

## Mech 1997

### *Chapter 1997 Vault Inspection*

After Ves received the fragment of the Idol of the Superior Mother, he summoned a lifter bot to transport it to the vault.

Though he hadn't taken a close look at it, Ves already noticed that the fragment was constantly leaking out its spiritual accumulation. Though the spillage wasn't severe, the piece of debris probably lost a lot of spiritual energy when it lay forgotten in some kind of warehouse!

Therefore, he was very eager to process the relic and turn its spiritual accumulation into something he could use to empower his forthcoming Hexer mech.

"Is it too much to ask for another relic?" Ves asked again.

"Forget it, kid. DIVA may be eager to try out unconventional solutions to break the stalemate at the frontlines, but it isn't desperate enough to resort to something more extreme."

"Does that mean I have a chance if the Fridaymen gain the upper hand?"

Calabast rapidly reached out and flicked her finger against his head!

"Ouch!"

"Don't try anything funny, Ves! Look, Hexers are very proud about their cultural heritage. If word gets out that you managed to obtain a damaged portion of a destroyed statue, you can easily shrug off the criticism with the help of your allies. If it turns out you've obtained something more important, then the Wodin Dynasty's support won't save you from the wrath of the matriarchs!"

Ves scowled a bit. "If I had something better, I could have easily produced something greater! The Hegemony is missing out on a valuable opportunity!"

"Prove yourself first. If you manage to exceed DIVA's expectations, then it might prioritize your requests higher. For now, no one wants to commit too much to you. It still remains to be seen whether your success and accomplishments represents a flash in the pan."

"It never ends."

"That's life."

"Let's assume I managed to succeed in designing a Hexer mech. How extensively will it be used?"

"It depends. As you can imagine, the performance and the impact it achieves on the battle is the most critical factor. What complicates its evaluation is the gender of its lead designer. Your work will have to climb an uphill battle in order to gain acceptance."

"I'm sure the Hex Army will come around as long as my mech is able to make a significant difference on the battlefield."

She nodded. "I think so as well. As much as my fellow Hexers like to stick to principles, when the outcome of the war and the future of the Hegemony is at stake, I'm confident that they will become a lot more open-minded towards unconventional solutions."

Great. That meant the only way to humble the Hexers was to make them lose the war. Success only fueled their preconceived notions of female supremacy!

Regardless, it wasn't as if Ves had a very big stake in the Komodo War. He just wanted the Friday Coalition to lose, and was very willing to give the Hexers a helping hand to accomplish this dream!

"Look, there are some Hexers who believe you can make a difference." Calabast reassured him. "Gloriana's mother is very hopeful about you, as do some other prominent Hexers. While you may not be aware of it, they spent a considerable amount of political capital to vouch on your behalf. Without their support, you wouldn't have obtained anything."

"I see."

"Don't paint every Hexer with the same brush. Some are more practical than others, and even the most dogmatic Hexer is capable of making smart decisions. The Komodo War is one of the biggest gambles the Hegemony has made in its existence."

"It sounds like you still care a lot about the Hegemony." Ves pointedly remarked. "Are you sure you're independent from your former home?"

The spy reached out and ruffled his hair. "Don't think so much. I am still your supporter. That's all that matters. Right there, there are many reasons for us to cooperate with the Hegemony. My old ties and Gloriana's ties to the state are powerful channels that we can use to exchange various benefits with each other. I think this will become a lot less prominent once we leave the Komodo Star Sector."

That was true.

Once she said those words, she quietly turned around and departed from his side.

Ves continued on to the vault. After undergoing an extensive security check, he entered one of the most close-ly-guarded compartments of the Scarlet Rose.

Only Compartment G-13 was better protected than the vault!

Before Ves directed his attention to the latest addition to his collection, he made his usual rounds and inspected all of his older valuables.

His vibrant P-stones thrummed with energy. His lone F-stone still contained a lot of sharpness. His B-stone lockbox was as solid and impenetrable as ever.

He briefly paused when he encountered the mysterious vial he obtained when he took over the Scarlet Rose.

