limitations of mechs wielding energy weapons was the incredible amount of heat they generated. All of this heat did not escape from the mech quickly and continued to build up inside.

If a mech was not designed with heat management in mind, then it was highly possible to cook the delicate internal components of the mech until it became completely inoperable!

This happened often in overheated mechs. While these machines usually came with integrated safeguards that automatically shut down the energy weapons when the internal temperature of the mechs reached critical levels, mech technicians sometimes deactivated this safety function on the request of their mech pilots!

To prevent such a catastrophe and lengthen the deployment time of a mech, heat management became a priority. This was especially important in space where vacuum hampered the transfer of heat!

Neither conduction nor convection could cool down a mech in space. The only way it could dump its heat to the environment was through radiation, which was obviously a very slow and inefficient process!

Therefore, every spaceborn mech needed to be able to deal with the heat buildup internally. The solutions ranged from adding heatsinks to the mech to increasing its overall tolerance towards extreme heat.

More advanced solutions existed. His Amastendira for example came with a dimensional heatsink that dumped the heat into another dimension.

This was obviously not possible here. Ves relied primarily on detachable heatsinks to manage the heat buildup of his rifleman mech configuration.

They took up a lot of space. While effective in absorbing and containing heat, they substantially cut the energy reserves of his rifleman mech configuration!

"Still, at least it's still strong." He sighed in relief.

There was one variable that affected the strength of laser weapons in relation to ballistic weapons.

The new mech generation was characterized with lots of innovation with regards to laser weapons. They hit harder, generated less waste heat and occupied less space than before!

For this reason, a Larkinson mech armed with a laser weapon could inflict substantially more damage than a Larkinson mech armed with a ballistic rifle!

Of course, that did not make the latter irrelevant. The advantage of laser weapons could only be felt in drawn-out engagements. In short-duration battles, physical weapons were still better because their damage delivery was a lot more front-loaded!

All in all, as Ves and Gloriana refined the rifleman mech configuration, they ended up with something that was lesser to a specialized rifleman mech in every aspect aside from defense.

There was no way around it. Both of them had already anticipated this result, so it didn't damage their passion all that much. They still felt they could do something more with this important configuration.

In many mech forces, at least half of their rosters consisted of ranged mechs! This proportion was even higher for spaceborn units!

Therefore, increasing the strength of the rifleman mech configuration would have huge implications down the line. The more he could do at this stage, the more his efforts would pay off when he was confronted by a formidable enemy in space!

"How can we give this configuration some extra oomph?"

Chapter 1857 Growing Influences

The Larkinson Clan thrived.

Even though only a short time had passed since its founding, the clan already started off on a strong footing.

With all of its clan members coming from the former Larkinson Family, the cohesion of the clan was high and the degree of organization was fantastic.

In fact, the clan already exceeded the old family in terms of wealth, influence and military power!

The clan was growing every day. Due to the latest developments of the Sand War, a continuous flow of family members from the Bright Republic trickled into the Ylvaine

Protectorate. They proceeded all the way to the Kesseling System in order to link up with the clan.

Some of these family members remained outsiders to the clan. They still believed in the old family and did not wish to get involved in the adventures of their bolder and more ambitious relatives.

Others became attracted to the benefits and dynamism of the clan. Compared to the mood at the old family, the latest offshoot of the Larkinsons was much more proactive!

The member rolls of the Larkinson Clan continued to rise, especially when a number of Larkinsons started arriving that weren't formally a part of the family!

One of the more clever recruitment policies of the clan was that it unflinchingly opened the door to exiles and non-members.

As long as they had a reasonable relation to the Larkinson bloodline, they were allowed to become a full clansman without any further questions!

Each generation, many Larkinsons chose to leave the ranks of the old family for one reason or another. Raella Larkinson was a typical example. Though they gave up their affiliation to the family, thereby becoming ineligible for its protection, they no longer had to uphold its reputation.

These exiles numbered surprisingly a lot. This was because they not only consisted of members who left the family, but also their offspring and descendants!

Most of them weren't mech pilots, but their blood and genes still possessed the mark of the Larkinson line.

The former Larkinson Family always pursued several policies to limit their numbers and keep their size at a certain range. This not only improved their cohesion due to kicking out all of the dissidents, it also prevented their finances and training resources from becoming too strained.

The clan did not follow the same path. Instead, the Larkinson Assembly and the Executive Council both agreed to pursue growth through several means. Snapping up these exiles and descendants of exiles was an easy way to expand their ranks!

Right now, a couple of hundred Larkinsons was not enough to form a strong and sustainable clan! It needed to accumulate at least a thousand members to achieve sustainability.

This was especially important because of the many risks the Larkinsons were about to undertake. This did not just encompass the mech pilots of the clan, but also the other military specialists who used to serve in the Mech Corps!

As the Avatars of Myth and the Living Sentinels sought to expand their numbers, the inclusion of the Larkinsons were vital. They not only possessed a military background, but were also loyal and more reliable. Each additional Larkinson in the ranks ensured that the units remained committed to Ves and the Larkinson Clan!

Perhaps more vital to the development of the Avatars and Sentinels was the recruitment of command officers, logistical officers, staff officers and many kinds of specialists.

