

Mech 1951

Chapter 1951 At A Crossroads

Part of the success of his previous commercial mechs was because Ves often identified some unmet demand.

With so many different products on the market, it was hard for Ves to stand out. Yet because of his unique design philosophy, he somehow succeeded where others would have failed.

Ves fully recognized that while designing a well-functioning mech with superior performance was still important, it could still be lost in the sea of product offerings if thousands of competitors already realized the same mech concept!

Differentiation was vitally important. He did not wish to invest months in designing a commercial mech, only for his end product to be regarded as a generic entry into an oversaturated market category!

"Do you have any bright ideas, Benny?"

"Our marketers have analyzed plenty of opportunities, but most of them are fairly localized or specific to certain states. At the scope the LMC operates, it's important to offer products that possess more universal appeal."

"Send me the reports. I'll go over them later." Ves told his assistant. "Let's move on. Aside from the lack of new products, is there anything else I need to address?"

"There are plenty of problems that could use your attention, boss. Most of them are fairly minor, though, so you can address them at your leisure. There is one issue that is rather urgent. Do you remember the Tovars that comprise our first design team?"

"Oh."

Ves overlooked their situation. Miles Tovar, Cherie Tovar, Vela Tovar, Pachtold Tovar and Gilbert Tovar were all citizens of the Bright Republic!

That wasn't very special in itself. Ves was technically still a Brighter, and so were many other Larkinsons!

The issue was that half of his subordinate mech designers belonged to one of the most dominant families of a state that recently stabbed the Larkinson Family in the back!

The identities of Miles Tovar and the rest were far more complicated than that of Joshua King or any other random Brighter citizen in his employ.

They didn't just represent themselves. By virtue of their last names, they also represented the Tovar Family!

"Have they left the company and returned home to the Bright Republic?"

"Not exactly..." Gavin trailed. "Their situation is a bit more complicated. You should hear them out directly."

"Oh. I have some time before I'm scheduled to talk to Raymond and the other leaders of the clan."

The two continued to go over some issues related to the company. Overall, Ves didn't really find them to be particularly pertinent. Leaders such as Raymond already did a great job in managing the LMC through this current crisis.

It was only issues like the one concerning the Tovars that was way above Raymond's head. This was something Ves had to confront in person.

"Connect me to the Tovars. Where are they, by the way?"

"All of your mech designers are aboard the Scarlet Rose. They're needed there in order to assist in performing repairs on the Bright Warriors and fabricate new ones."

That made sense. The Scarlet Rose was a former CRC mobile supply frigate and possessed one of the most impressive ship-based mech workshops of his current fleet.

Only Gloriana's Scarlet Chaser offered better facilities!

However, Ves was not entirely comfortable about putting too many people on his latest prize ship. The Scarlet Rose was the source of all of the Breyer alloy that now comprised much of the metallic content of his Bright Warrior mechs! The ultimate source of this strategically-important material had to be kept secret at all cost!

"I need to talk to the Tovars right away."

It didn't take long for Gavin to pull the Tovars off their current duties. Because the fleet was currently travelling through FTL, they could only meet each other through projections.

Ves wanted to face his First Design Team in person. He'd be able to use his spiritual senses to glean some hints of their emotions and be able to influence them in turn.

"Mr. Larkinson." Miles Tovar's projection bowed and greeted him respectfully.

The others soon followed suit.

Their behavior was very peculiar. As the descendants of a powerful political family, Ves did not believe that Miles and the rest were nerds who were completely oblivious on how to conduct themselves!

From all of the time he spent with them, he discovered that they were always deliberate in their conduct.

Right now, the Tovar Family's ties with Ves were very problematic. The Friday Coalition probably took a very dim view on Senator Tovar's strategy to hedge his bets and foster relations with both sides.

Under these conditions, the Tovar mech designers still chose to greet Ves with respect. In fact, they displayed even more reverence towards him than before!

In fact, if the Tovars wanted to leave, they could have just tendered their resignations and departed home in the last month. No one would blame them for returning to their family instead of continuing to consort with the 'enemy'!

Ves crossed his arms. "Benny has already brought me up to speed on what is going on between the Bright Republic and the Friday Coalition. What I want to know is your stance on the matter."

The Tovars each glanced at each other before their leader spoke on their behalf.

"We want to stay."

Ves blinked.

"Pardon?"

"We want to continue to work for the LMC." Miles expanded. "My fellow cousins and I have been thinking long and hard on what we want. We.. kind of like it here. While we no longer enjoy as much regard or privilege as before, there is something very satisfying about being a part of your team. The situation back home is much more complicated. We are often forced to work for our family as opposed to our vocation. I feel I have made a lot more progress in a single year of working under you as opposed to five years of trying to run my own company!"

The other Tovars expressed similar sentiments or simply nodded in agreement.

While Ves knew that every Tovar was also a politician, he could hear nothing but honesty in their words. Mech designers always understood each other the best. He readily believed that they truly wished to continue their current arrangement!

However, the current situation made that very difficult. As much as Ves wanted to keep them, their divided loyalties made it very difficult for him to continue to extend his trust to them. Who could say they wouldn't become the next Dr. Guernica someday?

"What about the Tovar Family?" Ves directly addressed the elephant in the room. "The Friday Coalition no longer allows the Bright Republic to remain uninvolved. The government has chosen a side."

"It's not as bad as you think, Mr. Larkinson. While our Tovar Family is still a part of the ruling class of the Bright Republic, we have continued to support you and the Larkinsons as we have promised. While the current political climate has made it difficult for our family, we possess a very deep foundation in the fabric of our state. We are confident that our family will be able to weather the storm. We have even undertaken many risky measures to help your Larkinson Family in various ways."

That was true. Calabast did mention that the Tovar Family and a bunch of other supporters assisted the Larkinson Family in the dark. They dared to defy the prevailing trend and incurred a considerable amount of risk in doing so! Their decision to march out of lockstep with their peers was either very shrewd or very stupid!

Ves couldn't ignore the goodwill offered by the Tovar Family. His opinion of them improved considerably. Unlike last time, the Tovars had firmly stuck to his side!

Naturally, they weren't doing it out of the good of their heart. Senator Tovar clearly wanted to form a backup plan in the event the Hexadric Hegemony won the Komodo War.

"I acknowledge the help your family has provided. However, that makes your continued presence in my employ even more sensitive."

"We know." Miles responded. "We still want to continue to work for you. If you will have us, Senator Tovar is prepared to make the situation less awkward for us by exiling us from the family."

What?!

"Are you serious?"

None of the Tovars showed any doubt. "We are. Our relatives have already given us their blessings to part ways with the family in order to offer our primary loyalty to you and the LMC. To be honest, we don't miss the Tovar Family very much. Ever since we started travelling with you, we are looking forward to seeing the galaxy and beyond. If we chose to leave the LMC and go back to the Bright Republic, then chances are we'll never be able to amount to anything more than a handful of forgettable Apprentice Mech Designers."

Miles Tovar certainly didn't mince any words when it came to his own future prospect. Working under superstars like Ves and Gloriana made it very difficult for them to hold on to any self-esteem.

While Ves was a little disappointed in their lack of confidence in themselves, he applauded their willingness to confront reality without resorting to excuses. It was easy to resort to lies and rationalizations in order to avoid hurting their precious egos.

He actually expected the Tovars to possess an inflated sense of confidence, but it appeared the Tovars were more astute than he credited them for.

Ves felt as if he reached a crossroads. The decision he made here would be indicative of how he treated his other workers.

In the context of Calabast's proposal, this decision took on additional significance because Ves was in effect contemplating whether the Tovar mech designers should be allowed to join the Larkinson Clan!

On the surface, he wasn't a fan of divided loyalties. He wanted to trust his fellow clansmen to put the interests of the clan before the interests of another faction!

Ves doubted whether Miles Tovar would be able to act against the interests of the Tovar Family in order to advance the interests of the Larkinson Clan.

Then again, such a situation was unlikely to occur for the time being. The Tovars still sided with the Larkinsons. As long as this was the case, Ves might be able to accept the Tovar Mech Designers as clansmen!

The only issue was how he could be sure that Miles, Cherie and the rest were truly invested in the Larkinson Clan. If they lacked sincerity, then Ves would only be inviting disaster!

As Ves thought about this implacable problem, he suddenly turned his gaze away from the projection and towards Nitaa.

He held out his hand. "Can you pass me the Larkinson Mandate?"

Though his silent bodyguard didn't understand why he made this random request, she dutifully handed over the book that had been braced onto her armor.

As soon as Ves held the book, he basked in its glow. Goldie's strong and lively presence greeted Ves with a cute yawn.

Nyaaa.

Ves spiritually issued a request.

"Can you check these people out and see whether they would make for good additions to the clan?"

Nyaaa?

"Just check whether they are sincere. Can you do that from this distance?"

Nyaaa!

Goldie seemed to be more versatile than he thought. The fact that they were on different ships travelling through FTL didn't seem to stop her from inspecting the Tovars.

After a dozen seconds, the Golden Cat turned away from the projection.

Nyaa.

"Really?"

Nyaa nyaa.

"Okay. Thank you, Goldie. I'll play with you later."

Nyaaaaaaa!

The answer she provided was simple, but carried immense implications. According to the Golden Cat, the Tovar mech designers were truly willing to dedicate themselves to their current jobs!

Even though they were still Tovars and would always remember their roots, they primarily saw themselves as mech designers.

The Tovar Family, for all of their support they provided to Miles, Cherie, Vela, Pachtold and Gilbert, none of them had been able to achieve genuine success in their careers!

A rich and powerful family could only provide them with some conveniences. The Tovars didn't possess a notable mech designer tradition, so they were pretty much clueless when it came to raising mech designers!

Only a mech designer could guide other mech designers! This was true since the beginning of the Age of Mechs, where the nascent Mech Trade Association already established a strong tradition of compelling established mech designers to teach the next generation of professionals!

In that context, the willingness of the Tovar mech designers to part ways with their own family made sense.

The question was whether Ves should accept them at all. While he appreciated the help they offered, they weren't particularly talented or notable. Only Miles possessed spiritual potential, and he still had a long way to go before he was worthy enough to become a Journeyman.

"This is a complicated issue." Ves eventually said. "Let me think about it. Don't be in a hurry to decide."

Though they looked a little disappointed, the Tovars tried to maintain their smiles.

"We shall await your decision."

Chapter 1952 Spiritual Monitoring System

After Ves ended his call with the Tovar mech designers, he fell into thought while Gavin dutifully remained silent.

His earlier discussion might have been simpler if Ves didn't talk with Calabast beforehand.

Her proposal continued to dominate his thoughts. It even started to color his judgement, which was very precarious because he himself didn't know his own stance on the matter!

Ves looked down on the Larkinson Mandate. The ancestral heirloom's glow had grown even stronger despite the loss of a number of connections.

He expected the Golden Cat to grow weaker or become downcast after the deaths of dozens mech pilots, but instead she looked as upbeat as ever.

Nyaaa.

Ves caressed her intangible body with a spiritual projection. The cat squinted and enjoyed his touch.

Though they didn't share any words, they conveyed their feelings and emotions in a different way.

He felt a lot less confused now that he sampled Goldie's opinion. As the spirit that represented the Larkinson Clan, Ves only had to gauge her reaction in order to determine what the clan wanted!

Of course, just because Goldie approved of a decision didn't mean it was the best choice to make.

Right now, Goldie didn't show much aversion towards the idea of adding a lot of outsiders to the clan. In fact, she even showed some eagerness at the thought of welcoming so many many Larkinsons to the fold!

The crucial difference why Goldie was a lot more optimistic than Ves was because she was a spiritual entity by nature.

Due to her central position in the Larkinson Clan, she was able to peer through the heart of every clansman.

She didn't fear adopting potential traitors into the clan because Goldie would instantly be able to detect them as long as they pledged an oath in her presence!

Once she formed a connection with the new clansmen, she would continue to keep an eye on them without their knowledge.

It was as if Ves had inadvertently designed a spiritual monitoring system when he conceived of an ancestral spirit for the clan!

Unlike electronic monitoring systems, it was a lot harder to jam or tamper with spiritual monitoring systems! The permanent spiritual connections that Goldie maintained with every member of the clan would continue to stay in effect regardless of how much his clansmen tried to isolate themselves!