Dr. Ranya had already researched it and managed to identify its contents. His guess turned out to be right. The vial actually contained a second phase priming agent. Those looking to expand their physical body's capacity for genetic modification needed to take successively priming agents.

The first phase priming agents were relatively easy to obtain, but the second phase priming agents were a lot more difficult to find! They were rare enough to be treated as strategic goods by the Friday Coalition. Lady Aisling Curver probably carried one as a valuable bargaining chip in negotiations.

Now, it fell into his hands.

"I don't need it. I already received my dose."

He already expanded the limit of his genes a second time when he infiltrated the Starlight Megalodon and pretended to be a mech designer in the employ of the CFA.

He wasn't sure whether Gloriana needed it. Dr. Ranya didn't seem to find the vial important enough to insist on keeping hold of it, so Ves probably figured that the Wodins already enjoyed something similar.

For now, Ves just planned to keep it locked up until he needed it. Perhaps he could use it to reward a loyal subordinate for their excellent performance.

"Should I reserve it for Benny? Nah. I should keep it ready for someone like Joshua King or Jannzi Larkinson. They are much more deserving."

He put the vial back into its protective case and put it away.

The next object he inspected was the plain, unadorned wedding rings gifted by his mother. He never really looked at them beforehand because he didn't think it was time to bring his relationship with Gloriana a step further.

Even now, Ves still wasn't sure whether their relationship had advanced far enough. Before, he refrained from taking out the rings because he still needed to prove himself to Gloriana's mother.

Now that he succeeded in this objective, he had one less reason to tie the knot with his girlfriend.

"Should I..?"

He hesitated for a dozen seconds before impulsively deciding to stuff the tiny boxes containing the rings into his suit pocket.

Whether he was ready or not, a part of him wanted to be sure he carried the rings if he ever felt the need to profess his eternal devotion to his girlfriend.

"It will probably take a few years, though. Our relationship has slowed down a bit in recent times."

So far, Ves only got as far as sleeping in the same bed as Gloriana. That did not sound very impressive, and the masculine part of him felt very ashamed he hadn't made any further progress!

"No thanks to you."

"Meow?"

Lucky was floating around his pocket trying to sniff the wedding rings.

Ves pushed his cat away.

"Bad Lucky! These rings are not for you to eat!"

"Meeeeeeeeooooow!"

"I don't care if you can produce the greatest gems in the galaxy!"

After admonishing his gluttonous pet, he turned his attention to the most dangerous object in his vault.

"Hello, Nyxie."

The Ancient Sarcophagus radiated a low but ominous presence that slowly built up the longer Ves remained in the vault. Even now, Ves never figured out a way to isolate its pervasive influence field aside from carving out some spiritual fragments from its prisoners.

Even then, the undying spiritual entity that emerged from the body of the ancient alien tyrant was still a very big threat!

To make sure it wouldn't be up to any shenanigans, Ves inspected the red coffin at least once every few weeks. He also checked up on his spiritual products to make sure that none of the ones who were created with the help of Nyxie's spiritual fragments provided any spiritual feedback to the hostile entity.

Though his spiritual products had remained obedient so far, Nyxie nonetheless made up for its losses and grew in strength at a slow but worrisome rate.

It was as if the prisoner locked inside the sarcophagus was slowly waking up. Each time the spiritual entity woke up a bit more, a greater proportion of his power leaked out of the sarcophagus!

As effective as the red crystal kept its prisoner contained, it was probably getting on in years. Ves didn't know how many eons it existed, but like any creation, some of its structure and functions had probably decayed.

One day, the prisoner might break out of his prison, thereby unleashing a great terror to the galaxy!

The only reason why Ves wasn't worried was because he was confident that the sarcophagus wouldn't be breaking anytime soon. Machines had a tendency to break down gradually rather than suddenly. Its original builders made sure to make the red coffin as solid and enduring as possible, and their craftsmanship succeeded in keeping the alien tyrant contained long after the fall of their civilization!

"Sleep well, Nyxie. Keep on the good work."

He stashed the Ancient Sarcophagus away, lessening its intimidating presence a tiny bit.

Now that he completed his customary inspection, he finally turned towards his latest resource. He whipped out his Vulcaneye and meticulously scanned the blackened debris.