Back when the Avatars only numbered a couple of mech companies, it was fine for the troop to be run by Melkor and a handful of staff.

This was obviously inefficient now that the Avatars sought to expand their ranks to 500 mechs.

With the rapid pace of recruitment, managing the units became increasingly more burdensome. The administrative overhead grew ahead of the rate of expansion as more and more complicated problems occurred.

Commander Melkor had to form a general staff and reorganize the hierarchy of the Avatars to reflect all of the departments and layers of command.

The Living Sentinels already had a robust hierarchy in place due to their larger numbers. Commander Magdalena already planned ahead so her mech force didn't have to make too many changes to process the huge influx of recruits.

Though all of these moves drained the coffers of Ves, the LMC and the clan, no one bothered with the expenditures. The LMC, though not as prominent as before, still sold lots of mechs in both the Protectorate and dozens of other foreign markets!

With this generous and fairly stable cash flow, there was no worry that they would run out of money anytime soon.

With the Komodo Star Sector in turmoil, sitting on an increasing mountain of depreciating currency was incredibly useless.

Only when their money was being spent would they be able to strengthen themselves! Converting numbers in bank accounts to physical mechs and starships was the best course of action to increase their chance of survival!

At the base leased to by the Avatars of Myth, a private meeting took place. Melkor, Jannzi and Tusa both sat in the Avatar Commander's office by the windows.

Each of them possessed an overarching view of the base grounds, where various mechs, vehicles and people moved around.

The bustling sight had become even more vigorous in the last couple of weeks. The new recruits in the form of Larkinsons, Brighters and most notably Ylvainains enthusiastically took part in boot camps meant to bring them up to speed in the Avatar way of life.

"The Avatars have changed." Melkor sighed as he adjusted the visor on his face. "We spent years as a small unit. I still remember the days when we consisted of just a single mech company. It's different now. I can no longer remember every name and face. I have officers and subordinates to do that for me. Maybe this is what it feels like to be Ves. It's no wonder that he's becoming increasingly more detached from everyone."

Jannzi tilted her head at her cousin. "People change. Organizations change. This is a good thing. It means that our efforts are paying off. As long as we remain persistent and work towards our goals, we won't go astray."

"If you can't handle your leadership position, then you should make way for a better Larkinson." Tusa added bluntly as he crossed his arms.

Of the two expert candidates, Tusa was a lot less polite and patient!

Melkor didn't take offense at Tusa's rudeness.

As the Avatar Commander who had led the mech force from the moment of its founding, he deserved to be treated with respect. This was something that his growing inner circle of officers increasingly emphasized in order to strengthen the increasingly-more formal hierarchy of the Avatars!

Yet Melkor did not even think about throwing his weight around when he was in the presence of two future expert pilots!

Even though expert pilots didn't always become officers, they were never treated as grunts! Expert candidates and above were always regarded as the champions of their respective units.

They weren't treated like royalty without reason!

The benefits they brought were numerous and immeasurable.

Their presence served as a huge morale booster to the rank-and-file.

They challenged the most powerful enemies to prevent their ordinary mech pilots from getting butchered.

Their inhuman skill and judgement turned them into excellent training instructors.

Getting tutored by a mech pilot who broke through the extraordinary threshold was the best way to improve!

All in all, Melkor thanked his lucky stars that Ves managed to poach both Jannzi and Tusa from the Bright Republic's Mech Corps. Securing their support was immensely vital to his future prospects. If either expert candidate spoke against him, then his position became untenable!

Of the two, Melkor knew that he couldn't afford to lose Jannzi's trust and confidence. Ves possessed a prior bond with her, and even spent precious time and resources to upgrade her Shield of Samar!

That said, Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson also had to be appeased. Though he wasn't one for politics, his grandfather was Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson, who many clansmen considered to be the second or third-most influential member of the clan!

This meeting was as much about securing their support as it was about addressing an increasingly more pressing problem.

"Alright, let me get to the point." The Avatar Commander spoke as he turned his head away from the windows. "The reason why I brought up the changes is because the Avatars might be developing in an unwanted direction due the recruitment of so many newcomers. There are too few Larkinsons and Brighters among the new recruits."

"What does that have to do with us? Isn't this your problem?" Tusa dismissively asked.

"The Avatars exist to strengthen Ves, and by extension the Larkinson Clan. We are all members of the clan now. The development of the Avatars not only affects us directly, but also the clan that we are apart of! Do you wish your children or grandchildren to join a mech troop that is steeped with the Ylvainan Faith?"

Jannzi seemed to understand what Melkor was getting at. "You're worried about foreign influences. More specifically, you're concerned about the encroachment of Ylvainan beliefs."

"The new Ylvainans are already pushing their faith onto the other Avatars. I've ordered them to keep their beliefs to themselves, but the promulgation of their faith will proceed regardless."

"What do you want to do, then?"

"Neither Ves nor I want to see the Ylvainan Faith prosper in our ranks." Melkor stated. "The Larkinson Clan may have parted ways with the Bright Republic, but we are still rooted in its culture."

"That sounds great, but you can't regulate people's beliefs." Tusa scoffed. "Let the Avatars believe in what they want. As long as it doesn't stop them from fighting, there's no reason for me to care!"

Melkor frowned. The expert candidates of the clan were more detached than he liked!