This was a unique and exceptionally useful tool to ensure the loyalty of the new Larkinsons.

However, the story wasn't so simple.

Just as the Golden Cat affected the Larkinsons, the Larkinsons also shaped the Golden Cat.

While this interaction was a lot stronger in the early days, Ves ultimately designed the Golden Cat to pose as a collective representation of the Larkinsons.

For example, if the Larkinsons all lost their morals and turned into pirates, then Goldie would eventually be tainted by their poison and become a cruel and degenerate spirit.

While Ves designed some safeguards in the Golden Cat by putting more weight in the values she adopted early on as opposed to the ones she assimilated later, he could not go too far in sticking to the past.

The Larkinson Clan needed to be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances, and Goldie had to be open-minded enough to accept new ideas.

As a result, introducing a lot of new outsiders into the clan risked warping Goldie into a direction that Ves wasn't fully comfortable with. Just thinking about how thousands of Ylvainans would flood the Golden Cat with veneration towards Prophet Ylvaine frightened him beyond his wits!

Ves could not stand by and let Goldie transform into becoming Ylvaine's greatest fan. If he decided to accept Calabast's proposal, he had to find a way to integrate all of that diversity while maintaining the essence of the Larkinson Clan.

As he continued to mull over this issue, his meeting with the Larkinsons soon began.

A bunch of elders from the clan, ranging from Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson to Clinton Larkinson joined the conference call from various ships. The conference room lit up with various projections.

Everyone looked at Ves.

"You're awake."

"I am."

"Good to have you back, patriarch."

"Thank you."

After they were done exchanging small talk, they immediately proceeded to discuss the most critical issue.

"I'm not sure if Gavin or your girlfriend has informed you, but there are a number of clansmen who have applied to leave our clan. They want to depart as soon as we meet with Ark and the members of the old family that escaped the Republic." Raymond gently started.

Everyone was watching Ves' reaction like a hawk. They wanted to see how the patriarch reacted to such an egregious development.

Someone with very little control and quick to anger would definitely blow his top!

Ves did not do so. Not only did he have prior warning, he didn't really care about the departure of weak-minded rabble who possessed no stomach for hardship.

"We have never prohibited Larkinson clansmen from leaving the clan." Ves eventually spoke. "I would like our clan to hold the same stance as the original Larkinson Family. If at any point a Larkinson believes they no longer have a future in the clan, they should be free to part ways without any fuss or punishment."

His calm cadence quietly reassured the most influential elders, many of whom were members of the Executive Council and Larkinson Assembly.

Yet just because Ves was okay with it didn't mean that the other Larkinsons were as accepting!

"Two-hundred of our clansmen are leaving, Ves! Their selfishness will weaken us in a time where we can least afford it! They should at least offer some compensation for the harm they cause with their departure!"

The words of one of the members of the council provoked a brief but seemingly familiar argument. Ves heard both sides but did not sway from his decision.

"I agree that leaving the clan while it is in the middle of a battle or a very precarious situation is no different from betrayal. That is clearly not allowed. However, I think it is detrimental to act as strict as the Mech Corps with regards to leaving. The two-hundred clansmen who want to leave at least have the decency to wait until we reach the Sentinel Kingdom before they depart."

"That's only because they want to keep riding our ships while enjoying our protection against any potential Fridayman ambush!"

That was true, but Ves didn't really care.

"Look, it seems their departure is pretty much set in stone. What do you want?"

"We want you to talk to them and persuade them to reconsider." Raymond answered. "We tried to convince the Larkinsons who intend to leave to change their minds, but we aren't as persuasive as you. They are too taken in by the new vision that Ark Larkinson has set for the Larkinson Family. Only you have the clout to compete against an expert pilot!"

Ves frowned. "What does Uncle Ark want to do?"

"Venerable Ark wants to attach the Larkinson Family to another state. I heard that the members of the old family are considering whether to dedicate themselves to the Sentinel Kingdom. With their recent troubles, they could use the help. I even heard a rumor that Sentinel offered to elevate the old family into a noble house in return for their military service!"

"What?! That's a very big offer!"

Kingdoms generally weren't keen on inviting foreigners. The Sentinel Kingdom already possessed enough noble houses, and all of them had already carved out every piece of territory.

The old family simply wasn't set up as a noble house. They possessed no governance experience and they weren't very adept in the ruthless politics that was essential to keep a noble house in power!

Speaker Ovrin Larkinson shook his head. "That rumor isn't very credible. Ark would never in a million years allow the formation of House Larkinson. We have fought the Vesians long enough to know how aristocracy corrupts. I think that Ark is more likely to decide to leave the Komodo Star Sector entirely and find a more decent state to offer the family's services."

As someone who intended to leave the Komodo Star Sector himself, Ves didn't blame Ark for leaving.

Half of the star sector turned into hostile territory, and the other half was aligned to a state that elevated females over males. There was nowhere in the current star sector that the Larkinson Family could settle and still retain their old values and way of life.

Yet Ves believed that Ark and the old family would have to travel very far in order to find a state that was worthy enough to meet their demands.

The Vicious Mountain Star Sector worshipped mech pilots and especially expert pilots like Venerable Ark. Yet its warlords also engaged in frequent scuffles and destructive conflicts just to earn more glory!

Their interpretation of honor was a lot less about sacrifice and a lot more about padding their battle records!

As for the Majestic Teal Star Sector, political intrigue was rife there. Even though full-blown wars were rather rare there, its decadent rulers engaged in constant backstabbing and proxy wars while shifting alliances as frequently as they changed their clothes!

From the stories Ves heard about Majestic Teal, honor was just an empty word there. A lot of people from Majestic Teal liked to boast about their honor and valor in battle, but it was really just a tool to raise their reputation. Whether their honor was authentic or not was no concern as long as no one exposed the truth!

In short, the Larkinson Family would have to travel very far away to find a compatible state to offer its services!

Ves wasn't the only one to recognize this problem.

Clinton Larkinson sighed. "If there aren't any good options available, then Ark might turn the Larkinsons into mercenaries, at least for a time. They can work and keep their skills sharp as they move further and further away from our home. Eventually, they'll find a

good state or star sector to settle in if they don't get ambushed or robbed along the way."

Every Larkinson in the conference room displayed some concern to their fellow Larkinsons.

No one suggested that they should absorb the old family into the clan. There was no way to persuade these Larkinsons to get over their hard feelings when they were targeted by Ves' enemies.

Even his famous Devil Tongue was probably unable to convince his own uncle to take part in his risky venture!

The discussion proceeded onwards. However, Ves continually showed very little interest in speaking with the leavers.

"I don't want to waste my energy on those who don't abide by our clan's motto." Ves firmly set his foot down. "Even if ninety percent of the clan wants to leave, I will still answer the same way because I only want comrades at my side who I can trust in battle!"

While a lot of Larkinson elders looked disappointed, they grudgingly accepted his argument.

Ves wasn't wrong by any means, but the departure of so many Larkinsons hurt the clan immensely.

"Did Calabast come to you with her proposal?"

Groans immediately sounded across the conference room as at least half of the elders showed some sort of reaction.

"Who is Calabast? What is her proposal all about?" A clueless assembly member asked.

It appeared that Calabast only approached the most senior Larkinsons with her radical proposal. This was helpful in maintaining stability. With all of the setbacks it suffered, the clan could hardly endure another shock!

However, Ves saw little point in secrecy. Besides, enough time had passed that his clansmen should be able to discuss this idea without losing their temper.

He quickly introduced Calabast's suggestion.

It didn't take long for the recently-enlightened Larkinsons elders to react!

"Impossible! Becoming a Larkinson is not a matter of changing your last name!"

"There are too many Ylvainans! Their religious expression is cute, but it's all superstition! We can't allow our descendants to turn into cultists!"

"A lot of mech pilots who risked their lives during the Battle for Kesseling VIII deserve to be honored. However, what have the civilians done for us to warrant the same treatment? Inducting them in the clan will only weaken our martial tradition! From the founding of the Bright Republic, our heritage has always revolved around mechs and mech pilots! We should keep our focus pure and avoid any distractions!"

Most of the sentiments sounded negative towards Calabast's proposal. Ves didn't expect anything different.

Since Ves wasn't sure about his stance on the matter, he didn't bother to support or reject the proposal.

"Please discuss this suggestion at the Larkinson Assembly and the Executive Council." He requested. "Don't discard it right away. No matter what decision you end up with, I hope you'll back it up with serious arguments!"

Rather than continue to wrestle over this decision, Ves just decided to wash his hands off it and let the rest of the clan decide!

In the meantime, Ves could start a new design project!

Chapter 1953 Spirit and Body

A few days went by as Ves continued to meet with different people.

He discussed the sprawling disposition of vessels with Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon.

"We have accumulated a lot of carriers and other vessels, but by and large they are quite vulnerable against enemy attacks." She told him through a projection. "While we have an adequate amount of mechs to protect our fleet, there are various problems related to coordination. Some vessels belong to the Larkinson Clan, some vessels follow the lead of the Avatars of Myth while many other vessels follow the direction of the Living Sentinels."

"This isn't necessarily a problem." Ves responded as he scratched Lucky's chin. "Our combat vessels have to cover for our civilian vessels."

"That's true, but our biggest problem is that we lack fully-fledged combat vessels. Compared to the Mech Corps or the Kronon Dynasty, we are sorely lacking in armored vessels that can withstand a blow and possibly withstand incoming fire. In many naval

battles in space, combat carriers and other armored ships are often needed to cover our most vulnerable vessels."

Ves grimaced. "We tried to obtain combat carriers, but with the huge demand for starships, we still haven't been able to secure an order."

Both of them knew that obtaining combat vessels just wasn't in the cards right now. The declining financial situation of the LMC also didn't help any matters. Even if Ves offered three times as much money, the shipyards still wouldn't supply him with a combat vessel!

Even though the Sand War was already nearing its end, the Komodo War continued to grow hotter. The fighting at the border between the second-rate states continued to spread like wildfire while the rest of the star sector increasingly began to feel the heat!

"We will have to intercept any enemies before they are in range to threaten our ships." Ophelia declared. "While we tentatively have the mechs to fulfill this function, our reserves are distressingly low."

"How many spaceborn mechs do we have in total?"

"After repairing our damaged mechs, restoring some of the salvaged machines and transferring some landbound mech pilots to spaceborn mechs, we can muster up around 500 mechs. Manpower is a great bottleneck, but we have picked up a lot of Kronon defectors during our flight from the Ylvaine Protectorate. As we work them into our hierarchy, we can probably expand our numbers even further."

While the amount of mechs didn't sound so bad, the haphazard fleet centered around the Larkinson Clan amounted to a lot of ships, all of which were vulnerable to attacks.

"We don't have many options available." Ves murmured as he rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Hardly any of the states along our route are great recruitment sites. States such as the Reinald Republic and the Council Stars of Lisv are either devastated by the sandmen or already strained for manpower."

As for mechs, that was a bit easier. While their fleet didn't possess any strong fabrication capabilities due to the absence of a factory ship, they did pick up a considerable amount of salvage.

The CRC mechs they managed to defeat at Kesseling VIII were all worth a considerable amount of money!

While it was too difficult to restore them to functionality considering the vast tech disparity, they could still be traded for mechs or recycled in order to utilize their excellent materials elsewhere.

After discussing all of these issues, the fleet coordinator bid goodbye while Ves met with various other people.

He cautiously sounded out James. The Living Prophet seemed as obnoxiously friendly as ever, but Ves didn't believe he was as simple as he appeared.

"I heard from Calabast that you wanted to join the Larkinson Clan. Do you even know what you are asking? While we respect your faith, My relatives and I are highly opposed to religion."

James smiled as if there wasn't any problem. "I am sure that you and your fellow Larkinsons are able to tolerate us. We have never compelled others to accept our beliefs. Besides, your Larkinsons and my True Believers share a lot more in common than you think. We too cherish fellowship, duty and bravery, especially when it comes to our Kronons."

While he was technically right, their fellowship and duty mainly applied to their fellow Ylvainans!

"If your True Believers ever have to choose between obeying you or me, who will they listen to? Can you guarantee that the Ylvainans working for me will recognize my leadership?"

