

Mech 1531

Chapter 1531 For the Bes

Ves lamented that he wasn't back in the Bright Republic to promote his newly-released Desolate Soldier.

Yet the gift given to him by the Ylvainans was so much better. The publicity of a carefully-planned product reveal event was so much more modest than the organic buzz generated by the successful Ylvainan raids!

Mech companies could hardly ever ask for a better publicity boost, especially since the difference made by the mechs designed by Ves was so incredibly obvious!

Even expert pilots on the same side became affected!

Ves ruefully chuckled to himself. "If my mechs are able to damage the confidence of hostile expert pilots, then the galaxy would have truly gone mad!"

He understood that expert pilots possessed a force of will that was just as strong if not stronger than the auras of his mechs.

If both of them complemented each other, then the expert pilot wouldn't reject the influence.

"That's the best I can hope for the moment."

It was too soon for him to think about affecting expert pilots. He was still too far away from designing expert mechs, though Gloriana's tutoring sessions already started to cover some of this ground.

Due to her specialty, she had already been preparing to design expert mechs ahead of time.

In addition, third-class expert mechs shared a lot of similarities with second-class standard mechs. The quality of their materials and their price ranges heavily overlapped.

In many cases, a third-class expert mech was equivalent to a second-class mech customized for expert pilots.

When a mech pilot from a third-rate state like the Bright Republic reached the expert level, second-class mechs no longer confounded them. Their broadly-improved piloting skills easily enabled them to master the added complexities of piloting complex, higher-performing mechs!

"If any of my subordinates advances to expert pilot, then I can already save a lot of effort to retrain them. They're already good enough to master them by themselves." He scoffed.

Of course, how easy was it for him to get his hands on an expert pilot?

For many people, it was impossible. For Ves, it depended on if he could apply his theories about Spirituality in a special way.

After arranging his business affairs, Ves no longer felt the need to meddle. The LMC was more than capable enough to market his Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier models on its own.

While he supposed he could help market his product by conducting remote interviews of press events, his personal involvement would hardly make a difference.

He decided to spend his time on the return trip to the Bright Republic on something better.

When Ves next met with Gloriana at the lounge compartment of the Stellar Chaser, he made his proposal.

"You want us to collaborate on designing a customized version of the Desolate Soldier?" She puzzlingly frowned. "Why would you ever want to do such a thing, Ves!? Even in your third-class mech market standards, your Desolate Soldier is hardly worth the effort to customize!"

"While I admit that my other mech models are better candidates, they are not immediately relevant under the current circumstances. For the coming year or so, my Desolate Soldiers will be the only LMC mech that people will witness in battle!"

"Even so, it's better to collaborate on a much higher quality custom mech that is worth our attention!"

Gloriana showed intense dislike towards any idea of using a mech model with a market price of 20 million bright credits as the base of a custom mech. It sounded just as absurd as employing a top-class chef to prepare a dish made out of reconstituted nutrient packs!

Nonetheless, Ves did not set out to torture his girlfriend or push her design philosophy to the brink. He had a very good reason to suggest this unusual project.

"Remember when we first met on Centerpoint?"

"Of course I remember! I recall it every day. It was love at first sight. I already knew back then that you were the perfect boy for me. No other boy in the Hegemony has ever made me feel that way. If only you didn't run so soon!" She sighed in a wistful manner.

"Well, before I met you, I inadvertently fell into a hole and entered some kind of trial conducted by the Rim Guardians."

"Oh! So that's why I couldn't investigate all of your movements on Centerpoint! The Rim Guardians are very influential throughout the galactic rim. For you to come under their attention is a great thing! How did it go?"

"The short version is that I've managed to pass the trials and earned their initial recognition."

"I knew it! You're such a good mech designer to stay unnoticed!"

"It's not as impressive as it sounds, Gloriana. I only managed to get my foot in the door. If I want to enter into their circle, I need to prove myself in a much more difficult way. They issued me an assignment."

"What does your assignment entail?"

"Turn a coward into an expert pilot." Ves responded morosely.

He briefly introduced William Urbesh to his girlfriend and explained the progress they made so far. Ves had put him under the care of Melkor and the Larkinsons to see if they could apply their famed training to transform Urbesh into a capable mech pilot.

So far, the exile from the Slicer Tribe hadn't changed at all. Though all of the intensive training succeeded in increasing his proficiency in piloting mechs, the moment William Urbesh faced an opponent, he instantly buckled!

Without addressing his crippling psychological fear of battle, there was no way Ves could make any progress in fulfilling the request of the Rim Guardians!

Gloriana frowned. "So let me get this straight. The Rim Guardians expect you to turn one of the most unsuitable mech pilots that I've ever heard of into an expert candidate? Are they setting you up or something?"

"To be fair, if not for this psychological affliction, Urbesh's chances of becoming an expert candidate is as good as any other. I think the Rim Guardians really wants me to solve this problem. As for turning him into an expert candidate, they've expressed so little confidence that it's fine if I fail. I'll just have to complete another assignment to prove my commitment and earn their approval."

"So why don't you do that instead?" She asked.

"I don't want to wait. Who can guarantee that the next assignment will be any easier? The reason why I want to take a serious shot at reforming Urbesh is because I think I can succeed where others failed!"

"How?!"

"I'm not sure." He shrugged. He was partially honest this time. "I have some ideas, and I'm not sure how they will work out. I think it would definitely help if I can get Urbesh to pilot a custom mech."

"Are you plotting some kind of plan to throw Urbesh into the crucible by forcing him to fight against the sandmen?"

"Yup. What better way to stimulate his potential than to put him in a life-or-death struggle? Expert candidates always emerge during these instances."

"From the information you've given me, Urbesh doesn't specialize in piloting ranged mechs."

"That's no problem. The Larkinsons have attempted to train him into piloting ranged mechs on account of his reluctance to face enemies in battle. While they've failed, Urbesh has at least become competent enough to wield ranged weapons. Besides, the Desolate Soldier model is not a very demanding mech in the first place."

"It's very fragile though. Aren't you afraid that the sandmen will kill him with one of their pinpoint laser strikes?"

Ves shrugged. "That's the risk that we have to take. I know that I'm playing with fire here, but in the worst case someone else's hands will get burned. Mine will stay untouched."

"Yeah, but the Rim Guardians won't be pleased at all for failing this assignment in such a fashion."

"If they truly cared, they would have directed more effort into reforming him. Instead, the Rim Guardians dumped him into the care of a stranger. I don't think the Rim Guardians will take much issue with Urbesh's death. I don't have anything to fear from the Urbesh Clan from the Vicious Mountain Star Sector either because they're already in decline. William's untimely death would be the nail in the coffin for them, so in a way this outcome isn't so bad at all."

He felt much more free in taking risks if he could get others to pay the bulk of the cost!

Though Gloriana kept expressing her reluctance, she quickly swallowed her objections.

"I'll do anything for you." She whispered softly to him. "If you really want me to become involved in this project, then I'll do so. Just make sure it's worth it, Ves."

"We'll both gain from this project. It will be the first time we pooled our design philosophies together in a project where you'll take the lead. Unlike before, you will call the shots."

Ves already fixed most of the parameters of the original Desolate Soldier design before Gloriana came along. Though he officially credited her as a contributing designer to the Desolate Soldier project, her involvement at the later phases did not allow her to make any drastic changes.

It was different now that they no longer worked on the assumption of adapting their mech design to as many mech pilots as possible.

Now that they played by Gloriana's rules, Ves expected their collaboration to yield much more substantive results. The outcome of this project would reveal how effectively their design philosophies really amplified each other's strengths.

"It's better to see if we can work together on a smaller and simple project like adapting our existing Desolate Soldier to a single mech pilot." He reasoned to her. "There is still more than a month to go before we reach the Bright Republic. This should be more than enough time to complete our project. Aside from that, working on this project will also help you adjust to working with third-class mechs."

After contemplating Gloriana's situation for a long time, Ves believed it was better for her if she became more open-minded towards mechs. As her boyfriend, he wanted her to succeed, and he suspected that she would stand a better chance of realizing her design philosophy if it wasn't so overly narrow.

Perhaps it was presumptuous of him to steer Gloriana's development. However, Gloriana was just as smart as him. As long as he gave her some hints, she could form the same conclusion.

She frowned at him. "Don't think I don't know what you are trying to do. You want me to become more flexible, is that it? You want me to be able to work with even the worst third-class mechs. That's something that I've never contemplated in my life!"

"I think the distinction between third-class, second-class and first-class mechs is artificial." He stated. "As mech designers, shouldn't we tailor our products to the demands of the market? It just so happens that every customer has adopted this paradigm, but that doesn't mean that we should stick to it so closely. In the end, regardless of the differences in tech and materials, a mech is a mech. While it is all well and good to design the perfect vessel out of the best possible tech and materials, it takes true skill to do the same when your starting point is the Desolate Soldier."

This was a lesson he learned during the time he occupied Axelar Streon's mind and body during a past Mastery experience. Having worked first-hand with fantastic first-class tech and materials, he long lost his fascination towards this height.

Ves believed he was doing Gloriana a huge favor by imparting a similar lesson towards her. If she stopped turning up her nose at cheaply-constructed mechs, then her design philosophy no longer became so reliant on the materials and tech at her disposal.

This ought to be a good development because that meant she wouldn't need to depend on designing astronomically expensive first-class mechs to progress!

His continued persuasion started to take effect in his girlfriend's minds. Another mental storm surged in her mind.

A small part of him felt a little guilty. It would have been best if she made this decision on her own. Ves had deliberately altered her path forward. Even if he had the best of intentions, it still didn't change the fact that he influenced her away from her original principles.

"It's for the best." He whispered to her as she became lost in her own thoughts.

Chapter 1532 Commbook

Gloriana was in no mood to dive into their new project after she finished adjusting her principles.

Before, she willingly embraced the incorporation of a spiritual component to her conception of the perfect vessel. The insights she received back then slotted in her mind as if she was adding an important piece to the puzzle in her design philosophy.

This time was different. Under his deliberate manipulation, her design philosophy, which formerly followed a straight direction, suddenly took a crooked turn!

Such a major shift in her future progression was so impactful that she still wasn't quite sure what she was getting into now. Her previous ambitions no longer matched her current direction. She needed to spend some time to process all of the changes and alter her prior goals.

The shift she went through reminded Ves of the time the System forced him to develop a gamma laser rifle to upgrade his Physics Skill to Senior.

Just like how the System prodded him to become less rigid in his principles back then, Ves had taken on a similar role to guide Gloriana towards a more open and adaptable mindset.

Ves didn't question whether the System was even a good role model for him to emulate. Even though the System liked to make things difficult for him, he always thought he benefited from its lessons. He would have never become the mech designer he was today without its guidance.

A few minutes passed by as both mech designers remained silent. Eventually, Gloriana recovered and directed a resentful glance at Ves.

She lightly punched his arm. "Sometimes, I wonder what I'm getting into by binding myself to you. Not even my teachers have impacted my design philosophy to this extent! If I didn't trust you so much, I would have ordered Clixie to claw off your face!"

"Miaow?"

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat looked up from the cat bed placed next to the loveseat.

"Meow."

Lucky pawed at Clixie, causing her to stop paying attention to their owners and get back to grooming each other.

Having anticipated Gloriana's response, Ves smiled apologetically while he retrieved something from his pockets. "I have a gift for you. Why don't you try them out?"

He handed over the pair of cosmetic cat ears made out of Zeigra's fur he reserved for Gloriana.

As his girlfriend accepted the accessories with confusion, Ves retrieved his own pair and placed them atop his head. "Come on! I think you'll look cute!"

That convinced her. She summoned a mirror projection from her comm and admired how well the black-furred complimented her appearance. Her eyes instantly sparkled.

"Thank you, Ves! I love them! Come closer, let's take a snapshot together!"

She stretched out her arm and dragged Ves closer until they pressed their shoulders against each other. They smiled at her comm which recorded a high-fidelity three-dimensional image of them sitting on the loveseat.

"Let's bring our cats into the picture as well! Come over here, Clixie!"

After they called over their pets, they took another snapshot with their two cats resting on their laps. Gloriana loved every image they took of themselves and even recorded a few seconds of footage.

"Hihihi! This would look lovely on my Commbook page!"