"Please don't misunderstand. Any changes to the Avatars will inevitably influence our clan. Almost every Larkinson looks up to us! We are rightfully setting an example and serving as an object of admiration to the younger generation of our clan. What will they think when we become increasingly more devoted to the Ylvainan Faith?"

That finally caused Jannzi and Tusa to look concerned.

"What do you want?"

"I'd like you to take a more proactive attitude towards the rest of the Avatars. Look at Venerable Brutus Wodin. He's been visiting us every day to instruct and tutor our mech pilots. All of them have seen significant improvements in performance, which I'm grateful for. The problem is that he is also rehabilitating the image of Hexers!"

"So you want us to act like politicians?"

"Ah, please don't misunderstand, Tusa. I'm not asking you to demean yourself. I am just asking you to contribute some of your wisdom to the other Avatars like Brutus is doing. Not only will you be able to develop an accord with the men and women you will be fighting alongside, you'll also ensure that our Larkinson Clan will remain the top influence in the Avatars."

Though Jannzi looked amenable to the request, Tusa remained disinterested. His nature was very different from his fellow expert candidate.

Melkor decided to introduce his next plan.

"To facilitate your influence in the Avatars, I would like to facilitate the formation of elite squads. My intention is that they will be led and shaped by you. As your direct subordinates, they will also accompany you in battle as your attendants and trusted comrades! What do you think?"

The idea finally intrigued Tusa. "That sounds interesting. I'm not that big of a fan in commanding troops, though."

"You can assign a lieutenant or deputy to handle all of the tedious administrative and command responsibilities. You can focus on your own development while at the same time training a small number of highly-skilled Avatars into useful assistants, on and off the battlefield. Does that sound attractive to you? You can raise them in any way you like. For example, Jannzi could form a squad called the Shieldmaidens, while you could

lead a unit called the Speed Demons. Both can facilitate your actions on the battlefield and take care of matters that don't require your attention."

Both Jannzi and Tusa looked thoughtful. What would it be like to stride into battle with a squad of attendants following in their wake?

Chapter 1858 The Missing Link

Back at the design labs, the Larkinson mech took shape. The rifleman mech, space knight, lancer mech and swordsman mech configurations all became increasingly more real as Ves, Gloriana and their design teams continually added to the overall design.

Yet as the design project was about to reach an advanced stage where no more major additions took place, Ves hesitated.

When he took a step back and evaluated their current progress, he felt there was something missing from the mech design.

This was a feeling borne from his instinct as a mech designer. He didn't quite know the reason why he felt his mech design was lacking, but he trusted in it enough to pause and reflect on his work.

"What's missing?" He asked.

Gloriana, who was seated at his side, leaned into his arm and viewed the projections of the design schematics with interest.

"All four configurations are fairly good if I may say so. None of the individual configurations perform as well as their specialized counterparts, but the versatility we've gained more than makes up for that. From a logistical perspective, it is considerably easier to meet the upkeep of a single modular mech platform than four separate designs."

This was because the latter often entailed vastly different parts, materials, systems, expertise and quirks. Unless the mech designs all came from the same product group and mech designer, it was highly unlikely for all of these elements to be interchangeable!

Ves knew how troublesome it was to keep an eclectic mech roster supplied with the appropriate parts and materials. Mech technicians also had to go through a lot of effort to develop a passing familiarity of each new mech model introduced in the ranks.

The advantages provided by the Larkinson mech significantly eased this burden. This was very important as Ves and the Larkinson Clan weren't as robust as the Mech Corps in terms of supporting large mech forces!

Currently, the Avatars and Sentinels were both lean in terms of headcount and complexity. While they were expanding every day, it was a mistake to think that they would be able to match a formal mech military in many aspects.

From this angle, the Larkinson mech wonderfully fit their purposes. Its mix of versatility, high defensive prowess and economies of scale were all boons in the times to come.

Yet Ves still felt dissatisfied for some reason.

He frowned and continued to scrutinize each aspect of his incomplete design. From a technical standpoint, they managed to solve many of the seemingly-intractable technical problems that emerged. Now that the direction of the design was almost fixed, he expected the remainder of the design work to be smooth sailing from this point onwards.

Yet why did he still feel ill at ease?

"The design works." He murmured. "There is nothing wrong with the implementation of the design. That means the problem is more fundamental. There is an issue with the design choices I've made."

As the silence stretched on for minutes, Gloriana eventually poked his side with her slender, manicured finger.

"You know, we haven't dressed up the exterior of our mechs yet. Maybe it will help if we add our signature looks to the design."

Ves shrugged. "We might as well."

Adding their signature look was very simple.

Ves merely added the crystal third eye on the forehead of the modular mech platform from his previous design. He tweaked its size and placement to make sure it fit with the aesthetic of the head of the mech.

Meanwhile, Gloriana meticulously drew out a crystal hexagon around the third eye from scratch. Its placement on the forehead enhanced the mysterious aspect of both the third eye and the rest of the mech.

Their addition instantly changed the overall impression of the mech. This was the goal that Ves had been aiming for when he initially conceived of the third eye. Its odd appearance and its ability to adjust its luminosity in accordance with the bond between the mech pilot and the design spirit had perplexed countless mech pilots and mech designers.