"That is all the more reason to merge my followers with your clan." James smiled wider. "As long as a separation exists between your Larkinsons and the rest of us, tension will always exist. In contrast, absorbing us into your Larkinson Clan will truly unite us all. There will never be an instance where divided loyalties will pose a problem because both believers and non-believers are aligned! As long as your Larkinsons accept my followers in earnest, our differences will diminish."

It was impressive how James managed to turn his argument around. Ves had a feeling that there was no point in debating the Living Prophet because he was so good at it! As the clone of the original prophet, James inherited his gene donator's skilled oratory and exceptional persuasiveness!

Along with the illusion that he was able to see the future, Ves constantly felt as if James already foresaw this conversation!

Ves felt frustrated the longer he talked to James. As the Living Prophet provided a lot of reassurances that his believers would earnestly try to integrate with the Larkinsons, he eventually waved his hand.

"Enough! I'm not the main decision maker. Before you try to obtain my approval, you'll have to convince my secularist relatives why they should embrace your fanatics into the clan."

"They will come around to our viewpoint." The religious leader immediately declared. "While you and your Larkinsons are focusing too much on our differences, in time you will come to appreciate what we share in common."

"WHatever you say, prophet."

Ves ended the conversation as fast as possible. There was just something unsettling about talking to the clone.

His apprehension increased when he realized that James was channeling Ylvaine's spiritual fragment!

"The two are in cahoots!"

This was an incredibly disturbing conclusion! In his perspective, the two shouldn't be intersecting with each other.

Ves originally created Ylvaine's spiritual fragment out of a miniscule spiritual remnant he lifted from a nutrient pack wrapper.

The spiritual fragment was never meant to be a complete spiritual entity. Yet as it assumed its position as design spirit, it connected with an increasing number of Ylvainan mech pilots, each of whom developed their own impression of the Great Prophet!

The design spirit began to turn more human. All of those devout Ylvainan mech pilots inadvertently filled the holes in the design spirit's personality, essentially recreating a version of the Great Prophet in spiritual form!

That wasn't necessarily bad. Ves never wanted to restrict his design spirits. He treated them like living beings, and always benefited when they grew stronger and more sophisticated.

The problem was that the spiritual fragment was somehow colluding with the clone of the prophet!

A clone who only spewed nonsense wasn't very scary. A clone who somehow gained the assistance of a highly-compatible design spirit was something else!

He shook his head. As much as he wanted to prevent Ylvaine's spiritual fragment from getting influenced by the clone, he wasn't sure if it was possible to undo their alliance.

One of them was derived from the spirit of Prophet Ylvaine, while the other was derived from his body!

A very frightening realization suddenly struck him like a lightning bolt.

"Did I inadvertently resurrect the Great Prophet?"

The implications of these words were simply too much for Ves to cope!

He didn't believe he brought the original prophet back to life. At most, the design spirit and the clone were merely derivations of a common source. These pale and incomplete copies could never match the original.

However, that didn't mean that these incomplete copies would be able to turn into something greater than the original prophet, especially when they pooled their strengths!

What Ves didn't understand was why James wanted to become a part of the Larkinson Clan. Even if he was just half as capable as the original prophet, then he was definitely capable of branching out on his own!

Ves didn't want to devote any more processing power to this issue.

Regardless what he thought, the Ylvainans comprised at least half of his workforce, if not more. They crewed his ships, piloted his mechs and and more.

If Ves or the Larkinson Clan had a falling out with the True Ylvaine Dynasty, their fleet would instantly become a shadow of its former self!

This was not a time to provoke a schism! As long as his fleet was still travelling through Coalition-aligned space, there was always a chance the CRC would strike them again!

For better or worse, Ves needed the True Believers. Tolerating James' nonsense was a small price to pay in exchange for the protection of his loyal followers.

As for adopting them into the Larkinson Clan, Ves did not believe that the future was set in stone. Even prophets were wrong sometimes!

After conducting various meetings, Ves finally cleared up his agenda. While many issues still needed to be addressed, he merely had to provide direction to his deputies. After Ophelia, Raymond, Melkor and other senior leaders understood his priorities, they dutifully followed his intentions.

This finally freed up time for Ves to contemplate his next design projects.

Ves gathered with Gloriana at the Stellar Chaser's mech workshop.

While their cats were nuzzling their noses at each other, both of them sat in front of a terminal.

His girlfriend clapped her hand and grinned with excitement!

"Hihihi! We're finally designing a mech again! I missed this so much!"

Their Bright Warrior was their last project. So far, the design proved to be a massive success. Not only did their Bright Warrior model single-handedly beat the CRC in space, it also enabled them to create their first officially-recognized masterwork mech!

It was very difficult to top that kind of success.

Ves was still determined to try. Now that he activated Archimedes Rubal implant, he looked forward to testing how much it boosted his design work!

"I'm not sure what mech concept we should tackle next." He admitted. "I'm a bit short on ideas right now."

"Well, you already stated that you wanted to design a commercial mech model in order to invigorate the LMC. I take it that you want to present a third-class mech, correct?"

He nodded. "While I'm confident that I'm ready to design a second-class mech, there isn't a viable market in this star sector. The Friday Coalition obviously won't accept my mechs, and the Hexadric Hegemony is too hung up on my gender to do the same."

His girlfriend grinned wider. "I wouldn't be so sure about the last one. While Calabast is still finalizing the details with DIVA, there may be a possibility for you to design a mech for the Hegemony. It'll be fairly special, though."

"How so?"

"After hearing Calabast and I out, DIVA is interested in your glows. The agency is curious whether your design philosophy can be leveraged at the main front of the Komodo War. We made a very persuasive case that we can tilt the balance of all of those pitched battles in our favor due to the proven effects that your glows can affect the morale of thousands of mech pilots."

Ves looked surprised. "Even if that is so, aren't you Hexers biased against male mech designers like me? I won't agree to working under another Hexer mech designer. I also don't want anyone else to steal my credit for my work. This is non-negotiable, Gloriana."

Now that he gained a lot of recognition, he felt more confident about putting down his foot. Even if the Hexers were a bunch of female supremacists, it was impossible for them to ignore his value!

"That won't be a problem, Ves." Gloriana reassured him. "There is a very elegant solution to your concerns. DIVA wants to test the water by allowing you to design a mech. The only condition is that it should exclusively be targeted towards males rather than females!"

"What?!"

Chapter 1954 Condescending Mech Design

Mechs didn't possess genders.

Hardly anyone even thought about it. Regardless of whether a mech pilot was male or female, they piloted a machine whether its dimensions resembled a male or female form.

Most mech designers defaulted to a male form when they designed a humanoid mech because that was the optimal standard in most cases.

Of course, some mechs designed to be slim occasionally looked feminine, but that was ordinarily not a major issue to male mech pilots.

These users cared a lot more about the condition and performance of their mechs rather than their gender.

Masculine mechs were generally beefier and tougher while feminine mechs were often slimmer and faster.

This was not a hard rule, though. Plenty of mech designers developed female knight mechs and a lot of light mechs strictly adhered to the masculine form.

In short, hardly anyone in the mech industry cared about the gender of a mech.

Only a society obsessed with gender differences made this arbitrary distinction!

Ves knew that the Hexers didn't forbid their males from piloting mechs. That was simply too stupid considering how they would instantly half their manpower pool!

Otherwise, Venerable Brutus Wodin wouldn't be allowed to pilot the Star Dancer in the first place!

With a rival as formidable as the Friday Coalition, the Hexers would be fools to cripple their own fighting strength!

However, even if the Hexers allowed males to pilot mechs and serve in the Hex Army, they predominantly comprise of the lower ranks!

There was not a single 'boy' in the senior ranks of the Hex Army. It was impossible for boys to be promoted to the rank of mech captain or mech lieutenant. Both male and female Hexers agreed that putting any boy in a leadership position should never be allowed!

Therefore, males predominantly comprised the lower ranks of every mech force.

The discrimination didn't end there.

Aside from blocking the promotion opportunities of the lesser gender, the female Hexers also hogged all of the better mechs to themselves!

Gloriana tapped the terminal and projected two different mechs.

"Here are two typical mechs of the Hex Army." She began. "One is reserved for boys and the other is reserved for women."

There was no question which belonged to which. The mech for boys consisted of a large but fairly low-quality knight mech.

Even though it was sizable and incorporated a lot of advanced technology, it was hardly the best representation of the strength of the Hex Army.

It was basically a budget model in second-class terms. The knight mech was still a lot more formidable than any third-class equivalent, but it was very much a mech designed to be cheap and economic!

What grated Ves the most about this mech design was how it implicitly denigrated its intended users.

"This male mech is probably designed by a female Hexer." Ves remarked.

There was no doubt in his tone.

Gloriana sighed. "That's true. In the Hegemony, regardless if a mech is meant to be piloted by boys or women, a female mech designer should always be in charge of the design project! In the history of the Hegemony, I'm not sure if the Hegemony approved of any mechs designed by a boy! You have to know that even Brutus will never pilot an expert mech designed by a fellow male! It's simply unthinkable!"

That shouldn't necessarily be an issue. Plenty of female mech designers were able to design excellent mechs for males.

However, with the mindset the Hexer females adopted, their condescension and disregard for boys was subtly evident in the design choices they made.

The knight mech design that Gloriana used as an example was designed to act as cannon fodder. It combined mediocre exotics and materials into an economically-efficient package that was meant to offer as much protection as possible.

This wasn't necessarily bad, but the defensive mech was significantly poorer in preserving the life of the mech pilot!

First, its armor layout and its internal architecture was meant to make the mech as durable as possible.

The degree of compartmentalization was very high.

Even if an enemy finally breached its armor and felled the mech, enough of the wreck should be able to survive to make it possible to restore it back to functionality after performing restoration work.

However, the degree of redundancy was rather low, and Ves noticed a distinct priority in protecting the power reactor and mech engine over the cockpit!

The meaning of this mech was very clear to Ves. Its designer valued the internal components of the mech design over its intended mech pilots!

This was a very unusual design priority!

In other mech markets, preserving the life of the mech pilot was one of the top three priorities of a mech.

No one wanted to pilot a death trap! Any mech that didn't prioritize the lives of its mech pilots would never be liked by its intended customers!

Only stupid customers purchased these kinds of mechs.

If boys actually had a say in the Hegemony, then a knight mech like this would never be allowed into the mech lineup of the Hex Army!

The female-shaped swordsman mech was obviously better. It was a premier mech that was at least eight times more expensive than the previous mech!

Despite its smaller dimensions, its high-quality armor system made it even more resilient than the knight mech!

Its lower mass and stronger locomotion made the swordsman mech a lot more mobile. If that wasn't enough, it came with integrated flight modules that allowed the mechs to hop rapidly across the battlefield or fly in the air or space with reasonable effectiveness.

Naturally, the feminine mech design also provided a lot of protection to the mech pilot. Its cockpit was clad with a hefty layer of armor. In the event of ejection, its formidable thrusters ensured that it would rapidly be able to flee to the rear intact!

All in all, the mindsets of the mech designers of the two mechs couldn't be more different.

Ves grimaced and crossed his arms. "What is the point of showing me this insulting comparison?"

His girlfriend shouldn't be blind to the differences either!

"I know how.. bad it looks, but this is what Hexer mech pilots and mech designers are accustomed to. Male mechs are designed to fulfill supportive roles in the battlefield while female mechs are meant to achieve victory. Any mechs designed for Hexers have to fit this paradigm."

She elaborated on what she meant by displaying other male and female Hexer mech designs.

Male mech designs generally consisted of relatively lower-end 'support mechs'. That translated to defensive mechs and ranged mechs that were very necessary in any force makeup but rarely stole the show in a battle.

The knight mechs were meant to anchor the enemy while the ranged mechs were meant to provide ranged support.

Both mech types had the potential to be more than a generic presence on the battlefield.

His old Blackbeak and Crystal Lord designs were excellent examples.

The Blackbeak was an offensive knight rather than a defensive knight. While its defensive capabilities weren't as formidable, its mobility more than made up for it, allowing its mech pilot to take the fight to the enemy or perform various complicated maneuvers!

The Crystal Lord was not only fast, but also resilient. This allowed its mech pilot to deploy it closer to the enemy and enable it to duel opponents with the confidence that its armor would always hold up against opposing ranged mechs!

