

# Mech 1861

## *Chapter 1861 Empowering Mechs*

Ever since Ves discovered the Golden Cat's domain and her ability to gather the spiritual energy of every Larkinson, he began to think how to employ them to his advantage.

This was harder than it sounded.

The value of the Golden Cat as an ancestral spirit was very evident. As a design spirit, Ves was not so sure.

A spiritual beam attack might be devastating against an individual, but did it even work in mech combat?

Would a spiritual attack even be effective against a mech pilot who joined his mind with a mech? From his own experiences, Ves learned that the man-machine connection caused mech pilots to become extraordinarily resilient against spiritual attacks.

"This may even be one of the driving reasons why mechs were popularized!"

From the scattered information he learned of the Five Scrolls Compact and the rebellion that caused it to lose most of its Holy Scrolls, mechs probably played an essential role!

It was clear that the Five Scrolls Compact possessed a deep grasp of spirituality. They developed many mysterious applications of it. All of the examples of spiritual engineering that Ves had witnessed might have originated from this very obscure but enormous cult!

Yet somehow, mech pilots became very resilient against direct spiritual manipulation when they interfaced with a mech.

With the man-machine connection, the often small and weak spiritualities of the mech pilots became part of a greater whole, a cog in a great machine that served as the most impervious spiritual armor that Ves had ever witnessed!

Was this why the Five Scrolls Compact faltered against the Big Two? Was mechs the key to defeating the Holy Sons and Daughters and all of their spiritual sorcerers?

Ves couldn't tell. He could only make some informed guesses from unreliable information. Regardless, he believed he was on the right track!

If his speculation was right, mechs and spirituality were intertwined after all. It was just for a very different reason! Rather than seeking to exploit spirituality like the Compact, the Association instead sought to defeat it! The MTA's hidden but very much ongoing

research on 'psionic power' probably took this direction, hence why the organization kept it secret!

The MTA's promulgation of very distinctly supernatural progression trajectories for mech pilots and mech designers was another aspect which showed they were interested in spirituality.

Rather than allowing people with spiritual potential to become members of test subjects of the Five Scrolls Compact, turning them into mech pilots or mech designers would instead turn them into the archenemies of the cultists!

It all made sense.

Mechs existed to defeat the Compact. The MTA was the foremost defender against this defeated but not extinct organization!

This conclusion neatly explained the reason why mechs and the MTA turned into a force to be reckoned with. The rise of mechs as a weapon platform was very much an artificial process.

While most people believed that mechs became popularized throughout human space in order to give them something to play with after their warships were taken away, this was a rather weak explanation.

If mechs turned out to play a greater role than toys, then the current order of the galaxy all made sense!

Right now, the Age of Mechs was ascendant, and the Five Scrolls Compact could only scurry in the darkness.

This was because mechs were practically everywhere! No matter how sophisticated or impressive a spiritual sorcerer could fight, Ves doubted anyone of them could defeat an entire mech regiment!

"Mechs have a greater purpose than what is evident on the surface. The MTA's mandate doesn't solely extend to guarding and governing human space. Their actual goal is to suppress the previous overlords of humanity as much as possible!"

Though it seemed a bit random for Ves to contemplate the current galactic order, it put all of his research and applications into context.

Obviously, Ves was right to obscure most of what he could do with regards to spirituality. By focusing mostly on mechs, he had an alternate explanation why he managed to come up with glows and other esoteric phenomena.

"I'll have to act even more eccentric in public to reinforce my disguise!"

Perhaps the key takeaway from this train of thought was that direct spiritual manipulation wasn't as useful against mechs than he hoped. It was a pipedream for the Golden Cat to be able to fell a mech by knocking out the mech pilot.

Even if spirituality seemed to pass through physical matter like air, the man-machine connection was like another layer of armor that completely protected the mech pilot!

Therefore, Ves shrugged off all ideas to add a spiritual beam attack to the Larkinson mech. It was a fantasy to believe that it could disable a powerful mech by bypassing its physical armor to strike directly at the mech pilot!

If that was the case, the Five Scrolls Compact would have regained control of human civilization by now!

However, that did not mean that spirituality was useless in the context of large-scale battles.

Weren't his glows the best example? They didn't affect people and mech pilots directly, but rather influenced their minds through boosting the confidence of friendlies while suppressing the morale of their foes.

These kinds of indirect effects may not be strong enough to single-handedly win a battle, but they were definitely influential on the battlefield!

To Ves, the difference between a spiritual sorcerer and a mech designer was very clear. The former always aimed to empower himself, while the latter always sought to empower others!

While it wasn't impossible for spiritual adepts to find ways to boost others, it probably wasn't ubiquitous.

Mech designers like Ves were different. The proper ones always sought to meet the needs of their customers.

"Mech designers exist to serve mech pilots."

This service mentality was the guiding principle of his profession. Ves should constantly exercise his abilities along this principle.

When he extended it to his current situation, Ves began to develop some modest and workable ideas surrounding the Golden Cat.

He scrapped his plan to empower the Larkinson mech by finding a way to excite forced resonance.

Ves planned to do so by 'crowdfunding' the required spiritual energy to a single mech pilot. There was a lot of promise with this method. Even if it was only temporary, giving mech pilots a taste of what it was like to wield the strength of an expert pilot would be very beneficial to their future progression!

It was too bad that it was way too eye-catching. Ves also doubted that regular mech pilots could handle all of that heterogenic spiritual energy on their own. He would have to find some way to turn the Golden Cat into an active medium of spiritual energy, allowing mechs and mech pilots to draw upon its strength without getting consumed by it. This was way too complicated and also way too attention-grabbing!

He also dropped his idea to find some way to supercharge the attacks of a mech with spiritual energy. Though somewhat related to the previous idea, it was a more narrow application of spirituality. It was essentially forced resonance on a very short timeframe.

Dumping all of that spiritual energy into a single blow could empower it to the point that it matched the full-strength of an authentic expert mech!

Ves had witnessed several instances of true resonance boosting the power of attacks by an insane margin! Both lance charges and projectile fire turned into mighty attacks that had the power to threaten an expert mech!

Granting this power to the mech pilots of his Larkinson mech would definitely have a drastic effect on the battlefield!

Unfortunately, it suffered from the same problems of his last idea, causing Ves to put it away as well.

He formed some other ideas that sounded a bit more realistic.

One of them was to find some way to supercharge the spiritual network. If the Golden Cat could increase the potency and depth of her connections to the mech pilots in battle, she might be able to bring them closer together!

The intended goal was to form an active spiritual network that could truly increase the coordination and mutual understanding between the mech pilots in battle! In essence, it would function as an actual neural network without requiring any tampering to the neural interfaces!

"This falls in line with all of my conditions."

It empowered mechs in a manner that didn't catch too much attention. It wasn't as blatant as the previous ideas, which should hopefully keep the MTA off his back, especially when this was strictly supposed to be a trump card and option of last resort.

This method also sought to make the most out of the mech pilots. This method put full agency in the hands of the mech pilots themselves. Whether they sought to use their augmented prowess to save their lives, kill an overpowering opponent or block pursuit, the power was completely in their hands!

"This is true fellowship." He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin.

Ves quite liked the idea. He believed it was possible as long as there was enough spiritual energy to maintain this state among so many Larkinsons. It didn't even have to apply to mech pilots. It could also be employed to empower a group of Larkinsons on foot!

Best of all, it didn't require any special adjustments to the Larkinson mech design. The mech should already be connected to the Golden Cat. This meant that any mech pilot that made use of one of the four configurations of the Larkinson mech could all become part of the same active spiritual network!

Though Ves definitely intended to explore whether the Golden Cat could form such a network, that was for later.

"This domain ability should be made global to every Larkinson."

He believed the Larkinson mech should have something more specific. It had to fit with the ideals of the Larkinson Clan and become something iconic to this line of mechs.

"The Larkinson mech is a mech with four different configurations." He hummed and continued to rub his smooth-shaven chin. "Its versatility is great, but its overall identity is lacking."

This was partially his fault. He had become too preoccupied with solving the technical problems of each individual configuration to take the bigger picture into account.

Right now, he could rectify this shortcoming. The Larkinson mech already embodied the Larkinson Clan in many ways, but that was not enough to make it stand out as a distinctive product.

"What can give my Larkinson mech some punch?"

Out of all of the half-baked ideas he formed in his mind, he eventually focused on the other purpose of the Larkinson mech design.

"How could I neglect this?! It's also a training mech!"

Ves explicitly designed the Larkinson mech to facilitate the promotion of third-class mech pilots to second-class mech pilots.

This meant that Ves had to set the performance and shape various aspects of his modular mech platform to be sensitive towards piloting skill.

"Skill. The mech is all about polishing and refining the skills of its mech pilot!"

What if Ves could emphasize this aspect with the Golden Cat?

One of the properties that made the Golden Cat distinct from other design spirits was her direct and permanent connections to the Larkinsons.

This meant that she maintained access to all of their minds! This included the expert pilots of the old family such as his uncle Ark and his cousin Ghanso!

What if Ves could leverage the Golden Cat's spiritual network to borrow their skill?

If Ves found some way to make the Larkinson mech borrow the accumulated piloting skills and experience of an expert pilot, wouldn't that be astonishing?

An average mech pilot would instantly be able to outfight a stronger opponent if he truly gained the skill of an expert pilot!

Not only that, but some of that skill might stick even if the Golden Cat retracted this ability. This way, this method would be useful in times of peace as well as war! It was as if Ves gave the mech pilots the opportunity to have their very own pseudo-Mastery experiences!

"This is it! This is the ability that I've been looking for! It might not be as direct or deadly as the other choices, but it is an ability that truly fits with the identity of the Larkinson mech!"

Now Ves had to figure out a way to implement it. He scratched his head.

"This.. is going to be a problem."

### *Chapter 1862 High Capacity Model*

Ever since Ves came across the concept of the neural network, he became obsessed with it. His attempts to develop a spiritual version of it for the Larkinson Clan had partially succeeded.

While the spiritual network based around the Larkinson Mandate and the Golden Cat fell short of his expectations, it still had the potential to become more.

"It's like it's constantly running on minimum power. If I want to get a good use out of it, the Golden Cat has to charge it up with spiritual energy!"

This was something the Golden Cat was definitely capable of. Wasting all of that energy on a direct, wasteful and simplistic spiritual beam attack was not very practical. Ves could achieve much better results by firing his Amastendira!

The true value of the spiritual network lay in its potential to facilitate transfers between the Larkinsons connected to it. Spiritual energy was only one possible medium.

What Ves sought was a way to transfer something different through the network! What if it was possible to pass the knowledge and skill of piloting a mech to someone else? What if the Larkinson mech could impart the piloting skill of an excellent mech pilot to a lesser mech pilot?

The combat and training potential of such a phenomenon was huge!

The moment he came up with the idea, he instantly felt as if it was meant for the Larkinson mech.

Compared to his more direct ideas, this method would have a drastic effect on his mech pilots without attracting too much attention. It was also a method that benefited the mech pilot rather than the mech.

Improving the mech was only useful for a single battle, while improving the mech pilot bestowed much longer-term benefits!

"Mech pilots are the foundation of any mech force. Their overall skill level determines the maximum prowess of mechs I can field!"

It was pointless to replace all of the current mechs fielded by the Avatars and Sentinels with second-class mechs. They could barely even make good use out of the four second-class training mechs!

The overarching reason why such an action would fail was because the skill gap was too large. While it was possible to design an excellent second-class mech with a low skill floor, it would still be neutered in many ways.

No. If Ves wanted to strengthen the Larkinson Clan, then he shouldn't prioritize the development of mechs. Instead, he should seek to prioritize the growth of mech pilots!

"Right now, Venerable Brutus is regularly tutoring the Avatars and Sentinels on how to pilot a higher class of mechs. What would it be like if I can borrow his formidable piloting skill and directly insert it in the head of another mech pilot?"

While this sounded very risky, Ves hoped to limit any potentially catastrophic outcomes by relying on the Golden Cat.