Even Ves sometimes had the illusion that he was creating something more than just a new mech design.

The impressions he gained and the mood that swept over his mind put in him into a different mentality, one that was much more familiar when the project was in its conception stage.

He suddenly realized he spent too much time on solving the technical challenges of his project. This was necessary as designing a modular mech platform in a short amount of time was anything but easy. A mech design never arose if mech designers didn't put in the hard work to implement their ideas in a fashion that worked.

However, was this what a mech design was all about? Where was the creative aspect? Where was the design aspect? Technology was not the only part about mech designs that mattered!

"I get it now!" He uttered in realization. "I've been so involved in solving technical problems that I can't see the forest from the trees."

"What do you mean by that?"

He waved his hand in front of the schematics. "When I compare my mech to my latest works, this mech doesn't excite me as much. The Desolate Soldier and the Deliverer designs were frankly much more impactful than this mech! While our Larkinson mech already possessed numerous notable advantages, they're largely mundane in nature. In essence, any mech designer who is as good as us can design something similar!"

Gloriana angrily pinched his skin, only to fail because it was too resistant against her feeble fingers!

"I object to that description! Our design is plenty unique already! Not only did you impart it with its own divine nature, it will also gain the support of the Golden Cat! As for me, I made sure that there is nothing to complain about the quality of the design! Don't think that my role can be replaced by some kind of automated design program!"

While she had a point, Ves still believed that there was something lacking about their contributions. Her words finally allowed him to identify what he thought was wrong!

"Our mech is not distinctive enough." He told her. "By that, I mean that it is a bit too generic compared to what we can do. It needs an additional ingredient. Something which can truly set our mech apart from the other mech designs in my library!"

"Are you talking about the lack of offense in our rifleman mech configuration?"

"Not that. I mean that our mech should be able to do more than we have already added to the list of capabilities. Remember the special features I added to the Deliverer design?"

"I do." She said. "If I recall, you only managed to add them to the Deliverer with the support of its proto-god. We're not working with the Great Prophet now, though. Instead, we're designing this mech to fit the Golden Cat!"

"That's true, but only partially. We designed this mech to fit the Avatars, Sentinels and most importantly the Larkinsons. The Golden Cat has mainly played the role of a mascot up to now. Her importance to the mech is still rather marginal. Her glow, though useful in reinforcing the identity of our mech as a Larkinson Clan asset, is not particularly potent in battle. At the very least, compared to the implementation of my specialization on the Deliverer, it still falls short!"

The Larkinson mech and its four configurations were already good. Yet a good mech design was not what Ves was going for. He wanted to design a great mech, something which had the potential to produce a masterwork mech like the Devil Tiger design!

In order to meet this exceedingly high standard, Ves needed to pour his heart and soul into the design. Not only that, he needed to innovate and add something truly ingenious to the design!

So far, many of the additions to the mechs were derived from their existing works. All four configurations bore the traces of their previous works.

For example, Ves heavily borrowed from the Crystal Lord, Desolate Soldier and Deliverer designs to shape the rifleman mech configuration.

There was nothing wrong with this. There was no need to reinvent the wheel when time was of the essence.

Yet all of his copying and recycling also indicated that much of the Larkinson mech did not stand out enough. Its unique identity was too weak and reliant on familiar aspects that did not necessarily represent innovation.

Just designing a modular mech platform in itself was not anything innovative. Just because it was difficult to put into practice didn't mean that Ves and Gloriana would win a prize if they succeeded.

The outcome still mattered. Ves still needed to pay attention to the value proposition of his mech despite the fact that he never intended to bring it to market. The mech had to excel in something that no other product on the market could match.

Otherwise, he might as well buy some ready-made mechs from the markets or develop a variant of an existing mech!

"If the Golden Cat was like Prophet Ylvaine, what would her special ability be?" Gloriana suddenly asked. "What is she good at? Each proto-god has a domain, I think. All we have to do is figure that out and work from there."

"That's the missing link! The Golden Cat might be young and immature, but she is the ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan. She is inseparable from mechs due to her bonds and the conditions of her birth. She should definitely be able to empower a mech beyond her glow!"

The question was what powers she possessed and what 'domain' she was inclined towards.

The pair of mech designers both drew their attention away from the schematics and turned to a work table.

Their cats were currently lounging on the table while sitting on top of the Larkinson Mandate. The Golden Cat playfully popped her head in and out of the heavy tome. Each time her cute and pointy ears emerged, Lucky attempted to make a move and give the juvenile spiritual product another lick!

"Meow."

Nyaaaaa.

"Miaow."

Ves had the mistaken impression as if he was seeing a mom, dad and their child!

"Sorry, but I need my book."

He snapped his fingers, causing the antigrav bracers he mounted on the heavy book to activate and propel in his direction.

Lucky and Clixie both panicked as their perch suddenly started moving. They jumped back onto the table and yowled at Ves in complaint!

Once the book hovered in front of his body, Ves reverently took hold of it and studied the Golden Cat peering curiously towards her creator.

Nyaaaa?

Ves couldn't help but melt and smile. "You're so adorable."

Nyaaa.

He began to flip through the pages of the Larkinson Mandate and interact with the Golden Cat. Over the past month, she improved considerably, both in spirituality and in other ways.