She quickly manipulated her comm to upload the best and wholesome-looking image on her Commbook page.

Peering at her comm, Ves watched her actions with bemusement. "You have a Commbook page?"

"Of course! Why wouldn't I? It's the largest social network in the galaxy!"

Backed by the Comm Consortium, Commbook's reach spread far and wide. Wherever the galactic net reached, Commbook inevitably held sway."

"It's also a cesspool for junk and conspiracy theories. It brings out the worst of humanity." Ves scoffed.

"I still use it to stay in touch with my friends and colleagues. What about you?"

"I stopped fooling around with Commbook a long time ago and closed my page. Whatever can be gained from virtual reality is inconsequential compared to what I can gain from physical reality."

In the past, he started practising his skills by designing virtual mechs. However, that was just a phase in his life.

While the LMC still published his mech designs in virtual form to allow the public to experience his products without a significant cost, Ves no longer paid much attention to it. A mech designer never progressed by relying purely on virtual mech designs.

"That's such a shame." Gloriana remarked. "No wonder you didn't accept my friend invite. I thought you blocked me! Well, it's no big deal. After all, having you by my side is much better!"

They quickly shoved the matter aside after Gloriana uploaded a cute image of them together. Their new cat ears made it seem as if they were intimately together, which was probably the biggest reason why she felt so eager to put it on her Commbook page.

In any case, Ves succeeded in distracting Gloriana from what he did to her. She was a much more pleasant person to be around as long as she was happy.

She was so happy with her gift that she even snuggled and kissed Ves for a time. Of course, she also kept a watchful eye on Melody and stopped just short of provoking another intervention.

"Let's discuss our project!" She chirped.

Ves nodded. "Let me lay down my requirements."

He briefly explained what he desired from the end product. He wanted the customized Desolate Soldier to fit William Urbesh as best as possible. The most important demand he posed was that it had to be as comfortable and fitting to him as possible.

Though it sounded simple, Gloriana slowly frowned as she realized an immediate problem.

"You told me that Urbesh specializes in piloting landbound axeman mechs. Even with extensive training, I doubt he feels comfortable in piloting a spaceborn rifleman mech. Is it even possible to design a mech that fits him perfectly?"

An inherent contradiction emerged that faintly started to trouble her mind again. She had never experienced so many paradigm shifts before she hooked up with Ves!

Fortunately, Ves had already thought of this issue.

"We are not aiming to achieve perfection. It's good enough to get close to perfect as possible while adhering to our limitations. This is a good test for you. Unlike your previous projects, you won't have access to your usual luxuries. You need to rely on your own skill to make the most out of limited means. This is what third-class mech designers like myself face every day. That's why my other demand is that we shouldn't rely on better materials or parts to improve our custom mech."

Second-class mech designers were capable of designing amazing mechs, but their efficiency was always a bit lower than their poorer counterparts. Every class of mech designer possessed their own strengths.

Gloriana regarded the new project as a challenge and a test. "I'll do it. It's not what I'm used to, but I feel kind of excited now that I think about it. Without distracting myself from chasing after the best tech and exotics I can get my hands upon, the outcome of our efforts will mainly rely on our skill."

"It's the best opportunity to see if our design philosophies can complement each other. We can make a direct comparison between our custom mech design and the standard Desolate Soldier Design."

Just like Gloriana, Ves looked forward at the results as well. He always sensed that Gloriana withheld a lot of strength when she worked on the Desolate Soldier project.

Now that he appointed her as the lead designer of their custom mech project, she was free to unleash some of her repressed design urges.

They called up the design schematic of the Desolate Soldier and studied it for a moment.

"One of the first things we need to alter is the structure of the mech. The body proportions of the Desolate Soldier should match the proportions of the mech pilot as closely as possible."

"Is that necessary?" Ves questioned.

"Not entirely. A large person can pilot a light mech just fine. It's just that there is always an element of dissociation at the start. As the mech pilot practices with the mech over time, they will slowly develop new reflexes and muscle memory adapted to the mech frame."

"Urbesh doesn't have the time to spare." Ves commented. "It's best if he can get the hang of his new custom mech as fast as possible."

"Right, and adjusting the body proportions of the base model is a good way to shorten the adjustment period. Let me show you how it's done."

Since William Urbesh was under the complete care of the Larkinsons, Ves had already obtained very detailed medical data on his body. He transferred them over to Gloriana, who studied them for a time before beginning to morph the Desolate Soldier's frame.

Overall, the altered proportions caused the Desolate Soldier to look a little shorter and stockier. It lost its sense of liveness typical to budget mechs and ranged mechs.

If the altered mech wielded an axe instead of a rifle, then it would have looked a lot more natural!

This reflected William Urbesh's physical fitness. Even though he was a complete coward, like any mech pilot he maintained a physically-intensive training regime, which included practicing with handheld axes.

If there was one benefit that he derived from his stay with the Rim Guardians, it was that they had tuned up his body!

"I didn't think you would go this far." He said. "With such drastic changes, we'll have to overhaul the entire internal structure of our mech!"

It was one thing if Gloriana lengthened the arms by a centimeter or something. Such a change only forced him to make some extensions and fill up some extra space. Yet changing the proportions of the torso and all of the limbs of the mech in so many aspects meant that the existing internal architecture had broken down entirely!

There was no way the mech would be able to function with so much rejigging!

Gloriana waved away his concerns. "It's not that bad. The Desolate Soldier is not a complex mech and many of the design choices you've made can still be applied to this altered version, which saves us lots of time."

This was just the start. She outlined many more alterations to the internal structure. She had developed a vast array of methods to make a mech fit a mech pilot like a glove, many of which Ves had never even conceived of before!

In some cases, he no longer kept up with her train of thought as she started to draw upon the unique theories and principles of her design philosophy!

The more Gloriana showed off her ingenuity, the more Ves felt ashamed at his prior custom mechs! All of his earlier machines designed for single mech pilots had never truly been adjusted to their mech pilots.

It was more apt to say that Ves simply designed a mech like usual, but only produced a single copy. Aside from abiding by the rules of a competition or meeting the demands of his client, he did not expend a lot of effort into figuring out how much better a mech could fit a specific mech pilot.

Gloriana held nothing back and confidently explained her methods as if she had nothing to hide. Ves soaked up as much as he could. Even if he only understood a portion of her theories and methods, he still gained an enormous improvement in his ability to design a custom mech!

This not only came handy if he was designing a custom mech on his own. The reason why Gloriana explained so much was that she wanted him to become familiar with her design style.

The more he became familiar with her way of working, the better he could integrate his own design style with hers! Only when both knew what the other was capable of would they be able to combine their strengths without stepping on each other's toes.

"Did you get it?" She happily clapped her hands together. "No matter. Once we begin to work, we will see how it goes! I'm confident we can turn the Desolate Soldier into something special! As our first true collaboration, I won't allow it besmirch this special moment of ours!"

Chapter 1533 Sales Projections

As the LMC and LMYC began to produce the first batches of Desolate Soldiers and Holy Soldier, the MTA approved the designs only days after receiving the first copies.

The LMC did not expect the MTA to approve the mech designs so fast. With the mental influencing effects of the mechs designed by Ves becoming more and more evident, how could the MTA not investigate?

Yet they barely took any notice of the complaints submitted by the critics. The Mech Trade Association existed for several hundred years and spanned the breadth of the galaxy. What weird mech hadn't they seen before?

Knowing more than most, Ves never doubted that his mech would get approved. The MTA wanted an endless variety of design philosophies to bloom. The more interesting, the better. Unusual design philosophies that achieved unprecedented results earned far more appreciation than the stale ones that overlapped with known and highly-studied specialties.

"As long as I don't cross the bottom line of the MTA, they are more inclined to see how far I can go." Ves grinned.

Nobody except Ves knew that the MTA asked him some questions before they issued their judgement.

They were curious about how his design philosophy made his Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier so remarkable. The testers of his mechs very clearly noticed the influence they exerted over people.

Even though they were just silver label mechs, the mechs radiated such a pure sense of duty that it couldn't be explained with common sense! Even if the LMC somehow tampered with the neural interface, it couldn't explain how the people around the mechs became affected as well!

Ves merely shrugged when he read the message sent to his comm. A bright idea came to him. Since both Ves and Gloriana designed the mechs, why not let his girlfriend compose the answer?

"That's a brilliant idea!"

Compared to Ves, Gloriana possessed a much better relationship with the MTA! Not only that, but her weird belief in hexism would probably cause the evaluators to go crazy!

"Gloriana, can you do me a favor? Can you reply to the MTA in my stead?"

"Sure!" She chirped.

She eagerly accepted his request and rapidly wrote a deluge of answers to the questions posed by the MTA. Words and phrases such as divinity, proto-gods, six phases of existence and other nonsense suffused her written replies.

To Ves, all of it sounded like crazy talk. She interpreted his design philosophy through the lens of her own beliefs, causing her to couch all of her explanations in a way that only Hexers understood.

Even if the MTA employed Hexer mech designers, they would probably scratch their heads at the outlandish claims that Gloriana made.

"Hahaha!" Ves laughed as he read his girlfriend's reply over her shoulder. "Excellent! I should let you write up all the submissions to the MTA from now on! You make so much sense!"

"Thank you, Ves! I've made sure to be as thorough as possible! The MTA will surely recognize your brilliance after this! You deserve so much better!" Gloriana turned her head to Ves with a loving smile.

The cat ears atop her head made her ten times cuter right now! In fact, they both started wearing them permanently. Ves wanted to cultivate a certain image of themselves, while Gloriana just wanted to tie Ves closer to herself.

In any case, once they sent Gloriana's exhaustive reply, the MTA did not inquire again. Ves had the impression that the mech designers on the other side merely threw up their hands and hastily put their stamp of approval on the Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier designs in order to move on to evaluating saner designs.

What could they do? Question Gloriana's beliefs? Insult hexism as a whole? It wasn't worth it for such a small issue!

The only complication that occurred was that the MTA issued a minor warning and advisory on the Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier.

[These mechs exert a noticeable mental influence on people through unknown and potentially hazardous means. Caution is advised when fielding these mechs.]

The MTA tested the mental influence much more thoroughly than Ves expected.

They even verified that the effects were selective depending on the perspective of the mech pilot! Anyone deemed friendly and neutral received a positive influence while anyone deemed hostile received a negative influence.

Of course, the MTA also cautioned that positive and negative influences did not necessarily equate to beneficial and detrimental effects.

For example, if one of his mech designs caused mech pilots to fight harder to the point of disregarding their own lives, then was it truly a boon? Many people would probably argue that it was a bane instead.

The market had to make its own judgement.

One point in the LMC's favor was that the MTA put a surprisingly high valuation on the standard 10-year licenses of the two designs.

"10 billion bright credits for the Desolate Soldier! 7 billion bright credits for the Holy Soldier!"

That was far more than his Aurora Titan design, which possessed some insane if uneven performance parameters!

"Is that a lot?" Gloriana asked.

"It probably falls in line with other comparable mech designs published in the Bright Republic." Ves admitted. "It's still a considerable achievement for me! The standard license for my Aurora Titan design is worth only 6 billion bright credits!"

License valuations did not necessarily correlate to the performance or quality of a mech design. Instead, the MTA made their determinations according to the commercial value of a product.

If they believed a particular mech model sold well, then they should be worth more. The MTA basically expressed their confidence in the success of the Desolate Soldier when they priced its license at 10 billion credits!

As for the lower valuation of the Holy Soldier, Ves accepted it without a blink. Its tacky exterior and the plethora of religious iconography limited its market appeal to just a specific group of people.

Due to the minute influence of Prophet Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, the Holy Soldier's X-Factor gained a fraction of its character. Those who didn't believe in the Ylvainan Faith would always feel a vague sense of rejection when they piloted a Holy Soldier.

"Let's see if the MTA is right to value them so highly."

Ves carefully paid attention to the initial sales of the LMC's newly-released mech models. Would the official warning issued by the MTA deter too many buyers?

Three days after releasing the mechs, Gavin called Ves from the Barracuda.

"How is the market reaction, Benny?"

"Good! Initial demand largely fell within our expectations. Due to recent events, the Ylvainans all snapped up our Holy Soldiers in an instant! In fact, they just can't get enough! Demand for our Holy Soldiers is so great that the LMYC is forced to partner up with dozens of more mech manufacturers to even begin to meet the insane demand for our Holy Soldiers!"

