

## Mech 1991

### *Chapter 1991 Original Charm*

Was Ves bashing his head against a wall?

He certainly felt like it after trying to come up with several alternate mech concepts. Each time, he attempted to come up with a mech shape that was able to offer better and more tailored performance compared to what a bog-standard vanilla humanoid striker mech had to offer!

"I refuse to give up! I refuse to give in! I'm a mech designer! I can work with multiple mech shapes!"

Designing humanoid mechs was very familiar territory to Ves. He almost never designed a mech that deviated from the premise of an upright machine that walked on two legs and used its two arms to wield its primary armaments.

This standard was very popular in the mech community, and for good reason.

Ves didn't need to reiterate that it was a shape that was easy to pick up and understand by his customers.

He didn't need to say that research on humanoid mechs had been done to death, so there were a lot of standard layouts that offered immediate answers on how to structure their internals and artificial musculature systems.

All of these advantages and more turned humanoid mechs into the predominant mech shape in human space. Bestial mechs took second place, but were very popular in certain states and star sectors.

Outside of these established conventions, there was still room for more mech shapes, some of which weren't inspired by the shapes of existing humans and beasts.

These days, the mech industry came up with a lot of standards and best practices. A lot of excellent mech designers over the generations experimented with what they could do. The MTA and other organizations gathered all of the results and aggregated them in order to determine which one was the best out of all of them. After a very long process, the solution the MTA chose would eventually become the most optimal standard which every mech designer had to respect!

Was there anything nefarious behind this drive towards pushing standards on the mech industry? Not necessarily. They were often the most optimal solution to most situations. It was a waste of time trying to explore other options when the existing standards were already the best!

"Still, it's a mistake to assume that the standards are unquestionably the best in every situation."

Technology constantly progressed, opening up newer options and making unviable choices more practical.

The imagination of the entire mech industry was vast, but not unlimited. The most deviant minds who weren't satisfied with the existing standards always tried to figure out if there was a better way to solve a problem!

Most attempts ended in failure, but occasionally someone got lucky. Still, their successes were usually marginal and limited to specific circumstances. After so much technological development, it was very rare that a single mech designer was able to come up with a radical solution that was good enough to overturn existing standards!

Changing the shape of a mech to suit a certain purpose was not that unusual. However, most mechs designed in this fashion still fell within the boundaries of conventional standards.

Not many mech designers chose to take it a step further and design a true deviation from the standard.

Now that Ves started to tackle this challenge himself, he found out first hand why even Seniors and Masters declined to explore this direction further.

"It's too difficult!"

He felt as if he was straining his creativity to come up with good ideas. Most of them sounded promising at first, but as soon as Ves sketched a rough draft, they turned out to be very deficient in certain aspects.

So far, many of his mechs came across as demented frontline mechs. Removing the legs and turning the arms into flamethrower mounts vastly increased the capacity and efficiency of his mech.

However, these design choices neutered his striker mech's ability to defend against melee threats. This was not something striker mech pilots liked to see. Their mech types were designed to fend off approaching melee mechs, so they were at high risk of getting attacked by enemy mechs up close!

"They'll probably equate my mech to a starfighter." Ves tiredly remarked as he mentally threw his latest draft design into his implant's trash bin.

Spaceborn frontline mechs were often indistinguishable from starfighters past a certain point. The only reason why they still fell under the category of mechs at all was because they required a pilot with the right neural aptitude to operate.

That said, which mech pilot wanted to pilot such a limiting machine? Mech pilots possessed their own pride! They spent at least eight, ten or twelve years learning how to pilot complicated, multi-limbed war machines! Putting them into the cockpit of a glorified starfighter was an insult to their identity!

After making so many futile attempts, Ves was out of inspiration. He no longer possessed the drive and energy to research alternate concepts.

"Enough!"

Ves threw his hands and decided to end this session. He wouldn't gain anything when his inspiration ran dry. Even his creativity had limits!

