

Mech 1641

Chapter 1641 The Protective Piece

While Ves considered himself to be an artful mech designer, Gloriana was no slouch in this department either.

The Hexer clients she catered to in the past always liked to make their mechs more grand and imposing. The Hexer mech culture also featured a light degree of gender segregation in many cases.

Male mech pilots predominantly piloted masculine-looking mechs while female mech pilots preferred more feminine-looking mechs.

This was not a hard rule, though. The more liberal parts of the Hegemony did not adhere too much to this custom. In parts where hexism was more predominant, it became a lot more evident.

So Gloriana possessed a fair amount of experience in designing mechs that purposefully leaned towards a masculine and feminine aesthetic.

She just never added a codpiece to her mechs before. In the Hexadric Hegemony, designing such a ridiculously chauvinistic ornament would have instantly ruined her reputation!

Even now, she was well aware that her involvement in the Adonis Colossus project might lead to unwelcome repercussions if she returned to her own society.

She didn't care, though. Collaborating with Ves on a custom mech design was a dream come true for her. Regardless of how much criticism she might be subjected to, she would never give up the opportunity to become more intimate with her boyfriend's design philosophy!

After spending an entire hour, she finished her answer to Vincent's request.

The 'codpiece' that adorned the draft design of the Adonis Colossus project looked nothing like the ancient versions that adorned the suits of armor.

Instead, Gloriana successfully managed to design a modern rendition of a codpiece that looked tasteful and anything but obscene.

"The main reason why the codpieces in the articles look so awful is because they stick out from the pelvis at a perpendicular angle." Gloriana explained.

Ves nodded in agreement. "It's as if the wearers of the codpiece are prepared to satisfy their lust instead of fighting a war."

"Codpieces like that are designed to suggest virility. The problem is that their angle, size and shape make them too attention-grabbing. Anyone who sees them for the first time will immediately ignore the rest of the armor and fixate on the codpiece. I don't think Vincent wants that. A codpiece that is too exaggerated will turn him into an object of ridicule, which is the opposite of what he wants to achieve."

"Ah. I get it. The first purpose of the mech is to raise his profile. He wants to turn himself into an object of admiration that everyone looks up to. The Adonis Colossus can only do that if it looks impressive and manly but not to the point of turning it into a parody!"

"The problem we're facing is that the first purpose clashes with the second purpose, which is to affirm his masculinity and boost his mentality. An inadequate codpiece won't give him the satisfaction he needs to feel validated."

"So the codpiece has to be large, but also shaped in a way that won't look obscene." Ves described. "At the very least, it should look kid-friendly enough to avoid indignation from parents."

"Yep. That's why I shaped the codpiece in this style. Its dimensions are quite sizable, but because it's pointed downwards like an arrow, it can still be mistaken for something else. It leans more towards emphasizing the martial prowess of a man rather than his virility in bed."

The tasteful codpiece that Gloriana finally came up with looked like if a man placed his palm against his stomach and slid it downwards.

The subtle bulge that curved out from the pelvis attracted a minor amount of attention to the codpiece without suggesting that the Adonis Colossus was ready to jump on a feminine-shaped mech!

Instead, the codpiece looked like it was purely there to protect the vulnerable equipment of the mech. By giving the illusion that it was functional, it shouldn't attract too much condemnation.

"Now, we should see what Vincent has to say."

When the two mech designers showed off the rendition to Vincent, the man fell silent.

He studied the Adonis Colossus through every angle. He zoomed in and zoomed out as if he was trying to see if the codpiece was still noticeable at a distance.

The effort Vincent put into evaluating the codpiece was disturbing!

Eventually, he completed his judgement. "It's not what I expected."

"Are you.. satisfied?" Ves cautiously asked.

"I don't know. It looks different from what I imagined. A part of me thinks it looks better. Another part of me feels the codpiece should be bigger."

"I personally designed the codpiece." Gloriana stated without shame.

Due to her identity, Vincent was reluctant to voice his doubts and objections.

If Ves had designed the codpiece, he would have been much more ready to argue about its underwhelming aesthetics.

However, now that Gloriana took sole responsibility for the codpiece, how could Vincent argue about the size of the package in front of a woman of exceedingly high status?

Vincent glanced briefly at the media crew and recorder bot floating at the side. He wanted to chronicle the most exciting parts of his life. Giving his fans a look into the design process of his Adonis Colossus was part of his plan to build up hype around himself.

He would not look good if he quibbled over the codpiece to Gloriana!

Therefore, after a perfunctory talk, Vincent reluctantly accepted the outcome.

"I have to admit it looks classier than I thought. If you can make it just a teensy bit larger, I'll be a lot more comfortable with piloting this mech."

Gloriana curtly nodded. "We shall take your feedback under consideration. Let me remind you that the Adonis Colossus you see before you is merely a draft. It serves the same purpose as concept art. The mech will most likely undergo substantial alterations before we finalize its design. We will keep you in the loop."

"Alright. Make sure to get it done quickly. I need it in two months!"

Once Vincent left with his crew, Ves sighed in relief.

"Vincent doesn't respect me as much as you." Ves sardonically remarked. "It was the right decision to put you in charge of this aspect."

Now that their guests had left, Gloriana relaxed her stern demeanor and sank into his arms as if she was a dog looking for affection.

"Hihi! I know how to handle boys like Vincent. I've met plenty of people of his type at Centerpoint."