Though Ves expected such a wild reaction, he still became delighted now that it actually happened.

"How many mechs?"

Gavin brought up a data pad and studied the numbers.

"With our current pace of ramping up production, our most modest estimate is that we'll be able to sell over five thousand Holy Soldiers in the first month!"

"Five thousand!" Ves gasped. "Are you kidding me?!"

"Many Ylvainans blindly believe in your products. They don't need to see the Holy Soldiers in action. They're willing to buy them straight away, especially when your new mech directly addresses the sandmen threat. Every other mech model competing against yours in the Protectorate mech market has become much less popular as soon as the LMYC started selling the Holy Soldiers! We don't even need to conduct a marketing campaign because the Ylvainans are already talking about them all day!"

Selling five thousand copies of the Holy Soldier in the first month was just the start. Gavin proceeded to reveal the sales projections for the subsequent months. Ten thousand sales. Twenty thousand sales. Thirty thousand sales. The figures kept growing so much that Ves began to doubt whether the Ylvainans could even scrounge enough mech pilots to put all of the Holy Soldiers to use!

"This is insane!"

"Hahaha! I know, boss! The Ylvainans are crazy, but it just so happens that they are crazy for the Bright Martyr! As long as you don't disappoint them, our sales in this market will always be crazy! That has already been the case with the Blackbeak, Crystal Lord and Aurora Titan to a lesser degree. It was just that their high prices impeded wider adoption."

The Holy Soldier was completely different from his older commercial mechs! As a mech designed from the ground up to be affordable and very applicable, Ves precisely aimed to achieve high sales volumes!

Still, as much as it pleased Ves immensely to spread his influence so dramatically through the widespread adoption of his latest mech model, there was one major caveat to the good news.

"Even if our Holy Soldier model will sell incredibly well, our profits won't be as high as we'd like, right?" Ves asked with a grimace.

Some of the enthusiasm dropped from Gavin's face. "You're sight, boss. It costs about 16 to 17 million bright credits to produce a Holy Soldier or Desolate Soldier. The bronze label editions sell at a list price of 20 million bright credits while the silver label editions sell for 22 million bright credits. While the profits of the latter are much more healthy, practically all of the Holy Soldiers sold in the Protectorate are bronze label versions."

The LMC adopted a strict standard when it came to labelling their products. The LMC was unable to guarantee the quality of mechs produced by third-party manufacturers. Ves did not allow any external partner to produce silver label mechs no matter how many guarantees they made.

"How much profit are we actually making?"

"Not much. The profit for the bronze label Holy Soldier is around 3 million bright credits. The third-party manufacturer takes a hefty cut out of this profit, say, 1 million bright credits."

That still sounded decent considering how much Holy Soldiers they expected to sell, but there was more. The LMYC had to pay various fees and taxes per fiscal year. The LMC owned a fifty-percent stake in the LMYC, so they only received half of the profits in the end.

Calabast's holding company received the other half of the profits. Ves became a little sour when he thought how easily she stood to profit from his success, though he had to admit that she contributed considerably to the smooth expansion of the LMC in the Protectorate mech market.

After every party involved received their cut, the LMC only received around 700,000 bright credits per sale.

"That doesn't sound so bad." Ves rubbed his chin.

"That is only the case when the cost of raw materials stays the same. Don't forget that the supply of raw materials will become more strained as more and more states begin to fall. The longer this invasion goes on, the more damage the sandmen will do. Many states are no longer exporting the materials they extract and are instead reserving them for domestic suppliers."

Ves did not worry too much about this trend. He already took it into account when he made sure to incorporate the most common materials available in the region in his latest mech designs.

Still, even a modest increase in the cost of raw materials would have a drastic effect on the profitability of his Holy Soldiers. The profit the LMC made per sale could easily dwindle to 300,000 bright credits or even worse!

"You know, we could remedy this situation if we increase the list price of our Holy Soldiers." Gavin suggested all of a sudden. "We know demand for them is insane, to the point that we're simply unable to meet most of the demand. In this situation, it makes a lot of sense to raise our prices. Those who are more conscious of their spending will wait for it to drop, while your more devoted fans will easily swallow the added costs."

Ves immediately shook his head. "No. Let's not play that game. The Ylvainans trust me, and I don't want to exploit that. Our primary goal should be to assist our customers in fighting the sandmen and spread our reputation in the process by selling as many mechs as possible. Making a profit is secondary. We'll earn much more money once the customers we've gained during this crisis begins to recognize the value of my products."

This fell in line with his plan to earn broad acceptance from the mech community. He especially kept his products cheap in order for them to become an attractive choice to the movers and shakers of every state under threat!

Chapter 1534 A Wild Be

The wildly optimistic projections for the Holy Soldier already came as a shock to Ves. This was the first time one of his mech models would surpass 10,000 sales in the second month!

As for the Desolate Soldier model, the circumstances were different and more complex.

His assistant dutifully explained the situation.

"Unlike the Holy Soldier, the demand of the Desolate Soldier is much more modest. The good news is that the LMC's reputation for quality and reliability along with the positive attitudes of our existing customers has generated a lot of initial interest. The shenanigans of the Ylvainans have been particularly helpful in publicizing our latest product and putting a positive spin on its effects."

"How has the warning issued by the MTA and the efforts of our critics affected the initial reception of my Desolate Soldier model?"

"Pretty bad, at least at the start. The Bright Republic's mech market is a lot more sober when it comes to our mechs. Most interested customers outside of our existing fans have adopted a wait-and-see approach."

"Has that changed?"

Gavin grinned. "Well, opinions are quickly beginning to turn around as soon as we adopted your plan to place the first batch of Desolate Soldiers across Bentheim. The duty they inspire from bystanders is so remarkable that the Bentheim Planetary Guard is actually the first major client to place a major order on our new product!"

"The Planetary Guard?!" Ves sat up straight. "Don't they normally operate on the surface of Bentheim?!"

"It's a nightmare to fight the sandmen on land. The Planetary Guard would much rather dispatch a bunch of mech pilots to space in order to help resist the sandmen that will be

flooding the Bentheim System soon. As a port system, it's a certainty that it will become a magnet to these accursed aliens!"

It would be an absolute catastrophe if even a single sandman vessel reached the surface of Beintheim. Due to the planet's high population density, a sandman vessel could quickly spread out and harvest hundreds of thousands lives within minutes!

His cousin Melinda happened to be a mech captain in the Bentheim Planetary Guard. Perhaps he should get in touch with her in order to find out if she would be the ones deployed to space. Her Larkinson training meant she likely possessed a basic proficiency in spaceborn mech combat, so she might very well be assigned to pilot one of his mechs!

The thought of Melinda facing a flood of sandmen while piloting a mech that was only worth 20 million bright credits almost gave Ves a heart attack!

If possible, he wanted her to pilot a much better mech!

"How many Desolate Soldiers do you think we'll sell?"

"Our current estimate is 3,000 sales. We're actually partnering up with more third-party manufacturers to produce more mechs in anticipation of meeting future demand. We're betting that once the mech market recognizes that our Desolate Soldiers are good value, people will no longer hesitate and flood our company with orders."

"What's our projection for the second month."

"50,000 mechs."

"WHAT?!" Ves practically jumped out of his seat!

His shock was so drastic that even Lucky and Nitaa became alarmed.

"The first sandmen fleets will almost certainly hit the third line of defense by this time." Gavin spoke as if he hadn't dropped a bombshell. "Once the Desolate Soldiers perform as well as we think they will, demand will skyrocket. The widespread use of the Holy Soldiers in the Ylvaine Protectorate will also prove that our mechs can give defenders an edge."

Even so, Ves still thought that selling 50,000 Desolate Soldiers in the second month of the model's release was rather exaggerated!

"Don't forget that this accounts for sales in every state we maintain an active presence." Gavin added. "While much of our sales will still come from the Bright Republic, we expect to do very well in mech markets like the Reinald Republic that have most to gain from a mech that inspires duty."

"Ah. I see."

While Ves mainly designed the Desolate Soldier for the Bright Republic, a state with much less internal stability would likely value his new mech model much more than usual! If his Desolate Soldiers succeeded in affecting the moods of the citizens of the Reinald Republic and similarly unstable states, then selling 50,000 mechs was not out of the question!

"This is why we think it might be possible for us to reach 100,000 in the third month."

The shock of this immense sum had lessened after Ves digested the sales projections for the second month. After all, unlike the competition, his Desolate Soldier was the only mech that possessed the additional function of inspiring duty in everyone! The dual-purpose nature of his mech would probably come as a godsend to many faltering states!

Of course, with such an insane level of popularity, copycats and counterfeits would quickly begin to flood the market as well. While Ves knew that many of them would come with defective or absent auras, many consumers who weren't familiar with authentic LMC mechs probably didn't know the difference.

"This problem will mainly impact distant mech markets where we don't have a presence." Ves determined. "In the short term, it doesn't matter if unscrupulous mech manufacturers flood those distant markets with our products."

Gavin nodded. "The Bright Republic's mech market is well aware that only authentic mechs will deliver the best results. Foreign mech markets will quickly follow suit once we become more known there. Since our margins are already so low, there isn't much of a difference in the price of a counterfeit and an authentic copy. Mech buyers will definitely opt for the genuine products so long as they are available."

After the third month of release, the LMC could no longer make any confident predictions of the sales projections for the Desolate Soldier. It depended heavily on how the Desolate Soldier actually fared against the sandmen and how much their customers appreciated its aura.

Unless the Desolate Soldier performed disastrously in combat, the LMC did not expect its sales figures to subside! Selling more than 100,000 copies a month was a very realistic prospect so long as no other competing mech model was able to steal its thunder!

The insane numbers sounded rather surreal to Ves.

Of course, the mech markets became saturated, sales would quickly fall to saner levels. Even if that didn't happen, once humanity repelled the sandman invasion, the Desolate Soldier no longer had a purpose.

"Let's see how it goes." He spoke, forcing himself to calm down. "Keep track of the market reception of our Desolate Soldiers and inform me as soon as sales begin to spike. Also, make sure to allocate some funds on resuming construction of our second manufacturing complex on Bentheim. We're going to need it if we want to produce more silver label mechs."

After a long and extensive discussion with Gavin, Ves finally ended the call. He took a couple of deep breaths to calm down his wildly-beating heart.

"All of this hinges on whether the market values my Desolate Soldier highly. If the LMC overestimated its market reception, then we can forget about reaching 100,000 sales per month!"

Ves had already compared his Desolate Soldier to the works of other mech designers. Its performance was good enough to surpass most rifleman mechs designed by Journeymen. However, its performance in some aspects was noticeably worse when compared to mechs designed by Seniors.

Seniors whose design philosophies excelled in raising the performance of specific aspects of their mechs possessed the greatest advantage in this area. Their products always captured significant chunks of market share and Ves expected no different this time.

"At least we don't have to worry about competition from mainstream mechs this time."

It was impossible for the huge, trans-galactic enterprises to take notice of a tiny incident taking place in the Komodo Star Sector. All of their Master and Senior Mech Designers had better things to do than spend all of their valuable time and effort into designing a ludicrously-optimized mech that fit the current circumstances of a single region!

This was also one of the major reasons why the LMC and every other mech company revised their sales projections upwards. Mainstream mech models ordinarily took up a lot of space in open mech markets. Now that they had become irrelevant, local mech companies eagerly filled in the void!

"That reminds me, I still need to check something."

He went to the bathroom and activated his usual security precautions before activating the System.

[Design Evaluation: Desolate Soldier DS-A-01]

Model name: Desolate Soldier DS-A-01

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson

Weight Classification: Medium-Light

Recommended Role: Ballistic Rifleman Mech

Armor: E-

Carrying Capacity: C

Aesthetics: B+

Endurance: C

Energy Efficiency: C

Flexibility: D

Firepower: C

Integrity: A

Mobility: B-

Spotting: C

X-Factor: A-

Cost efficiency: A

Project involvement: 80%

Original component composition: 17%

Overall evaluation: The Desolate Soldier is a simple spaceborn rifleman mech designed for cost efficiency and ease of use. It does not possess any other strengths aside from its mobility and duty-oriented X-Factor. This mech is primarily meant to be employed against the sandman race,

[You have received 1,000 Design Points for completing an original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

Most of the scores didn't look very flattering to Ves. As a cheap mech, there was no way it would score well on armor and firepower.