She seemed to possess an inherent and instinctual understanding of spirituality. By making her an active participant and supervisor of this skill transfer process, Ves hoped to avoid many of the pitfalls in his way!

The moment he brought this idea to Gloriana, she looked intrigued.

"I have to admit, your ideas sound outlandish, but I'm interested in them nonetheless. I'm not sure how it is possible to transfer such a thing through the divine network. Knowledge is contained within the brain. At least it is to most people. If the transfer of knowledge can only be done through the man-machine connection, then our mech's neural interface needs to be adapted in order to accommodate this data transfer."

Ves scowled. "I've been trying my best to avoid tampering with the neural interface. Messing with it would be a huge breach of trust and an enormous danger to boot! Besides, what you say might not be necessary."

He knew that spiritual entities possessed their own memories and knowledge. Qilanxo didn't need to be in her huge physical body to be able to retain all of her personality and memories. So did his mother for that matter.

Yet strong spiritual entities like his mother and Qilanxo were the exception rather than the rule. The majority of mech pilots in the Larkinson Clan did not possess spiritual potential. Of those that did, some of their potential would never be activated!

Ves wasn't sure whether it was wise to impart lots of knowledge through the spiritual medium if the recipient was too weak to accept this gift.

What Gloriana suggested was a way to solve this problem. Rather than rely on the spiritual network as the sole means of transferring skills, it was much better to rely on a neural interface as well to convey lots of data!

Ves would have to test these assumptions further at a later date. He was depending far too much on unsubstantiated guesses to underpin his latest theories!

Still, he believed he was on the mark with most of his guesses. His intuition already gave some hints that his theories weren't fantasies.

"Assuming that this skill and knowledge transfer ability requires a neural interface, then how should we adjust our mech design? Is a normal neural interface enough to enable this transfer?"

Gloriana pressed a finger against her lips as she fell into thought. "If the data is as much as I fear, then it might not be enough."

"Well, we can't tweak the neural interface. Neither of us has the right permits from the MTA to dabble in this sensitive field."

"I don't think we have to tinker with the neural interfaces ourselves. We can just grab another off-the-shelf model from the MTA's component library."

"That.. is a good idea."

Both of them logged in to the MTA's virtual portal for mech designers and browsed the components available for licensing.

As expected, the section which offered countless varieties of neural interface models were heavily restricted. Many of them weren't even available for licensing unless Ves or Gloriana met some very stringent standards!

That said, there were still enough neural interface models to satisfy the needs of a typical mech designer.

The pair sought out a specific neural interface model that excelled in data transfer, and they found a couple of high-capacity ones that came with all sorts of warnings.

"This doesn't seem like a good idea." Gloriana hesitated.

Neither of them knew why this subset of models hadn't been locked behind restrictions like all of the other neural interface models.

It was clear that this anomalous collection of components posed a considerable danger to meh pilots!

That said, Ves wasn't afraid. "From what I've learned about neural interfaces, the risks inherent in these high-capacity models are mostly relevant in extreme cases. The chances of suffering permanent brain damage is higher when the mech incurs critical damage."

"Don't you care about your mech pilots, Ves? Many of them are your fellow clan members! Each of them put their trust in your products!"

This was the Devil Tiger all over again. Ves used the same arguments he used to justify all of the illegal modifications to the tiger mech's neural interface.

"We Larkinsons aren't afraid of taking risks." He proudly stated. "Even if we cherish each other's lives, we also accept the need to brave dangers in order to protect our family!"

Gloriana blinked and looked at Ves as if he said something weird. "Okay...?"

"Look. We know far too little about this potentially useful method. We'll have to perform some experiments to figure out what we need. It might be that these risky high-capacity neural interface models are essential. It might also be that our assumptions are wrong

and that the spiritual network and a regular neural interface are enough to handle the data transfer. We don't know the answer!"

His intuition said otherwise, though. It practically lit up with excitement as soon as Ves browsed the high-capacity models from the MTA. There was something about them that was very essential to the Larkinson mech!

"These neural interface models are very suspicious, though. It says here that they're developed by an internal MTA mech designer, but it doesn't mention the name nor any other details. There are lesser high-capacity models that are locked behind some hefty restrictions! Why did these models escape this treatment?"

"Maybe the MTA dropped the ball." Ves shrugged. "Even if the MTA made a mistake, it shouldn't be a severe one seeing that they still made it available for licensing."

In fact, Ves had another theory. From his past exchanges with neural interface specialists such as Old Man Terrence, the MTA tweaked the availability of neural interface models and standard from region to region. They did this to regulate the amount of high-ranking mech pilots that emerged in a star sector and to gather lots of data on the performance of abnormal models.

To assume that the MTA was strictly putting safety first in regulating the mech industry was a mistake!

Even though these abnormal high-capacity models were probably part of some scheme from the MTA, Ves still viewed them with promise. The main benefits of high-capacity models was not just their high scaling factor, but also their potential for facilitating deeper immersion!

This was something that Ves had always advocated for. He successfully implemented it in the Devil Tiger, but never dared to do so with his other mech designs. Most of the neural interface models he browsed back then weren't nearly as potent and dangerous as the ones before him! It was truly odd how the MTA loosened its reins for this particular instance!

It was also a stroke of luck for Ves. He wasn't allowed to modify the safety restrictions of existing neural interface designs to be less strict. Yet if he licensed an 'approved' neural interface model which just happened to have weaker safety restrictions baked in, then Ves Wouldn't be breaking any rules!

He couldn't resist any longer. He moved without consulting Gloriana any further and licensed one of the models as quickly as possible! By the time Ves transferred the licensing fees to the MTA from the LMC's cash reserves, Gloriana just recovered from her shock!

"Ves! I can't believe you did it! This license is dangerous!"

"I know." He spoke with a serious expression. "I made a calculated choice. First, as I've said before, we Larkinsons aren't afraid of danger. The increased risk of injury is worth it as long as the mech pilot gets enough benefits in return! The deeper connection is vital because one of the strengths of my mechs is the bond that every mech pilot is able to form with a design spirit! Second, if my guesses are right, this high capacity model will also be essential to activating the Ancestral Possession ability!"

He needed to find a more succinct way to refer to the skill and knowledge transfer. He eventually settled for calling it Ancestral Possession. Anyone who heard it would understand what it was about, and the word 'ancestral' had a double meaning in this context.

It was a pretty clever name. Ves mentally patted himself on the back for coming with this moniker!

Unfortunately, Gloriana did not share in his optimism. Usually, she went along his plans and crazy ideas as if she was his accomplice, but there were limits even to her! Experimenting with neural interfaces was taboo even in the Hexadric Hegemony!

"Urgh." She grunted in disgust. She rose from her seat and picked up Clixie. "I need a break. We should both think through this decision some more. I really prefer you drop this entire idea. Ancestral Possession sounds like a powerful ability, but it is not essential to the Larkinson mech. It isn't necessary to make all of your mech designs special! Sometimes, the only result we need is a mech that does the job!"

With those words, she left the design lab in protest of his latest decision.

Ves watched her go, confused why Gloriana kicked up such a fuss. Sure, he made a reckless decision, but it wasn't that bad! After all, the MTA still allowed it for sale, which meant it wasn't a defective product!

"What's her problem?"

### *Chapter 1863 Siren Song*

Disagreements frequently occurred between two different mech designers. Unless they were raised and educated the same way, it was inevitable for 'creative differences' to occur.

One of the more important challenges of a designer pair was how well they managed to resolve these differences.

When neither side wanted to give ground, it was difficult to come up to a solution that satisfied both.

In this case, Ves deeply desired to incorporate the high-capacity neural interface model into his Larkinson mech.

Actually, he wanted to adopt it for every mech if possible! Compared to more standard neural interfaces, the oddly-legal high-capacity models did not err on the side of safety!

From what he learned from fellow mech designers such as Old Man Terrence and books like the ones in Lady Curver's library, neural interfaces were capable of so much more.

Research in neural interface technology might be heavily curtailed these days, but enough studies had shown that deeper and more immerse connections often led to better performance.

The synchronization and responsiveness between the mech and mech pilot increased. In effect, a deeper connection allowed the mech pilot to embody the mech to a finer degree.

This meant that decisions that normally required conscious thought and manipulation became unconscious instinct. This freed up valuable mental processing power that the mech pilot could utilize on other, more important issues!

Naturally, the downside of a deeper connection was that the damage feedback between the mech and mech pilot also increased.

Despite all of the safeguards developed over the centuries since the popularization of mechs, brain damage was still a significant threat to every mech pilot!

Though Ves was aware of the risks, he already set his stance on this matter when he designed the Devil Tiger.

"Per angusta, ad augusta."

He set this phrase as the Larkinson Clan's motto for a very good reason. Deeper immersion and more extensive man-machine connections stimulated mech pilots to a greater degree, thereby increasing the chance that they would find the chance to advance to expert candidate!

Giving every Larkinson mech pilot a greater chance to transform their lives was worth the risks they incurred if they used a high-capacity model!

The day after Gloriana stormed off, Ves met her again at breakfast at the Austen Estate. When they quietly finished their individualized meals, Ves approached his girlfriend, who huffed and turned her head away.

"Let's talk about our problem."

"Why? I already made my opinion clear." She spoke.

"I don't understand why you object so strongly to this choice."

"Because it's wrong!" She shouted. "Look, you're a brilliant mech designer, and many of your choices are amazing, but sometimes you lose perspective and go too far! Just because you have dangerous proclivities doesn't mean you should pass that on to your clan and subordinates! Are you not a leader? Where is your sense of responsibility?"

Ves sat next to her and enjoyed her rosy scent for a moment. His voice grew softer as he issued his reply.

"I am always thinking about the good of others. I'm no longer a lone ranger, I get that. Hundreds of Larkinsons and thousands of subordinates rely on me, and I take that very seriously. This doesn't mean I want to bury my head in the sand or just sit back and relax while taking no risks at all. The galaxy is dangerous and our situation is very precarious. We also have to make a huge effort in order to form and launch our grand expedition in time."

Gloriana brushed aside her black hair and eyed her boyfriend with an impassive expression.

"I'm sympathetic to that, but your latest choice is needlessly excessive. You are experimenting with an innovation that you haven't even worked out yet! There is no proof that it could work, but already you're resorting to the most extreme option without considering safer alternatives!"

"I have a good feeling about my choice."

She let out a frustrated grunt. "Your feelings have been wrong before. Your intuition is not omnipotent. You're a far cry from Prophet Ylvaine in predicting the future!"

"My intuition is an expression of my inner mech designer. The same goes for you. Trusting in your intuition is not a bad idea."

"Sometimes, I think you are a slave to your intuition." She muttered. "You make choices that no one who is normal would take. Even you can't really explain why you went for a specific choice."

"Is that wrong? You're the same as me, you know. You make many choices that look weird to me but are completely normal to you. As mech designers, each of us pursue separate passions. It's not odd for you to question me, but you should be aware that I stand by every choice I made."

Gloriana scowled deeper. "You think I don't know that? I've let many disagreements slide because it's not worth bringing up. This decision goes too far though. High-

capacity neural interfaces are rightfully shunned for very good reasons. I care a lot about the mech pilots who use my mechs. I can't accept the idea of using them as your lab rats!"

The two of them possessed many similarities, but also many differences. The treatment of mech pilots was a rather contentious subject for them. Gloriana's design philosophy caused her to view mech pilots with great importance. She sought to develop products that served their uses as best as possible.

Ves did not necessarily disagree with his stance, but his views on the matter were a little more... flexible.

He decided to be a little more drastic. He leaned into her and grasped both her shoulders. He pressed his face up against her own and stared directly into her eyes.

"Ves!" She gasped.

"I need your support, Gloriana. The Larkinson mech has the potential to be a fantastic mech for both us and the clan. The risk borne by my mech pilots is admittedly large, but it's not as bad as you think. Did you forget about the Breyer alloy? Against third-class mechs, our Larkinson mech is invincible! Hardly any opponent outside the Friday Coalition will be able to crack through such thick and resilient armor! The risk that a mech suffered heavy damage and proceeds to feed its trauma back to the mech pilot is significantly less!"