Yet to Ves, she still remained in a state between a kitten and an adult cat. The Golden Cat had a lot more to go before she lived up to her identity as the spiritual guardian and the ancestral spirit of the Larkinson clan.

Even so, the Golden Cat should still possess at least one intrinsic strength of ability. The question was what she was capable of and how Ves could leverage her advantages in his mech designs.

"What is your domain, Golden Cat?"

Nyaaa?

Not every spiritual entity appeared to have a special ability or talent, but the most notable ones always did. Whether human, alien or artificial, all of them were similar in this regard!

Prophet Ylvaine appeared to be able to see the future.

Qilanxo possessed incredible defensive prowess.

The Solemn Guardian was the embodiment of duty.

Zeigra was a ferocious Crown Cat in life and in death.

Compared to all of these strong spiritual entities, what did the Golden Cat excel at? What was the Larkinson Clan good at? Ves looked down and sensed the spiritual product in question looking up at him with trusting eyes.

Nyaaaa~

Chapter 1859 Predator Instincts

Progress on the Larkinson mech stalled as Ves sought to explore the Golden Cat's properties and strengths.

He wasted half a day in examining and interacting with his latest spiritual product.

Compared to her predecessors, the Golden Cat was a lot more vigorous and lively. Vescas, the Solemn Guardian and Bravo had all been created with a very narrow purpose in mind.

Not so for the Golden Cat. Not only did Ves invest more effort and resources in her creation, he also broadened her scope and purpose to live up to her role as the totem spirit of the Larkinson Clan.

All of this sounded great, but what kind of benefits did she actually provide? How could Ves leverage her distinctive properties to empower the Larkinson mech and other future mech designs?

As Ves continued to examine the Golden Cat without much result, he began to scratch his head.

Though he disliked Gloriana's habit of distorting his specialty in the lens of the hexism belief system, he had to admit that sometimes her analogy became handy.

If the Golden Cat was a god in the making, then what godly powers did she possess? What was she trying to develop and what would she excel at in the future?

When Ves attempted to ask the Golden Cat these questions, she merely replied with a senseless 'nyaaaaa' before pawing at Ves to scratch her head!

Though she was adorably cute, Ves still had a mech to design! He couldn't afford to divert too much time on this exploration!

Ves sighed and closed the book. "Maybe I should change my approach. Further examination won't bear any fruit."

The Golden Cat didn't even know what she was good at. How could she possibly answer his questions?

Unlike his prior spiritual products, Ves merged many properties and influences in her spiritual makeup. The result was an amalgamation of values, thought, emotions and ideals that made up for a very complex entity.

This complexity was a boon in some ways as the Golden Cat could adapt to many different circumstances.

However, there was a distinct lack of focus. Aside from her affection and sentiment towards the Larkinson Clan, there wasn't anything about her that stood out in the way his more narrowly-defined design spirits conveyed.

The Solemn Guardian was all about the ideal of duty.

Bravo revolved around both false bravado and immaturity.

Even though the former was stronger and far more prominent than the latter, that did not mean that Bravo was weak!

His long-term bond with the Adonis Colossus and Vincent Ricklin seemed to make him take on their traits. Each time Ves periodically inspected his design spirits, Bravo reminded him more and more of the codpiece enthusiast!

Ves was actually quite interested to see this experiment develop. What was the long-term influence of a bond between a design spirit and its sole mech pilot? How much would the design spirit influence the mech pilot and vice versa?

Was there a possibility that they would eventually grow to become identical to each other? Ves had no idea what was possible, but it sounded crazy enough for him to look forward to the result of this experiment!

In any case, the Golden Cat was different from Bravo in that she was bound to the entire Larkinson lineage rather than a single individual.

While she favored specific individuals such as Ves, no one would ever be able to gain sole 'ownership' of her. Her core identity did not allow her to neglect the clan in order to devote herself to a single clansman! Ves had hardwired her to prioritize the needs of the collective over the individual!

"Maybe I'm going at this the wrong way."

The Golden Cat couldn't answer his questions and his examinations yielded no results due to her complex spiritual makeup.

In order to figure out her domain, Ves had to take a different approach, and he knew just the way to tease out her strengths!

"Lucky! Come over here!"

"Meow?"

Lucky jumped from the work table and floated over to Ves. His tail swished curiously as he looked at both Ves and the Golden Cat residing in the book.

"The Golden Cat could use some.. exercise. Why don't you play with her and teach her the ways of a cat? Don't hold back. Push her to her limits."

"Meow?"

Did Ves think that Lucky was the same as him? Unlike his owner, the gem cat did not have a habit of bullying cats!

"Just do it, Lucky! The Golden Cat needs to learn how to defend herself. You don't want her to grow up as a weak and defenseless kitty, do you? You're a tomcat. Now go do what dads like you are supposed to teach to your litter!"

Even though male cats didn't make for great fathers, that was only the case for the lowest breeds.

The smarter, sentient and genetically-modified breeds of cats were always designed to take parenthood seriously. Though Lucky was a gem cat, he was not an uncaring dad considering how much attention he paid to the Golden Cat!

Though the Golden Cat wasn't technically his offspring, it made little difference to Lucky and Clixie!

Once Ves managed to convince Lucky to 'teach' the Golden Cat how to protect herself, his cat went about his job with gusto!