That was not a big deal to Ves. The Desolate Soldier scored well in the areas that mattered. Its cost efficiency, integrity and mobility were the two main selling points of his product, and in that regard it could hold its own against the competition.

Of course, Ves knew his mech design well enough to be able to come up with these scores on his own. What he truly cared about was how the System evaluated the X-Factor of his mech.

This was the second instance in which he made use of a spiritual product as his design spirit. Though Ves believed that the Solemn Guardian had reached a respectable amount of strength, he still needed confirmation.

"A- is better than I expected."

The Solemn Guardian did not match the strength of Qilanxo. In fact, it was only a little bit stronger than Ylvaine's spiritual fragment at the beginning.

Ves knew that this was just the start. Ylvaine's spiritual fragment experienced a considerable amount of growth for some reason, and Ves expected the Solemn Guardian to grow even faster if the Holy Soldier and Desolate Soldier actually realized their ludicrously high sales projections!

The only regret he had was that the urgency of the situation didn't allow him to shape the upbringing of the Solemn Guardian as he wished.

Ves only hoped that his initial customers served as good role models for the maturing design spirit.

"Uh oh."

The Solemn Guardian occupied both the Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier design. Since the initial market demand for the Holy Soldier was much more drastic, the Ylvainans would likely become the dominant influence!

"Well, it's too late to do anything." Ves shrugged. "I can hardly withhold sales for my product when demand is so high."

He resolved to check up on the Solemn Guardian frequently and step in if it developed a desire to convert mech pilots to the Ylvainan Faith.

In fact, Ves did not even wait. He dismissed the System and concentrated his mind on the Desolate Soldier design. As soon as he made contact with the Solemn Guardian, he already noticed that it had grown much more turbulent since last time.

This signified that his infantile spiritual product was rapidly learning and maturing under the influence of the first people who piloted his new mechs!

Though the Solemn Guardian appeared very active and chaotic right now, Ves believed there should be a way for him to influence its growth.

"I'll need to prune out some unwelcome developments."

The drastic shifts taking place in the Solemn Guardian reflected its nature as an artificially-created entity. It lacked the maturity of naturally-grown spiritual entities.

If Ves hadn't gotten the idea of checking up on the Solemn Guardian so early, who knew how it would turn out in the end! It would have been too late to steer its growth once it matured and internalized its lessons!

Chapter 1535 Spiritual Foundation

Since Ves was the parent of the Solemn Guardian, the spiritual product trusted him a lot. While it already started communicating with hundreds of early adopters of the Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier model, none of their voices weighed as much as the voice of its creator.

Ves didn't have to resort to drastic measures to influence the Solemn Guardian's development. He merely instructed the Solemn Guardian and prodded certain aspects of his spiritual makeup.

Of course, He held no illusions that he would be able to exert total control over the Solemn Guardian's development. It was already good enough to discourage it from developing a couple of undesirable habits.

"Hopefully, it's enough to prevent it from converting to the Ylvainan Faith. That would be a true disaster!"

For now, sales of his new products were already on track to smashing the LMC's previous records. The production of his mechs reached an even higher figure as Ves and the LMC made a very costly bet.

They bet that the demand for Desolate Soldiers would take off. They bet that the market would quickly order the mech in such large numbers that the LMC could never possibly contract enough third-party manufacturers to keep up with demand!

Though Ves possessed a lot of confidence in his work, he still doubted whether the market would be able to recognize the merits of his mech design. The LMC already blatantly promoted the Desolate Soldier's ability to inspire duty to mech pilots and bystanders, but would everyone else believe this outlandish claim?

When Ves met with Gloriana at the workshop compartment, he voiced some of his concerns.

"Hmm. I'm not really familiar with third-class mech markets, but in the Hegemony it's not unusual for Journeymen to sell hundreds of thousands of copies a year. Our mech market is much bigger, but our market is also more competitive. When you are forced to compete against Master Mech Designers, only the most exceptional mech designers are able to surpass this threshold!"

"Why would a mech buyer opt to buy a mech designed by a Journeyman as opposed to a Master?" Ves curiously asked.

"They're not irrational, if that's what you're thinking. There are perfectly rational reasons to buy a mech designed by a Journeyman. In general, every Master abides by the unwritten custom to price their products in relation to their value. The better they perform, the more expensive it is to buy them. Journeymen are still able to achieve considerable sales figures by severely discounting the prices of their products. Sure, their profits aren't anything to boast about, but proving your ability to sell lots of mechs opens up a lot of opportunities."

"Is that the only reason?"

"Well, sometimes the specialties of Masters can be rather peculiar. Not everyone needs a mech that is able to absorb a huge amount of shock or can transform into an alternate configuration. Lesser mech designers are able to fulfill thousands of different niches that Masters don't bother with. Do you understand now?"

Ves nodded. That was similar to the situation at home.

"Do you think the sales projections of our Desolate Soldier design are overblown?"

"Nope. It's clear to me that our work is incredibly valuable." She replied with absolute confidence. "If the mech market doesn't accept our Desolate Soldiers, I will make people appreciate them! No one gets away with disrespecting our precious mechs!"

Her words alarmed Ves. "Let's not do anything drastic, Gloriana! I think it's best to wait and see how it goes."

The LMC and by extension Ves claimed total ownership of the Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier designs. Even though Gloriana contributed considerably to their designs, she was already satisfied with receiving credit.

As a result, Gloriana did not even earn a single credit from the sales no matter how high they reached.

She simply didn't care about the amount of money she stood to earn this time. She knew that the margins of the Desolate Soldier and its variant were already low. If she claimed a 20 percent share of the profits which she rightfully earned, the LMC would be put under more pressure.

Of course, not even Gloriana foresaw that the sales of the Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier could reach the hundreds of thousands.

At such a height, the monthly profits reached a figure that even Gloriana could no longer remain impassive!

Still, she did not show any signs of wanting to claim any share. She knew that Ves and his mech company needed the money more. The only thing she could do with her share was to put it into a pot reserved for funding their expeditionary fleet.

While the money required to fund the fleet was incredibly high, they still had a decade to go. At this stage, it was much better to invest the LMC's current profits into expanding its reach and production capacity.

The greater the LMC's capabilities, the more impressive Ves became in the eyes of the Wodin Family. While selling lots of third-class mechs was not enough to earn their approval, his success at least increased his resume.

Besides, it was not impossible that the LMC earned so many profits one day that it could cover a considerable share of the cost of their expeditionary fleet. Even if the money the LMC made could only lessen the burden by a tenth, that still made life a lot easier for the pair!

They set aside their speculation for the time being and moved on to their current design project.

Ves knew that he wouldn't be able to do much to influence the sales of his Desolate Soldier model. He might as well distract himself by working on another mech design.

As for Gloriana, she simply enjoyed collaborating with her boyfriend. Ves had the impression that she was happiest when they worked together on a mech design where they could both express their specialties to their fullest.

As they went back to overhauling the Desolate Soldier design to fit William Urbesh, both of them learned from each other's specialties.

Just as Gloriana taught him some of the basics on how to customize a mech to suit a specific mech pilot, Ves reciprocated by teaching her some of his tricks of the trade.

"You're not concentrating enough." He frowned at her. "I thought we agreed on adopting the prior vision design method. Why is your mind beginning to wander off?"

She sighed. "I just can't help it, Ves. I've dreamt about working together on a custom mech design project for almost a year! How can I not enjoy this precious moment of ours?"

This prompted Ves to pause his work and turn towards his girlfriend sitting next to him. He grasped her soft and slender fingers and squeezed them. Gloriana let out a delighted squeal.

"I love you, Gloriana. It's all well and good to revel in your emotions, but you should take care not to put too many inappropriate thoughts into our mech design."

"Why so? I'm happy! I enjoy working like this! Whenever I design a mech with you, I can't contain my excitement!"

"Try as best as you can to temper your excitement. Your thoughts will reflect on your mech design. While it's not very obvious, it's highly related to my design philosophy. Each mech we work upon carries an imprint of our thoughts and emotions."

"Why does this imprint matter?"

"Because it sets the foundation of my specialty? Remember how you feel when I imparted our designs with their spiritual components? The truth is that we attach this spiritual component to the spiritual internal frame I've formed by applying my mind while I worked on a design."

The explanation started to make sense to her. "So the quality of the spiritual internal frame will drop if we add too many distractions?"

"Right."

In truth, Ves still needed to test this assumption, but he had a strong hunch he was right. In any case, the spiritual foundation of his mech designs still played a role even if his design spirits often stole the show.

"So what do I have to do?"

"If you want me to give full play to my design philosophy, then you should concentrate your mind on the vision we formed for this project. By directing the bulk of your mental attention to our vision and all of the thinking that is necessary to realize it, you will mentally be able to imprint it onto our mech design."

"What is the purpose of this? Does it have to be done during the design process?"

"It's very important, Gloriana. It's too late to shape the spiritual foundation of our mech design once it's complete. The reason why we want to do this is manifold. Even without adding a spiritual component, the foundation can still exert a modest influence on the mech pilot. Its most important function is to form a bridge between the mech and mech pilot."

"I see!" She happily clapped again. "So we are actually setting up the divine foundation of our mech design! In order to make them as compatible to the mech design and accompanying proto-gods, all of their domains need to align with each other!"

Ves wanted to palm his face. He knew he should be grateful that she got the gist of his explanation. If there was one benefit to her weird beliefs, it was that she never exhibited any skepticism as long as she found a way to fit his lessons in her religious framework.

He decided to move on.

"It's fine if you are thinking about me while you are working. I'm pretty much the same when it comes to you. It's just that we need to maintain the majority of our focus on our vision and on our work. Our mech design will absorb some of our focus in a coherent manner as long as our thoughts are pure enough."

"What about emotions?"

"As far as I know, passion and heated emotions can be a wonderful boon to our mech designs. The more we care about our work, the more pronounced the foundation we are building. As long as you take care not to impart too many irrelevant thoughts, it's fine if you are very happy for some reason."

"What happens if our thoughts aren't as pure as you'd like?"

"Then we end up with a foundation that resembles a mud pool. Since it lacks a strong and focused direction, it ends up achieving nothing. Do you understand the importance of holding on to a single vision now?"

She tentatively nodded. "I'm not used to concentrating my mind in this way."

"Just try it out. You don't have to maintain perfect concentration. I can use my own mental strength to smooth over any wrinkles in our mech design."

They got off on a bumpy start. Unlike Ves who could observe and get a feel for the spiritual foundation of their work, Gloriana had to act blindly in maintaining what she thought was a sufficient amount of concentration.

Gloriana only possessed average concentration, so her focus frequently slipped.

Nonetheless, this result was a lot better than before. Ves could easily clean up her messes this time, unlike before where her wandering mind produced too many distractions for him to keep up after some time!

As Gloriana continued to follow his instructions, she became a little more adept at maintaining her concentration in this fashion. She no longer let her whimsies and

impulses disturb her work, though she frequently demanded breaks in order to cuddle up to him and enjoy his company.

"I love these moments when we are together." She smiled as she leaned on his chest.

Ves noticed that she worked better and put more feeling in her work whenever they shared these breaks together.

What was more, her happiness was infectious. Each time she became happy, Ves felt the same way!

Happiness not only fueled their passion, but also brought them together. When both of them felt the same way, much less friction occurred during their work.

Chapter 1536 Early Adopter

Over the past several months, Bentheim experienced a major transformation. As the economic center of the Bright Republic, the planet always focused most of its efforts on expanding its industry and trade.

Even with the Vesia Kingdom casting greedy eyes at Bentheim, the economic engine kept running at full tilt. The vast amount of money flowing through this trade nexus was vital in keeping the rest of the Republic aloft.

The sandman invasion changed everything.

Unlike the Vesians, the sandmen race mobilized so many sandmen vessels that they could easily overwhelm a fifth of the Komodo Star Sector at the same time!

The might of the Bright Republic alone was not able to withstand such might, especially not after consuming a considerable amount of strength during the recently-concluded war against the Vesia Kingdom.

Even if the sandmen race attacked without any coordination, a state that already exhausted half of its strength could not withstand the deluge of sandmen ships alone.