In both cases, Ves designed the mechs to empower the mech pilot. During his various Mastery experiences, Ves learned how much mech pilots valued agency.

Mech pilots always sought to do something, but they weren't always able to follow through because their mechs limited their options!

Ves had encountered plenty of mech models where their mech designers deliberately lowered the agency of the mech pilots. Frontline mechs were pretty much centered around this premise. His own Desolate Soldier model also adopted it to some degree.

However, the intentions of their mech designers were always benign. Ves designed the Desolate Soldier to be simple in order to accommodate a very wide variety of skill levels.

Those good intentions were absent in Hexer mech designs targeted to males. To Ves, it seemed that their female lead designers deliberately infantilized their target audience, expecting them to screw up if they piloted anything more powerful or complicated.

This meant that regardless of the skill level of male Hexer mech pilots, their performance on the battlefield wouldn't differ that much because the good ones weren't able to surpass the limitations of their mechs!

When Ves described his observations to Gloriana, she at least looked ashamed.

"To be honest, I agree with you." She said. "I used to design exclusively for women, but once I took part in the development of Brutus' Star Dancer, I learned that boys can be just as impressive as women on the battlefield. Women are better leaders, of course, but when it comes to pure fighting, boys inherently possess a greater propensity for violence."

That sounded both right and wrong! Ves was glad that she acknowledged that male mech pilots were just as good as female mech pilots, but what was that about 'propensity for violence'?!

"Designing a Hexer mech is becoming even less and less attractive to me." Ves scowled. "If I have to design a mech, I want to do it on my terms."

His girlfriend did her best to reassure him. "I didn't show you these examples in order to force you to adhere to them. I'm aware your design style doesn't agree with our style of mech design. Calabast and I communicated that to DIVA, and the agency altered its demands as a response."

"What does DIVA want?"

"I already told you, Ves. They want you to design a male mech that is oriented around support. The key is the glow of the mech. It should support the Hex Army and suppress the Fridayman combatants on the battlefield. The details are mostly up to us, but DIVA did attach some additional conditions to this commission."

She sent him a list of requirements and specifications. Overall, Ves didn't have to worry about licensing any components, because DIVA would be extending its propriety component licenses to Ves for the project.

That said, the budget of the project was fairly strict. Male mech designs were not allowed to be better than their female equivalents!

Perhaps the only upside to the project was that Ves and Gloriana were able to choose the mech type of their next project themselves. Whether they wanted to design a ranged mech, melee mech, spaceborn mech or landbound mech was fully up to them! The only caveat was that their choice should fully conform to a supportive function, so Ves wasn't allowed to pick a swift light skirmisher or a flashy lancer mech.

The restrictions grated on Ves.

"Can I refuse?" He asked.

Gloriana shook her head and smirked. "Not this time. Remember that DIVA is almost about to rescue your captured relatives. The amount of effort they put in this operation is significant. They expect something in return, and designing a mech that can embolden Hexers and strike fear in the hearts of the Fridaymen is the best way to pay back your debt!"

Obviously, his girlfriend was very eager to accept this commission! She knew how much potential his design philosophy possessed, and she wanted Ves to demonstrate his strength in order to earn even more appreciation from her fellow Hexers!

For his part, Ves may not like the Hexer approach to mech design, but it seemed this was the only acceptable way for a 'boy' like him to offer a mech to the Hexers.

Ves hadn't forgotten about his determination to take revenge on the Fridaymen. Killing his relatives and ruining their lives had to be paid back a thousand-fold!

Therefore, even if it was an insult to his dignity, Ves was more than willing to grit his teeth and accept DIVA's conditions if it meant he could exact his revenge!

Chapter 1955 Anti-Crowd

"Let's put DIVA's commission aside for the moment." Ves suggested. "All of this is a bit new to me. I think I need to study Hexer mech designs more extensively in order to develop a vision that conforms to your people's demands."

The rebellious part of him wanted to subvert the commission in some way. He wanted to sneak a design past the Hexers that secretly empowered male mech pilots.

Ves immediately thought of the Adonis Colossus. Of all of his mech designs, this custom mech was the epitome of an alpha male design!

His first idea was to reuse Bravo, its design spirit, into his Hexer mech design.

Perhaps he could slowly insert some much needed backbone in the spine of those repressed male mech pilots.

It was a stupid idea.

The Hexers probably watched their boys like a hawk. Any adverse change would doubtlessly be investigated! If it turned out that all they shared in common was the mech they piloted, then Ves would get into a lot of trouble!

As much as he wanted to give those poor men a much-needed boost, the price was too much. He would get into so much trouble with the Hexers that he might ruin all of the goodwill he earned so far. Gloriana would be displeased as well, which was an even greater reason for him to refrain from messing around!

Besides, as a matter of principle, Ves despised duplicity when it came to commissions. As a mech designer, he had to be professional and design a mech that best fit the demands of his client.

Perhaps he broke or bent these principles sometimes, but generally Ves truly valued honesty in mech design!

People may lie, but mechs were always honest.

Ves didn't want to stoop to sabotaging or subverting the intentions of his clients just because he was in a bad mood. That was unprofessional and would certainly harm his reputation if his shenanigans became known.

He glanced towards his girlfriend, who offered him a brilliant smile.

He doubted that Gloriana would let him get away with any of his vile plots. While she deviated from the mold of a stereotypical Hexer, she still cared a lot about her home state! She would never do anything that harmed the Hegemony!

She stretched out her finger. "I will transfer a selection of iconic Hexer designs as well as my personal notes to you. Would you like me to pass it to your cranial implant?"

"NO! Ahem, just send it to my comm as usual. I'll peruse it in my own time."

While his Archimedes Rubal could fit an enormous amount of data, Ves was not about to fill it up with junk! How will his implant shape his thoughts when it was filled with mech designs that denigrated their male mech pilots and nonsensical propaganda of how boys shouldn't be entrusted with responsibilities?

Although the implant was typically designed to prevent this kind of bleed-through, Ves was not going to take any risks on this matter!

After Gloriana transferred the files to his comm, they went back to the original topic.

"We can tackle multiple projects at the same time." He said. "We can work on DIVA's commission at the same time as designing the LMC's next commercial mech. Let's exchange some ideas on the latter. Do you have any suggestions?"

"You want to design a third-class mech, right? Then perhaps you can design something with an eye towards our own needs."

"We already have the Bright Warrior, Gloriana. It's not just a single mech design, but a platform that encompasses four different configurations. In fact, we can even design additional configurations as long as it's not too extreme."

Gloriana shook her head. "I know, but the Bright Warrior platform isn't a solution to everything. First, demand for it heavily outstrips supply."

The availability of Breyer alloy still remained very limited, and the entire fleet only offered two advanced workshops that were capable of fabricating Bright Warrior mechs.

"Second, not all of our mech pilots are able to promote to second-class mech pilots within a year." She continued. "Some people are simply less talented or need more time to learn how to handle a higher class of mechs. In the interim, they need a serviceable mech design to perform their duties. While your Avatars and Sentinels are fine with piloting third-party mechs, I think they probably prefer to pilot mechs with glows."

He agreed with her. As a mech designer, how could he continue to rely so heavily on the products of other mech designers?

Certainly, there were cases where it was acceptable for mech designers to rely on other people's products.

Someone who specialized in a specific type or category of mechs like Ketis wouldn't be able to design her own ranged mechs.

Lack of familiarity or expertise was another reason for Ves to rely on third-party mechs. While he considered himself to be rather versatile, he possessed enough self-knowledge to know that he wouldn't be able to design a fantastic heavy mech.

Considering that his slower mech pilots wouldn't be able to turn into second-class mech pilots anytime soon, it was not a waste of time to design a third-class mech that fit their needs.

Ves came up with a set of requirements. "Since my Larkinson Clan will be roving in space, we'll have to design a spaceborn mech. It has to be able to fill a niche in our mech roster but also be commercially viable. I'm not giving up on designing a mech that appeals to the market."

"What will be the price tier of your mech?"

"Premium." He decided. "Not too extravagant, but not cheap by any means. It has to be a mech that shouldn't be difficult to field en masse, but it has to be more than cannon fodder. Our mech pilots deserve better than being treated as disposable meat shields."

He implicitly criticized the Hexer approach to mech design with that remark, and Gloriana knew it. She winced at his acid tone.

"You're in charge when it comes to mass market mechs. I'm in charge when we design a custom mech. We agreed on that at the start of our collaboration."

He was being a bit too harsh on her. Normally, she often adjusted to his preferences in their collaborations. He was being a bit more catty than usual after Gloriana revealed another ugly aspect about Hexer society.

"Let's list out some mech types." He suggested.

"Okay." Gloriana pressed her finger against her lips. "Um, our Bright Warriors already fulfill the basic functions, but the Battle of Kesseling VIII showed that we are still short on a couple of aspects."

"Such as?"

"Well, we could use a better solution against a flood of low-quality mechs. In both the space battle and the land battle, the CRC attacked us in tandem with foreign mercenaries. Since they can do so once, they can do it again. Besides, not all of our enemies are powerful state actors. What if we cross horns with a major pirate syndicate? What if we enter into a vendetta with a powerful mercenary organization? The Bright Warrior's configurations are quite good at confronting powerful mechs, but they don't possess an inherent advantage against massed attacks."

Her words had merit. While Ves didn't have the time to study the Battle of Kesseling VIII in detail yet, from what he had seen, quantity could be just as scary as quality when the numbers were great enough!

However, providing a solution was easier said than done. In the same class, no mech could mow down dozens of enemy mechs with a couple of attacks!

The only exception was expert mechs, but they were not in his consideration right now.

Some mechs offered better options than others against massed attacks.

"What about artillery mechs?" Ves proposed.

"Medium artillery mechs or heavy artillery mechs?"

"Medium, of course. Heavy mechs are generally reserved to state actors and mech militaries. It's too cumbersome for us to field heavy mechs. They require specialized knowledge to design, fabricate and maintain."

She nodded in agreement. "You aren't wrong, but third-class artillery mechs are rather limited. The reason why most third-class artillery mechs fall under the heavyweight class is because they are very demanding mechs. All of their might and firepower requires lots of capacity."

"Most of our battles are fairly short, though." Ves retorted. "We aren't invading a fortification or anything. We can make do with less capacity as long as the battle doesn't last long enough to require a resupply. Even if our medium artillery mechs are forced to return to their carriers, it shouldn't take too long to replenish their magazines and energy cells."

"Hmm, I still think they are too limited. While they are reasonably effective at a distance, they aren't necessarily good against a group of mechs, especially in a space environment. I was thinking about designing a striker mech."

"A striker mech?"

"Yes, a striker mech. You never designed a striker mech before, right?"

He nodded. "Striker mechs are on my list. I always wanted to design one. I'm not so sure that this is the right time."

"Striker mechs armed with flamethrowers can be an effective deterrent against massed attacks."

"I don't entirely agree, Gloriana. They're less effective in this role in space. The distances are greater and the formations are more dispersed. While striker mechs can still be useful in fending off light skirmishers and other thinly-armored mechs, their armaments are notoriously poor at piercing armor."

"That's not important. The Bright Warriors are already capable of defeating tough opponents. What we need is a mech that can wipe out the riffraff in the most efficient way possible. A striker mech is the obvious answer."

While Ves didn't fully buy in her argument, he couldn't provide any alternatives.

It was different for higher classes of mechs. Second-class mech design opened up a lot of options. For example, an energy rifleman mech could put its weapon in a wide-area scatter mode.

However, at the bottom class, Ves was mainly confined to specialized mechs with hardly any room for gimmicks and gadgets.

After a bit more discussion, they decided to settle on a spaceborn medium striker mech.

To be honest, due to his recent Mastery experience, Ves wanted to design a light skirmisher. While he hadn't learned as much about light skirmishers than he expected, he did pick up a handful of insights that he wanted to test in a mech design.

A new light skirmisher model wasn't as needed as a striker mech, though.

The Avatars and Sentinels already fielded decent commercial light skirmishers. They also fielded a handful of striker mechs, but they weren't as suited to counter massed attacks as they wanted.

Gloriana doodled a very rough sketch in the air. The projected lines came together to form a mech that resembled a knight mech without a shield.