The results didn't yield anything important. The object wasn't radioactive and it didn't carry any poisons or toxins. The torn piece was exactly as it appeared.

"Some kind of huge blast must have destroyed the original Idol of the Superior Mother. After that, the Hexers must have picked up the pieces and stored them somewhere."

Nothing else had happened with the relic. No one tried to reconstruct the Idol of the Superior Mother with the remains of the first statue. Maybe the temple already built a replacement using new materials.

Whatever the case, Ves felt reassured that no one tried to mess with the object. After confirming that it was safe to handle it, he stretched out with his hand and touched the damaged piece with his hand.

The metal was cool to the touch and its surface was very rough due to all of the damage markings.

He didn't care about that. What mattered more to him was making a connection with the damaged and slowly-decaying spiritual residue locked inside its spiritual space.

A handful of decades ago, a huge amount of female Hexers paid tribute to this statue. The Idol of the Superior Mother attracted a lot of pregnant women in order to pray their hopes and dreams to a symbol that represented the Hexer version of motherhood in its purest form!

As could be imagined in a female-dominated society, mothers enjoyed a very high status in the Hegemony!

The Hexers associated mothers with wisdom, nurture, leadership and generosity.

This was why his first contact with the spiritual residue was very encouraging. Ves felt as if he encountered a spiritual remnant that gladly welcomed his company!

Its loneliness and lack of interaction had not done the spiritual remnant any good. Its constant leakage and its worsening integrity was slowly breaking it down. It had a lot of spiritual energy, making it weaker and weaker as more and more years passed. The decay also affected its spiritual attributes, causing it to become less sophisticated as it lost a lot of weaker aspects!

Though this sounded bad at first, Ves pleasantly discovered that the spiritual residue was also purer than he thought! Only the strongest spiritual attributes managed to survive up to this point, which meant that it truly captured the essence of Hexer motherhood!

Even though the relic did not fully represent all of the facets and dimensions of the six phases of existence, Ves was confident he could make good use of its attributes!

#### *Chapter 1998 Nurturing Spiri*

The remnant of the Idol of the Superior Mother was a very valuable object, even if it looked like a piece of trash.

Though Ves felt tempted to cut short the spiritual bleeding by processing the spiritual remnant into a spiritual product right away, he paused for a moment.

"This relic doesn't really fit my specifications."

His original vision for his Hexer mech design revolved around a mech based on the six phases of existence.

As its name suggested, the Idol of the Superior Mother predominantly centered around mothers. It wasn't really associated with hexism as plenty of secular Hexers paid tribute to the statue as well. Those mothers were just doing it in order to take part in an established ritual and because they wanted to gain their social circle's approval.

The mix between secular and religious worshippers shaped the statue's spiritual residue in a direction that blended both elements. Attributes related to motherhood and women strongly suffused its spiritual character, which made it very unsuitable to be adapted to mechs designed to be piloted by boys.

Or was it?

"The design spirit doesn't have to conform to the mech pilot. Not necessarily." He whispered.

He long regarded the unity between mech pilot, mech and mech designer as the only way to increase the X-Factor of his mech and improve their overall synchronization.

What if that wasn't necessary? What if there was a different way to empower a mech?

What if he took a different approach?

To Ves, the perfect outcome had always been to enable mech pilots to become more aligned with the mechs they piloted.

For example, the Aurora Titan meshed well with defense-focused mech pilots who want to protect their comrades.

The Desolate Soldier slowly influenced its mech pilots to become more and more committed to their duty.

The Deliverer's entire premise revolved around piety and devotion. Its Guided Aim ability was only available to the mech pilots who earned Prophet Ylvaine's approval!

Yet.. Ves couldn't do the same for his Hexer mech. DIVA's commission explicitly called for designing a support mech reserved exclusively for the male mech pilots of the Hex Army.

So far, he invented an entire vision around a landbound knight mech that embodied the six phases of existence.

"I don't have to scrap this vision. I'll just need to make some adjustments."

He sat down next to the remnant of the idol and began to adjust his vision.