He had a point, but that was only the case when their Larkinson mech fought against ordinary opponents.

With the enemies that Ves had been attracting in recent times, this was not necessarily the case anymore!

"It's still a suboptimal choice."

"I don't agree." Ves whispered to her. "From the start, I've always tried to cultivate my own forces. I spent years to fund and grow my Avatars and Sentinels until they became as formidable as they are today, but even then it's not enough! My men aren't as good as their counterparts in the Glory Battalion. They need every help they can get in order to promote to second-class mech pilots, and our Larkinson mech is a great means to make this possible!"

Both mech pilots still stood their ground. Gloriana was sympathetic to his viewpoint, but that wasn't enough to shake her conviction!

"There are ways to train your forces. Isn't my brother already helping your mech pilots out?"

Ves grimaced a bit. "I'm thankful for that, but I don't like to rely on others. Besides, your brother is only a single person. It's impossible for him to guide the development of over 1,500 mech pilots! The expansion of my forces doesn't end there either. I want to have a robust training regime in place that allows us to train our own second-class mech pilots, and our Larkinson mech is a vital piece of the puzzle!"

His ambition for their current design project was enormous! He wanted this mech to perform multiple roles and fulfill multiple objectives at the same time! He not only wanted it to come in four different configurations, but also employ it as the mainstay of his forces while at the same time functioning as a training mech!

All of these goals complicated the project enormously, but Ves never doubted his ability to succeed!

Gloriana started to look swayed. His close proximity started to make her feel dizzy. "Ves.. I..."

"Mech pilots learn faster when they pilot real mechs as opposed to virtual mechs." He said. "Mech pilots learn even faster in actual combat as opposed to live training sessions. Excessively trying to coddle them won't do them any good down the line. Sure, their chances of survival increases, but what of their dreams? What of their aspirations? To chase after greatness is the ambition of every mech pilot! No matter how much they try to suppress this urge, in their hearts they all long for glory!"

"Glory is—"

"Glory is in your name!" Ves interrupted her! "Haven't you taken some risks to be with me and collaborate with me? You are no different from me and my mech pilots! Since you're so willing to spend so much time outside your state to work with me, why are you depriving my mech pilots of their own opportunities? Let them choose! They can pilot my Larkinson mech if they want or opt for a safer mech if they think it's too dangerous!"

Gloriana tried to press Ves away, but he was simply too strong! Her feeble, baseline human strength was no match to his half-alien physique!

"That's a false choice and you know it." She hissed. "Others may see you as the Devil Tongue for your ability to deceive others, but I see it as a reflection of your ability to make your mechs desirable! From the Transcendent Messenger onwards, almost all of your mechs possess an irresistible charm to them. Their glows and their intrinsic divinities are like siren songs to mortals! I have no doubt you'd be able to make people jump into the abyss by droves if you design an attractive sign in front of its entrance!"

That.. was a strange remark. Ves felt a bit flattered actually. She wasn't wrong. This was definitely something he banked on to make his Larkinson mech a wanted product by his mech pilots!

Seeing that Gloriana managed to expose him, Ves decided to resort to plan B.

He kissed her on the lips.

"Mppphff! Ves! This isn't the time! I—"

He kissed her again, deeper this time!

"Ves! You scoundrel! If you think you can—"

"—I've already made my choice, Gloriana. I'm not one of your Hexer boys who rolls over for you whenever you make a demand. The Larkinson mech is MY design project. I'm in charge here. Not only that, I'm also the client! As the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan and the owner of the Avatars of Myth and the Living Sentinels, I have the right to set my own requirements!"

"Just because you—"

He kissed her again. And again. And again.

He kissed her so many times that he began to embrace her closer to his chest. For her part, Gloriana eventually forgot what she wanted to say and simply melted in his arms.

They shared so much body warmth and affection that the intimate moment eventually grew too hot for the Glory Battalion!

Melody, who had always been hanging in the background, eventually stepped forward to separate their lips and bodies!

"That's enough for one day!"

As Ves and Gloriana maintained a proper distance to each other, their moods had changed a lot from before!

Whereas Ves radiated confidence and satisfaction, Gloriana looked a little muddled. Her thoughts were in disarray and the emotions rampaging inside her didn't make her situation any better!

"Will you let me have my way now, Gloriana."

"Uhm... I'll give you a chance... I'll shut your attempts down if they turn out to be unacceptable... is that okay...?"

Ves grinned. "That's all I'm asking for. Thanks, love."

"You're welcome."

With this issue resolved, they proceeded to travel to the LMC's headquarters to resume their design work. Adding the Ancestral Possession ability to the Larkinson mech required a lot of research and exploration!

### *Chapter 1864 Godly Experience*

Though Ves managed to drop Gloriana's objections, that didn't necessarily equate to obtaining her support.

An enthusiasm gap became evident as Ves had to take the lead over his latest initiative. Gloriana on the other hand went on to address the other aspects of the mech.

While this was not an ideal way to handle this situation, Ves was fine with it. He was fully convinced his abundance of passion would make up for any shortcomings resulting from Gloriana's absence.

"Now, let me think." He murmured. "How can I get Ancestral Possession to work?"

One of the problems he faced was that he didn't know what was possible. He needed to perform a lot of experiments in order to define what he could do, but Ves did not plan to go through all of that trouble.

His time frame was too tight. He couldn't afford to spend precious weeks to perform the necessary experiments.

"I'm also lacking in test subjects."

Mech pilots were valuable commodities. He would never subject his own Larkinsons and subordinates to his dangerous experiments.

It would be easier if he could get a batch of disposable mech pilots, but those were rather difficult to get ahold of in the Ylvaine Protectorate.

For various reasons, it was impractical for Ves to get his hands on qualified test subjects.

"I'll have to make do with educated guesswork and hope for the best." He muttered.

Fortunately for Ves, he happened to be very experienced in relying on his predictions. His combination of knowledge, judgement, intuition and a healthy dose of confidence always seem to pull him through.

This was a bit more difficult than he was used to, though. Ves was trying to accomplish something that was heavily reliant on spirituality. Ves would have to find some way of wrangling it and turn it into something that was both possible and safe.

His first steps towards making his latest vision into reality was not to tweak the current design.

Instead, he directed his attention towards the Golden Cat.

After her huge outburst yesterday, the adorable Golden Cat hid inside the Larkinson Mandate and gave in to her exhaustion.

She still hadn't finished her recovery yet, but that didn't stop Ves from attempting to wake her. He needed to obtain her cooperation in order to go any further!

"Wake up, kitty."

He concentrated his mind and gently massaged the ancestral spirit residing inside the book with his spiritual projections.

Nyaa..?

Though Ves and the Golden Cat were two separate entities, the latter consisted largely of his own spiritual energy. This gave them an inseparable bond and made them compatible with each other!

After a bit of nudging, the Golden Cat eventually bit the projection. Pure life flooded into his incorporeal existence! Though the infusion of spiritual energy was exhilarating, it also made her uncomfortable!

Ever since she turned into a living, independent entity, she could no longer accept other sources of spiritual energy without repercussions!

Ves only dared to feed her enough of his spiritual energy to hasten her recovery.

Nyaaaaa.

He succeeded! The Golden Cat soon regained her prior vigor and popped her head out of the Larkinson Mandate!

As Ves started stroking the Golden Cat's adorable head with a hand infused with spiritual energy, a pair of cats watched on from another work table.

"Miaow."

"Meow..."

While Clixie appeared as impeccable as before, Lucky was a different matter!

Though his mechanical body seemed as spotless as ever, his spirit was still at a low point. Suffering the brunt of the Golden Cat's beam attack put him in no mood to eat exotics or do anything else for the foreseeable time!

Ves didn't bother with Lucky. He only had eyes for the Golden Cat this time. After coaxing her out of the Larkinson Mandate, he began to outline his intentions.

"Can you do that, Goldie? Is it possible for you to draw out one mech pilot's knowledge, memories and experiences and impart them to another mech pilot?"

The Golden Cat tilted her head.

Nyaa?

Ves palmed his face. "You don't understand, do you? This is too complicated for a kitten like you. The spiritual network is also strange to you. Even though you have been born with all of the connections, you hardly know what you are capable of. Is that right?"

Nyaaa.

The Golden Cat rolled over on her back and exposed her belly to him. He tentatively rubbed her adorable belly, only to be batted away by her playful paws.

"Well then, let's explore what we can do, shall we? We have to start somewhere. As the guardian of our clan, you ought to be more than a passive observer."

As Ves proceeded to encourage the Golden Cat to explore the spiritual network, frustration quickly mounted.

The Golden Cat much preferred to play and fool around than to listen to his instructions!

Progress was hampered by the fact that neither of them were familiar with the spiritual network. Ves wasn't able to instruct the Golden Cat because he didn't know what he was talking about.

As for the Golden Cat, while she had been born with instincts on how to use her powers, that was still a far cry from conscious manipulation. Mentally and spiritually, she was still an infant, causing her to know little else besides what little she explored!

"Urgh.. this isn't working." He sighed.

He set the Larkinson Mandate back onto the table while the Golden Cat rolled around as if she was having fun!

Perhaps his decision to base the ancestral spirit of the Larkinson Clan on a cat was a mistake!

"That's just an excuse. The real problem is that I can't instruct her because I don't know how to achieve the desired effects."

His knowledge on spirituality was too one-sided. He was only proficient in the few methods and techniques he came up on his own. With regards to other other applications, he was still a neophyte as far as he was concerned.

Seeing that at least some guidance was necessary to educate the Golden Cat, Ves began to consider other options.

"Why not let someone else take over from me? I'm clearly not the best teacher here! There are others who can do better!"

Of the possible candidates, his mother and Cassandra Breyer immediately stood out. Ves barely thought of their names before instantly dumping them out of his mind.

Both of them were terrible witches! One of them wasn't even friendly towards him and continued to harass him from time to time!

That caused Ves to turn his attention to his design spirits.

He ruled out the artificial spiritual products because they weren't any better in this regard. As for his natural design spirits, that was when the selection became more interesting.

Two of the most notable spiritual entities were Prophet Ylvaine and Qilanxo.

The former was a bit weaker, but he was the most human out of all the design spirits. He was also friendly and easy to get along with. Imparting some human wisdom in the Golden Cat would definitely be a boon!

Yet.. Qilanxo was the better choice. She was centuries old and developed a formidable understanding of spirituality and how to mold it to her will.

What was even better was that this former lizard used to be in the same position as the Golden Cat! As the Sacred God of the ancient city of Samar, she enjoyed the worship of thousands of Blessed People and somehow managed to derive strength from these bonds!

"Besides, didn't Qilanxo impart some of her strength to the Golden Cat? They're related by spirit!"

After recalling these important facets, Ves no longer hesitated. He concentrated his mind and made contact with Qilanxo.

Her means of communicating was different from other entities. She conveyed her opinions in the form of emotional impressions.

As Ves conveyed his request, it didn't take long for Qilanxo to reply.

A wave of curiosity, interest and affection greeted Ves. The Sacred God was more than willing to teach the Golden Cat her ways!

Ves was surprised by her quick assent. Then again, Qilanxo was clearly being affected by her motherly urges. Her emotions radiated more than a bit of love and care towards the infant spiritual entity.

The fact that the Golden Cat was so young and innocent simply hit all of the right buttons!

Qilanxo didn't wait for Ves to convey any further thoughts. She readily reached out to the Golden Cat, causing the latter to stop and look up in surprise!

Nyaa?

A huge spiritual weight suddenly descended in the vicinity! Though everyone else in the design lab felt nothing, Ves and to a lesser extent Gloriana sensed something significant had approached!

"What's happening, Ves?!" His girlfriend asked from the other side of the lab.

"I don't know!"

Before they could talk any further, the Golden Cat disappeared!