For this reason, under the leadership of the bright president and the bright senate, the entire Bright Republic mobilized to a degree unprecedented in its history!

Not even in the worst days of the Bright-Vesia Wars did the Bright Republic mobilize such a high proportion of manpower and resources to war!

The drums of war beat throughout the entire state, calling everyone to war. Peaceful pursuits and idle pleasures no longer became available. The mech games circuit, which had run continuously even during wartime, finally shuttered for the first time since its formation!

Different from the wars the Bright Republic waged before, the state conscripted a vast amount of norms.

The sandman relied on brute force and persistent attacks to overrun their opposition. Against such a simple foe that did not employ any sophisticated battle tactics, sheer firepower could play a key role.

For this reason, an incredible proportion of industry on Bentheim had switched over to mass-producing turrets and defensive platforms. All of these fixed defenses needed to be manned, hence why so many citizens became soldiers.

Of course, even if turrets and defensive platforms could play a major role in repelling the sandmen, the Bright Republic did not neglect its mech forces.

Mech athletes, mech champions and mech duelists of every stripe no longer performed in front of a crowd. Instead, they either enlisted in the Mech Corps or joined one of the many mercenary corps and other outfits contracted by the state to deploy against the sandmen!

Though many outfits thought about leaving, the rewards issued by the Bright Republic were too attractive to ignore. The state no longer hoarded its vast wealth and promised rich payment to any mercenary brave enough to resist the sandmen!

Of course, to some mercenaries, no amount of money was enough to compensate for their lives. They only had to keep track of the news of the states in the first and second line of defense to know how horrible it was to resist the sandmen onslaught.

An unavoidable amount of outfits and individual mech pilots left the Bright Republic. Though the state imposed a fair amount of restrictions on travel, the outflow couldn't be stopped.

When those who remained behind watched the cowards leave for better pastures, their sense of urgency increased. The Bright Republic's total combat strength decreased with each mech pilot leaving.

Of course, an incredible amount of normal people started leaving as well. They saw what their fates might be if they stayed around. Once the sandmen completely took over a planet, they had no use for their human population. Each and every settlement would be washed away by a tide of sand that was powerful enough to crush the lives of those who were cowering in their homes and bunkers!

For this reason, every state under threat suffered from an outflow of people, capital and mechs. Compared to less cohesive states like the Reinald Republic, the Bright Republic fared much better in this regard. It bled much slower than others on account of the confidence of most of its citizens.

Whether this state of confidence could be maintained was another question. The most senior leaders of the Bright Republic observed the fall of the border states extensively and knew that everything they built was like a house of cards.

As long as a state suffered one major setback, the confidence of the people might falter, thereby sparking an unstoppable tide of fear!

To bolster the confidence of its citizens, the Bright Republic pulled out all the stops. The government blanketed the media space with patriotic and uplifting propaganda and sent forth a vast amount of people into society to bolster their confidence!

Under this broad and overarching initiative, the Bentheim Planetary Guard employed a completely novel method.

As the first major client to order a batch of Desolate Soldiers, the Planetary Guard did not deploy them to space as Ves expected.

Instead, the Planetary Guard immediately deployed the first hundred Desolate Soldiers on the streets of Bentheim.

The cities of Dorum, Haston, Ansel, Meirling and more became host to a brand new model of mechs.

Among the mechs already patrolling the streets, the new mechs did not look impressive at first. Hastily coated in the colors of the Bentheim Planetary Guard, the size and quality of the mechs left much to be desired.

In addition, its peculiar flight system made it obvious that the mech had been designed to operate in space. On land, its weak legs only allowed the rifleman mechs to walk at a steady pace.

"Has the Planetary Guard gone crazy? Even if the Guard desperately needs to replace its peacekeeping mechs with ballistic rifleman mechs, why are they opting for something so bad?"

Yet as soon as the observers entered into a certain range, their faces drastically shifted.

As long as anyone came close enough, they immediately became subject to the auras of the new mechs. Not a single person could remain impassive!

What was more, the auras carried a strong and relatively pure sense of duty! Anyone who became impacted by this aura could not help but become affected.

Each Brighter carried a sense of duty ingrained in their minds. The Bright Republic paid a lot of attention to instilling loyalty and patriotism to the state in their early upbringing.

Under the stimulation of the auras of the Desolate Soldier, these buried values grew stronger, causing everyone's sense of duty to amplify!

The effect of the auras couldn't be underestimated. In terms of X-Factor, the Desolate Soldier design was a little bit weaker than the Aurora Titan design and roughly matched that of the initial Transcendent Messenger design.

However, unlike the expensive Aurora Titan and the highly exclusive Transcendent Messenger, the Desolate Soldier possessed one great advantage.

It was cheap!

The Desolate Soldier was so cheap and easy to produce, that many third-party manufacturers immediately started producing batches of them without any adjustment period.

The technical design of the Desolate Soldier was so simple and elegant that its learning curve was nothing to speak of! Most of the sophistication of the Desolate Soldier lay in its X-Factor and its profound but hidden design principles, both of which did not negatively affect the production process.

Of course, one major caveat about the Desolate Soldiers was that they were virtually all bronze label mechs. The mixed and unfocused production processes employed by third-party manufacturers weakened the X-Factor of the mechs rolling off their production lines, but even then they still retained considerable auras.

"If one of these mechs aren't enough, what about two? If two aren't enough, what about four?"

After a bit of experimentation and a lot of mathematical modeling, the Bentheim Planetary Guard finally came to the conclusion that it was best to group them up in fours.

Four Desolate Soldiers patrolling side by side strengthened their auras to such an extent that even the most selfish individuals started questioning themselves.

While grouping up more Desolate Soldiers strengthened their auras even further, the law of diminishing returns had already come into effect. The difference in impact became so marginal that the Planetary Guard was better off focusing on spreading out the groups of four to as many places as possible.

As more and more days passed by, the Planetary Guard received more and more Desolate Soldiers. The mechs became more ubiquitous on the streets. The confidence of the previously fearful citizens had stabilized. In fact, many Bentheimers even became more optimistic about their future!

Captain Melinda Larkinson could hardly believe how profound the Desolate Soldiers affected the moods of the locals by their mere presence on the streets.

As a Larkinson and a cousin of the mech designer of the Desolate Soldier, she received the privilege of piloting one of the few silver label Desolate Soldiers delivered to the Planetary Guard.

"This mech.. How can Ves possibly design such a fearsome mech?"

Melinda patrolled the streets in her brand-new Desolate Soldier long enough to recognize how strong it affected the moods of the surrounding people.

If the MTA hadn't issued their verdict on it, she would have thought that her mech was outright brainwashing the people that fell into its range!

In truth, Melinda and the rest of the Planetary Guard concluded that the effects were a little bit more mild. The Desolate Soldier roused certain thoughts and emotions, causing them to become more pronounced.

As soon as someone walked out of range, those thoughts and emotions quickly went back to normal. The person affected by the Desolate Soldier would only be left with the memories and impressions of their moment of inspiration.

However, this was enough to change their original trajectories! The sense of duty that they felt was so sublime and fulfilling that many people no longer viewed their lives the same way.

Not everyone discovered their sense of duty.

Some, like Melinda, already performed their duties. The Desolate Soldiers only strengthened what they already possessed.

Others were too unrepentant to reform. Their blackened minds completely rejected any notions of duty.

Most people came away with something extra to think about. While they didn't change their lives to a drastic degree, they became a little bit more inclined to answer the call of duty.

This was sufficient! Compared to the government's propaganda efforts, the impact of the Desolate Soldiers on the moods of the citizens was much more immediate.

The short-term stability produced by the disgustingly-cheap mechs was incredibly valuable! So much so that the Planetary Guards of other planets in the Republic started to take note! The LMC received more and more orders!

Driven by the actions of the Planetary Guard forces, other outfits began to take note of the Desolate Soldier.

Aside from their ability to inspire duty, the Desolate Soldier was still a functional combat mech. Its primary purpose was to offer the market an affordable means to field lots of mechs in battle against the sandmen.

"This mech is not half-bad."

Did mercenaries care about duty? Not necessarily. Yet even mercenary corps saw value in the mechs.

If nothing else, their mech pilots wouldn't cut and run so easily if they piloted the mechs. It had already become known that the Desolate Soldiers affected their mech pilots most of all!

For this reason, the private sector began to order Desolate Soldiers as well, though only single copies or small batches at a time.

Under the backdrop of this major movement, a single young man stood on the sidewalk as a patrol of Desolate Soldiers walked past. The man admired the mechs with a heated glance, and his entire mind and body vibrated with excitement as he basked in the auras of the mechs.

"Mr. King."

A man in uniform walked up to the young man. The visor on the newcomer's face looked incredibly distinctive.

The younger of the two immediately stood at attention. "Avatar Commander! It's an honor to meet you in person!"

Melkor Larkinson smiled. "There is no need for that. The Avatars of Myth is not a military mech force."

"Ah, sorry."

"No need. It is a pleasure to witness your enthusiasm. While I can guess that you received some attractive offers from the Mech Corps, we will not treat you wrong."

Normally, Melkor never bothered to travel to Bentheim to greet a new recruit of the Avatars of Myth.

Only a few circumstances compelled him to move out in person. The recruitment of a top graduate of the Meirling Advanced Mech Academy definitely qualified!

"I'm ready to go, Commander Larkinson."

"Good. Our shuttle awaits, Joshua."

Joshua obediently followed after the Avatar Commander, knowing that he was close to fulfilling one of his most cherished dreams!

Chapter 1537 Supreme Existence

"Our attempt to push our Desolate Soldiers onto the Bentheim Planetary Guard has succeeded. They're so enthusiastic about our new mechs that they'll soon be fielding thousands of them across the planet and in orbit!"

The LMC deliberately courted the Bentheim Planetary Guard due to its strong authority and heavy presence on Bentheim. Any mech model adopted by this pivotal peacekeeping force would doubtlessly attract a lot of attention!

Once the Planetary Guard adopted the Desolate Soldier model, they practically marketed it on behalf of the LMC. Not only did they field the mechs everywhere, allowing many people to experience their auras, their authoritative status lent a lot of credibility to the products they used!

It was no surprise to Ves to hear from Gavin that other Planetary Guard forces followed suit. The auras of the Desolate Soldiers simply met their needs too well for them to ignore!

As for the potential accusations of brainwashing or improper mental influence, who cared? The Bright Republic was on the precipice of destruction and needed to pull out all the stops! The authorities couldn't care less about the potentially dangerous repercussions right now!

In any case, they could always revisit this issue after they repelled the sandmen.

"Hahaha! You should see the tears of the snobby Ansel mech designers!" Gavin laughed over the comm. "Professor Pendleton and their ilk has been leading the wave of criticism directed at the LMC's mechs. Even though he published a long diatribe that warns against the dangers of the Desolate Soldier, his influence is not as great as before!"

Ves smiled as well. "As long as the Bentheim Planetary Guard uses my mechs, they're effectively vouching for them. The biased opinions of a couple of snooty Seniors simply can't compare to the weight of a seemingly-neutral institution."

Was the Bentheim Planetary Guard devoid of politics? No! It took sides like any institution run by humans. It was just that their political character wasn't very obvious. In

order to maintain its reputation, the Bentheim Planetary Guard did its best to appear neutral and fair.

Now, the LMC essentially piggy-backed on the Guard's stellar reputation to legitimize their Desolate Soldier model. This deliberate strategy effectively mitigated most of the controversy surrounding the LMC's products!

Gavin and the LMC believed that enacting this plan was incredibly pivotal to the wider adoption of the Desolate Soldier. Unlike the Ylvainans who exhibited no misgivings about the Holy Soldier, the Brighters were much more cautious and sober.

The LMC could still work with that as long as they published a mech with an X-Factor as strong as the Blackbeak or the Crystal Lord.

Yet the Desolate Soldier was different. Its X-Factor put it in the same range as the Aurora Titan and Transcendent Messenger, but its affordability meant that it became much more widely available.

If people started fearing the Desolate Soldiers, their ubiquity might provoke a very ugly backlash.

"The hardest part is behind us." Gavin continued. "Now that so many Planetary Guards have adopted our Desolate Soldiers, there is no way this trend can be reversed, at least in the Bright Republic. Recently, our marketing focus has shifted to foreign markets. The Coman Federation, the Reinald Republic, the Independent State of Pillis and the Council Stars of Lisv are all fertile ground for our Desolate Soldiers!"