"Since this mech is meant to counter massed enemies, it's mainly reactive rather than proactive. Mobility isn't as important. Instead, we should make it as tough as our budget allows."

She added a crude representation of a flamethrower a moment later.

"Cheap mechs usually skimp out on heat management. Their maximum heat tolerance is very limited, and it's very easy to overwhelm them with heat. Even if the enemy avoids the flames, they can still act as a deterrent and keep them at bay."

Ves studied the sketch and tried to extrapolate its performance if they fleshed it out.

"With our budget, it's difficult to make the flamethrower potent enough. The armor system of a defensive mech already demands a lot of money. There is hardly any money left to improve the weapon."

"That's not necessarily the case, at least when it comes to us." She grinned. "As long as the LMC gets back on track, our financial situation will improve. We can outfit our striker mechs with sturdier flamethrowers and more potent propellants. If we have to go back to saving money, then we can just switch to cheaper propellants for a time."

That.. actually sounded reasonable.

Chapter 1956 Limited Capacity

Striker mechs predominantly served a defensive role in combat. They stacked up almost as much armor as knight mechs. Sometimes they carried a shield, but usually they didn't bother with one in favor of carrying a large and powerful area of effect weapon.

Shotguns and flamethrowers were the most basic and iconic weapons associated with striker mechs. Higher classes of striker mechs even wielded more advanced weapons such as gravity manipulators or high-powered heat projectors.

Though their mobility was almost as bad as knight mechs, as long as the enemy had to come to them, these mechs formed an effective deterrent against any melee mech.

Compared to more traditional ranged mechs, striker mechs were much more proficient in close-ranged combat. They traded punch and penetration for wide-area denial.

While they were fairly decent at attacking offensive melee mechs such as swordsman mechs or spearman mechs, they were far more suited at countering light mechs.

Compared to medium mechs, light mechs possessed much less armor. Compared to other mechs, their armor might as well be as fragile as skin!

In compensation, their mobility was the highest out of all of the weight classes. They survived on the battlefield despite their paper-thin armor by evading attacks and using their superior mobility to maneuver in complex environments.

Yet for all of their fancy flight maneuvers or footwork, if their opponent was able to blast an entire area with weapons fire, how could they possibly dodge?

Tougher mechs may be able to withstand the flames or shotgun pellets for a time, but light mechs didn't have that luxury most of the time!

Ves knew that striker mechs performed differently in space than on land.

On the ground, distances were much smaller. It was much easier for striker mechs to make an impact on the battlefield as light mechs didn't have as much room for maneuver.

However, Ves and Gloriana considered designing a striker mech for space combat. This was a lot more difficult as the larger distances and additional degrees of freedom made it much more harder to deny an area.

Once light mechs got close, they could approach an enemy from the front, left, right, rear, top or bottom!

Still, any melee mech still had to get close in order to make good on their threat. The closer they got, the easier it was to narrow down their angle of approach.

Even though striker mechs were too slow to chase after light mechs, that wasn't necessarily important. As long as they deterred a melee mech from moving close, they wouldn't be able to inflict any meaningful damage!

If this lasted long enough, then the defending side would surely be able to gain an advantage because their enemies were unable to leverage all of their mechs!

The mech concept that Gloriana proposed had to do all of this, and more.

Right now, Ves agreed with Gloriana that they needed to have a solution ready to resist masses of low-quality mechs.

Even if it wasn't possible to destroy them en masse right away, just pressuring them and blunting their momentum was enough to give his mech forces a much-needed reprieve!

For this reason, they started sketching a striker mech that started off with a flamethrower as its primary armament.

"We need to reserve plenty of capacity." Gloriana explained as she sketched out a large and armored tank on the rear of their draft design. "Landbound striker mechs usually operate in standard atmospheric conditions, so their flamethrowers can draw on plenty of oxygen in the air to feed their combustion reactions."

There was no air in space. That meant there wasn't any oxygen in space.

Under these conditions, how could someone start a fire in space?

The simplest answer was to bring your own oxidizing agent. It didn't necessarily have to be oxygen. While oxygen was rather cheap, there were denser and more efficient substances available.

The same went for the propellant. When they were laced with potent exotics, the energy they unleashed in the form of heat could reach extreme levels!

The only issue was that more effective substances cost a lot more money. Operating a striker mech could get very expensive as their propellants and oxidizing agents quickly ate in someone's budget.

However, this also gave their owners a lot of choice. If an outfit had to tighten their belts, then they could settle for cheap fuel and oxygen.

If the Avatars added a striker mech to their roster, then Commander Melkor would definitely invest millions of hex credits in enhancing its firepower!

Ves never designed a striker mech before. He had seen plenty of them in action, both on land and in space, and understood how they worked and how they were put together in theory.

It turned out that they were a lot more complex to design in practice.

It wasn't a matter of complexity. Striker mechs were very simple by nature. Just like knight mechs, they weren't required to perform any fancy moves. Third-class mechs also didn't contain a lot of extra functions.

The only problem was capacity.

"There's too little room!" Ves complained as he petted Lucky's back.

"Meow!"

He looked down at the cat lounging on his lap. "No matter how many exotics you eat, it all seems to disappear in your stomach. I can't say the same for our draft design."

Even if the propellant and oxidizing agent came in a compressed and compact state, striker mechs could go through their reserves at a frightening rate!

Compounding the capacity problem was the need to manage their heat. The flamethrowers and striker mechs themselves had to channel and contain an immense amount of heat.

Even if most of the energy was projected outwards, plenty of it still washed over the mech itself.

As mechs were unable to shunt away as much heat in space than on land, this could pose a very serious problem if the design of the mech did not sufficiently cope with its own heat!

Perhaps the only mitigating factor was that the mechs usually ran out of propellant before their heat reached critical levels.

"Miaow."

While Lucky was taking a break, Clixie was cheerfully eating a bowl of freshly-prepared cat food. Gloriana's chefs weren't just good at cooking human food, but they were also proficient in satisfying the taste palates of cats!

"Hehehe." Gloriana smiled and rubbed Clixie's belly.

"Miaow!"

"Oh, sorry!"

While playing with their cats cheered them up, neither Ves nor Gloriana felt very good about their draft design.

No matter how ingenious they tried to be, striker mechs were brutally straight and simple from a design perspective.

They needed to fit in too much stuff. It was already bad enough when it came to landbound mechs, but the spaceborn versions were much more burdened in this aspect!

A lot of capacity had to be reserved for armor. As high-priority targets, striker mechs often attracted a lot of firepower.

Unlike rifleman mechs, mobility warfare was not an option due to all of the propellant, oxidizing agents, heat sinks they carried.

On top of that, their flight system also took up a substantial amount of capacity! Flight systems took up a lot of space, demanded a lot of energy and generated a considerable amount of heat!

From a technical standpoint, these weren't very complex elements. They just took up a lot of space, and there were very limited ways to mitigate this issue!

Gloriana furrowed her brows as she studied their current draft design.

Since Ves gained a bioimplant, he was finally able to keep up with Gloriana's mental calculations. Even though the projected design was just a draft, its technical precision and accuracy already reached a very advanced level!

Yet despite its beauty, the draft design didn't convey any notable advantages compared to comparable products on the market.

"Third-class spaceborn striker mechs are much more limited than I anticipated." His girlfriend pressed her fingers against her head. "No matter how much we adjust its configuration, we can't gain any additional advantages."

More propellant and oxidizing agents resulted in less armor and heat sinks.

More heat sinks resulted in less propellant, oxidizers and armor.

More armor resulted in less propellant, oxidizers and heat sinks.

Such tradeoffs were ubiquitous in mech design, but the problem was that no amount of ingenuity could offer a better tradeoff!

Gloriana was particularly annoyed with the limited tech base and material availability. She didn't shy away from the challenge, though. She knew she had to utilize her recently-improved mech affinity and the countless insights she gained from the Bright Warrior and Quint to design her most efficient third-class mech to date!

As for Ves, he was already starting to think how he could increase the value proposition of a commercial spaceborn striker mech when he couldn't rely on superior technology, expensive materials or design ingenuity.

"How good are the second-class versions of this mech type?" He asked.

"They're totally better. Everything takes up less capacity as their degree of miniaturization is much higher. They can also use more effective means of area denial such as creating localized gravity wells that don't rely on ammunition or propellants. Even if they utilize a classic flamethrower, the quality of propellants and oxidizing agents are so powerful that they can pose a threat against any melee mech, not just lightly-armored ones!"

The more advanced striker mechs even made use of dimensional storage, allowing them to carry a lot more charges than their frames allowed!

In other words, they were just like Lucky and his bottomless stomach!

Ves sighed. After designing something as fantastic as the Bright Warrior, he felt incredibly constrained now that he was back to his old haunt.

It was as if he returned from living in Gloriana's opulent mansion to his rickety wooden shack with a leaky roof.

If Ves designed this striker mech for his mech forces, then he wouldn't care that much about the budget of the mech. Any insurmountable problem could easily be solved as long as he threw enough money at it! This was exactly why the Bright Warrior performed so well during the Battle of Kesselling VIII!

Yet who could spend as much money as Ves? Not many. Mechs sold on the market had to perform their functions as efficiently as possible.

A mech that could do the same job as a competing mech but at half the cost would certainly take the crown!

When was the last time he designed a true commercial mech? Too long, it seemed, because Ves didn't feel very willing to abide by these restrictions!

He knew that this was not a good development. Third-class mech designs was his root. For years, he tried to work around their many limitations. The more he felt constrained, the more he felt pressured to innovate and develop brilliant design solutions.

If he continued to come up with expensive designs such as the Bright Warrior, Ves feared losing his efficiency edge.

In the mech market, mech designs had to be cost effective. Ves wouldn't be able to compete as effectively if he forgot how to design an inferior mech with superior value!

As long as he regained and maintained this edge, he could carry it over to second-class mech design and gain a lot more advantages over the competition!

Gloriana herself already recognized how useful it was to practice with designing these kinds of limiting mechs. How could Ves possibly fall behind his own girlfriend?

As a bona fide man, he refused to be worse than her in designing the mechs that formed his design roots!

"I don't want our upcoming product to become a forgettable addition to the mech market." Ves declared. "The LMC needs a bestseller in order to invigorate its brand and I need to prove that my previous commercial mech designs aren't outliers. I think we should increase the value of our striker mech design in two ways. First, we need to develop a good mech concept that synergizes with its glow. Second, we need some way to make its technical performance stand out. One of the two is not enough. We need both to deliver a product that can sell throughout the entire star sector, no star cluster!"

His ambition wasn't limited to the Komodo Star Sector anymore!

Chapter 1957 Deterrence

While Gloriana started to explore how they could give their striker mech design a performance edge, Ves began to explore its mech concept.

He wanted to develop a compelling vision for his mech. Its design and features had to harmonize with each other in a way that made sense.

In order to come up with a good idea, Ves began to doodle with the appearance of the mech.

Approaching the striker mech from an artistic direction rather than a technical direction was a lot more comfortable to him. His stress noticeably decreased as Ves temporarily put aside the headache-inducing capacity issues.

As a mech designed to fight against a horde of enemy mechs, the mech needed to project a very strong image.

If the enemy mech pilots believed his striker mech was a pushover, then they were much more likely to brave the flames!

This was not an outcome that Ves wanted to see.

After examining the draft design from every direction, he decided to gain some inspiration from the battle footage taken from the Battle of Kesseling VIII.

He loaded up the recordings and silently observed the brief but very intense battle in space from multiple angles.

He witnessed many heroic sights.

The handful of Deliverers put heavy pressure on the mercenary commanders.

Imon Ingvar recklessly dove into the enemy ranks.

Jannzi Larkinson's Shield of Samar came to his rescue.

The Solar Warriors held off the powerful second-class CRC mechs.

The Nova Warriors whittle away the mercenary mechs.

The Quint single-handedly destroyed several CRC mechs in its lancer mech configuration!

All in all, his Bright Warrior mechs did a marvelous job in foiling the CRC's attempt to cut off the Larkinson Clan's escape route.

Naturally, Ves also saw how many Avatar and Sentinel mechs succumbed to the flood of enemies.

If they weren't being taken out by a single attack from a CRC mech, they faltered as soon as they were being mobbed by several mercenary mechs!