Ves looked at the Larkinson Mandate in shock! Ever since he empowered it, the Golden Cat became inseparable to the book! It was her nest and abode and she couldn't leave it because her spiritual existence was too weak to survive in the open!

"Qilanxo! What did you do?!"

The Sacred God soon passed on another wave of emotion to him. Through the mix of affection, love, hope and determination, Ves managed to interpret it, causing his panic to subside.

Qilanxo somehow summoned the Golden Cat to her side! She also offered her protection to the younger spiritual entity and supported her existence away from the book.

Seeing that Qilanxo had no intention to harm the Golden Cat, Ves reluctantly let the matter be. He didn't know why Qilanxo went through all of that trouble, but hopefully it would help the spiritual cat grow into her power faster.

With that out of the way, Ves turned to the other aspect of his plan, the high-capacity neural interface.

Its parameters were significantly better than comparable neural interface models. It was the big boy version of the skinnier and more restrained devices on the market.

Developed internally by the MTA and dumped onto its catalog at random, the component hadn't gone through marketing at all. Its accompanying documents were filled with complicated jargon that Ves barely understood while its name was simply a string of codes.

By all accounts, the high-capacity neural interface was never meant for widespread use. Just the warnings posted on its description was enough to scare away most mech designers!

To other mech designers, the taboo of tampering with neural interfaces was inviolable. They were so intimidated by abnormal neural interfaces that they chose to skip them without ever giving them a chance!

Ves was different. He broke taboos like he was drinking water. While abnormal neural interfaces always caused him to adopt a more careful posture, that didn't mean he shied away from them entirely!

"This high-capacity neural interface is just what I need!" He celebrated. "If I had you earlier, I would have put you in my Desolate Soldier and Deliverer designs!"

With greater immersion, came better performance. The bond between mech and design spirit also grew stronger, allowing for greater interaction between the two! This meant that the high-capacity neural interface model became even more useful! Its benefits didn't end with the Larkinson mech! Ves already reserved this interface model with the other mechs that Ves had in mind!

Of course, before he did that, he needed to see this specific model in action. He also needed to verify its performance and see whether the risks and rewards were still in proportion.

Ves approached the 3D printer and fabricated a single copy of the high-capacity neural interface. After that, he proceeded to put it on a lifter platform before ordering it to be transported to the Avatars!

After leaving the design lab, boarded the same shuttle that carried the newly-fabricated component.

A short flight later, the shuttle touched down at the Avatar base. With many Avatars noticing his arrival, Ves moved to the mech stables where a number of mechs were

stashed. He stepped forward with his bodyguards and the lifter platform in tow until he reached a certain mech.

Its mech pilot already stood by at the foot of his assigned mech. The man saluted Ves with vigor!

"Mr. Larkinson! It's an honor to meet you, sir!"

"Joshua. I need to upgrade your mech. Would you like to try out my new neural interface?"

### *Chapter 1865 Two Requests*

The new high-capacity neural interface was powerful. In the right hands, employed in the right mech, this single change could result in far-reaching effects!

The difference was as clear as day as the Deliverer zipped in space with much more gusto than before!

Though its performance parameters hadn't changed, its third eye glowed brighter than ever before! This signified that the bond between the mech, mech pilot and design spirit had reached a greater degree of integration than before!

Joshua, though not a believer, managed to take advantage of the new high-capacity neural interface to take his control to the next level!

"I thought he was already good. It turns out he's even better!" Commander Melkor uttered.

Ves grinned. "A single component can make all the difference."

As Joshua was one of the most promising mech pilots of the Avatars, how could Melkor not be present?

After hearing what Ves was up to, Melkor demanded to accompany Ves to the space station in orbit. He wanted to see the results for himself!

Though the Avatar Commander expected some changes, he never heard of a situation where switching out a neural interface led to such a drastic boost in performance!

"Mr. King has already reached the upper limits of standard neural interfaces." Ves explained to his cousin. "He sits in the awkward position of sitting between regular mech pilots and expert candidates. While he's not as skilled as Jannzi and Tusa, Joshua is clearly a cut above the rest."

"So the old interface in his mech acted like a bottleneck that constrained any further improvement?"

"Not exactly." Ves shook his head. "I'm sure that Joshua continued to improve as a mech pilot. It was just that his mech remained stagnant. With the same neural interface, Joshua eventually hit a ceiling where any further improvement could no longer be expressed through the neural interface."

"And you raised his ceiling with your fancy new gizmo, is that right?"

"In a nutshell, yes. It's a bit more complicated than that. Swapping out neural interfaces is a delicate matter. I could have screwed up. This isn't necessary since most mech pilots are able to do fine with standard neural interfaces."

In other words, as long as the other mech pilots failed to approach the ceiling, the argument to swap out neural interfaces became weaker.

That said, even if the high-capacity models weren't particularly better, they still insured a stronger bond between the mech pilot and the design spirit. Regardless of the skill of the mech pilot, everyone who interfaced with an LMC mech had a chance of developing a relationship with a design spirit!

Though the distance between the testing station and the testing ground was rather great, Ves could still perceive how vivid the man-machine connection between Joshua and the Deliverer had grown.

Relief, exhilaration and excitement suffused their bond as they continued to snipe target dummy after target dummy with the Executor rifle! Joshua wasn't even drawing on the support of Prophet Ylvaine to hit targets that his fellow Avatars would miss seven out of ten times!

"It's a shame Joshua hasn't managed to become an expert candidate yet." Melkor sighed. As a rifleman mech specialist, he felt a bit ashamed that someone else managed to outperform him on his own turf! "Joshua trains harder than everyone else. His commitment to you and the Avatars is insane. He's a good kid."

Ves chuckled. "You say that like you have a couple of decades on him. Heh. It seems you have adapted well to your role."

"I have to. We continue to expand, and I have to keep up if I want to remain in charge. I work just as hard as Joshua in the aspect of command and management."

"Well, you are a bit young and inexperienced for your position. I didn't expect to expand my Avatars so quickly. My ambitions have grown, and so have my intentions for my Avatars."

"Do you regret putting me in charge of the Avatars?" Melkor asked.

Ves glanced at his visored cousin. This was a rather loaded question.

"I don't regret it, at least for now. From what I see and hear, the Avatars are doing well. Discipline is good and cohesion is high. There is no doubt that the Avatars will follow my orders to the letter. If there is one issue that is of concern, it's your ability to lead so many men in a crisis."

"I've survived the sandman. I'm confident I can handle the pressure. I have a general staff and many experienced Larkinsons backing me up. I'm never alone."

Ves smiled. "Confidence is good. Just make sure you have the competence to back it up. I hope to see you in charge for many decades to come."

There were times when Ves considered the idea of replacing Melkor with another, more qualified Larkinson. There were several mech pilots with command experience in his clan. Magdalena Larkinson was just one of the more notable ones.

Some of the reasons that caused Ves to elevate Melkor over other Larkinsons were moot now that he had reached this point.

He was not a young and junior Larkinson anymore. He was a Journeyman, a galactic citizen and the effective leader of the Larkinson Clan! Many of the Larkinsons who joined his clan became his loyalists by default! With the Larkinson Mandate binding them to a spiritual accord, Ves obtained even greater guarantees of their commitment to him and the clan!

Yet... Ves did not do so in the end. Some of the Larkinsons qualified to command the Avatars were geezers in the same generation as his grandfather. They were too old and stuck in their ways to adapt to the rapidly-changing circumstances of his life.

More than that, all of their experience bore the strong imprint of the Mech Corps. Ves had no doubt that if these veterans got to be in charge, they would shape the Avatars in the image of the Mech Corps!

Something like that had already happened to the Living Sentinels. Under Commander Magdalena's leadership, the Sentinels developed into a more casual imitation of her former service!

Was that bad? Not necessarily. The Mech Corps was a well-run mech military and Ves had few problems in how they set their rules.

However, Ves wanted to diverge from the Bright Republic. If he adopted the laws and the customs of his home state to the letter, then his grand expedition might as well be a Brighter colonization fleet!

As the tests eventually wrapped up and the Deliverer flew back to its berth, Ves and Melkor stepped away from the control center.

The small Ylvainan space station they walked through was suffused with religious symbols and iconography. Prophet Ylvaine's likeness in the form of statues, paintings and projections were practically everywhere!

The sight of so much religion made the both of them feel ill at ease.

"How long will we stay in the Ylvaine Protectorate?" Melkor softly asked. "Some of us have grown.. restless at our continued stay in this state."

"What's the matter? Are you in a hurry to leave?"

"The Ylvainans aren't awful hosts by any means, but.. you know."

Ves ruefully smiled. "I understand what you mean. I already told you that our stay here isn't permanent. I haven't set my next destination yet, but I'll let you know as soon as I'm ready. Right now, I still need to complete my current design project and wait for some other matters to come to a conclusion."

The refit of the Scarlet Rose and the long-awaited implantation surgery weighed heavily on his mind.

The two cousins continued to chat as they boarded a shuttle that brought them back to the Avatar base on the surface of the planet.

As they stepped out, they encountered a surprising sight.

Two mech pilots waited for Ves to come back. While that wasn't necessarily noteworthy, it was their identities that caused him to pay attention!

"Venerable Brutus Wodin. How lovely to see you this day." Ves composed his face into a polite expression. "I see you have brought one of my.. guests with you as well."

Standing next to the resplendently uniformed Brutus was a mech pilot that Ves frankly forgot when he became consumed by his current design project.

Davia Stark stood next to the expert pilot with lifeless eyes and a demeanor that screamed that she wanted to be left alone!

How Brutus managed to convince such a depressed mech pilot to follow him to the Avatar base was a mystery!

Suspicious at their appearance, Ves subtly concentrated his mind and activated his spiritual vision.

A remarkable sight came into view. Brutus' spiritual manifestation had always been abnormal. Compared to other expert pilots, he was much more proactive in its use, preferring to wrap his force of will around his loved ones like a protective shell!

Right now, something else was going on. Brutus attempted to wrap Davia Stark with his comforting and protective spiritual blanket, only to be rebuffed by the sheer nihilism of the void in her mentality!

She rejected Brutus' kindness because she felt she was unworthy to receive his care!

Even though Brutus failed to get through Davia's despair, his force of will never gave up. It continued its attempts without getting discouraged by its continuous failures!

Ves found this interaction to be endlessly fascinating. Despite Davia's lack of active spirituality, her mindscape nonetheless turned into an impregnable fortress! Brutus had no way of breaching its walls!

"What do the two of you want?"

Brutus coughed a bit. "I've been speaking to Miss Davia here. Well, I've attempted to, anyway. It's clear that she's hurt, Ves. She's broken into pieces, and she hasn't even begun to pick up the pieces."

"I know that. I put her in the care of my clan members in order to slowly bring her back to life."

"It won't work." Brutus stated. "Davia's trauma is much more serious than you can imagine. As a warrior and a mech pilot, she experienced the greatest disaster that she could imagine. You don't get over that, especially since she was in the position to save her Vindmars."

"I know that as well." Ves nodded impatiently. "I need to be somewhere. Could you please get to the point?"

"Very well. Davia is a wonderful woman who possessed a bright future. We can still restore this all if we give her the opportunity to obtain closure and move on from her painful past."

"And how do we do that, Venerable Brutus?"

"From what I've figured out about Davia's past, she possesses an intense hatred against the sandmen and an enormous regret for the fall of her home state. We can rectify these traumas by allowing her to confront them in person."

This caused Ves to pay more attention to this conversation.

"Do you mean...?"

"My proposals are two-fold. First, we should seek to give Davia an opportunity to strike a blow against the sandmen."

"That.. might be a problem. The sandmen have retreated from their conquered holdings and are converging on a single location. When they finally go on the offensive, their power is not something a single mech can contend against!"

"She enjoys my protection." Brutus declared. "This is my promise!"

"Okay... Well, if things go according to plan, which isn't likely due to all of the uncertainties involved, what next?"

"Then, we travel to the former capital of the Vindmar Republic. I believe it will do Miss Davia a lot of good if we install a memorial on the scoured surface of the capital planet of her former state. The Vindmars deserve to be remembered. Regardless of which power or state will occupy this territory in the future, Davia can rest easy knowing that her people will still live on in memory!"