"Meow!"

Nyaa? Nyaaaa!

Lucky pounced on the Larkinson Mandate and used his intangibility to his advantage! Not only was the mechanical cat able to grip the Golden Cat's intangible body, he also ignored any physical obstacles in the process!

This basically meant that the Golden Cat had nowhere to hide!

Nyaaaa! Nyaaaa!

Spiritual cries of distress escaped from the book as Lucky started to roughhouse with the Golden Cat!

Ves quietly observed Lucky teasing the ancestral spirit. Though they were two completely different entities, Lucky still possessed the upper hand due to various reasons.

He found it interesting that Lucky's intangibility powers allowed him to interact 'physically' with other spiritual entities.

This was something that Ves hadn't fully explored. This basically meant that Lucky could not only defend himself against physical threats, but also spiritual ones!

"If that is so, why didn't he defend me against Cassandra?" He whispered.

His cat was very unreliable. Ves would be better off if he learned how to defend his mind on his own. He never gave up on his intention to develop spiritual mechs. He was only forced to postpone it because he didn't install his bioimplant yet and he still had his current design project to take care of. Once he was done, he would definitely explore this avenue further!

Nyaa! Nyaaaaa!"

"Meow meow!"

"Miaow?"

For now, his focus lay on the Golden Cat, who became increasingly more panicked at her inability to fend off the seasoned killer!

Clixie looked concerned, but not too much. She knew what Lucky was doing and tentatively approved.

Every cat had to learn how to fight and how to hunt! No matter how many generations humans spent to tame their species, cats were still predators at heart!

The Golden Cat spent far too much time in the comfort of her book to learn how to fight. Right now, she was forced to get a crash course in how to defend herself and how cats fought as Lucky showed little mercy!

Though Lucky's attacks seemed cruel, Ves knew it was all a facade. A sense of playfulness emanated from him and he never showed off his claws.

Regardless, he was so much stronger than the Golden Cat that the pressure he exerted was too much for the innocent ancestral spirit!

Nyaaa!

A shift in mentality eventually took place. The Golden Cat grew angry at the indignity of being subjected to such treatment. She was a noble creature! As the spirit who watched over a clan of valiant warriors and honorable mech pilots, how could she be worthy of her august position if she couldn't even fight?

The Golden Cat started to counter-attack. Though her diminutive size, her lack of strength and her gap in experience posed no threat to Lucky, her effort was admirable!

She was a fast learner. Through some means unknown to Ves, he somehow managed to impart her with the full range of instincts and traits of a cat. Now that she was being pushed for the first time, she slowly discovered her feral roots!

Though that was still not enough to defeat Lucky, he gave her some space and granted her several openings to launch her attacks!

The two cats tumbled off the work surfaces and began to float around midair as they asserted their superiority over each other!

Lucky, though maintaining the upper hand, began to feel increasingly more pressured. The Golden Cat was becoming more proficient in beating him back!

Though Ves was rather pleased that Lucky managed to draw out the fighting spirit of the Golden Cat, he failed to notice anything different.

"You're going too easy on her, Lucky. Fight harder! Push her to her limits! She can take it! She can do more!"

His cat seemed to agree with his instruction as the intensity of his attacks increased. He became even more shameless at leveraging his superior size and strength and he also started to bite the Golden Cat's fur here and there!

The sudden barrage of attacks caused the poor victim to feel much more frightened! An instinctual panic started to build up as the Golden Cat became more and more desperate to dislodge her attacker!

Eventually, something drastic happened! The Golden Cat seemed to glow even brighter and stronger than ever before!

Ves tuned his spiritual senses even higher as he observed her panic reaction.

As her spiritual intensity increased, the Golden Cat began to draw additional strength from somewhere!

To Ves' utter surprise, he felt a minute amount of his spiritual energy being drawn from his connection with the ancestral spirit!

He wasn't the only one to donate a portion of the strength! Others who formed a bond with the Golden Cat experienced the same!

Ves looked at Clixie and Gloriana to observe a tiny hint of their spiritual strength separating seamlessly from their spiritual presences and zipping all the way towards the Golden Cat!

What Ves found curious was that he and Gloriana contributed much more spiritual energy than Clixie. This caused him to feel relieved as this showed that the Golden Cat wasn't overdrawing from the entities connected to her in spirit.

The strength she gathered did not just come from the couple of people and cats in the design lab. Tiny motes of spirituality emerged from other directions as more and more Larkinsons paused as a strange sensation came over their minds.

"What was that?"

"Did you feel that?"

"I need more coffee."

Instead of drawing hundreds of motes, thousands of them rapidly converged to the increasingly more energetic spiritual cat!

The Golden Cat did not just draw strength from the members of the Larkinson Clan, but also every other Larkinson such as those who were still a part of the old family!

Ves even noticed two particularly strong notes of spirituality that he unmistakably identified as belonging to Venerable Ark Larkinson and Venerable Ghanso Larkinson!

With the infusion of this power, the Golden Cat seemed to reach a critical stage!

She radiated so much power right now that Lucky became scared. He floated back and attempted to escape, but before he could do so, the energized cat made her move!

NYAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

A golden beam of concentrated spiritual energy escaped from her throat, striking Lucky with significant spiritual force!