Even though he hadn't gained any concrete results so far, Ves nonetheless gained at least some satisfaction.

He felt he was going back to his roots. Lately, Ves had been pushing off a lot of problems to Gloriana. It felt good to tackle a technical problem by himself. Unlike the other problems, Ves cared a lot about this issue, so he was fully invested in trying to solve it in a better way than the standard formulas could achieve.

It reminded him what mech design was really all about. His design philosophy had more in common with spiritual sorcery than the nuts and bolts of creating technically-sophisticated war machines. It was easy for Ves to become more and more detached from the technical side of mech design, especially since his girlfriend was so good in this aspect.

Ves couldn't help but be reminded of a warning he received from Master Moira Willix.

"Specialization is good for gaining greater efficiency in my workflow, but not necessarily good for my development. If I keep handing off work I don't like to my girlfriend, I will eventually lose the ability to perform this work myself!"

He needed to design mechs by himself in order to keep his comprehensive design skills sharp. Right now, the challenge he accepted forced him to exercise several technical design skills that he had neglected for a very long time!

"It feels good to approach a design like I did at the start of my career!" He smiled.

Though he failed to yield any useful results, the entire process benefited him in a different way. He felt mentally stimulated in a way that caused him to discover some of the original charm he appreciated about mechs.

No matter what shape they came in, mechs represented the ultimate creative potential of the human race. The vibrant mech industry constantly produced an uncountable amount of designs, many of which contained wonderful new innovations!

Leaving aside glows and design spirits, mechs fascinated Ves because they were capable of outputting a lot of damage or withstanding a lot of attacks through their clever design and thorough destruction.

Ves rediscovered some of the childish fascination he held towards mechs. In his childhood, he didn't know any better, but that didn't stop him from admiring these great and terrible machines!

"Maybe I'm forcing the matter too much."

His latest setbacks and realizations cleansed his mind and snapped him out of his obsession. Now that he was able to look back at the past few days, he felt a bit ashamed. He was so determined to achieve the impossible that he disregarded his girlfriend's sound advice and proceeded to do exactly what she said, hitting his head against a wall.

"At least I knocked off some dust in my mind when I did all of that head bashing!" Ves joked.

He decided to take a break from work and occupy his time with other matters.

He spent some time tutoring Maikel and Zanthra Larkinson. Both of his pupils weren't ready for the real lessons yet, but that was no excuse for the two teenagers to slack off! Ves was determined to push them in order to make sure they earned their progress through blood, sweat and tears!

When the two kids whined to him that their workload was too high, Ves verbally slapped aside these arguments.

"Do you think it's easy to become a Journeyman? Do you think you can stroll your way to my level of success? That's impossible! There are so many ambitious and hard-working mech designers in the mech industry that there is always someone better! The best you can do is keep up as much as possible while finding your own strengths. You can play after you become a mech designer. Until then, I expect you to manage your time well so that you keep learning something new every day!"

He had to give the Larkinsons at least some leisure time. Ves was very careful about that. If he forced Maikel and Zanthar to study from morning to evening, they wouldn't be able to unwind and live their lives!

Ves had long developed a hypothesis that spiritual potential emerged from individuals who made the most of life. Spirituality seemed to have a very strong correlation with sentience. He guessed that clever and emotional people were much more prone to develop spiritual potential than someone dull!

After he finished checking their progress, Ves exited the design lab and wandered through the halls of the Scarlet Rose.

He couldn't help but recall the memories of the original-prefitted version of the ship and what took place in the corridors and compartments. With the help of his implant, he could call up the exact positions of the bodies on the deck and the damage to the interior.

Now, none of those signs were visible. The refit had extensively repaired the damage and wiped away the traces. Instead, the comfortable white interior was interspersed with the symbol of the LMC and the Larkinson Clan. Two different cats adorned the logos, though many people thought they were the same!