For a moment, both Ves and Melkor looked gobsmacked. Flying all the way to the border of civilized space in order to appease a single mech pilot sounded crazy! Who knew what kind of shenanigans went on in the star systems swept by the sandmen. Even if the aliens themselves had abandoned their conquests, others would quickly fill in the void!

To go through all of that trouble wasn't worth it, but... Davia was an expert pilot. A broken one, but a genuine one. Would she really be able to recover if he performed these favors for her? Her lack of emotion and interest didn't inspire Ves with much confidence.

#### *Chapter 1866 Easy Manpower*

In the end, Ves gave a noncommittal answer to Venerable Brutus. He needed to think about it and consider whether it was worth it to go through all of that trouble.

As Ves returned to the LMC's headquarters, he began to weigh the costs and benefits of such a decision.

The value of an expert pilot was evident. Obtaining the service of an expert pilot would be a massive boon for his enterprise. Few private organizations secured the services of such august and powerful talents.

They were incomparable to expert candidates. They possessed a will and charisma that was greater than anything comparable to mortals, and their battle prowess was enough to elevate themselves to a higher class!

Their value on the battlefield was just as great as off the battlefield. Venerable Brutus already showed how much of a boost he provided to the Avatars and Sentinels. Many mech pilots benefited from his sage advice and personal instruction. As an excellent mech pilot in terms of skill, Brutus was able to pinpoint all of the flaws in another pilot's fighting style and suggest ways to remedy these shortcomings.

This was one of the greatest benefits of securing an expert pilot! This was also the main reason why the Larkinson Family kept pumping out mech pilots of a very high standard. Each young Larkinson mech pilot received periodic instruction from either current or former expert pilots.

Regrettably, the newly-founded Larkinson Clan lacked an expert pilot to perform this function. The Larkinsons who joined the clan would have been forced to receive instructions from ordinary Larkinson mech pilots.

While there wasn't anything wrong with that, only expert pilots were astute and skilled enough to provide the best advice!

This was why the presence and generosity of Venerable Brutus was so important to Ves. In this crucial early period of the clan, receiving the support of an expert pilot was extremely vital to keep up everyone's morale!

"He'll be gone, though." He murmured.

By all accounts, the Hexadric Hegemony would eventually recall Brutus in order to deploy him on the front lines against the Friday Coalition. The time for his departure was fairly fuzzy, but Ves suspected that it was getting close.

Once Venerable Brutus left, the Larkinson Clan lost the protection of an expert pilot.

Without the presence of an expert pilot, Ves and the Larkinson Clan would look a lot more vulnerable! It didn't matter if he was trying to build up his forces to the level of a mech regiment! Expert pilots were so feared and worshipped in the Age of Mechs that the presence or absence of one could sway entire battles!

Their deterrence value was already more than worth all of the effort to secure their allegiance! It was so rare for independent organizations to possess their own expert pilots that just having one was enough to double everyone's evaluation of the Larkinson Clan's strength!

Naturally, that was assuming Davia Stark would be able to recover her former will and regain the strength and mentality of an expert pilot!

"Will that really happen?"

Davia did not possess any personal loyalty to Ves. In fact, she should resent him a bit for his heavy-handed attempt to bring her along. Brutus probably owed more of her affection.

If Ves risked his forces to participate in the final battle against the sandmen, if Ves sent a fleet to the former Vindmar Republic so that she could find some closure, would she even recover?

Even if she did, would she be thankful?

Both of the questions were shrouded with uncertainty. Ves did not wish to go through all of that effort, only to give the Hegemony another expert pilot!

"I need some guarantees." He concluded as he rubbed his smooth-shaven skin.

Despite her broken state, Davia was still a brighter prospect than the other alternatives.

In the short term, Jannzi Larkinson and Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson weren't turning into expert pilots anytime soon. They were close, but not enough. They needed more precipitation as well as a catalyst to trigger apotheosis.

Perhaps their time might come in the next five to ten years, but now that the Larkinson Clan was at its weakest and most vulnerable state, Ves couldn't wait that long!

"I've been setting so many long-term plans that it will take decades or even centuries for them to come to fruition! I've been neglecting our short-term needs!"

He didn't rule out this option for this reason. As long as neither requests were unreasonably dangerous, Ves didn't mind meeting them in order to give Davia a chance to move on from her trauma.

When Ves returned to his office at the headquarters, he voiced his thoughts on the matter to Gavin.

"I've been studying the conditions of the Sand War for a while now." His assistant said. "From what I know so far, the sandmen are halfway into converging all of their fleets into a planet-sized deathball. The window of opportunity isn't big. If you want to take part in this so-called 'decisive battle', then you need to make a choice within a month, maybe two at most."

Ves grimaced. "I see. Where will the battle be fought, Benny?"

"It depends entirely on what the MTA war fleet will do. They haven't revealed any of their plans so far, but the most probable guess is that they'll let the sandmen come to them in the Bentheim System."

The Bright Republic probably didn't appreciate that choice. Too bad the MTA wasn't inclined to listen to a tiny state's complaints.

"What about the situation in the former Vindmar Republic? If I recall, this border state is a bit far away."

"Vindmar is situated in the Hexer half of the star sector, which means we'll have to cross a fair distance to reach its former territory. The good news is that there shouldn't be any sandman left. The stupid aliens completely abandoned their conquered territories and dismantled all of their colonies to form as many fleets as possible."

"Which means that the scavengers and bottom feeders have already swooped in, right?"

Gavin smiled ruefully. "Reports have already come in of pirates, scavengers and mercenaries swooping into the abandoned star systems in order to scavenge as much valuables as they can! The sandmen may have consumed a lot of valuable exotics and minerals, but they have ignored plenty of valuables!"

"The Sand War isn't even over yet! Damn these greedy bastards!"

From high-grade exotic deposits to neglected holdings, there was plenty of treasure to pick off the ground if the scavengers moved in fast enough!

"They shouldn't pose a threat, though. There are so many ruined planets to loot that the opportunities will mostly be focused on picking up as many scraps as they can. The last thing the scavengers want to do is to confront a neutral party, especially a strong one!"

"You're right. Another factor is that most of the scavengers will move to the planets. There is nothing for them to gain if they remain at the edge of a star system."

If Ves wished to meet Davia's request, he likely wouldn't dispatch his entire fleet to Vindwar. As long as the danger level did not exceed a certain standard, it was enough for Ves to hand over this responsibility to the Battle Criers! This was exactly the kind of mission they were supposed to fulfill!

The only issue was that his Battle Criers still hadn't been reinforced with Kinners from their tribe. Commander Cinnabar already told Ves that this would take a while due to the Komodo War getting in the way.

As Ves continued to discuss this matter with Gavin, he gained some confidence that he'd be able to meet the two requests. He didn't want to make a choice immediately, though. None of his forces were in a state to move right now. Ves still wanted to grant them enough time to reinforce their numbers and procure more carriers. The latter was especially important!

"How are we on the starship end? Do we have enough ships to transport all of our mechs on short notice?"

Gavin looked at his data pad and browsed a status report.

"Right now, the Avatars and the Battle Criers are doing okay, but the Sentinels received the short end of the stick. They can only field a third of their mechs from a carrier, though they have enough transport capacity to bring along more mechs. They'll just have to empty the cargo bays of every ship in their possession and squeeze in as many mechs as possible in their packed and partially-disassembled state."

That meant that any mech put into the cargo bay would not be ready to deploy if a battle broke out.

It took far too much time and effort to unpack a mech and restore it to a functional state! Most battles would be over by then!

This was the reason why everyone valued carriers. They were specifically designed to accommodate mechs and facilitate their deployment no matter the circumstances!

Right now, the only reason Ves managed to gain a lot of carriers was due to his friendly relations with the Ylvaine Protectorate. If not for his identity as the Bright Martyr, the Curin Dynasty would have never allowed Ves to place so many orders for light carriers!

As it was, the Avatars and Sentinels still had to slow down or curtail their recruitment entirely in order to allow their starship departments to catch up with the growth of their mech contingents!

"How is the manpower situation, Benny?"

"I can't say much about your mech forces as my access to their systems are limited. The LMC has changed a lot, though.

"Oh? How so?"

"For one, we are slowly drawing down our Manufacturing Department. We have way too many mech technicians and other production personnel on our payroll. Though we own some manufacturing complexes, we are mostly relying on external manufacturers to produce and supply our mechs throughout the Komodo Star Sector. Since we are increasingly becoming more dependent on outsourcing production to foreign partners, it doesn't make much sense to have all of these mech technicians hanging around."

Ves furrowed his brows. "Only fire the useless ones. Try to retain the more talented and loyal individuals. Don't fire any people with crucial skillsets, and don't get rid off too many workers. Remember, we still need a lot of technical personnel on hand to man a

factory ship as well as all of the smaller production facilities in our future expeditionary fleet!"

Skilled manpower was hard to come by. Though the population base of the Komodo Star Sector was enormous, a lot of organizations competed over their employment!

"How is the staffing of our new ships proceeding along?"

This was one of his most persistent worries. Spacers were extremely hard to come by these days as the Sand War practically skyrocketed their value! States could produce as many starships as their shipyards could handle, but training qualified spacers to man all of these vessels was not as straightforward!

"Surprisingly, it's going well. In fact, staffing is one of the few issues that aren't of concern to us anymore!"

"Oh?" Ves sat up straighter in his office seat. "What's going on?"

"The Curin Dynasty passed some preferential policies that made it easier for us to recruit Ylvainans. The desire and enthusiasm to work for you has always been strong. It's just that the most valuable professionals such as starship captains and chief engineers are already committed to their current employers. Poaching them is very difficult for most people."

"Then how did you solve this problem?"

"We didn't." Gavin shrugged. "Lately, a lot of Ylvainan professionals have decided to escape their current employment contracts to work for us. They come from all around the Protectorate."

"How have they been able to get away with ending their contracts early?"

"That's the strange part. Their employers all agreed to release the professionals without much fuss. We think the Curin Dynasty might have pressured the bosses to acquiesce, but we don't know for sure. In any case, ever since change, we've been recruiting starship personnel left and right! As long as you don't mind Ylvainans manning most of your ships, we won't have any problems on this end!"

Ves grimaced with distaste. If this went on, the Ylvainans would probably outnumber the Brighters in his employ!

*Chapter 1867 Ylvainan Navy*

Ves actually became so concerned at all the Ylvainans joining the fleets of the Avatars and Sentinels that he decided to take a look in person.

Together with Nitaa, Lucky and his bodyguards, he took another shuttle trip to orbit where he stopped by some of the ships.

The brand-new light carriers weren't very impressive to Ves. They possessed the same level of performance as the Greenfeather and Redfeather. In fact, in some areas, they were even worse!

His forces didn't have any choice, though. With the supply of materials curtailed and prices ballooning by as much as an order of magnitude, shipyards were only able to supply their customers with their cheaper offerings!

The persistent lack of combat carriers within his fleets had always been a sore point for Ves. The only way for him to make up for this shortcoming was to leave the war-stricken regions and head to a more stable and prosperous region.

The greater the chaos, the greater the demand for ships!

No one wanted to be stuck on a planet when doom approached the star system. The Sand War already showed how fatal it could be for people to lack an escape route!

When Ves met up with some of the captains and key crew of his new ships, he came across a lot of very enthusiastic Ylvainans!

"It's an honor to work for you, Bright Martyr."

"I have dreamt of serving a Martyr Follower for all my life. It is a great pleasure to captain one of your ships with the Great Prophet's blessing!"

"Sir! I have made a vow to devote my entire service to you! Prophet Ylvaine himself has willed us to be at your disposal!"

The reactions of every Ylvainan he met sounded similar. No matter where he walked, the spacers around him paused and bowed with utmost sincerity towards him. They literally believed that he was one of Prophet Ylvaine's agents in the mortal realm!