The LMC already possessed a moderate presence in those states. They only left out the Vesia Kingdom for obvious reasons.

As Gavin transmitted some reports for him to peruse, Ves started thinking deeply. He initially found it hard to believe in the LMC's rosy projections.

How could his mech company suddenly take a huge leap from selling a couple of thousand mechs a year to selling more than 100,000 mechs in a single month?

It sounded far too unrealistic, yet as more and more orders poured in, Ves began to waver in his assumptions.

What if the LMC estimated correctly? What if the LMC really managed to sell so many mechs?

Ves could scarcely imagine the consequences!

"It's too bad that we've outsourced most of our production." Ves sighed. "If we possessed greater production capacity, we could have profited more from this trend."

In the last week, the LMC resumed construction of its second manufacturing complex on Bentheim. This time, the planetary government even lent some assistance to hurry up construction. The faster the site went up, the sooner it started churning out mechs.

"We may be missing out a bit this time, but we'll definitely be in a better position next time."

Ves and Gavin talked extensively about the market reception of the Desolate Soldier over the comm. Though Ves always put his guard up towards his assistant, that did not change their current working relationship.

So what if Flashlight hooked their tentacles into Gavin? He was still a very capable and insightful adviser and attendant.

In any case, the current crisis transcended any friction between Ves and Flashlight.

After Ves finished receiving his daily update from Gavin, he ended the call and met up with Gloriana. They briefly enjoyed their breakfast before heading to the workshop compartment of the Stellar Lancer.

By this time, their combined fleet had already reached the territory of the Reinald Republic. Even if he was passing by, Ves had the feeling of entering a familiar stomping ground.

In fact, after crossing the Reinald Republic, their route ran straight through the Vesia Kingdom!

Normally, Ves would never dare to enter this state on his own accord!

Yet everything was different now that he travelled together with Gloriana. There was no way the Kingdom would have the guts to stir up trouble against a prominent Hexer escorted by a powerful second-class mech unit!

"It feels good to shelter under Gloriana's umbrella sometimes." He mused.

As Ves and Gloriana continued to work on their collaborative design project, they both got to know each other better on multiple levels. Not only did they learn from each other's specialties and adjusted their design styles to each other, they also got to know each other better as a person.

For example, Ves asked a very important question that had been nagging at him for a while.

"Gloriana, what do gods mean to you? Sometimes, I have the feeling you don't view them with as much reverence as I think."

Though both of them had been seriously working on an increasingly more sophisticated custom mech design, they also looked rather silly together. The identical cat ears atop their head made them look as if they were a couple on a date!

"Haven't I told you about the six phases of existence before?"

"Yeah, but I don't understand the significance of these phases."

Gloriana patted his forearm. "It's not that hard to understand. Adherents of hexism believe that existence can be expressed in six phases, each of which are interconnected. One flows to the other. A god is simply someone who has ascended to power. We consider god pilots and Star Designers to be among that level, but they are only the most obvious gods in existence today."

"Is a living god pilot a man or a god?"

"Both. A person can encompass multiple phases at once. That's how interconnected they are, Ves."

"Is there a ranking?"

"Of course! Women fall under the most supreme phase of existence! Every follower of hexism believes that it is better to be a mortal woman than a male god!"

"What?!"

What kind of nonsense was this?!

"Hexism doesn't call for worshipping gods. We merely respect them, that's all, and only if they're female."

"Does that mean you would rather be an average female mech designer than a powerful male Star Designer?"

"Yes!" Gloriana replied without hesitation. "Women are supreme! We are the wisest and most enlightened half of humanity! I know it sounds hard for you as a man to learn that you're inferior to us, but that's what we're here for. Under our guidance and protection, we make sure that men behave and know their boundaries."

She spoke with so much conviction that Ves had no doubt that she believed what she said. Her subtle green eyes radiated such intense focus when she spoke about her beliefs.

There was no way that Ves could ever talk some sense into her! He would have to break her mind in order to get rid of this aspect of hers, but that was far too cruel for Ves to ever contemplate.

For better or worse, his girlfriend was an unrepentant Hexer.

"So how do you view my so-called "proto-gods'?" Ves shifted the topic.

"They're very interesting." She answered admiringly. "Though I have no idea how you're able to manipulate them, the ease in which you do so shows just how interconnected they are to us. Gods aren't necessarily aloof or immortal and they aren't condescendingly watching over us from some higher plane. They're merely... special."

Though her answers surprised Ves, he rested a little easier now that he knew her attitude on gods. He was afraid that she might have been inclined to worship them or something. She differed from the Ylvainans in this regard.

"What do you think about the design spirit I created for the Desolate Soldier?"

"It's.. adequate. I think it does a good job fulfilling the role it is meant to fulfill, but..." She grimaced. "It's very masculine. In fact, most of the proto-gods I've sensed in your design are male. That's very bad, Ves!"

She playfully swatted Ves' cheek as if he was a naughty boy!

"Gloriana! Gender doesn't matter! A god is a god!"

"It does! Don't think I haven't noticed that the proto-god residing in the Aurora Titan is more powerful than the rest. She's the only female among your little collection of proto-gods, so that proves that female gods are more powerful than male ones!"

Her warped explanation made Ves sick. How could she possibly use Qilanxo's strength to justify her beliefs! The most powerful spiritual fragment that he managed to get ahold of just happened to come from a female Sacred God.

It would have made no difference if Ves obtained a spiritual fragment from a male Sacred God!

As for his other design spirits, most of them were men because Ves was a man. He never really consciously thought about the genders of his images and spiritual products, so they all defaulted to men because that was what he was familiar with. That they happened to be weaker was because it was too difficult for him to replicate Qilanxo's spiritual strength!

Though her strange beliefs weirded him out, Gloriana was mindful enough to keep them to herself. According to her, she had all the time in the galaxy to convert Ves to hexism.

"You'll see the light one day! Hihi!"

Ves could only respond to her claim with a brittle smile.

He would rather let his mother suck his Spirituality dry than to convert to a religion that blatantly discriminated by gender! At least the Ylvainans kept gender differences out of their beliefs!

Nonetheless, Ves wasn't sure if he could maintain this equilibrium with Gloriana. As their intimacy grew, a difference in beliefs might become an obstacle.

How much hexism was Ves prepared to tolerate?

How long could Gloriana keep up her indulgence towards his rejection of her beliefs?

As if guessing what he was thinking, Gloriana swatted his head again.

"You're thinking too much, Ves. Regardless of what we believe, we are meant to be together. Our differences won't pull us apart so long as we value things we share in common. We're far from the only couple with differences."

"You're right." He sighed. His parents came to mind. "We should get back to work. We're making very good progress right now."

Both of them had poured a lot of effort into transforming the Desolate Soldier from a standard mech design into a highly-customized work of craftsmanship.

While Ves excelled in shaping the custom mech's spiritual framework, Gloriana showcased her ability to elevate its technical aspects!

When both of them combined their strengths to the fullest, the outcome reached a level that neither of them had ever managed to reach on their own!

So far, the progress they made proved Gloriana's assertions right! Their design philosophies complemented each other!

In fact, Ves also spotted signs that their design philosophy cooperated with each other on a deeper level...

Chapter 1538 Self-Interes

As Ves and Gloriana kept improving their ability to work off each other's strengths and specialties, a minor incident interrupted their travels.

As their combined fleet almost left the territory of the Reinald Republic, they inadvertently transitioned into a star system under attack by a sandman fleet!

Both Ves and Gloriana entered the bridge of the Stellar Chaser upon the sounding of the alarm.

"What is the situation?" Gloriana immediately took charge.

"The local star system is under attack by a single sandman fleet, ma'am."

"Composition?"

"One sandman capital ship. Six sandman escort ships."

Ves recognized that as the standard sandman fleet composition. Only the young and inexperienced sandman admirals adopted this stale and highly-exploitable formation.

Having met them in battle before, the sight of the sandmen fleet did not arouse any fear in him. In any case, the sandmen fleet was many light-hours away from their current position.

"What are the sandmen doing?"

"They're about to engulf the rural planet." Ves answered grimly. "The sandmen are attracted by energy. While the power generators of a thinly-populated planet don't amount to much, they're easily digestible to the sandmen. The aliens love that."

Gloriana gasped with horror. "Those poor people! How come there aren't any mechs protecting the planet from the sandmen?"

"Look over there." Ves pointed at the side of the local plot. Faint signals flew towards the edge of the star systems. "Those two light carriers are running as fast as possible. I'm guessing that they're the ones that are tasked with defending the local population."

"Are they running?" She frowned.

"Yup. Wow, the sensors of your ship are really good. I can even tell they never even attempted to fulfill their mission. See how they're completely undamaged? Look at how many mechs are orbiting them. I don't think they've lost a single one in battle."

His cynical-sounding description painted a bleak picture.

Based on the distances traversed by the sandman fleet and the fleeing light carriers, the outfit hired to defend this star system ran as soon as the aliens appeared!

Even if the mercenaries signed a contract and received some rewards, they never appeared to take their mission seriously.

When faced with an actual sandman fleet, they would rather run than fight!

Ves understood their reluctance. A single sandman fleet consisted of so many masses of sand that two mech companies would have a hard time wearing them down. The only

way they could defeat the sandman fleet before it reached the planet in the inner system was by pestering the sandmen over a long period of time.

Such a strategy came with inherent risks. The sandmen possessed the sporadic ability to fire incredibly strong lasers. Their firing rate was slow, but their firepower was enough to take out a mech in a single shot!

The longer a battle dragged on, the greater the chances the sandmen scored a hit. Every successful hit signified a dead mech and very likely a dead mech pilot.

In fact, the power of a laser beam fired from the sandman capital ship was so powerful that it could even threaten the light carriers!

Faced with a situation where the mercenaries would suffer severe, guaranteed losses, it was no surprise that they had opted to run!

"Does this mean the people on the planet are defenseless?"

"The people living on the planet are likely doomed the moment the mercenaries decided to abandon their mission. Perhaps they have a bunch of landbound mechs to defend themselves, but once the sandmen land on the surface of a planet, it's ten times harder to resist them! It's unlikely that this planet can field so many mechs."

Gloriana studied the data on the planet. "Seven million people live on the surface. Will the sandmen really kill all of them, Ves?"

"Every living human is a threat to the sandmen. They're not in the habit of taking prisoners."

Melody decided to step forward this time. "Gloriana, don't get any wild ideas."

"I was just considering, that's all! Isn't the Glory Battalion strong enough to repel the sandmen?!"

"If we want to help, we'll have to reach the inner system first." Ves noted. "The sandmen will have reached the planet at that time and begin to engulf every energy source and human on the surface."

"If my Glory Battalion hurries up, they can make it in time to save the survivors who are left."

Ves shook his head. "Forget about it, Gloriana. I'm with your assistant on this. It's not our business. Even if we reach the planet in time and manage to repel the sandmen, we're not going to get anything in return. In fact, we'll be paying a price for this by delaying our arrival to the Bright Republic by three to five days, depending on what happens."

His current priority remained returning to the LMC as fast as possible. He already anticipated that their fleet might encounter a situation like this where a populated planet came under threat.

Unless there was a compelling reason for them to dispatch their mechs to assist, Ves would rather leave as soon as the FTL drives of their starships finished cycling.

"I don't know, Ves... I don't feel so good about this situation."

"It's none of our business. So many planets and star systems have already fallen to the sandmen. Trillions of people who were unable to obtain passage on a refugee ship have died at the hands of this alien race. More will die in the coming months."

"I know that! I just find it hard to accept doing nothing when a tragedy like this plays out right in front of my eyes!"

Ves sighed and embraced Gloriana with his arm. "You're too soft, Gloriana. The galaxy is a cruel place, and people die all the time. As mech designers we are indirectly responsible for much of the killing that goes on in the galaxy. The primary function of the machines we design is to fight."

Due to her privileged upbringing, mechs had always been a technical marvel to her. She never actually experienced a lethal battle up close in her life. The closest she ever came to seeing mechs in battle was when she attended mech duels or something.

Fortunately, after Ves hugged her a bit, she became swayed by his argument.

"I guess you're right. It's the Reinald Republic's responsibility to defend its citizens when you think about it. They should have been more thorough in allocating mercenaries to defend their star systems."