It didn't matter if the enemy machines were cheaper and not as well-maintained. Aside from the Bright Warriors and the Shield of Samar, every other mech in the Avatar and Sentinel spaceborn contingent were unable to contend against this aggression!

If the Bright Warriors hadn't whittled down the CRC mechs and leveraged their superior defensive powers to sweep away the mercenaries, the battle in space might have been lost!

Could the battle have turned out better if his mech forces fielded more striker mechs?

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. He could see Gloriana's point. While the CRC mechs wouldn't be deterred at all, the mercenary mechs would have never made so many aggressive and unbridled attack passes if they had to brave a lot of flames!

Some of the mercenary corps that took part in the attack were obviously not as diligent in servicing their mechs than other outfits.

He paused the footage and zoomed in on a number of enemy mechs. On certain mechs, he spotted numerous signs of botched repairs, lack of maintenance and a lot of cut corners.

What was particularly egregious was that the armor coverage of some of the mechs was not complete!

Against a fully-armored target, flamethrowers weren't particularly deadly. The flames mostly melted the surface layers while increasing the heat level of the target.

However, the damage was countless times worse if the armor of the target contained vulnerabilities!

Striker mechs were able to inflict a lot of damage to the internals of a mech! The extreme application of heat and energy ruined lots of delicate components and machinery at a time!

A striker mech was a damaged mech's worst nightmare!

"We could have used more striker mechs." Ves concluded.

A lot more Avatar and Sentinel mechs would have still been up if his mech forces possessed an effective solution against massed attacks.

While a striker mech was only effective against melee mechs, freeing up pressure up close was vital in allowing friendly ranged mechs to fire at their targets without getting chased!

He shut down the projector. Despite the large amount of mechs, the battle didn't last very long. Ves had already seen what he needed to see, and he could always recall footage because he uploaded the files in his Archimedes Rubal implant.

His implant was supercharging his thinking speed and efficiency. Even if he didn't project the draft design, he could precisely envision it with his partially-digitized mind.

In fact, if they wanted to, Ves and Gloriana were fully capable of designing their mech in their minds!

He was a bit uncomfortable with this method, though. Visualizing his mech with his eyes was just a bit more real and substantial to him. It was hard to take a mech design seriously if it only existed in his mind.

Besides, Ves also needed to cooperate and coordinate with other mech designers. While it was no problem for him to exchange data with Gloriana, they also had to share their work with two design teams.

"Hmm.. the Bright Warriors failed to scare the mercenaries until my mechs finally crushed the CRC mechs."

The bridge mechs weren't as overwhelming as second-class mechs, but they were definitely superior to third-class mechs.

Sadly, his opponents didn't always possess a good discernment for mechs. If his enemies didn't study his mech lineup beforehand, then they could easily mistake the Bright Warriors as bog-stand third-class mechs!

Being underestimated was usually an advantage. However, the lack of deterrence value also meant that his forces would probably get into fights that could have been avoided if his enemies properly recognized their strength.

What Ves found notable about the mercenaries was that their morale at the start was very high. Likely buoyed by the rich rewards promised by the CRC, the mercenaries fought as if they would be set for life as long as they did their part!

The greedier the mercenaries, the harder they fought!

"And mercenaries are always greedy for money!"

Money translated into luxury. Money could be spent on training or augmentations. Money allowed mech pilots to buy their own personally-owned mechs, thereby freeing them from depending on their employers!

In short, as long as someone waved enough money in front of their faces, the mercenaries were more than willing to disregard a portion of their fear of death and take some risks!

His thoughts grew more focused towards manipulating morale.

This happened to be an area his design philosophy excelled in. He learned the importance of maintaining the confidence of his own men from watching how Major Verle motivated the hearts of the Flagrant Vandals.

He incorporated these lessons in his own design approach. His Desolate Soldiers and his Bright Warriors were already doing a great job in boosting the confidence of his mech pilots!

While their glows were also capable of pressuring enemy mech pilots, they didn't particularly excel in this aspect.

Ves didn't prioritize the deterrence of his previous mech designs. It had never been a major problem up until now.

"What tools do I have to enhance the deterrence value of my striker mech?"

He turned his gaze back towards the projected draft design and tried to come up ways to spice up its functional appearance.

Ves came up with two immediate answers.

First, he could shape the appearance of the mech in order to induce fear. The more intimidating it looked, the more its opponents faltered in their charge!

Second, he could compliment the mech's fearsome appearance with an equally-fearsome glow.

To generate such a glow, Ves had to empower his striker mech design with a suitable design spirit.

"Should I reuse one of my existing ones or create a new one?"

Right now, Ves wasn't in a good position to harvest one from an exobeast.

His fleet was constantly fleeing in the direction of Hegemony-aligned space, and all of the star systems they passed through were completely ravaged by the sandmen.

His second option was to create a new spiritual product. However, that was a fairly substantial effort and expended resources that Ves wanted to use as sparingly as possible.

His most preferred method was to see if he could reuse an existing design spirit!

After a bit of thought, two answers came in mind.

The milder option was to make use of Zeigra, the deceased Crown Cat of Felixia. Despite Zeigra's irreconcilable hatred against Ves, that didn't stop him from using the feline spirit to empower the Devil Tiger and the Prideful Soldier designs.

The more extreme option was to draw upon Nyxie, the ancient spiritual entity held captive in the Ancient Sarcophagus.

While Ves had already made use of several spiritual fragments harvested from the tyrannical spirit, he usually processed and sanitized them until they turned into strong and pliable spiritual ingredients.

What if Ves held back on removing their negative traits? What if he preserved much of what made Nyxie so unsettlingly scary and intimidating?

The Ancient Sarcophagus was safely stowed aboard the Scarlet Rose along with the rest of the contents of his vault, so he wasn't able to visit it immediately.

Still, in his memory, the Ancient Sarcophagus once exerted a very subtle but unavoidable pressure on Ves until it finally came to head!

Nyxie could also drive anyone in the vicinity to madness as long as they were trapped in the same chamber as the red coffin! Ves had already tested it out by using the cowardly William Urbesh as a test subject.

In short, incorporating Nyxie or some of the ancient alien's aspects was a good way to pump up the fear factor of his mech!

Yet.. Ves began to frown.

It was far too dangerous to make use of Nyxie in this fashion. Just like Cassandra Breyer, Nyxie was a hostile existence who possessed overwhelming strength but were constrained by their respective cages!

By allowing Nyxie to extend his influence outside his cage was incredibly dangerous. Ves had already suffered several times from Cassandra Breyer's interference.

Adding another threat in the form of Nyxie would probably drive him crazy!

Ves always had to be careful in deciding which entities he chose to become his design spirits.

Every design spirit earned spiritual feedback. They drew from the spiritual strength of every mech pilot and increased their strength as a result.

This interaction wasn't very apparent if only a couple of mechs had been produced.

Yet Ves didn't intend to design a custom mech or a low-production commission mech!

He wanted to design a striker mech that had the potential to dominate the market for its product category! His ambition was to match and surpass the success he enjoyed when he published his Desolate Soldier design!

If Ves was able to achieve this ambition, then he might be able to sell millions of copies of his striker mech throughout the Komodo Star Sector and possibly other star sectors!

With millions of mech pilots providing active feedback to Nyxie, Ves feared that he would not be able to stop him from gaining enough strength to break out of his prison!

"Nyxie is not a good choice!"

His emotions became a lot more stable when he turned his attention to Zeigra.

While the Crown Cat was just as hostile as Nyxie, he wasn't nearly as strong or sophisticated.

Nyxie likely used to be an alien tyrant and leader who dominated an empire in ancient times.

Zeigra was just a genetically-engineered cat who ruled an artificial jungle until Lady Miralix of House Laterna successfully hunted it down in a fair and officially-recognized Crown Hunt.

There was no comparison. While Zeigra was clearly the weaker entity, Ves was fully confident he could keep it under control even if his striker mech became popular.

"Unlike Nyxie who possesses an intelligent mentality, Zeigra is as stupid as a cat. He's only capable of displaying primal aggression and instinctual behavior."

"Meow!"

Lucky looked at Ves in anger! What did he say about cats?!

Ves looked down at his gem cat. "I'm not wrong! I doubt you're smarter than a Crown Cat."

"Meow!"

Chapter 1958 Fear Pulse

After settling for Zeigra as his striker mech's design spirit, Ves obtained a lot more direction for his mech design.

He let his imagination run wild. As he faced a projection of the draft design, he began to alter its appearance to align with its design spirit.

He didn't transform his striker mech into a tiger mech or anything as radical.

He wanted to theme his striker mech design in the same way his Aurora Titan design was themed around Qilanxo.

The humanoid mech form was still the most versatile mech type, especially in space. There was also an inherent advantage in keeping the flamethrower weapon system separate from the frame of the mech.

Due to all of the heat and energy the weapon channeled, they degraded incredibly fast. Unless mech technicians performed top-notch maintenance on the weapons, it was inevitable for them to malfunction or break down in battle.

If the flamethrower weapon system was attached to the mech, then it was pretty much impossible to repair it in battle!

If the mech merely carried a flamethrower, then it shouldn't be a problem for it to discard the broken weapon and pick up a spare one as soon as it returned to its mothership.

Besides, while striker mechs were often known for wielding shotguns or flamethrowers, they were also able to stow away their primary armaments and pull out a sword in order to fend off enemies up close!

This was an important feature of striker mechs. Since they always fought against mechs at a close distance, they inevitably had to fight off mechs that succeeded in getting close.

Ves left all of these details for later. For now, he continued to make the draft more distinct.

It was a lot like drawing concept art. It didn't matter if the exact proportions and outer components were subject to change. What Ves mainly sought was to create a powerful impression of his next mech design.

Just like the Devil Tiger, Ves coated the mech in a rust-brown shade. He took paints to make sure its shade wasn't identical to the Devil Tiger's shade.

There was no need for him to draw trouble to himself!

He played with the contours of the striker mech and turned it a bit more angular. He made sure to add his signature look to the head before surrounding it with Gloriana's hexagon.

The striker mech immediately took on a very different character with the addition of the signature looks.

Just like with his Deliverer and Bright Warriors, the third eye and the hexagon added a mysterious quality to their designs.

Normally, Ves appreciated this change, but now it looked rather incongruent with the intimidating theme of his striker mech.

"Maybe I should vary their appearances for this design."

He lifted his fingers and modified the projected appearance of the head.

Instead of keeping its third eye white, he transformed it into an ominous red-and-black cat eye. He also changed its glow from white to red!

To make Gloriana's hexagon fit, he experimented with various tones until he settled for a brighter shade of red.

Once he stepped back and studied his alterations, he became a lot more satisfied with its appearance.

The mech looked like it dipped out of hell in order to exact judgement on the living!

Its reddish coating and its intimidating red third eye conveyed a very aggressive impression.

When Ves imagined the mech wielding a flamethrower that spewed out a copious amount of flames, he believed the combination already achieved a substantial amount of deterrence solely due to its appearance!

Once he imparted it with a glow based on Zeigra's aggression and intimidation factor, the striker mech would definitely strike fear in the hearts of its enemies!

"What about the mech pilot?"

Ves remembered that he had gone rather crazy when he designed the Devil Tiger. He incorporated it with an illegally-modified neural interface that came with very loose safety restrictions.

The purpose of this design choice was to give the design spirit an opportunity to mess with the mech pilot of the Devil Tiger.

Obviously, he couldn't do that again for his upcoming mech design. His commercial products not only needed to be safe, but also had to earn the MTA's approval!

The most Ves could do was to make use of the new high-capacity neural interface model he incorporated in his Bright Warrior design.

Even then, he still doubted whether it was a good idea to deepen the connection between the mech pilot and the design spirit.

"This might be a case where it's better to keep them at a distance." He murmured.

He added a note to the draft to make sure it incorporated a more standard neural interface model in its cockpit.

Unlike his other mechs, the glow of his striker mech shouldn't contain any friendly elements.

It was only meant to be directed towards the enemy! If the glow intimidated its own side, then the mech was a liability instead of an asset on the battlefield!

"I should make sure that the glow affects the mech pilot and any friendlies as little as possible."

This required some spiritual tinkering, but Ves was confident he was able to keep its glow directed against the enemy.

Ves didn't mind that the striker mech did not possess any uplifting aspects. The Desolate Soldiers and the Bright Warriors already specialized in this role.