Ves tried his best to maintain a pleasant facade. Inwardly, he either groaned or cringed. There had been no attempts at all to curtail the Ylvainan's expressions of faith within his fleet.

Perhaps the only compromise the new Ylvainan ship crews had made was to keep the interior of the ships neutral. Unlike other Ylvainan ships, there weren't any shrines or religious artwork dedicated to their faith in the corridors or public compartments!

In order to coordinate the growing number of carriers and support ships across all of the mech forces, the position of fleet coordinator came into being.

Not quite an admiral, but more than a fleet commander, a fleet coordinator essentially oversaw the fleets and kept them organized at the higher level without exercising direct command.

No Larkinson could fulfill that position. It was difficult to hire Brighters with this level of knowledge, training and experience.

The only choice to fill this position was to resort to an Ylvainan!

By some strange reason that seemed more deliberate than accidental, a very senior ship officer of the Kronon Dynasty just happened to be available.

Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon possessed a long and storied record. She was an 80-year old matron who had commanded military ships and fleets for many decades with distinction. Due to her long service, she had plenty of time to develop her management and administrative skills.

What this meant was that she was exactly the sort of person his enterprise needed to organize the higher-level command and control structure of his fleet assets.

Working with both the Avatars, Battle Criers and Sentinels, Fleet Coordinator Ophelia already achieved a lot of results since she came into power.

Most notably, she shuffled around spacers so that the distribution of critical personnel became more even. No ship was lacking in chief engineers and senior officers!

The old but driven fleet coordinator also leaned on logistics to hasten the delivery of essential supplies! Without these necessities, the combined fleet would only be able to subsist in space for a month before encountering critical shortages. This was a very precarious situation to be in, so Ves was very thankful that Ophelia took care of these issues!

When Ves met with Ophelia aboard one of the new Ylvainan-produced light carriers, he already developed some expectations of what he heard.

From most accounts, Ves figured that Ophelia was similar to Colonel Lowenfield. Both were women who were appointed to clean up a mess. Both of them excelled in this aspect, though their battle experiences and crisis leadership were not as solid.

Ophelia was a Kronon however, and every Kronon was a soldier. Despite her age, the old woman exuded a sense of command and experience that couldn't be faked!

"Madame Kronon. I am pleased to meet you. I appreciate what you have done so far in wrangling my growing fleet. Keeping my ships and spacers from running into each other must be an exhausting chore."

"The worst will pass, sir." Ophelia replied with respect. "Within a single month, our fleets should be ready to embark on a lengthy journey."

The two discussed the state of the organizing fleets before Ves was satisfied with what he heard. Even though the new personnel still had to settle into their jobs and the ships still showed a lot of teething issues, most of these problems could be dealt with during the journey.

If some sort of crisis occurred that compelled them to evacuate, then they could still flee the star system as long as they left some assets behind. The new carriers and other ships would still remain liabilities though.

All of that was important but not really interesting to Ves. As a mech designer, fleets and naval vessels never held his interest for long. He much preferred to talk about mechs!

That said, Ves was also interested in Ophelia as a person. As long as she remained hale and healthy, she would probably be his most senior fleet officer for the foreseeable future! Developing an accord and understanding with her was essential!

"You don't seem as.. zealous as the other Ylvainans about your new employer."

The woman nodded. "I am a Kronon. My faith is my duty. My duty is faith."

"What does that mean?" Ves scratched his head in puzzlement.

"It means that it is not helpful for me to act as your worshipper. I applied to work for you because the Great Prophet has shown me that you lack a fleet coordinator. Since I have been brought on to manage your growing fleets, then that is what I should address. Anything else is secondary and unneeded."

"That sounds very logical."

He didn't expect that from an Ylvainan. Then again, Ophelia appeared to be a trueblood Kronon, which meant she was like a religious version of a Larkinson!

If the Kronon Dynasty was filled with brainless zealots, then how could the Kronons get anything done?

"We Kronons have learned it was best to separate our faith from our responsibilities. While I am an Ylvainan and allow my faith to guide my choices, I should never let that get in the way of my duty. The Protectors of the Faith must protect before they can exercise their faith."

"I see. Well, I'm very glad to hear that." Ves nodded while stroking Lucky's back.

"Please keep in mind that my enterprise, which includes the LMC and all of my mech forces, will not adhere to any single faith or culture in its entirety. My enterprise will

continue to grow, and that will bring people from other parts of the galaxy. I would like my organizations to be as inclusive as possible. The goal is to increase cooperation and reduce friction as much as possible among different foreigners. Will you be able to do that, Madame Ophelia?"

The message implicit in his words was clearly directed towards the Ylvainans. He didn't want their culture and beliefs to contaminate the Larkinsons and Brighters under his employ!

"I understand." The old but active woman nodded. "I will endeavor to encourage my fellow Ylvainans to rein themselves in. Mind you, this is not an easy task. None of us have spent much time with foreigners. Many of us are still getting used to working alongside foreigners who doesn't necessarily appreciate what we have to say about our faith."

Ves grimaced. "Does that mean the problem will persist?"

"It.. will, sir." The fleet coordinator looked regretful. "Virtually every Ylvainan in your fleets will not hesitate to follow your orders. However, it is one thing to have the intention, it is another thing to have the ability. We Ylvainans are not trained to rein in our expressions of faith. It is something that is common and expected in our state. From a behavioral perspective, your new Ylvainan spacers will have to learn something that goes against every fiber of their being. Issuing a direct order for them to stop will likely backfire for that reason."

Damnit. Ves wanted to palm his face. He fully understood Ophelia's point.

"Do the best you can, madame. I'm not expecting any miracles, but you should at least endeavor to make every ship welcome to Brighters and other people. Due to our current circumstances, we are hiring a lot of Ylvainans, but in a year we might be forced to recruit a lot of foreigners from another state. I don't want the latter to feel unwelcome."

After finishing his questioning and passing on some more instructions, Ves finally ended his meeting with the fleet coordinator.

All in all, Ves was very glad he had someone like her. Her disciplined mind and lifelong service to the Kronon Dynasty imparted her with a high degree of professionalism.

She still sounded a bit devout in some parts, but she hid that side of her as much as possible.

Ves could sense the devotion within her. His other senses tingled the same way as when he encountered zealots!

"Well, it probably doesn't matter." He shook his head. "At least I don't have to worry about her loyalties."

Once he settled his concerns about his naval assets, he turned his attention back to his design projects.

He began to analyze the logs generated by Joshua's mech.

Ever since Ves upgraded the Deliverer with a high-capacity neural interface, a lot of piloting-related parameters changed.

Many of them rose, reflecting Joshua's increasing control over his assigned mech!

Not only that, but his bond with Prophet Ylvaine had definitely grown!

This was amazing for someone who still admitted that he did not believe in the Ylvainan Faith!

In any case, the logs provided Ves with a wealth of data, though much of it was filled with gibberish as far as he was concerned.

From what little he could figure out, Joshua's performance had clearly improved. This definitely proved that high-capacity neural interfaces had potential!

Ves just had to make sure that the neural interface did not fry Joshua's brain anytime soon!

"Not every mech pilot warrants this neural interface." He mused. "Some are simply not good enough to reach the bottleneck of a standard neural interface."

The neural interface models that the mech industry considered standard was designed around an 'average' mech pilot. This was someone who wasn't too strong or weak.

In most cases, this worked fine, as many mech pilots were close enough to the average to fit with every standard solution.

It was the extreme case that always suffered in these cases. Joshua King would have been a promising asset to any mech regiment. Ves would be remiss if he did not make sure that Joshua had a good mech in his hands."

Ves found it peculiar that Joshua hadn't advanced yet despite possessing strong spiritual potential.

He briefly contemplated the option to perform spiritual surgery on the young mech pilot.

"What an awful idea!"

There was no way that would end well! Cracking Joshua's spirituality apart, only to piece them together with a lot of junk would inevitably kill the initial personality!

"Even if it takes some time, it's better if Joshua can overcome his problem by himself! Otherwise, he's not worthy to become an expert candidate!"

*Chapter 1868 Expensive Payload*

Slowly but surely, a clear line of division emerged within Ves' enterprise.

The 'old guard' consisting of the original Brighters and Larkinsons mostly concerned themselves with the mechs.

The newcomers in the form of Ylvainans disproportionately consisted of spacers. They were crawling all over his ships!

Did Ves like his division? No. Was Ves forced to accept it? Yes.

It was not as if complete segregation had occurred. There were still enough Brighters in the fleet to add some diversity to the crews.

Ves had no interest in managing this situation any further. He passed on his instructions to the fleet coordinator and other people and left them to address his concerns.

In the meantime, he completed his analysis of the test results. The new Deliverer performed admirably with the new neural interface. Though the test only showed the positive sides of the high-capacity model, it was enough to show that there was definitely a reason for its existence!

When Ves went back to Gloriana and showed her the benefits of the new model, she glanced at him with an expression of distaste.

"This only shows the potential of a high-capacity model. All you have shown me is that there is some merit to employing it to our top mech pilots. Most of your mech pilots are not up to that standard yet. They won't be able to derive enough benefits to compensate for the higher likelihood of suffering permanent brain damage."

Ves sighed. "I already told you, Gloriana, it's not just that. A less restricted neural interface will always increase the bond between mech and design spirit."

The two already discussed this topic, so they didn't bother to rehash it any further. Suffice to say, Gloriana remained skeptical, while Ves insisted on doubling down on this new neural interface.

At the very least, it didn't appear to be some sort of trap from the MTA! Ves had already used his exalted status in the Ylvaine Protectorate to his advantage by consulting some of the local neural interface specialists.

The ones who answered back in time had all studied the high-capacity model in detail and judged it to be exactly what it said on the tin. Just like any other neural interface license offered by the MTA, it was devoid of backdoors and secret programming!

With that reassurance, Ves felt completely at ease with its use. He even wanted to make it a standard addition to all of his future mechs! This included both commercial designs, commissioned designs and private designs!

"I doubt the mech markets will appreciate a mech that incorporates such a dangerous neural interface."

Ves grinned. "I don't mind. I'm always pursuing quality over quantity. Even if my products become less attractive, it is still worthwhile to impart them with high-capacity neural interfaces unless I absolutely have to make a lot of sales!"

That shouldn't be necessary, he believed.

"I suspect that many of your customers will rip out its stock neural interface and install a safer version in its place." Gloriana retorted. "You might as well develop a 'safe' variant and a 'performance' variant or something. You can derive most of your sales from the safe variant while satisfying your need for accomplishment with the performance variant!"

"That.. sounds interesting. I'll think about it, though I don't favor it. I don't want any product confusion to occur."

He didn't want to deal with all of the whining and buyer's remorse that would inevitably take place when customers ordered the wrong edition of his designs.

At a certain level, Ves wanted to keep his sales volume low. The Desolate Soldier attracted way too much attention, and not always for the right reasons. Even now, a lot of Soldier mechs were being sold in various parts of the Komodo Star Sector. Most customers sought to abuse their glows to their own ends!

Wary of attracting too much MTA attention, Ves wanted to limit the application of his mechs. Focusing on the high-end market and targeting skilled and elite mech pilots would allow him to continue his passion while at the same time prevent his mechs from proliferating out of his control.

When Ves went back to trying to empower his Larkinson mech, he worked the high-capacity neural interface into the design.

After that, he attempted to explore how he could facilitate the spiritual aspect of the man-machine connection.

This was a rather nebulous area as Ves didn't have an actual mech to output telemetry.

"This data can't be simulated."

In truth, a lot of models existed that could simulate the performance of a neural interface, but only specialists were able to make the most of them! Laymen in this field like Ves would probably do more harm than good.

The results weren't accurate enough. Human brains were simply too complex to model completely. Aside from the conventional reasons that skewed the results, the models didn't include anything related to spirituality!

With such an influential variable missing, how could Ves put his faith in any of these models?

If Ves wanted to make headway into integrating Ancestral Possession into his Larkinson mech, then he needed to wait for two events.