Ves chuckled darkly under his breath. He doubted whether an honest Reinaldan mercenary even existed. He had a very poor impression of Reinaldan culture and military readiness. Their so-called 'Honored Ones' were so unfit for war that Ves doubted the Reinald Republic would even be able to survive the crisis!

As the pair exited the bridge without issuing any orders to save the beleaguered planet, Ves tried to console her as best as possible.

"We are mech designers. We don't solve our problems by dispatching mechs at them. We design mechs that are suited to tackle the problems. That is why I came up with the Desolate Soldier. If the mercenaries fielded our new mechs, they probably wouldn't have run as fast."

She nodded. "I guess you're right. To be honest, I'm grateful you've convinced me out of it. I wasn't acting like a proper Hexer back then. It's just that I've never been in a

situation where so many humans were under threat. Now that I've calmed, I realize that those people aren't actually worth my attention."

Ves wasn't sure whether he should be pleased at her words.

"We all have a bit of selfishness. The MTA refuses to save the border states and all of the people who live there despite possessing an abundance of power. The CFA isn't doing more than sending out a single warfleet towards the source because they're obligated to. The Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony have both decided to stay put and stare at each other instead of lifting their hands to help. In every case, those who possess power prioritize their own interests above everyone else's. As far as I'm concerned, we're no different."

"You're right, Ves. You're so right. I'm so glad you're so understanding. I love you, Ves."

"I love you too, Gloriana." He smiled back.

Their fleet quickly transitioned out of the star system just as the sandmen fleet was about to reach the defenseless planet. By the time they reached their next star system, another seven million people lost their lives to the heartless alien race.

Fortunately, they didn't encounter any similar incidents along the way. Right now, the sandmen were still in the process of battering the second line of defense. States such as the Bright Republic, Ylvaine Protectorate, Vesia Kingdom and the Reinald Republic only met with sporadic leaks.

As Ves kept track of the news, he noted that these incidents started to become more and more prevalent. That was a sign that the second line of defense was starting to fail.

The news emerging from the second line of defense took on an increasingly more fatalistic tone.

Most relevant to Ves was the fate of the Coman Federation. As the state that stood in the way between the sandmen and the Bright Republic, Ves hoped that the Comen lasted as long as possible.

"How worthless." Ves shook his head in disappointment after reading the latest news. "They're already starting to break."

The Comen were anything but weak. They were very open about augmenting themselves to the point where they worshipped transhumanism. The Coman Federation also possessed a strong military culture that had given the Bright Republic plenty of headaches over the centuries.

Yet no matter how conceited they were, the sheer quantity of sandmen fleets battering their star systems was too much for them to bear.

While their fortified star systems withstood the waves of sandmen without consuming too much strength, their lesser star systems fared much more poorly. Though the Comen mercenaries and outfits hired to protect these locations fought bravely, their numbers were ultimately insufficient.

There were too few mechs to adequately cover every star system!

The loss of insufficiently-defended star systems meant that a crack had formed in the Coman Federation's armor. The sandmen fleets that arrived later no longer bothered stay around in conquered star systems and instead directed their attention elsewhere.

This basically meant that more and more sandmen fleets began to batter a smaller number of star systems. The increase in intensity meant that more star systems started to get overwhelmed. This in turn meant that the besieged star systems became host to even more sandmen!

This was how pretty much every state in the second line of defense started to fall. Even though they received some advanced warning, their preparations turned out to be insufficient.

Already, many Comen had seen the writing on the wall and fled to the Bright Republic or beyond.

Of course, since starships were in short supply, only a fraction of the population managed to make it out. The rest were destined to become crushed in a tide of sand.

"Hasn't the Bright Republic done anything to assist the Comen?" Ves suddenly frowned.

He searched the galactic net and found out that the Bright Republic deliberately withheld any aid. They even issued a warning to mercenaries not to lend their assistance to the Comen!

Though the Bright Republic never really liked their neighboring state, Ves still thought it was in its best interest to reinforce the Comen!

"It's better to contain the damage in the Coman Federation rather than letting it spill into the Bright Republic! It's too late now!"

From what he could gather from reading all of the political analyses on the news, the leaders of the Bright Republic wanted to use the sandmen to get rid of the Coman Federation without getting any of the blame.

As long as the Bright Republic successfully repelled the sandmen, the Bright Republic could easily double its territory by taking over all of the star systems formerly held by the defunct Coman Federation!

Ves couldn't help but laugh when he understood the Bright Republic was doing exactly what he had been thinking!

"Even my own home state is pursuing its own self interests!"

Of course, by denying the Comen any material assistance, the Bright Republic was about to pay the price for their inaction.

Once the sandmen finished consuming the territory of the Coman Federation, the aliens would definitely direct their might towards the Bright Republic!

If the leaders of the Bright Republic had bet wrong, then they stood to lose their entire state due to their selfish decisions!

Chapter 1539 Mutual Strengthening

"Hihi!" Gloriana giggled as she hugged Clixie to her chest as she jumped onto her bed. "Working with Ves is so fun! I don't ever want these days to end!"

"Miaow."

"You approve of Ves, right?"

"Miaow!"

"I mean, he can be a silly boy sometimes, but he's also the cutest at those times!"

"Miaow?"

"Our custom mech is shaping to become something fantastic! Though it's difficult to adjust my methods to become more in line with his, I can feel the difference it makes. There is no way I'll ever go back to collaborating with other mech designers! Only Ves can enable me to touch the divine!"

The Hexadric Hegemony possessed a rather flexible attitude towards religion. Hexism was neither mandated nor universal in the powerful second-rate state.

Nonetheless, many Hexers still ascribed to the philosophy, either half-heartedly or wholeheartedly. Many of its tenets fell in line with Hexer culture, so it was not that big of a burden for most Hexers to follow hexism.

When Ves heard how the Hegemony treated religion, he judged that the Hexers were trying to have their cake and eat it too. By propagating a philosophy that closely matched the predominant culture, the state essentially ensured that secularists and believers could live side-by-side in harmony without any of the usual clashes in beliefs!

In essence, the Hegemony tried to be both a secular and a religious state at the same time! By offering room for both, the state avoided most of the problems associated with leaning too closely to a specific inclination. Its policies especially opened room for future expansion and assimilation of territory.

No matter if a Hexer was a secularist or believer, they both united together in the common belief that women were superior!

Of course, Gloriana did not think her state was doing anything special. To her, hexism described the truth. Working with Ves so closely had granted her access to a whole new facet of mech design.

Though Ves did not know it, Gloriana believed that the six phases of existence formed the true foundation of his specialty. He just didn't acknowledge yet, but she was confident she could change that one day!

As Gloriana continued to cuddle with her Rubarthan Sentinel Cat while fantasizing about turning Ves into a Hexer, Melody walked up to her bed with a hexagonal data pad in her hand.

"Madame Constance has just been in contact with me." She spoke. "Some dynasties have approached her with offers for strategic alliances."

Gloriana's good mood instantly sunk. "I already told my mother that I'm not considering any other boys! I've already set my sights on Ves! Haven't you seen how well we pair together?"

"Mr. Larkinson is indeed more remarkable than I thought, but his qualifications still leave much to be desired." Melody scoffed.

"His qualifications are far greater than you can ever imagine! You just can't see it because you're not a mech designer!"

"Even so, your mother still worries about your future. Please look at your list of suitors before you continue objecting. Your mother insists."

As much as Gloriana wanted to throw away the data pad that her assistant passed into her hands, she knew she would just get in trouble. She grumpily skimmed through the profiles as fast as possible.

"All of these boys are trash!"

"Gloriana..."

"Do you want me to dissect their faults like I did last time?" She hissed. "I'll even post them on my Commbook if that's what it takes!"

Melody instantly shut up. If there was anything Gloriana was good at, it was identifying faults. The amount of boys she repulsed by acidly pointing out their many flaws had reached the double digits!

"Three years." Gloriana spoke and stretched out five of her fingers. "Tell my mother that Ves will prove himself worthy of me in five years. If he hasn't excelled in that time, I'll return home and obediently settle with a boy my mother approves of. Is that okay?"

Her assistant looked a little more mollified at that. "Three years is.. a reasonable compromise, if not for Operation K. Don't think I am blind to what you are doing. If it is too dangerous for you to return home, Mr. Larkinson effectively gains more time to prove himself."

"It won't get to that! We'll succeed, I'm sure of it! Besides, I'm confident Ves will astound my mother. Even if he takes more time than I expected, won't it be a good thing that he outperforms every other boy?"

Melody shook her head. "It's different. Those boys you are so dismissive about all come from respectable dynasties. Mr. Larkinson is on his own. Marrying him won't open up any valuable ties for the Wodins. For this reason, your mother has set a much higher bar for Mr. Larkinson."

"Hmph! As if my mother has never set high expectations on me! Tell her that she shouldn't worry about me. Three years is enough!"

Of course, if three years wasn't enough for her boyfriend to gain her mother's approval, then she would still stay with Ves. She would rather abscond with Ves into the frontier than to return to the Hegemony alone!

"The situation will become very hectic soon, Miss Gloriana. We can't guarantee that you will be able to stay by Mr. Larkinson's side for three years."

"I'll bring Ves with me wherever I go. No matter if it's the sandmen or any other threat, we're inseparable now. This is one thing I won't let my mother interfere."

Time continued to pass. The combined fleet continued its rapid journey after crossing over into Vesian space.

Though unintentional, the navigator of the Stellar Chaser charted a route that passed through the Hafner, Klein, Venidse and Imodris Duchies.

Ves had mixed feelings as he passed through the territories of the duchies that he once treated as hostile. The war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom had long faded from everyone's mind. With the sandmen threatening everyone, no one had the time to revisit past grudges.

He breathed a little easier once the combined fleet passed through the Hafner Duchy without incident. He half expected Venerable Foster to pop up all of a sudden and stir some trouble. Wasn't that what happened in all of the action dramas he used to watch when he was younger?

"What's wrong, Ves?" Gloriana walked over to his side.

"Just thinking about old times."

Both of them looked at a projection that showed their current route. They were only a couple of weeks away from reaching their destination.

"Do you hate the Vesians?" She asked.

"No." Ves shook his head. "They're just aggressive, that's all. I've witnessed a lot of people die during the war, but there's no point holding a grudge. War is war."

He could never forget how many Vandals and Swordmaidens died on the surface of Aeon Corona VII. The Hostland Warriors and the Meandering Monkeys wiped most of their ground forces. Venerable Foster piloting her nearly-invincible Belisarius expert mech practically ensured their inevitable defeat.

It was a sad thing that taking prisoners was not a universal custom in human space. If all of those Vandals still lived, the Bright Republic would have been in a better shape to resist the sandmen.

"From what I've read on the news, it appears the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom has entered into a defensive pact of some sorts."

Ves idly nodded. "We make for strange bedfellows, but the sandmen don't care about our human disputes. We're all obstacles to them. No matter if we are Brighters or Vesians, the aliens will engulf us both."

"Let's return to work. Our design is almost finished. Let's try and bring it closer to completion."

They both left the lounge compartment and returned to the familiar workshop compartment.

After more than a month of work, they had made incredible strides in their custom mech project.

In truth, customizing an existing mech design for a single mech pilot did not require that much time. Not only did they start with an existing mech platform instead of starting from nothing, the Desolate Soldier design was remarkably simple and easy to manipulate.

The reason why they took so long was that they decided to take their time. They spent more time trying to find more ways to collaborate together than actually improving their design.

Many methods failed, but the ones that succeeded formed the start of their combined toolbox.

Their main goal was to go beyond complementing each other's strengths. They had already discovered early on that their design philosophies didn't overlap too much.

Gloriana excelled in the technical domain.

Ves possessed a competent grasp in the spiritual domain.

Neither domains collided with each other, which meant that they both covered each other's shortcomings with their strengths.

That was not enough.

Synergy did not arise from fitting two pieces of a puzzle together. Synergy arose when one puzzle piece transformed another puzzle piece into something greater.

The whole had to be greater than the sum of its parts.

The simplest way to explain it was that Ves and Gloriana worked hard to achieve a result that was greater than $1 + 1 = 2$.

For their collaboration to be truly worthwhile, they needed to reach $1 + 1 = 3!$

In other words, Ves and Gloriana sought to generate enough value to match the contributions of three unrelated mech designers!