It felt very gratifying to own a ship as expensive and capable as the Scarlet Rose. It felt even better when Ves realized that he didn't pay fortune to obtain this ship!

"No wonder the pirate profession holds so much attraction! It's so easy to steal someone's pride and joy through the use of force!"

That said, Ves would be crazy if he decided to go pirate. Stealing the possessions of others was a very fast way to tanking his reputation and earning the ire of every lawful organization!

Eventually, he returned to his stateroom. Gavin stood and waited patiently at the entrance.

"Benny? Why are you here?"

"Something important has come up." His assistant answered as his eyes darted in several directions. "Let's head inside to talk."

When they entered the stateroom and took their seats, Gavin activated his comm and projected a recording of a compartment turned into a chamber of worship by a bunch of Ylvainans.

"What is so concerning about this, Benny? All I see is a bunch of Ylvainan crew members performing their daily prayers."

Gavin zoomed in the projection. "Ah, that is normally the case, but recently the Ylvainans have altered their worship rituals. Look closely at the statue placed in the back."

Now that Ves directed his attention towards it, the metal statue that usually depicted the robed form of Prophet Ylvaine was absent.

Instead, a new statue took its place! Ves studied the figure it depicted carefully and found some very disturbing aspects about it. Its face and demeanor looked very familiar!

"Is that.. me?"

"Yes." Gavin answered. "We don't quite know yet when it started, but the thousands of Ylvainans running our ships and piloting some of our mechs have all started to worship you directly! To be honest, that was already happening to some extent, but lately the Ylvainans have started to put you ahead of the Great Prophet! It's as if the Living Prophet voluntarily relinquished his central role in his own faith in favor of you! James has to be responsible for this massive shift, but the reason for it eludes us! None of the Ylvainans we've questioned can provide us with a solid answer!"

Ves looked shocked at the news! If what happened in the recording took place throughout his entire fleet, then he was basically enjoying the worship of the entire True Ylvaine Dynasty!

This was incredibly surprising because he didn't even believe in the Ylvainan Faith!

"What is that bastard James up to now?!"

*Chapter 1992 Another "Benny"*

Ever since Gavin informed him of the huge shift in worship pattern among the Ylvainans in his fleet, Ves felt more anxious about this group than ever.

Religious fanatics always concerned him a lot. Unlike normal people, fanatics wholeheartedly devoted themselves to whatever cause they idolized!

This compulsion could be used for both innocuous ends and destructive ends! When people turned off the part of their brains that ran on logic, they were capable of doing anything regardless of the harm to their own lives and wellbeing!

This was why Ves hated them so much. To him, reality made much more sense when people solely pursued their rational self-interests. Extremists and fanatics were some of the people who were most prone to ignoring this pattern, which made them very hard to predict and guard against!

It was already bad enough that some of his enemies consisted of fanatics.

It was worse when they counted among his allies!

The two groups that concerned him the most were the Ylvainans and the Hexers.

Even though Ves grew increasingly more close to the Hexers, he wasn't too concerned. As long as he refrained from entering Hegemony space, he didn't have to deal with their man-hating ways aside from the occasional insensitive remark from his girlfriend.

The same could not be said for the Ylvainans.

Though he left the Ylvaine Protectorate far behind, that only separated him from the 'moderate' Ylvainans.

A large portion of his fleet and his other organizations consisted of True Believers! Compared to regular Ylvainans, they were even more devoted to their faith, and they just happened to be indoctrinated in the belief that the clones of the Great Prophet actually represented the original Ylvaine!

The amount of craziness needed to believe in such an absurd premise was astounding. Everyone in the galaxy knew that clones of people did not take over their identities. Far from it. Clowns were essentially bots in human skin! Even if the less flawed clones could pass off as human, it was largely similar to AIs programmed to act like humans.

James Ylvaine was different, however. So much so that Ves demanded a personal meeting with the latest clone of the prophet. This new development obviously came from the top!