Its mech concept didn't require any major adjustments. However, rather than embodying a generic interpretation of the six phases of existence, his Hexer mech instead adopted the perspective of a mother!

"My mech is the mother and the mech pilot is the son!"

It was a notable departure from his conventional approach to mech design. His usual goal for his mechs was to accommodate compatible mech pilots so that their effective performance skyrocketed and that anyone with spiritual potential received a greater chance of breaking through the extraordinary threshold!

Yet.. did he have to aim for the jackpot every time? So far, aside from Jannzi Larkinson's unexpected promotion, Ves hadn't heard of any instances where the mech pilots of his successfully advanced to expert candidate or expert pilot with his mechs.

That sounded quite depressing. The LMC sold millions of Desolate Soldiers, but not one of its mech pilots managed to surpass the extraordinary threshold.

"What should I expect?" He sighed. "My Desolate Soldier is a budget mech model designed for less than stellar mech pilots. Their odds of advancements are a lot lower than the mech pilots of premium mechs."

It was too bad that the sales figures of his more expensive products such as the Aurora Titan had dropped to negligible levels.

He turned his attention back to his unnamed Hexer mech. According to DIVA, the Hegemony would try out his new creation with a select number of male mech pilots.

Hexer mech pilots were not like the average users of his mechs.

Ves had to split them up in two. Female mech pilots predominantly utilized the best and strongest mechs. They also claimed all of the flashier and more offense-oriented mechs.

Male mech pilots in the Hegemony weren't prohibited from piloting mechs, but they had to abide by a lot of limitations to practice their profession.

"According to the Hexer ideology, boys are reckless and immature. It is a disaster to give them too much power."

The inherent problem with this assumption was that it risked depriving boys from mechs entirely!



The Hexers eventually opted against this policy because they couldn't let half of their manpower pool of mech pilots stay home.

That said, even if males were allowed to pilot mechs in battle, they faced constant repression and indoctrination.

According to the Hexers, the former was needed to prevent the boys from abusing the power of mechs. The latter was needed to increase their motivation to fight on behalf of the Hegemony.

"There is a contradiction between these measures." Ves noted.

Mechs were dangerous weapons that were best left for women!

Since Hexer women believed that Hexer boys were both dangerous and incapable, the performance of the latter clearly dipped. Though Ves hadn't obtained any detailed statistics that confirmed this guess, he had seen plenty of internal footage that showed that Hexer mechs piloted by males exhibited an excessive amount of restraint and timidity.

The only instances where the male Hexer mechs exhibited any aggression was when they were directly ordered to do so by their mistresses!

With such a perverse mech culture in the Hegemony, how could his mech gain acceptance in its society?

"To women, my support mech can validate them with the outward expression of my glow. To boys, my mech can provide them with positive reinforcement and encouragement. To enemies, my mech can put the fear of Hexers in their hearts!"

As Ves became more familiar with the spiritual residue of the Idol of the Superior Mother, he learnt that it was called this way for a reason!

The Hexers who paid tribute to the original statue all passed on the same spiritual attributes. Gentle notions such as motherhood and the urge to nurture children was mixed with strong notions such as the superiority and might of women!

"I can still give my mech six different facets as long as I can emphasize specific attributes."

The more he fleshed out his idea, the more he got taken in by its potential. Any spiritual product he created based off the Superior Mother would essentially take the form of a Hexer matriarch!

If Ves designed his next spiritual product well enough, it might even surpass its limited role as design spirit for a single mech design!

"I can shift the outcome of the war with this spiritual product!" He exulted!

Of course, the mech had to be good as well. If such a fantastic design spirit was attached to a mediocre mech design, then it would probably be buried!

He began to figure out what kind of ingredients he needed to augment the attributes of the spiritual residue.

"I'll need to add a bit of myself, not just to create the spiritual product, but to add some much needed male influence to its spiritual mix."

The design spirit would still be female, but he hoped that it became a bit more understanding towards boys.

Ves didn't think he was a very appropriate role model for Hexer boys.

"Unlike them, I'm a man, not a boy!" He stated! "I can stand up to women! That's something that they can never imagine!"