First, he needed the cooperation of the Golden Cat. Ves glanced at the Larkinson Mandate, which appeared a lot more hollow than before.

Everyone felt the Golden Cat's absence. Clixie and Lucky yowled mournfully at the book.

Ever since Ves introduced the Golden Cat to Qilanxo, the Sacred God took the newborn spiritual product under her wing!

Ves had no idea how the teachings proceeded, but everytime the Golden Cat returned to the book to take a nap, she seemed more and more aware and confident of herself.

It was as if the Golden Cat was rapidly growing wiser every day!

The second condition he needed to wait for was the fabrication of a prototype. Only with an actual, physical mech would Ves be able to finetune the integration and cooperation between the Golden Cat, the mech and the mech pilot.

Ves predicted that he would have to depend heavily on intuition in order to make everything work. He didn't really have a solid idea on how he could add the desired capabilities to his design, but he was determined to try!

In the meantime, Ves rejoined Gloriana in refining the more mundane aspects of the mechs.

Though their disagreement caused the mood between them to become awkward, that did not affect their passion and enthusiasm in the project.

The more they worked, the more they fell back into tune with each other. Ves and Gloriana had become very adept at preventing their differences from affecting their cooperation!

At this time, the primary structure of the four configurations had already been set. The pair and their design teams were beginning to work on the finer parts of the modular mech platform.

However, one set of decisions in particular was a bit more significant!

Gloriana brought up her suggestion. "All four configurations are powerful enough that they have some capacity left to spare. Why don't we augment the mechs with secondary armaments? You've always been complaining about the lack of punch. This is your chance to rectify the imbalances!"

"I've already put a lot of thought on this option." Ves replied while pressing his fingers against his forehead. "While there is sufficient capacity to diversify our mech's arsenal, there isn't enough room to add a killer weapon to their loadout."

"Then let's focus on diversity, then. The Larkinson mech are very expensive by your standards. Don't you think it should have the power to fight back?"

The lancer mech, the swordsman mech and the knight mech all possessed a lot of prowess in melee combat, but their ranged countermeasures left much to be desired!

Therefore, both mech designers had been thinking about giving the melee configurations some self-protection ability.

"Adding a secondary rifle is a poor idea." Gloriana said as she crossed this item from the projected list. "The limbs of our melee mechs aren't designed to wield ranged weapons. Accuracy will be poor. We might as well give the configurations a pistol as they are easier to handle."

They quickly moved on to considering integrated weapons. There were many possible options here, though most were a bit too demanding on the design.

After browsing a lot of alternatives, Gloriana eventually paused her browsing on a page that displayed a missile launcher!

"Missiles! That's it!" She grinned and clapped her hand in happiness. "This is perfect for our mechs! Missiles and missile launchers come in all shapes and sizes, so we can easily fit one on all four configurations."

Ves was no stranger to missile launchers, especially the ones mounted on the shoulders of a mech. His old Caesar Augustus and Marc Antony models both used them to decent effect!

The last time he incorporated a missile launcher in a mech was when he designed the Adonis Colossus. Inspired by the aforementioned hybrid mechs, Vicent Ricklin's mech harkened back to his early days as a mech designer!

That said, Ves never went very deep in the study and applications of missiles and missile launching systems.

Every missile included more than just the exploding part. The ECM, targeting and propulsion systems occupied most of the body of a mech, leaving just a modest amount of space for the payload.

"Missiles won't necessarily solve the lack of offensive punch to our design, Gloriana. Only our lancer configuration stands a chance of posing a threat against a highly-armored target."

She shook his head. "You're still thinking in terms of the small and weak missiles used for enormous mass attacks. Don't forget that there is a lot of variety in missile payloads. If you want to deploy your mechs on a routine patrol, then it's sufficient to fill up their launchers with conventional missiles. If we are facing a tough opponent, then we can load the missile launchers up with a hugely potent missile!"

Ves had many problems with this suggestion. The Larkinson mech was not a true missileer mech. None of its four variants included this specialization.

"The targeting system will suck. With so little internal volume devoted to establishing locks and defeating ECM, those missiles launchers will look very unwieldy!"

"If they bother you too much, then we can fit the mechs with a smaller and lesser pair of missile launchers. Their capacity is smaller, but as long as our Larkinson mech can make each missile worth it, then I was fine with this decision!"

Eventually, they settled for a small and slimmer model that could be shaped to match the curved contours of the Larkinson mech.

Each missile launcher was so low profile that they could only launch four standard-sized missiles per salvo!

These missiles were fairly small in proportion to the mech. They usually didn't possess the power to fell a mech with a single hit, so they were often launched en masse to achieve a greater result.

While the size of mech-based missiles was always rather small, their payloads vastly differed in damage type and potency. Some unleashed plasma upon impact. Others released an EMP effect.

Most missiles simply sought to inflict as much damage as possible with a focused explosion.

As Ves began to explore Gloriana's suggestion, he realized that it was yet another decision that relied on superior funding and resources to raise the performance of their Larkinson mech.

There were many missiles laced with exotics that could pose a serious threat to any mech! All of them were expensive, and many cost as much as a mech!

This was an extravagant price, but not an insurmountable one to Ves! Since the Larkinson mech was an outlet of his passion, he didn't hesitate very long before assenting to this addition!

Providing the four configurations with miniature missile launchers was a hugely beneficial change.

The rifleman mech configuration could finally deliver a stronger punch to its opponents. The melee mechs each gained some retaliation capabilities against ranged mechs.

While the mechs wouldn't be able to carry a lot of missiles into battle, as long as their payloads were powerful enough, they didn't need to bring any more firepower!

#### *Chapter 1869 Brutal Pace*

The Larkinson mech was probably one of the most cost-inefficient mechs he ever designed.

Ves felt ashamed at how he let himself go. When presented with difficult design choices, he became more and more inclined to pick the lazy option and rely on his financial superiority rather than his ingenuity in mech design.

"It's as if I was previously rationing my meals because I couldn't afford any better, but then start to gorge myself once I can buy all the food I want!"

From this analogy, Ves was practically binging himself right now! The Larkinson mech became more and more stuffed with wonderful but extremely expensive features!

Fortunately, Ves did not set out to design a commercial mech from the start. Cost efficiency was one of the lowest priorities of a private mech, a mech developed for his own use!

If he was tasked with designing a commissioned mech, then he at least needed to abide by the budget of the client.

"I'm my own client right now." He grinned.

Being able to answer to no one to himself was a liberating experience. Neither the mech market nor the whimsical desires of a capricious client interfered with his demands. He had no need to take the expected product margin into account, nor did he have to add a codpiece onto his mech against his will!

Well, a small part of him wanted to add a subtle 'belt' onto the base platform of the Larkinson mech.

He quickly squashed down that impulse. He was not Vincent Ricklin! He did not need to emphasize his masculinity every second of the day!

Besides, he wasn't designing this mech alone. Gloriana also had a say, though her voice mattered less this time because it was mainly his pet project.

He never lost sight of his goal.

The Larkinson mech was meant to provide as much added value as possible to the Larkinson Clan. The mech had to provide his mech forces with benefits beyond what the market could provide!

This was why he didn't mind that the production cost of the mech rose to astronomic levels. Even with the cost of the Breyer alloy taken out of the equation, the unit price of a single copy might very well exceed the price of an Aurora Titan!

The culprits responsible for ballooning the cost of the mech was the various expensive components and materials Ves had added. While essential components such as the power reactor, flight system and the cockpit failed to attract much attention, they were very expensive compared to other components on the market!

"They're worth it. I don't regret licensing any of these overpriced components!"

All of these goodies served to elevate the Larkinson mech to the limits of third-class mechs or beyond. Ves fully embraced the notion of treating the Larkinson mech as his passion project.

Ves not only wanted to incorporate all of the features and nuances in the Larkinson mech that he refrained from adding to his other designs. He also wanted to take this opportunity a step further and push through some 'spicy' innovations!

In many subtle ways, the Larkinson mech design departed from his previous products by a significant margin. Not even the Deliverer, which was already extreme for a mech design, contained as many radical elements as his current project!

One of the subtler innovations he pushed through was adding various ways for the design spirit to 'nudge' the mech to move or act in a certain direction.

He did so during a design session when he became particularly inspired. He didn't quite know what he was doing, but he was adding several optional control methods to the various components that seemed redundant.

The neural interface was the key. As long as the neural interface outputted a signal from a second source, the mech would obey as long as the first source did not object!

Ordinarily, there was no reason to add these tweaks to the mech design. It added a vulnerability to the mech as the second source could very well take the form of tampering or outside interference!

Nonetheless, Ves believed the chances of that happening were low. The benefits were well worth the risk in his eyes. This was essentially incorporating an innovation that he already applied to the Devil Tiger.

Back then, Ves gave Zeigra, its design spirit, full control over the movements of its tail!

"This time, the control goes beyond just a balancing component."

The tail of a tiger mech only played a marginal role in its functioning. This contrasted sharply with how extensively Ves embedded backdoors throughout the base platform and individual configurations.

He did all of this to provide the Golden Cat with agency on the battlefield!

As the progenitor of the Golden Cat, he believed in his own product. He had faith that the ancestral spirit was completely dedicated to the Larkinson Clan and would never abuse her access to the systems of the Larkinson mech!

That said, Ves made sure the Golden Cat only had enough authority to 'nudge' the mech. Taking over outright control was a step too far even to Ves.

As a principle, the mech pilot should always be in control of the mech. No one else. Not the mech designer, not the mech, not the design spirit should ever interfere with the primacy of the mech pilot!

"A mech is not a mech if the mech pilot is not in control anymore." He muttered.

He dubbed this new feature Ancestral Assistance to reflect that the Golden Cat should only ever play an assisting role. There should never be a case where she would have to take control directly!

"I don't even know if that's even possible." He mused. "It's an interesting experiment, though."

Once he was done with these novel adjustments, he showed off his work to Gloriana as if he was a kid running to his mother.

"Well? What do you think?"

The female mech designer studied the altered schematic with a thoughtful expression. Her face soon turned pensive.

"You're very... bold. I give you that. Don't you care about the potential the mech might get hijacked?"

Ves shook his head. "The mech pilot remains in control. He can override any command from any other source. I made sure to hardwire that into the hardware and software of our mech. I spent extra time to add some redundant programming to the operating system in order to make sure that third parties can't wrest control!"

"I admit that your precautions are adequate, but.. it's the principle of the matter. This is yet another worrying sign of your deviances, Ves. You're getting weirder and weirder in your mech design. While I understand where you are coming from, just because we are working on a private project doesn't mean you have to abandon each and every requirement set by the market!"

"I'm not adding stuff willy-nilly to my mech! Every addition improves my mech in some way!"

"You're indulging in yourself too much!" She hit back! "Your restraint is getting less and less. Our mech is already overloaded with your 'innovations'. I don't think it will benefit it if you continue to add any more unplanned features to its design!"

Though Ves disagreed with his girlfriend, he was still affected by her rebuke. He stopped looking for opportunities to add further innovations to the design.

Instead, Ves and Gloriana transitioned into the refinement and optimization phase of the design project. Days passed by as they began to tighten the overall design and squeeze out more performance out of the rough implementations.

They weren't able to devote enough time to each of the four configurations. Many refinements required a lot of time, and Ves was forced to skip sleep for multiple days at a time in order to meet his increasingly brutal schedule.

Physically, his body could go on an extended period without sleep. Mentally, his mood began to be affected by his continuous obsession over his work.

This was not a bad thing! The pressure and urgency drove him to work even harder and commit himself more to his project. Even as his mind was starting to become a little bit frayed, he continued to persist by borrowing from the strength of his strong Spirituality!

He grew even less aware of his outside circumstances. He stopped showing up at his daily meetings with Gavin and others because he didn't even want to leave his design lab!

He fabricated his own bed and turned one of the private offices into his bedroom in order to skip the travel time between the Austen Estate and his headquarters!

The only person who could pull him back from his design fugues was Gloriana.

"You're very intense lately." She said mildly. "I'm concerned about your health. I love designing mechs as much as anyone, but I don't skip my sleep every day!"