"MEOW!"

Lucky practically acted as if he had been punched in the gut! All of his formidable physical defenses didn't avail him much as he was much less proficient in defending himself against spiritual attacks!

The gem cat collapsed on the floor. Ves paid no attention to his abused pet and instead focused all of his attention on the ancestral spirit.

The Golden Cat deflated now that she had unleashed her ultimate attack.

"Nyaaa..."

The Golden Cat tiredly dove back into the Larkinson Mandate and turned dormant.

All the while, Ves continued to recall the sensation he felt from her as she mustered up all of her strength.

"I see now.." He muttered in fascination. "So this is her domain! This is the true strength of our Larkinson Clan!"

Chapter 1860 The Larkinson Hear

Ves initially conceived of the idea of the Golden Cat through learning about Lady Curver's neural network.

To pool the minds of the mech pilots together in order to achieve greater coordination was a difficult but rewarding way to increase the battle effectiveness of a unit.

Yet humans were individuals before they were part of a collective.

Even with all of the technology available to humanity in modern times, it was too difficult and dangerous to meld the minds of mech pilots together!

Neural interface technology existed long before the Age of Mechs. Due to the risks of experimenting with this technology, successful innovation rarely took place.

Too many people when an experiment went wrong!

The MTA restricted research and adaptation of neural interfaces for a very good reason. Too many mech designers wouldn't be able to resist the temptation of messing with these sensitive components, thereby leading to a lot of unnecessary injuries and death!

This was bad not only for the offending mech designer in question, but other mech designers as well. The reputation of the mech industry and by extension the MTA would all take a very severe hit if everyone believed that piloting a mech was considered dangerous!

Right now, Ves felt as if he was messing around with something similarly dangerous.

Though spirituality was a fundamentally different field, it shared much in common with neural interface technology.

For one, any manipulation of spirituality involving human being put their lives at risk.

Seeing the Golden Cat drawing thousands of minute motes of spirituality, only to compress them all and use it as some sort of overwhelming spiritual beam attack was astonishing!

Ves had never programmed this function to the Golden Cat. The ancestral spirit seemed to perform it completely by instinct, which was strange as Ves didn't even know where it came from! It seemed the creation of life was a lot deeper and more obtuse than he initially thought!

As Lucky pitifully whined on the floor after getting hit by a strong spiritual attack, Ves continued to stare at the Larkinson Mandate as if it was the den of a sleeping dragon.

The Golden Cat was a lot more ferocious than he thought!

Though the spiritual attack she unleashed was not all that strong, its potential was pretty high. Perhaps the next time she unleashed the same attack, she might be able to kill Lucky's spirit entirely!

Naturally, she would never do so. At most, she would hold back, because Lucky was family!

"Family, huh.." He muttered.

The spiritual attack the Golden Cat unleashed at the end was not just an outburst of power. It was also an outburst of conviction. The ancestral spirit drew strength from the essence of her existing, deriving power from its meaning!

This meaning was fairly obvious now that he thought about it. Though it turned out to be somewhat boring, Ves nonetheless appreciated the Golden Cat's domain because it truly represented the heart of the Larkinson Clan!

He picked up the heavy book with appreciation and brushed his hand over the surface of the cover. The metal detail and the thick medallion depicting the head of the Golden Cat all dressed up its value.

To be frank, Ves felt as if he hadn't done enough. The Larkinson Mandate and the Golden Cat were much more valuable than he initially thought!

"So did you get an answer to your question?" Gloriana asked.

Ves continued to caress the book in his hands. "I did. The answer is rather simple. So simple in fact that I'm not even sure if it's a benefit!"

"Oh? Why is that?"

"I used to think the original Larkinson Family was all about duty, or honor, courage. We developed an obsession with service. We continued to send our mech pilots to the Mech Corps because that was expected of a Larkinson."

"So those values aren't as vital to your family?"

"Oh, they are. Hardly any Larkinson is lacking in the values I've mentioned earlier. It is just that they are not the primary motivators that make us who we are. There are deeper motivations behind the norms and values that we've adopted."

Gloriana scowled and patted Ves' arm. "Well, out with it then. Don't hold out on me, Ves. What is the Golden Cat good at? What does she embody? What is her godly domain?"

"I'm not sure how to define it." Ves hesitated. "Brotherhood. Camaraderie. Companionship. Solidarity. Esprit de corps. Fellowship. Yes, that's the word I'm looking for. It's fellowship!"

"Do you mean the fellowship of being part of the same family or bloodline?"

"Exactly!" Ves grinned. "This is the true essence of the Larkinson Family all along! Venerable Ghanso was wrong! The Larkinsons were never about doing our duty for duty's sake. It was always about advancing the interests of the family as a whole. We served in the military because it protected our family members and ensured their

welfare over many generations. Fighting for family is the primary reason why so many Larkinsons are so eager to serve!"

The Larkinsons emphasized the importance of maintaining family relations to every offspring. The shenanigans and backstabbing that took place in other family organizations never happened in their ranks.

This was because each and every Larkinson constantly worked to deepen the harmony and lessen the internal tension between family members. Through various methods, the Larkinson Family always through the worst of times due to the strong commitment that the Larkinsons held towards each other!