Perhaps that was exactly what his design spirit needed. He didn't want to coddle the mech pilots of his Hexer mech to death. They needed to show at least some spine while they piloted their machines.

Gloriana's influence was also essential. Her error-correcting ability and her strong Hexer beliefs would reinforce the spiritual product's main characteristics.

"That's two additional ingredients so far. I think it could use a third."

He needed a source of energy. Ves immediately turned his gaze to the vault section where he just stowed the Ancient Sarcophagus.

Was it time to harvest another spiritual fragment from Nyxie?

Just as he was about to retrieve his F-stone, he paused.

"Nyxie isn't my only option."

Ves suddenly recalled that Qilanxo was also a mother!

Though she was too alien and too centered around protection to make for a perfect Hexer design spirit, she was also a female!

He concentrated his mind and briefly communicated his request to Qilanxo.

She sent back a positive response. Ves guessed that she was filled with spiritual energy. Though she wasn't able to make a qualitative transformation, she wasn't lacking when it came to quantity!

"That was easy."

What wouldn't be easy would be his next step.

Now that he set his mind, he reluctantly decided to obtain Gloriana's input. Though she objected to his idea before, Ves hoped that she was a bit more tolerant this time. He wouldn't be able to proceed with his vision without her contribution!

He called Gloriana to the vault and passed the time by playing with Lucky.

"Meow."

"I don't know, Lucky. Gloriana might blow up on me again."

"Meow!"

"Hmm, that's true. This debris hardly looks like a proper relic. I don't think she'll mind that much."

Lucky rolled off his lap and floated above his head.

"Meow meow."

When Gloriana arrived with Clixie in tow, the vault instantly brightened up. Ves stood up and hugged her before breaking the news.

"Do you remember DIVA's commission?"

She immediately frowned. "What are you up to, Ves?"

"Well, DIVA managed to secure a relic for me. Before you get angry, let me show you what I'm talking about!"

He presented the blackened piece of broken metal to Gloriana and described its origins. He emphasized the fact that it had laid forgotten in some storage place for decades.

"...The Hexers would have probably melted it down and repurposed its materials if they hadn't given it to me." He finished his explanation. "Compared to erasing it from existence, I can make a portion of it live on through my mechs! What do you think, Gloriana?"

His girlfriend fell silent. Though she maintained her frown, she didn't blow up this time, much to his relief!

"I.. I'm not entirely comfortable with this idea, but.. it sounds a lot more acceptable this time." She responded. She reached out and touched the damaged surface of the piece of debris. "I think you're right. It's a shame to let the original Idol of the Superior Mother die out in such an ignoble fashion! What we can do is like giving it a second life!"

"So.. you approve?"

She slowly smiled. "I do. What you originally suggested was something that I would never agree with. This is different. I like the respect behind this decision!"

That was all he needed to hear. Ves relaxed, and so did Gloriana. The faint underlying tension between them after they had their last argument melted away.

The pair began to discuss what they needed to do to create his next spiritual product. Ves needed time to construct the most appropriate images to direct its formation.

"Let's design the mech first and wait until it's almost complete before creating its design spirit." Ves suggested. "I need you to contribute your spiritual strength to its creation. That will drain some of your spiritual energy reserves for a time."

"Creating proto-gods is never easy." Gloriana smiled and leaned her head against his chest. "I can't wait to see how she will turn out!"

The two snuggled a bit before leaving the vault. Ves carefully stored the relic in its protective crate to protect it from the environment as much as possible.

Just when they reached the design lab, Gavin waited next to the entrance.

Ves's heart sunk yet again. Whenever his assistant showed up outside of their scheduled meetings, he always brought a surprise.

"What is it this time, Benny?" He asked in an exasperated tone.

"Well... it's about the Larkinson Clan. Did you recall the proposal introduced by Calabast? Well, there has been a big discussion throughout the clan. The Larkinson Assembly and the Executive Council have both come to a consensus."

"What.. is their answer?"

Gavin breathed deeply. "There is a lot of support for the proposal. Both the Assembly and the Council are in favor of integrating outsiders into the clan!"

"What?!" Ves looked shocked. "That fast?!"