Ves embraced her in a brief hug. "I'm not asking you to. I can afford to go without sleep because of my augmentations. Your limits are lower than mine, so you should never try to imitate me. What you have contributed to the project is already sufficient!"

"Really?"

"Really." He smiled and kissed her on the lips. "I love you, Gloriana. Designing this mech with you is one of the most important reasons I can persist in my work!"

She looked adoringly into his eyes. "Oh Ves..."

Small moments like these invigorated Ves whenever he began to approach a mental limit. Sharing his passion with someone he loved was one of the greatest pleasures of his life. It was such a far cry from his days where he designed all alone!

Even the design teams that assisted their work from the side played considerable roles in making his marathon sessions more tolerable. He could offload all of the tedious and time-consuming tasks to his assistants. As long as the assignments didn't require too much knowledge or skill, Ves could pass them off to others without any further worries!

This was a very considerable luxury that Ves had neglected for too long. He even felt that he needed to expand his design teams in order to ease his burdens even more!

All of these factors played a role in sustaining his drive to design the Larkinson mech. No matter what kind of hindrances he encountered, he always managed to overcome them in some way!

As the first iteration of the design neared completion, Ves began to feel as if he had made a great accomplishment. He felt very good about his work so far. As long as the first prototype performed within expectations, then all of his efforts weren't in vain!

"I poured my very heart and soul in this design!" Ves clenched his fist and thumped it against his heart. "This mech design must succeed! My passion and my vision are on the line!"

The Larkinson mech design was a high-stakes bet in his eyes. He incorporated many major and minor innovations that he hadn't adequately tested before.

Though Gloriana questioned his weird design choices many times, in the end she had chosen to believe in his vision.

Ves appreciated her support. He could have never designed the Larkinson mech up to this point without her indispensable help!

Though it was a pity that her reluctance dampened some of her passion in the project, Ves hoped that his overpowering drive more than compensated for the shortfall!

"It's finished!"

After another day of refinement, both Ves and Gloriana agreed to set the current state of the design as the first iteration of their mech!

The Tovars, the Ylvainans and the other assistant mech designers practically collapsed in their chairs. With Ves setting such a frantic example, his design teams sought to keep up as much as possible!

Even Gloriana looked tired beyond belief as she had to cope with the rapid pace of design work. Ves was like a monster in the last month! He almost never tired and constantly progressed the mech design whenever she wasn't paying attention!

Reaching this important checkpoint was a massive relief to her. Now that the design had reached this stage, the upcoming design work would continue to focus on optimization as opposed to innovation.

Her ordeal was over!

### *Chapter 1870 Acquired Loyalty*

Though it sounded paradoxical, Ves believed the best course of action after completing the first iteration was to take a break.

Ves had always been aware that he had become consumed in his work. The Larkinson mech was so important to his future and the future of the Larkinson Clan that he never allowed himself a break during the core phases of the project!

Yet now that project moved on to testing the earliest incarnation of the modular mech platform, Ves and Gloriana deliberately withdrew from the stage.

Instead, they tasked the two design teams to fabricate and test the prototype in all four configurations in the next week.

"That's not enough time!" Miles Tovar protested. "We won't be able to test every significant aspect of the prototype in a couple of days. Don't forget that we have to test the prototype three more times in order to measure the performance of the other three configurations."

"Then fabricate four prototypes, then." Gloriana suggested. "We have the production capacity and we should have enough test pilots to put the four prototypes through their paces at the same time. The only question is whether our material stockpile is adequate enough to fabricate so many expensive mechs."

Ves grinned. "I already prepared the materials in advance. I've already imported a considerable amount of auxiliary materials and lesser exotics. It's a bit more difficult to secure a lot of Breyer alloy at once, but my Battle Criers have continued to procure enough of this vital material to fabricate enough mechs. Be sure to recycle the materials once we are done with the prototype!"

Several months had gone by since he started this design project. This was enough time for the production loop aboard the Scarlet Rose to yield a huge pile of Breyer alloy!

In fact, the only outside factor he cared about when he was in his most driven mood was the supply of Breyer alloy. His Larkinson mech practically hinged the availability of this strong and valuable material. Whether he wanted to make use of its default formula or the one geared towards shock absorption, it was incredibly difficult to fabricate his mech without the essential contribution from 'Cassandra Breyer'!

Ves felt very thankful that his captive spiritual sorceress continued to supply him with 'free' materials. Though the witch had harassed him from time to time, Ves figured that as long as he kept burning her body and escape pod at a rapid pace, she wouldn't have that much energy left to haunt him at inconvenient times.

"So far, she hasn't been bothering me. Am I supposed to feel relieved or apprehensive?"

Her lack of intervention might be a signal that she expended her available reserve of energy. On the other hand, it might also be a sign that she was saving up her spiritual energy for a big move!

Whatever the case, Ves couldn't do anything about it. Cassandra Breyer's mummified body was encased in a runic shell of spiritual energy that seemed impervious to all of his investigations.

Without deepening his understanding of spiritual engineering, Ves had no hope of cracking her existence anytime soon!

"Well, it's not as if I'm curious in the first place." He shrugged. "I'm better off staying as far away from her origin as possible!"

So far, the Battle Criers hadn't reported anything unusual taking place in Compartment G-13, so Ves did not worry about Cassandra any further.

Right now, Ves should take full advantage of his temporary break. As his subordinate mech designers proceeded to band together with a number of mech technicians in order to form four separate fabrication teams, he left the design labs in order to catch up with what he missed.

So far, nothing important enough to disturb him from his work had taken place. Neither Gavin nor Raymond informed him of any major developments.

While the LMC and the other organizations experienced many changes lately, none of it was too far outside their expectations. Most importantly, his fleets continued to grow in size as more and more Ylvainan light carriers continued to be delivered to their doorsteps.

Of course, more ships meant more crew. Practically all of them consisted of Ylvainans, which continued to weigh heavily on Ves. Right now, he had significantly more Ylvainans than Brighters in his employ!

Such a vast shift resulted in shifts in how his enterprise was being run. Aside from the Larkinson Clan which had nothing to do with the Ylvainans, his other organizations were starting to take on a different character!

"The change in culture and mood is a lot more noticeable at the bottom than at the top." Gavin reported. "The top positions still haven't changed, but a lot of Ylvainans have been added to the middle and lower layers of our hierarchy."

"Do the Ylvainans expect representation at the top?" Ves frowned.

"No. Not yet at least. I'm never really sure what the Ylvainans want. They're.. they're so fanatical about working for you that it sometimes sounds as if they're willing to become your slaves!"

Ves scoffed. "That's religion for you. The more people believe in something, the more they lose their common sense! Fanatics are some of the worst people in the galaxy?"

"Well, compared to other Ylvainans, the ones we recruit turn out to be a lot more pious than the average in the Protectorate. They're all well-meaning, though. Most of them are nice and they have received strict orders not to push their beliefs in our faces. It's just..."

"It's difficult to avoid their influence when they're so ubiquitous. I'm aware of the consequences, Benny, but we don't have a choice. Our ships won't run well without competent crews. It would be a severe dereliction of duty if I throw them into battle while they're being run by amateurs!"

The original Larkinson Family had never been geared towards independence. The old family mainly concerned itself with training mech pilots.

All of their other needs were met, so the Larkinsons only concerned themselves with sustaining and adding to the glorious heritage of their predecessors. Hardly any Larkinson pursued a career in ship command!

This shortcoming hit Ves and the Larkinson Clan like a shuttle now that they attempted to become an independent existence. Trying to become their own state meant they had to address all of the areas that they previously neglected or took for granted!

Considering the importance of ships to his future plans, it hurt Ves a lot that he didn't have any good options at his disposal.

The Bright Republic would never be as generous as the Protectorate. As the suspected target of the sandmen's final attack, there was no way the Brighters would allocate their precious shipyard capacity to Ves! As for recruiting valuable spacers, forget about it! Not a single Brighter spacer had signed up his fleets in the last couple of months!

In contrast, the Ylvainans were very eager. Too eager perhaps. Ves just felt very sour that all of the applicants consisted of the devoted believers of the Ylvainan Faith. They all seemed to convince themselves that the Great Prophet had passed a holy mission onto them to assist the Bright Martyr in any capacity possible!

This was a very precarious reason to work for him! Ves was deeply aware that such a one-dimensional reason could easily backfire on him if the Ylvainan Faith turned against him! As long as he was stripped of his status as the Bright Martyr, why would any Ylvainan in his employ continue to remain loyal?

"They aren't loyal to me." Ves made an important realization. "They're loyal to the idea of the Bright Martyr. They believe that I'm blessed or anointed by the Great Prophet!"

There was a difference between imparted and acquired loyalty. Ves believed he developed the former with his core followers, the Avatars and the Larkinson Clan. This was a kind of loyalty that was difficult to shake once formed. Because Ves painstakingly built it up through his own efforts, he was confident he could keep hold of it in the worst of times!

It was a bit different with acquired loyalty. Ves gained the loyalty of so many Ylvainans by depending on his prior accomplishments. He hadn't done anything in specific to secure the loyalty of these workers.

"Easy come, easy go. It's never difficult to lose what I've gained without expending any effort!"

Right now, Ves could only bank on his strong connection to 'Prophet Ylvaine' to keep these fanatics in line.

He was quite aware that this was not a long-term solution. Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was an ally and a partner to him. Allies and partners weren't permanent. His previous relations with Master Olson, Marcella Bollinger and the Bright Republic were prime examples of cases where his relationships changed!

While Ves believed that he would always be able to remain on the good side of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, he couldn't afford to bet his entire future on this sole assumption.

"I have to prepare some contingency plans if the worst comes true." He decided. "In the meantime, I should also find some ways to convert their acquired loyalty into imparted loyalty!"

He wanted to turn every employee into his man or woman! Regardless of their origins and backgrounds, he wanted to turn his future grand expedition into an existence that transcended the local cultures and beliefs!

"I can do so by forming my own culture!"

This was a very huge endeavor and couldn't be done in a single day. He had already taken the first steps with the establishment of the Larkinson Clan and the empowerment of the Larkinson Mandate.

With the Golden Cat as the spiritual heart, Ves hoped that the norms and values of the Larkinson Clan would slowly propagate to the LMC and his other organizations.

Ves was not deluded to think he could supplant the Ylvainan Faith in its entirety within his enterprise. He just wanted to decrease its prominence until it became a background entity.

As Ves shared some of his ideas with Gavin and Raymond, the two mostly agreed with his sentiment.

"The Ylvainans aren't problems per se, but they will definitely take over your organizations if we don't restrict their behavior." Raymond said. "Most of our clansmen don't really know what to make of the Ylvainans. They're so obviously superstitious, but they're also some of the friendliest foreigners we have met. It's very difficult to hate your fans."

"I think we need to adopt more drastic measures to integrate them into our way of life, boss. We should make it clear that the Ylvainans are supposed to adapt to us instead of the opposite."

"How do you suggest we do that, Benny?"

"You already told us how. The Larkinson Clan should become the model that everyone aspires to become. Don't you have a retainer structure in place? And didn't your clan open up a road for adoption for retainers?"

Ves and Raymond both looked at Gavin in shock!

"You're suggesting that we give the Ylvainans a chance to become like us!" Raymond exploded. "Do you know how controversial that sounds? Their foreign beliefs will weaken our clan and dilute our core values. What do you think, Ves?"

Once he got over his shock, Ves seriously considered the possibility.

"I'm not sure it will work out the way you think, Benny." He eventually spoke. "I'm leaning towards Raymond's opinion. I don't think the Ylvainans want to turn into Larkinsons. They're still committed to their own identities. There is nothing we can offer to them that can lure them away from their faith. In my opinion, it's pointless to try. That's why I emphasize the need to integrate them while respecting their beliefs."

In other words, Ves was stuck with the Ylvainan Faith as long as he continued to employ its believers. As long as they had no reason to abandon him, they would probably be a part of his enterprise for generations to come!