Gloriana never doubted that they could achieve this seemingly-impossible result. She held this belief from the very start back at Centerpoint.

The only problem was that achieving synergy was easier said than done. Both had to put in a lot of effort and ingenuity to discover ways to integrate and combine their design philosophies to achieve something greater than they could ever achieve by themselves.

Both of them knew that two different mech designers could accomplish several synergies at once. As long as both of their design philosophies were versatile enough, there were many different ways to combine their strengths.

Ves and Gloriana spent much of the last month in trying to discover as many potential synergies as possible.

They hadn't spent their time in vain.

After much experimentation and fumbling, they discovered three potential ways to strengthen their mechs further.

They both documented their results in their minds, unwilling to commit their findings on a digital storage medium vulnerable to unauthorized access attempts.

Currently, they discovered and labeled three promising methods to achieve synergy:

Synergy #1: mutual strengthening

Synergy #2: spiritual customization

Synergy #3: conceptual perfection

Of the three, the first one was the most straightforward.

As the name implied, mutual strengthening basically meant that both of them reinforced each other's specialties.

Ves strengthened Gloriana's specialty by empowering her applications with spiritual force.

Gloriana strengthened Ves by making the technical design more receptive to spirituality.

The latter sounded very vague to Ves, but ever since Gloriana became exposed to the concept of spiritual components, she managed to find a way to amplify a design's spiritual foundation using purely technical means.

"The tangible and intangible has to match." She explained to a confused-looking Ves. "A god is only powerful if their physical and divine forms are aligned. The greater the alignment between the two, the greater the power! All of it makes sense!"

Though Ves failed to understand her theory, the results were very evident. Somehow, Gloriana truly managed to strengthen his spiritual applications by manipulating their designs in an abstruse manner!

The ultimate result was the emergence of mutual strengthening. Ves amplified Gloriana's specialty, while Gloriana amplified Ves' specialty.

Though it sounded as if they could mutually strengthen each other in an infinite virtuous cycle, that was impossible. At their current shallow level of synergy, it was already good enough to complete a single cycle.

"That's enough." Gloriana nodded with satisfaction. "It's good as long as the fundamentals of this synergy are sound."

In other words, they should be happy they managed to achieve $1 + 1 = 3$ instead of $1 + 1 = 1.5$ or worse. Trying to achieve greater synergy such as $1 + 1 = 4$ was something reserved for the future.

Compared to mutual strengthening, the other two synergies were much more complicated. However, they both possessed the potential to elevate their collaborative mech designs to much greater heights!

Chapter 1540 Miracles

Of the three forms of synergy they discovered, mutual strengthening was the easiest and most straightforward one. It was also the most limited one as strengthening each other's design philosophies did not promise any drastic changes.

Mutual strengthening merely improved the existing attributes of a mech design. It did not promise anything exciting.

"It's still very valuable, though." Ves concluded after some time. "Mutual strengthening allows our design philosophies to approach the efficacy of Senior-level design philosophies while we are still Journeyman."

Gloriana smiled and leaned against his side as they observed their mostly-completed mech design. "We've just scratched the surface with mutual strengthening. Theoretically, we ought to be able to feed back our enhancements into each other."

"Nothing comes for free. There has to be a limit on account of waste. Achieving a perfect conservation of energy is impossible."

"Oh, we'll see about that." Her eyes glinted.

Compared to mutual strengthening, Ves found the other two synergies they discovered to be more promising.

Spiritual customization combined their specialties in a more complex fashion. The simplest way to describe it was that it attempted to extend Gloriana's specialty into the spiritual domain.

If they only scratched the surface with regards to mutual strengthening, then they achieved even less when it came to spiritual customization!

The idea sounded promising, but both Ves and Gloriana were in the dark on how to accomplish spiritual fit.

Ves possessed some of the means, while Gloriana possessed some of the expertise.

Both of them needed to solve two separate challenges.

On one hand, Ves had to find a way to allow Gloriana to work her specialty on something spiritual rather than technical.

As for Gloriana, instead of tinkering with a design schematic, she had to find some way to tinker with the spiritual foundation or the design spirit of a mech.

Both of them developed some potential ideas to solve these challenges, but exploring them went beyond the scope of their current design project.

"It doesn't make sense to work so hard to customize the physical aspects of a mech design while only paying lip service to customizing its divine aspects." Gloriana spoke with determination. "My design philosophy can only express itself to the fullest when I find some way to bridge into your domain and perfect the divine nature of our custom mech designs."

Ves wasn't entirely comfortable with that. A part of him felt that Gloriana attempted to encroach on his territory. What she wanted to do, he could do as well. The only difference was that she possessed a potentially greater intuitive grasp in improving the spiritual aspects of his mech designs.

Perhaps he might be able to do the same, but only after spending a disproportionate amount of time and effort to match Gloriana's proficiency.

From an efficiency standpoint, it was much better to let Gloriana find a way to apply something she was good at rather than force Ves to become good at something that was not in his nature.

Both of them possessed different inclinations.

Gloriana is still obsessed over perfection. Even if Ves did his best to steer her towards a more flexible and conditional approach, she would always chase after the perfect solution.

Ves was much more inclined to life, which was inherently chaotic and unpredictable. He didn't quibble over whether an outcome could be better, because sometimes life sprung both pleasant and unpleasant surprises at him. Who was he to judge?

To him, introducing life into his mech designs entailed accepting that the outcome was never under his control. Sometimes, the variables of life yielded a result that fulfilled his goals, but sometimes the outcome proved detrimental.

The more chaotic and uncontrollable his design spirits, the fewer guarantees he possessed that the eventual outcome aligned with his intentions.

Ves already grappled with this problem with regards to his Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier designs.

Now that his mechs were being sold and produced by the thousands, a lot of mech pilots came into touch with their common design spirit.

One of the hidden reasons why Ves insisted on delivering a lot of Desolate Soldiers to the Bentheim Planetary Guard was because he wanted them to serve as role models for the Solemn Guardian.

While the mech pilots of the Planetary Guard weren't perfect, they were better than the alternative.

As Ves frequently checked up on the Solemn Guardian, he performed frequent pruning to rid the rapidly-growing spiritual product from undesirable elements.

Though Ves thought he was doing a decent job at it, he couldn't help but think he was raising an exuberant and temperamental child.

As much as a parent would like to raise a child correctly, the latter always behaved naughtily at times.

The best he could do was keep his child from going too far. As for how the Solemn Guardian actually turned out, Ves didn't have the power to do more.

"I always feel as if there is more to the Solemn Guardian than I think..."

The incessant exposure to the beliefs of the Ylvainans must have left something behind. In addition, the bulk of the Solemn Guardian's spiritual makeup originally came from Nyxie which resided in the Ancient Sarcophagus.

Ves vaguely sensed that the remnant alien elements in the Solemn Guardian went active, exerting an unknown influence on its development.

So far, none of the status reports he received mentioned anything alarming, but Ves remained cautious. As soon as word came out that the X-Factor of his latest mechs started to turn mech pilots into alien worshippers or something, he wouldn't hesitate to drag the Solemn Guardian from his designs.

"Well, it's probably fine."

Compared to keeping an eye on the Solemn Guardian, Ves much rather preferred to focus on achieving greater synergies.

Though Ves and Gloriana both invested a lot of effort in trying to make their second form of synergy work, they discovered that they were way in over their heads at the moment. This was why they shelved their intentions to explore this option for later.

They hadn't spent much time on exploring the third form of synergy they discovered either. The notion of conceptual perception arose from another conversation about spirituality and godhood.

"I really can't get used to how you think so little of gods." Ves remarked one day. "In most cultures and religions, gods are all-powerful beings who deserve to be worshipped."

Gloriana frowned and paused her work. "Do you think a god pilot deserves worship?"

"..No, but god pilots aren't gods in the eyes of a secularist like me. They're very powerful, but still human as you and me. It's just that their might is so incredible that people can't help but treat them as gods."

"We're not as different as you think, Ves. God pilots are gods, but gods aren't inherently superior. They are a different phase of existence. God pilots just happen to be connected with the phase of life and phase of godhood at the same time. The same applies to Star Designers."

"What about us? As Journeymen, we are more than human, but less than gods."

"We're in a transition phase. Our phase of life has remained constant, but through our efforts, we are slowly approaching the phase of godhood."

"What does it mean to approach this phase?" Ves puzzlingly asked.

"We Hexers haven't adopted a different definition of gods. We still regard them as awesome beings of power. We merely think that phase of godhood is within the reach of everyone. For example, I believe that we are bringing our customers closer to this phase by empowering them with our divine mechs."

"What is a god even capable of that makes them worthy of notice?"

"Gods are defined by the miracles they can perform. Isn't that obvious, Ves? God pilots achieve miracles through their god mechs. Star designers achieve miracles by developing amazing designs. As Journeymen, we have taken our first steps towards accomplishing miracles. As long as we advance to Master, we will finally be able to perform the miracles that we have been chasing after since we formed our design philosophies."

"That.. is a very strange perspective. I've never equated mech designers to gods. It sounds too.. superstitious."

"Star Designers with awesome reality-defying design abilities exist, right?" Gloriana asked seriously.

"Yes.."

"Then what do you think exists between a Novice Mech Designer and a Star Designer?"

"Demigods?"

"Exactly!" His girlfriend vigorously nodded. "While we don't have the full powers of a god, we are still able to perform weak and minor miracles that bend or massage the rules governing reality. The entire basis of advancing to Master Mech Designer rests on the premise that you'll be able to achieve the impossible when you reach this rank, right?"

"That's what the MTA says."

"Well, just think about it. Isn't achieving the impossible the same as performing miracles? They share the exact same meaning! It's just packaged in a different way!"

Ves had to admit that Gloriana had a compelling argument. It was just that he refused to accept this comparison. He disliked the word miracle and its religious connotations.

"Is there a point in your comparison?"

"I've noticed something about you, Ves. You're too much of a secularist to open your mind to the possibilities that you can do. You have an amazing design philosophy, but you have a tendency to approach it with the mindset of a scientist or an engineer."

Ves crossed his arms against his chest. "What's wrong with that? We're mech designers, not priests!"

"That you look down on the latter is exactly the problem I have with you right now." Gloriana poked his chest with her finger. "Have you ever thought that miracles can only be achieved when you have faith?"

"..."

"Look, I'm not saying that you should embrace hexism." She said, adopting a conciliatory tone. "Just think of what our design philosophies can do right now, and what they can accomplish in the future. As future gods, we are continually mastering our abilities to affect reality by performing ever-greater miracles. What I want you to do is to go beyond the boundaries of established theory and take a leap of faith for once."

"I don't believe in leap of faiths. I'm much more likely to leap into an abyss if I follow your suggestion."

"Who says an abyss is a bad place? Perhaps you might be able to find what you seek."
She grinned.

Ves began to get confused. He always got confused when they talked about these kinds of topics.

"Why are we even talking about this?"

A hungry grin appeared on her face. "I've got an idea. A very interesting idea. I always kept it in my mind, but I always got stuck because I haven't found a basis to implement my ideas. Even miracles need a basis in reality to work."

"What's this miracle that you have in mind, then?"

"I think there is more to the divine nature of our mechs than you think. For all it is capable of, you aren't using it to your full potential. Divinity is the stuff that makes miracles possible, but all you're doing is shaping it into a few modest concepts to the proto-gods and divine nature of your mechs!"

"If a concept doesn't match the mech design, it won't be of any help."

"That doesn't mean we should be timid in playing around with the possibilities! Look, what if we attempt to perform a miracle that makes our mech designs more perfect? I call it conceptual perfection. By applying our powers as developing gods in this fashion, we can turn something that is not true into something closer to our desired truth. An imperfect mech is perfect because we say it is so. Therefore, the mech we've designed is perfect. The end."

Ves looked floored. "You're basically suggesting that we lie to reality."

"Why shouldn't it work? Aren't we on our way to become gods that can perform miracles? If you think about what other Master Mech Designers can do, conceptual perfection doesn't sound so bad. If we keep lying to reality until reality accepts a lie, doesn't that mean our lie has become a truth?"

His head started aching from the twisted logic of his girlfriend.

He always thought he was a bigger liar than Gloriana. It turned out that he was sorely mistaken!