By imposing a lower limit on the immersion of the striker mech, there wasn't as much room for a skilled mech pilot to excel in piloting the mech.

That was fine to Ves. Striker mechs didn't possess much skill expression to begin with. As long as the enemy stayed out of melee range, the mech pilot only had to aim the flamethrower in a vague direction in order to fulfill the mech's primary function.

Striker mechs were deliberately designed to be easy to pilot. Its weapon was easy to use and while there were a lot of advanced nuances, it was completely possible for someone unused to piloting this mech type to make effective use of it. Whether they were melee specialists or ranged mechs, anyone could point a flamethrower in the right direction!

Their low skill floor was already accompanied by a relatively low skill ceiling.

This basically meant that a great mech pilot didn't perform much differently from a bad mech pilot in a striker mech.

Certainly, there were many ways to express their skill. Striker mech specialists were intimately familiar with the limitations of their mechs and weapons. They efficiently regulated their firing patterns and skillfully managed their energy and heat levels.

When an enemy arrived at point-blank range, the striker mech pilot should be able to exchange the flamethrower for a sword and neutralize the threat.

Still, compared to other mech types, striker mechs were not expected to play a starring role in battle.

Sometimes, outfits assigned random mech pilots to these mechs if other mechs weren't available!

"This is a good way to give my landbound mech pilots something to do." Ves realized. "Since I'm spending lots of time in space, it will be a shame to let all of those mech pilots fiddle their thumbs while their colleagues are doing the heavy lifting."

He already provided his landbound specialists the option to contribute to a battle in space with his Desolate Soldiers.

The problem was that while his Desolate Soldiers performed decently against the sandmen, they were very inadequate against human opponents!

Their Sandbreaker rifles exhibited a very low muzzle velocity compared to railguns and laser weapons. This shortcoming hampered their long and medium-ranged accuracy.

Therefore, their effective range was a lot lower, especially in the hands of a mech pilot who didn't excel in marksmanship!

"This problem isn't nearly as bad with striker mechs." Ves predicted.

The Avatars of Myth and Living Sentinels still separated their mech pilots by environment. Ves wanted to transition away from this division, but in order to accomplish that he needed to provide his mech pilots with much better learning facilities.

Just like second-class mech pilots, they not only had to receive excellent tutelage, but also required several augmentations that enhanced their intelligence and combat instincts.

All of this meant that Ves became more determined than ever to realize this mech design!

His desire fueled his passion. As his passion burned brighter, Ves felt the need to be more inventive with regards to his vision for his mech.

What else could he do to spice up the rust-red striker mech?

"Maybe I can add some special features."

His Deliverer achieved fame through its Guided Aim ability. His Bright Warriors possessed the very valuable Ancestral Possession ability.

Though his Bright Warriors didn't have an opportunity to display the latter, Ves had high hopes for it in the future.

His striker mech should come with a special ability as well in order to keep up with the standard of his latest mech designs.

It shouldn't be too powerful. It wasn't appropriate to make his commercial mechs too exceptional. He should reserve his big guns for his custom mechs and commissioned mechs.

Besides, with a design spirit as hostile as Zeigra, it was a very bad idea to give him too much agency!

Ves thought for a moment before settling on a possible answer.

"Since my mech is all about intimidation, why not find a way to turn it up? A spike of intimidation can be very useful in the right circumstances!"

He called it the Fear Pulse. As long as the mech pilot timed the activation of this ability correctly, it was very much possible for a single striker mech to stall the charge of an entire squad of incoming enemy mechs!

Of course, Ves wasn't sure right now how he could incorporate this ability into his mech design and how to regulate it so that it only affected enemies.

Still, as long as Ves figured out the spiritual mechanics and made sure that it was powerful enough, it could definitely achieve a very significant effect on the battlefield!

"This is brilliant!" Ves grinned.

After he added this feature to his list, he tried to see whether he could add something else to his mech.

He thought back on his intentions to experiment with imaginary mechs and spiritual networks.

Both possessed a lot of potential, but Ves didn't see how he could make them relevant with his current mech design.

"Maybe I have better luck applying them to my upcoming second-class mech design."

He grimaced for a moment. He felt rather mixed about fulfilling DIVA's commission. He didn't look forward to abiding by all of the restrictions that constrained Hexer mech designs.

In any case, considering how distinctive his vision had already become, he was already satisfied with what he came up with. As long as he realized all of its features, it would definitely sell as much if not more than his Desolate Soldier model!

When Ves returned to Gloriana and explained his vision, he received a positive reaction.

"I love it!" She smiled. "You really turned our mech into something special!"

"What do you think about the modifications to our signature looks? Turning them red was an impulsive decision on my part. Is there anything significant about turning the hexagon red?"

She shook her head. "It's fine. While the hexagon carries a different meaning, I don't think it's bad. This rendition of the third eye looks very intimidating. Combined with the rest of your visual design, there is a lot of harmony between the intent, the performance and the appearance of the design!"

It felt good to receive her appreciation. He might lose out to her in terms of technical design, but when it came to the creative side of mech design, Ves refused to relinquish his throne!

"What did you come up with while I was working on the vision of our mech?"

"Well, I was trying to see how we can give our mechs a technical edge. It's very hard to find a way to do so without exceeding the budget of our mech design, but I think I found a way to give our striker mech an advantage."

"Do tell."

Chapter 1959 Trapped in Bentheim

An enormous number of ships and mechs had gathered at the Bentheim System.

With the sudden withdrawal of the sandman fleets from occupied human space, many people believed the war had ended.

They came up with several reasons why the Sand War took such a sudden turn when states like the Bright Republic had been pushed to the brink.

The sandmen race returned to sanity.

Killing the sandman emperor caused the aliens to lose confidence.

The invasion achieved its purpose.

Whatever the case, many of the states involved in the Sand War hoped that the ordeal was over.

Sadly, the sandmen weren't done yet. With their original territories ravaged by the CFA, the invasion forces were the only sandmen left in the galaxy!

Instead of running back into the deep frontier with their tails tucked between their legs, the sandman initiated one more suicidal attack.

They concentrated all of their sandman fleets and merged them into one, humongous sand planet.

The size of this planet reached an immense proportion. Not only that, but the scout ships also discovered that the sandman forces brought a lot of valuable exotics and materials harvested from their conquests!

With the reinforcement of a considerable amount of material wealth from thousands of planets, no one had a good idea of what the sandman planet could do! Was it stronger than the capital planet of the sandman empire? Was this the final attack run of the sandman race?

Whatever the case, the entire Bright Republic readied for the final confrontation.

An enormous amount of mech regiments and mech divisions gathered at Bentheim. A lot of star systems along the suspected route of the sandman planet had been evacuated.

Various scout ships had been posted in every single star system in the vicinity of the route. If the planet ever veered away from Bentheim, the defenders would know as soon as possible!

When the sandman planet finally finished its accumulation and set off in the direction of the center of the galaxy, every Brighter held their breaths.

The Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps in the Bentheim System both increased their readiness and prepared to fight what might arguably be the most important battle in the history of the Bright Republic!

Due to the enormous scope and the historical significance of impending battle, a lot of foreign glory hounds had gathered in the Bentheim System as well!

Vesians, Reinaldians, Fridaymen and many other foreign outfits sought to land at least one blow on the planet-sized alien threat!

Even if their contribution in the battle was negligible, they would still be able to brag about participating in this epic battle!

While the foreigners looked forward to the upcoming clash between the sandman planet and the MTA warfleet, the Brighters were less than enthused.

The foreigners didn't have a stake in the battle. Whether Bentheim got wrecked by the sandman was none of their business!

In contrast, the Brighters all knew that the Bright Republic would only become a shadow of its former self if it lost its economic heart. The sheer amount of commerce, industry and R\u0026D that took place on the main planet was immense!

For many centuries, the Bright Republic benefited enormously from this concentration. It had become one of the main trade destinations in this region of space. While the star system was often crowded with traffic, the vast amount of goods flowing in and out provided lots of opportunities for businessmen across the star sector!

Yet now, the state finally paid the price for putting most of its eggs in a single basket. Against a foe that was so overwhelming that dozens of border states succumbed to their might, the sandmen had proven to be too powerful to resist by third-rate states!

While the soldiers of the Bright Republic prepared for battle, their morale had fallen into a ditch.

It couldn't be helped. In a time where the citizens and servants of the Bright Republic had to lean together to resist the alien onslaught, their own higher-ups suddenly decided to stab one of the most storied military families in the back!

Almost every Brighter disapproved of this decision. Considering the Larkinson Family's considerable prestige and honor, they deserved better!

The Brighters weren't shy in expressing what they thought.

"Why are we letting the Fridaymen run our state?! Do our voices even matter?"

"The bright president has turned into a puppet! What has the Friday Coalition ever done for us? We're already being treated like pawns!"

"If our own government is shameless enough to betray the Larkinson Family, none of us are safe! Mark my words, soon it will be our turn!"

The disappearance of so many Larkinsons across the ranks of the Mech Corps hit the soldiers particularly hard. The reputation of the Bright Republic tanked, and with it the Mech Corps for acquiescing to their tyrannical decisions!

How could the Mech Corps retain any honor when it repaid its heroes with a stab in the back?

Colonel Ark Larkinson didn't deserve to be chased away from his own comrades.

Benjamin Larkinson made too many contributions in the previous war to be dragged away from Rittersberg in chains.

Melinda Larkinson defended Bentheim for months, yet her own surface took her into custody!

All of these Larkinsons and more set an example to the Brighters. A lot of average citizens aspired to become like them. For their heroes to be torn down like this was an immense blow to everyone's impression of their own government!

This led to a slight depression and sense of cynicism among the mech pilots and starfighter pilots, which was very dangerous when the survival of the Bright Republic was at stake!

As the sandmen planet was scheduled to arrive in the Bentheim in the next couple of weeks, almost every Brighter in the Bentheim System prepared for the inevitable clash in their own way.

Among the Brighters called to action, a young but promising mech designer aboard a military combat carrier regarded the upcoming battle with dread.

Carlos Shaw adjusted his Mech Corps-issued mech designer uniform with a sigh. He'd been pulled away from his comfortable assignment in the rear in order to bolster the mech technicians servicing all of the mechs gathered at Bentheim.

After taking part in the last Bright-Vesia War, Carlos had enough of war. After he left the LMC, he tried to set out on his own. With his bright intellect and valuable experiences, he was confident he'd be able to carve a spot in the market!

It turned out that starting his own mech company was far more challenging than he thought.

He didn't have the capital to start his own mech company! He spent more than a year trying to attract investment.

He failed. A flood of talented Novices entered the mech industry every year. Even more Novices and Apprentices constantly knocked on the doors of investors every day!

The people with money were spoiled for choice. These savvy and discerning investors never wasted their money on a mech designer with low potential! Each of them sought out the next Ves Larkinson. To Carlos, it seemed as if they treated it as a game. Every investor sought to outdo their rivals by picking out the most promising diamonds in the rough!

Compared to the prodigies and the ones with proven track records, a recently-elevated Apprentice like Carlos with hardly any mech designs under his name fell completely under the radar!

Carlos clenched his fists. "It's not fair! I'm smarter than them! My designs are better than other Apprentices!"

Yet regardless of his efforts, he just wasn't exceptional enough to stand out from the crowd.

Without money, how could he afford the money to purchase a production license? How could he fund the construction of a mech workshop? How could he market his obscure mech designs?

"How did Ves do it? He wasn't much better off than me at the start!"

Though Carlos knew it wasn't healthy, he couldn't help but compare himself to his former friend all the time.

While Ves and his rich and powerful girlfriend recently earned acclaim for becoming the youngest masterwork mech designers of the Yeina Star Cluster, Carlos had been forced to reenlist in the Mech Corps and become one of its many unremarkable careerist mech designers!

Though the Mech Corps treated him well, Carlos hardly gained any opportunities to excel in his job. His junior status meant that the military would never entrust him with any actual responsibility.

Why should his superiors put him in charge when there were thousands of eager Journeymen and numerous willing Seniors to develop the best mechs of the Bright Republic?

As hard as it was for him to admit it, Carlos threw away his opportunities when he impulsively resigned from the LMC.

The most infuriating aspect about his departure was that he did it for one of the most banal reasons of all! He left because he was jealous of Ves' success!