When the fleet next exited FTL, a shuttle departed from a light carrier. It crossed a short distance until it docked in the Scarlet Rose's crowded hangar bay.

Only one person exited the shuttle. James Ylvaine wearing his characteristic white robes emerged from the vehicle with a pleasant smile. The guards assigned to fetch him couldn't help but be taken aback by his natural charm!

"Please lead the way." He spoke, his smooth voice flowing like silk!

Wherever he passed, the crew members working in the vicinity all stared at him as if he was a celebrity. His regal-looking robe stood out from the functional uniforms of the Avatars and Battle Criers like a sore thumb. It was as if a pope had stepped onto their humble ship!

The pair of guards eventually ushered him in Ves' stateroom.

Aside from Nitaa and Lucky, no one else was present. Ves did not feel threatened by James as long as he was alone. It was his influence and the devotion of his followers that truly turned him into a formidable player!

"Mr. Larkinson." James greeted Ves as if they were ordinary buddies. "It's good to see you again. I'm aware that you are very busy lately. Just know that failure is a normal process that everyone has to go through. You are not strong enough to be able to fulfill

all of your ambitions. That's okay. I'm sure that you will be able to revisit your goal in the future."

Ves stroked Lucky's back as his cat dozed on his desk. His lips curled into a frown. "I did not ask for your advice. Please keep these kinds of comments to yourself. In fact, cut it off with the charade. I believe the future is never set in stone! Whatever you think might happen, there is always the possibility that events will happen outside of your supposed predictions!"

"I never claimed to be omniscient, Ves." James smiled toothily at him as he comfortably sat on the chair placed before the desk. "I think you are misconstruing what a prophet is. Prophets are messengers. Prophets serve as the voice of the people or something greater. I did not wear this robe to enrich myself. I serve a greater cause."

That sounded absurd to Ves. "The records of the original Ylvaine say otherwise. By all accounts, he was fully enjoying the life of a cult leader."

It was indisputable that the Prophet Ylvaine who founded the faith was a very indulgent human. Not only did he travel on the most luxurious ships, he also married a lot of wives and fathered a lot of sons!

Was this the behavior of a humble messenger?

"Again, I am not necessarily great." James calmly retorted as if he already expected the answer. "My current incarnation is just a mortal. Just like my first known incarnation, I am just as vulnerable to the threat of death as any other human. However, even if I die this instant, I will always live on. Life is rather quirky. As someone who embodies this domain, I'm sure you know all about it. Right, Mr. Larkinson?"

How many secrets did this man know?! Ves resisted the urge to restrain him and dig through his mind!

"Stop taunting me, James. I am in no mood to play these games!"

"As you wish, Ves. I'm sure you are curious why my followers have shifted to worshipping you. I can imagine that this is a very abrupt change to those who aren't versed in our faith. I did not intend to alarm you all, but this is the right time to enact this shift."

Would Ves ever be able to hold a normal conversation with James? The Living Prophet acted as if he was answering a question that hadn't even been voiced!

Ves knew he had to take control over the conversation. This charismatic bastard would definitely be able to walk all over him if he kept getting caught off-guard all the time!

"Tell me the meaning of this change." He demanded in a firmer tone than before. "As long as I have been familiar with the Ylvainan Faith, it has always centered around 'you'. The Martyred Followers have always been treated as 'your' sidekicks. While their accomplishments are worth celebrating, it has never been in doubt that your faith revolves around Ylvaine!"

James chuckled and shook his head. "Is that what you think? I'm sorry, Ves, but you don't know us well enough. First, the faith that is named after me has never centered around me. It's only being referred to as the Ylvainan Faith in order to make it easier for my people to understand what they are devoting themselves towards. In truth, I am never the star of this show. Remember what I told you about prophets. We are messengers, nothing more. Our job is to spread our message to the people."

"And what message are you exactly advocating?"