To fight for the family was not an empty platitude to a Larkinson. It was a true expression of belief and conviction. If a Larkinson stated that he would fight for the family, then he would definitely follow his words to the letter!

Ves grinned and spontaneously leaned into Gloriana to exchange a short kiss.

Though Gloriana enjoyed the impromptu kiss, she was a bit confused as well. "Where did that come from? You're such a bandit all of a sudden!"

"Hehe. I couldn't resist. I'm just so happy I finally figured out the essence and the direction of the Larkinson bloodline! The key to strengthening our clan is to keep ourselves together and continually reinforce our fellowship to each other. A true Larkinson always sticks up to his fellow Larkinsons!"

While Ves looked excited, Gloriana began to look rather skeptical.

"You're right. It does sound rather simplistic. I can see why you are both pleased and ambivalent about this core value. It's not something that inspires strength or dread."

He sighed and brushed his palm across his face. "You're right. It doesn't seem to grant any substantial advantages, but in fact it's extremely useful under the right circumstances. Aside from making sure our clan remains united, the Golden Cat has already demonstrated a possible application! It's the spiritual network?"

"The divine network?"

"The spiritual network." Ves glowered at her for a brief moment. "What the Golden Cat had done can be split up in two phases. The second phase is rather mysterious but also direct. I don't really care about it at the moment. It's the first phase that's important!"

"How so?"

"The attack she unleashed was much more powerful than she was capable of launching. Her spiritual strength wouldn't have been able to support such a considerable

beam attack. That energy has to come from somewhere, and that happens to be everyone who shares the Larkinson bloodline!"

"I see!" Her eyes lit up! "So the divine network is really useful after all! In crucial moments, it can allow the Golden Cat to gather a large amount of divine energy from many Larkinsons. It doesn't necessarily have to be employed in this beam attack you've described. It could also be utilized for different purposes!"

This was the engineer mindset towards this kind of phenomenon. Ves and Gloriana's first thoughts about the Golden Cat's attack was not to figure out how it worked, but how they could best replicate it and turn it into a concrete advantage!

However, nothing came without a price. Ves abruptly subsided a bit as he realized the price the Larkinson Clan paved to empower the Golden Cat.

What the Golden Cat just did to knock Lucky out had a lot of energy behind it. Only a tiny portion of it came from herself. She derived the bulk of the power of her outburst from other Larkinsons!

The spiritual network running through the Larkinson Mandate was not a communication network.

At this stage, it functioned more as a power network!

Connected to thousands of Larkinsons, the Golden Cat could draw upon a huge amount of reserve spiritual energy if needed. Though the Larkinsons connected to the Larkinson Mandate were unaware of what they had given up, they probably would have agreed to the Golden Cat's request anyway as long as it was used for the good of the family!

Ves became more energized after this discovery. Having a solid direction was crucial. With the insights he gained today, he would definitely be able to conceive of a way of applying this strength to his Larkinson mech!

He just needed to flesh out a lot of details.

Hours later, Ves kept doodling on a crowded design interface. He tried to come up with hundreds of possible implementations.

They ranged from forming a spiritual weapon to activating some sort of augmentation installed in the Larkinson mech.

Ves had to think over the exact implementation, but if he managed to succeed, then every mech pilot of his modular mech platform would be able to overcome insurmountable odds!

To be able to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat and to fell a challenging foe would certainly be able to make the clan safer!

"So how exactly do you plan to put this all to use in our mech design?" Gloriana asked the necessary question.

"I'm not sure. I can only say I'll try my best to find some mechanism that can do what you asked."

To be honest, the Larkinson Heart was not some amazing property. This was especially the case for a small clan that numbered less than a thousand clansmen at the moment.

The effectiveness of the spiritual network depended heavily on the amount of people connected to it. It might not be much when the Larkinson Clan was this small, but what about the future?

What if the number of Larkinson descendants ballooned? If the Golden Cat was able to demand tribute from over a million Larkinsons, then accumulating so much spiritual energy would definitely lead to an attack that might be able to fell the crew of a starship!

To be honest, Ves wasn't even sure if that was possible. He also hadn't figured out the mechanisms behind this method of attack.

All of these problems could come later. What Ves feared was that all of his creativity failed to generate good ideas.

"We should get back to working on our design. I no longer have any qualms about its missing link. We have just found a possible way to make our Larkinson mech stand out."

No matter how Ves chose to empower the Larkinson mech, it was undeniable that it relied on the spiritual network!

With the Golden Cat at the helm, Ves wasn't afraid that someone would abuse this connection for their own gains. Her primary priority was to make sure the clan became strong. The way to do so was to ration the power of the spiritual network carefully.

Her ability shouldn't be squandered!

If the Golden Cat failed to do her job, then a Larkinson might be able to abuse the spiritual network to drain the spiritual energy reserves of others!

This was a grossly severe violation of other people's rights. Not only that, it went against everything the Golden Cat stood for! The ancestral spirit would never support a Larkinson who was being reckless with borrowing from this power.

Ves found his direction. To make the best use of this phenomenon, Ves aimed to create a trump card for his Larkinson mech.

"A trump card is the best way to describe this kind of ability. Hopefully, it will only be used when it is truly necessary."

Ves had so many possible ideas. Which one should he choose?