"I was stupid back then." Carlos plainly admitted.

He wasn't in the best state of mind back then. His recent war experiences still haunted him in many ways.

Yet that was no excuse for his selfish decision to leave his friend. He assumed that he could equal Ves' accomplishments if he had a chance to start his own mech business!

How naive he was back then. If he could travel back in time, he would beat his younger self up before he could make such a stupid decision!

He shook his head in regret. "Time travel is just a fantasy."

There was no way for him to turn back the clock. Even though Ves and the Larkinson Family seemed to have attracted a lot of trouble, Carlos still believed that they were in a better spot than him! He had full confidence that his former employer would be able to overcome this crisis.

"Ves wouldn't be the man he is today if he can't succeed."

After inspecting his appearance, he left his room to start his shift. The mech technicians needed a lot of direction to service the more sophisticated mechs of the Mech Corps!

Elsewhere in the Bentheim System, Vincent Ricklin leaned against the bulkhead of his carrier as his Adonis Colossus underwent its daily cleaning cycle.

Various bots and mech technicians meticulously dusted off every bit of space dust from its surface.

Any cracks, pits and marks of imperfection had to be fixed as soon as possible! His mech had to look as impeccable as possible in order to maintain his public image!

Yet.. lately Vincent started to question his purpose.

What was the point of boosting his fame and dancing to the tune of the government when the Bright Republic was in decline?

Regardless of the outcome of the upcoming battle, Vincent didn't think his home state possessed a promising future.

As a former rebel of the Bentheim Liberation Movement, Vincent was privy to some of the darker secrets of the Bright Republic.

He also knew the state was weaker than it tried to portray in public. When he chatted with his former rebel contacts, he learned he wasn't the only one who held this sentiment.

"There is no future in the Bright Republic." Vincent frowned.

A part of him missed Raella Larkinson. Though they only shared a casual relationship, Raella was a lot spicier than any other babe he dated!

Hardly any babe left in the Bright Republic could bring that excitement.

A part of him wanted to chase after her. From what he heard, Raella joined up with other Larkinsons on their way to the Sentinel Kingdom.

Vincent never left the Bright Republic. Yet for the first time in his life, he started to set his sights away from his home state.

What would it be like to travel to the Sentinel Kingdom? How would Raella respond if he managed to meet her again?

Would she be pleased or annoyed?

"Probably both." He smirked.

Chapter 1960 Hexer Fashion

After the Larkinson Clan fleet transitioned out of FTL, the ships cycled their FTL drives at various rates.

It would be half a day before the fleet was ready to resume its journey.

A lot of shuttles and transports ferried goods and personnel between various vessels.

A sturdy shuttle surrounded by numerous Avatar and Glory Warrior mechs departed from the Stellar Chaser. After a brief journey, the shuttle effortlessly landed in the hangar bay of the Scarlet Rose.

Ves, Gloriana, their cats, their assistants, their bodyguards and other personnel emerged from the shuttle.

As much as Gloriana wanted to stay aboard her own ship, Ves detested the Stellar Chaser. The ship was a fine vessel marred by Hexer touches.

Almost everything on the ship was hexagon-shaped. The hexagon-shaped datapads, hexagon-shaped tables and hexagon-shaped corridors quickly started to grate on his sanity!

The way the ship crew were being treated also rankled him. Ves couldn't stand the sight of women bossing around the humble boys who were stuck with doing most of the grunt work.

Though he knew it was unfair to blame it all on Gloriana, he still wanted a change of scenery.

Fortunately, his girlfriend didn't object to transferring to another ship, though she was slightly annoyed that he decided to settle on his new flagship.

"The Stellar Chaser is better than the Scarlet Rose." She petulantly complained as they departed the hangar bay. "Fridayman engineering is worse than Hexer engineering, you know! Besides, I'm not entirely comfortable that your ship's recent overhaul fully wrested away all of the controls and backdoors the Fridaymen snuck into her systems."

Ves smiled confidently. "Calabast herself directed our overhaul. This particular ship class is hardly a secret to her and her associates. We even ripped out the original quantum entanglement node and replaced it with a different one to ensure it wouldn't siphon any data to the CRC!"

"I'm still not satisfied."

Too bad. Ves wasn't about to change his mind. His girlfriend could nag him all she wanted, but his feelings mattered as well! He wasn't about to let Gloriana dictate all of his decisions!

"Meow."

"Miaow."

"See? Even our cats agree!"

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

Both Lucky and Clixie hissed at Ves!

Gloriana looked amused as she picked up her furry friend. "It looks like you aren't being truthful, Ves."

"Don't doubt my impeccable communication skills. I'm called Devil Tongue for a reason?"

"I think the reason for that is different from the reason you are implying."

Jokes aside, both of them enjoyed their brief tour through Ves' latest conquest. The extensive overhaul transformed the former CRC ship in many ways.

On the surface, every symbol or marking related to the Friday Coalition and Coalition Reserve Corps had been removed. Instead, the Larkinson Clan's interior decorators reformed the entire interior in a pleasant bright palette livened up with plenty of markings that reflected his prestige.

The golden cat head emblem was the most prominent symbol of all. It was present in every corridor and every compartment. Ves and Gloriana couldn't help but smile as they encountered the logo of the clan.

"Every ship under my command will adopt this scheme in time." Ves revealed. "We need to impose some uniformity in our sprawling fleet. I'm not sure if we'll be able to keep everything together if we continue to grow without direction."

Gloriana glanced at him. "You know, you'd have an easier time trying to unite all of the groups together by adopting everyone in the Larkinson Clan."

"Huh?" Ves briefly halted in these steps. "Since when did you support Calabast's proposal?"

"I've discussed this topic with her several times. She made a very good case for her suggestion. As it is, our circumstances are already different from the circumstances that shaped the original Larkinson Family. Back when you Larkinsons served as cogs in the machine of the Bright Republic, you never had to worry about anything except feeding as many mech pilots to the Mech Corps as possible. Now that your Larkinson Clan set off on its own, your relatives are visibly overwhelmed."

Her explanation didn't sound very flattering. Ves couldn't help but frown. "We don't need to adopt outsiders into our clan in order to secure their services, Gloriana. Not everything revolves around family identity. So far, I'd say we are managing pretty well at the moment."

"That's only on the surface." She retorted. "Just look at the people around you. They are very attached to your organizations. Calabast described all of them as de-facto Larkinsons. You only need to take the final step in order to recognize what has already become the truth!"

Her words caused Ves to look around. The workers aboard the Scarlet Rose consisted of his most loyal Kinners and Avatars. As his new primary vessel, Ves did not allow anyone untrustworthy to step aboard.

Ves didn't look at the crew members with his eyes. Instead, he sounded them out with his spiritual senses.

Though he wasn't the best at discerning people's inner emotions, he didn't sense anything of concern from them. In fact, it was the opposite. The people around him were true comrades who he could trust to have his back.

Even so, the Larkinson identity possessed a very special meaning to him. Not just any Tom, Dick or Harry ought to be able to join his clan as a fully-fledged member! That was still a step too far for his stodgy self!

He directed a suspicious glance towards his girlfriend. "I thought you hated Calabast. Why are you carrying her water all of a sudden? Accepting her proposal means adopting her into the clan!"

She shrugged. "She's already a part of your circle, so nothing will actually change. She's a deceitful spy, but I don't think she'll betray us. She knows that you and I are her tickets to success. Turning her into a Larkinson allows us to exert more control over her actions."

"I think you are a bit too optimistic in your estimate how much control I can exert over Calabast."

He hardly had any leverage over her considering all of the blackmail materials she held in reserve. Leaking naked pictures of him doing his business in the bathroom was the least of his concerns!

They reached his stateroom.

It did not look as he expected. Instead of entering a chamber similar to the one he was familiar with before the refit, his stateroom had suddenly doubled in size!

Ves noted that the extra room came from the adjacent compartment. Two staterooms had been merged together to form a single, roomy compartment that offered far more space than Ves actually required!

"Hihi! This will be our new home for the time being!" Gloriana cheered.

She skipped forward and quickly arrived at the sumptuously large bed placed in the center.

"Miaow!"

Clixie jumped out of her arms and landed on the soft and comfy surface bed in order to luxuriate in its softness.

"Meow."

Lucky floated down and landed next to her to see what all of the fuss was all about.

"Look! Even our cats like the bed I've picked out for you!"

"Ah. I see who's responsible."

Ves did not look amused. He distinctly remembered that he never instructed his subordinates to expand his stateroom.

It seemed that Gloriana had taken liberal advantage of his month-long coma!

Expanding the compartment and replacing their bed with an admittedly superior one wasn't the only change that Gloriana pushed through. His entire wardrobe consisted of smart clothing cut in the best fashion of Hexer high society.

The moment Ves shifted through the outfits, his face grew uglier.

Different from the sober business outfits that he preferred to wear on a day-to-day basis, his girlfriend filled his closet with colorful and excessively-frilly ensembles designed to dandify their wearers!

This was the kind of clothing that Hexer women foisted upon their boytoys!

"Gloriana..." Ves said with gritted teeth.

"Yes, honey?"

"I appreciate your desire to improve my wardrobe, but I prefer to take care of my own clothing. Unless you can unlock the settings of these smart clothes, you can send them back to Brutus or something."

"How did you know I borrowed them from Brutus?" Gloriana looked shocked.

"The quality of these smart clothes is too high! The Hegemony was still too far away to ship any goods to their location. There's no other source you could have obtained them from except for your brother!"

"What's wrong with them? I think they will look quite dashing on you! I should know, because I tried them out on your body when you were in a coma! Let me show you the images I've recorded!"

"No thanks!"

After a bit of arguing, Ves finally managed to throw all of the flamboyant clothing out of his closet. Ves resolved to fill his wardrobe with clothes that conveyed dignity rather than ineptness.

Gloriana pouted at Ves as a bot took away the piles of smart clothing. "I thought you liked a bit of color. You didn't say no to wearing cat ears."

"That's because I wanted to convey levity. The point of wearing them was to decrease our threat level by coming across as eccentric. That does not mean I want to turn into a full-blown clown!"

She didn't understand his objections. To her, all of the males she cared about in her life wore these kinds of outfits!

Back in the Hegemony, women were fully in control of what their boys were allowed to wear. This led to a tendency where the stronger gender treated boys as dress-up dolls.

She always wanted to join this friendly competition! Dressing up a boy with the clothes a woman picked out for him was one of the most cherished pastimes for Hexers!

Ves knew that as well, so he didn't hesitate to shoot her down before she got going.

"I'll let Benny pick out a new wardrobe for me." He decided.

"Your assistant's fashion sense doesn't measure up. He's just a yokel from Cloudy Curtain? You need a professional, Ves!"

"No thanks."

She soon conceded the argument once Ves made it clear that he wouldn't budge. They both sat down on their bed and played with their cats for a few minutes.

"About our next mech design project." Gloriana spoke up. "How much time do you want to send on this project?"

"It took three months to design the Bright Warrior. While our striker mech design offers plenty of technical conundrums, it shouldn't take more time than that to present a decent product."

"The Bright Warrior lacked a considerable amount of optimization before you passed the design on to 'Mr. S.', you know. Can we rely on Mr. S. again?"

She looked almost hopeful at Ves. Sadly, the Superpublish function couldn't be used so soon again!

"No."

"Then we should reserve a bit more time to be certain. How about four months? That gives us plenty of time to iterate on the design and give us time to test the prototypes. It's crucially important that we allocate enough time to testing and optimization when it comes to commercial mechs. The market doesn't like to buy a mech that comes across as rough and incomplete."

She had a point. Besides, they might be working on another design project as well, so giving them some extra leeway in the form of an extra month was extremely helpful.

"A month longer doesn't make much difference." Ves observed. "It's not like we are operating under someone else's deadline. Four months it is, then. Hopefully, I can get a lot more work done now that I have my implant."

He didn't plan to spend all of his time on designing his striker mech, though. Aside from leading the Larkinson Clan, he also wanted to start making some actual headway into creating an imaginary mech!

He had waited so long to design a mech made out of spiritual energy, but he had always been hampered by his imperfect memory and mental visualization abilities.

Now that he installed a literal storage device in his brain, those problems no longer hampered his imagination!