"Do you even need to ask? My message has always been the same. A time will come when everyone will be elevated into gods. Humans or aliens, it doesn't matter. A time will come where we shall all ascend to a higher state of existence! Life, death and continuity will no longer be as absolute as before as everyone holds the potential of transcending the rules that limit our mortal existences!"

That was standard Ylvainan drivel. Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Yes, yes, yes, I'm already familiar with that nonsense. What I would like to know what this old message of yours has to do with ME! It's understandable if your True Believers keep worshipping you, but why are they starting to worship me?! I'm not a god?"

"Are you sure about that?" James retorted with a grin.

"I. Am. Not. A. God. Because. Gods. Do. Not. Exist."

"It's rather amusing how ardently you deny the obvious. Words have power. They ascribe meaning to others. You identify yourself as a mech designer. That's understandable. Yet this simple and generic-sounding description does not do you justice! You should listen to your girlfriend more. She's not as delusional as you think. In fact, from our perspective, it is you who are in denial!"

"SHUT UP!" Ves slammed his fists against his desk.

"Meow?!"

Lucky jumped in the air!

Ves ignored the distress of his cat. He was too angry right now! His patience with James was quickly wearing thin!

"Don't try to warp my beliefs or hoodwink me into converting to your nonsensical faith! While I tolerate the beliefs of your people, that does not mean I'm a part of your cult! I am not an Ylvainan. I will never be an Ylvainan!"

"That's okay." The Living Prophet gently replied. He remained completely unaffected by the ire shown by Ves! "The truth can never be changed no matter how much you deny it. Do you want to know the reason why my followers have shifted their worship towards you? It's because you deserve it more than I! Besides, this shift will do much to help our integration into your clan. We are all in this together, Ves. You're still treating us as a separate faction, and that is understandable, but your viewpoint is already outdated."

Ves looked at James in shock!

"What are you talking about? The Ylvainan Faith has always centered around you, the 'prophet!'"

"Prophets are messengers, Ves. They are agents of other entities. You can imagine them as the divine equivalent of your assistant Gavin. To put it simply, I'm your Benny, and the latest change reflects this reality!"

WHat?! It wasn't enough for James to make his followers idolize him in order to fit in with the clan. He also had the temerity to claim he was a Benny!

Ves started to develop a headache. Talking to James was always an enormous pain! He was far from an ordinary Benny in this regard!

Bennies like Gavin did his best to make his life easier. Of course, Bennies also had a very unfortunate tendency to serve another master at the same time.

The question was what ulterior motive drove James to enact this profound shift. Ves did not believe that he was doing all of this just to benefit their new 'god'! Cult leaders were always supposed to be self-serving bastards! Ves did not believe there was any exception to this rule!

"Is it even proper for you to change the tenets of your faith so drastically? The Ylvainans from the Protectorate would probably crucify you if they see how much you have warped their faith!"

"The Ylvainans left behind in the Protectorate are fallen." James sighed in a dramatic fashion. "While I respect their faith, they are too blinded by doctrine and old beliefs, courtesy of the Poxco Dynasty. The Poxcos have tried to enforce my old prophecies and sayings to such a great extent that they are stuck in the past! This is a distortion of my original intent. Faith is alive. Faith is organic. Faith constantly changes with the times. Paying attention to what I said over four centuries ago while ignoring what I am saying in the present time is completely wrong!"

If James Ylvaine was actually the original prophet, then Ves was inclined to accept his argument.

James was just a clone, though. Even though he received some help from Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, that still didn't change the fact that he was not the original prophet!

He was just a fake who had been deluded into thinking he was the same man as the one who lived over four centuries ago!

"I tire of this conversation. Please get to the point. What are your True Believers up to? What is the point of worshipping me as a god?"

The Living Prophet folded his hands and smiled. "It's rather simple, really. Our faith has always been about preparing for the Time of Ascension. How better to prepare for this epoch-changing event than to follow an actual god?"

"I told you already! I am not a god! Cut it out!"

"You cannot deny who you are, Vulcan."

"ARRRGGGHH!"