"I'm very impressed."

After snuggling for a while, they went back to work.

Now that they completed the preliminary steps for the Adonis Colossus and Deliverer projects, they moved on to designing the mechs at full speed.

Both of them had become a lot more proficient in working together. The five Tovars who assisted them also finished their integration in the LMC's design team.

Productivity soared and the design team achieved considerably more results than before!

During this time, Ves and Gloriana both devoted the bulk of their focus on different mech designs.

Whenever they worked on the Deliverer project, Ves clearly took the lead. His passion and his commitment in this project had reached a peak.

He really wanted the Deliverer mech to make the impact he envisioned!

"The Deliverer design will doubtlessly be met with doubt and derision from the public." Ves remarked as he tweaked the gauss rifle design that served as the main armament. "I don't care. As long as everything goes as planned, the Ylvainans will show that it's possible to win the Sand War!"

The restricted footage and reports painted a grim picture. The sandman assaults continued to assail the border systems without any interruption!

While the defenders were more than capable of repelling lots of sandman fleets, the constant influx of intruders were starting to push the defenders to their limits!

More and more minor star systems succumbed as the limited garrison forces failed to keep up with the grueling frequency of battles!

As more and more minor star systems fell into the hands of the sandmen, the major star systems came under increasing pressure as they became more and more isolated!

With the sandmen entering the fortified star systems from different directions, the reserves that ordinarily relieved the main force had to be put to use in repelling the flanking sandman fleets!

Casualties mounted as the defensive forces had no choice but to fight several back-to-back battles with hardly any rest in between!

Starfighter pilots died by droves. Mech pilots started to make mistakes as fatigue dulled their performance. Entire debris fields filled with dead sand and valuable wreckage floated away untouched as there weren't enough assets in place to salvage the valuables.

The Bright Republic continued to spend money like water, causing this month's inflation to exceed 27 percent!

Even if the government stopped publishing direct war reports to the public, many civilians figured out that the rate of inflation was a decent indicator of how well their home state fared.

If the government was so desperate to print more money, then the Bright Republic was evidently in a worse state than before!

The bad news did not solely linger in the Bright Republic. Worrying signs also emanated from its neighbors.

The Vesians, who were compelled to defend an elongated front, had already suffered several major defeats!

While the increasing influx of Desolate Soldiers and Proudful Soldiers managed to bolster the Vesian defense forces, they arrived awfully late!

As for the Ylvainans, their morale and fighting spirit remained high with the enthusiastic adoption of the Holy Soldiers.

However, the Ylvaine Protectorate's lack of wartime experience started to tell. The Protectors of the Faith were too rigid and bound by their rules to adapt their mech doctrine and fighting methods.

The Protectorate's war-related infrastructure was not robust enough and couldn't handle a massive increase in the production of supplies and machines.

Its civilian industry took many more months than necessary to transition to a wartime footing.

All of these factors weakened the Ylvaine Protectorate's depth. This meant that as long as the sandmen broke through the front, the Ylvainans would not be strong enough to stem the tide!

"What are you worried about, Ves?" Gloriana asked when she saw that he paused in his work.

"I'm worried whether the third line of defense can hold. The second line of defense crumbled quickly. It's already admirable that the Bright Republic and the other states in the vicinity have held out so long."

"You're worried because you believe your Deliverer design can turn the tide, right?"

He smiled at her. Her remark hit straight at his heavy heart!

"You know me too well. Perhaps it's arrogant for me to say so, but I truly believe the Deliverer design can save the beleaguered states! While my Deliverers are not very useful against the monolith or other massive configuration, it will at least offer a lot of relief against the increasingly-more prevalent swarm configuration!"

For some reason, the stalling of the sandmen at the third line of defense had caused the sandmen to accelerate their adaptation. There were more and more signs that the sandman admirals actively sought each other out and exchanged their best practices.

"I believe in you, Ves. I'm sure you'll be able to make the skeptics shut up once your Deliverers single-handedly save the lives of trillions of people at risk of being engulfed by the sandmen! I can't think of anything more noble than what you are attempting to do. Even if the Deliverer falls short of your expectations, it's still worthwhile to make the attempt."

He sighed. "I'm really lucky to have an understanding girlfriend like you. It means a lot that you believe in my work."

"That's what I'm for." She grinned and pecked his cheek. "I hope you extend the same courtesy to me. Don't slack off when we're working on the Adonis Colossus project!"

"I'm doing the best I can."

"You haven't even prepared its proto-god yet!"

"That's because I haven't made up my mind so far! I don't know whether I should reuse an existing design spirit or create a new one!"

"Don't be lazy! If your existing proto-gods aren't good enough, then come up with something new! Don't let your opinion against our client affect your professionalism! The Adonis Colossus deserves better!"

As much as Ves wanted to disagree with Gloriana, he knew she was right.

Chapter 1642 Sydney Superior System

While Ves and Gloriana vigorously worked to design their next two mechs, the situation at the front became a lot more desperate.

The Sydney Superior System had long served as a local bulwark for the Mech Corps.

In case hostilities ever broke out against the Coman Federation, the star system would have been a prime strategic location to block any Comen assaults!

Sadly, the Coman Federation no longer existed. Instead, a more terrible opponent emerged in their place!

Ever since the Sand War came to the Bright Republic, the Sydney Superior System endured continued incursions.

Due to its rich mineral resources, bright sun and other factors, both the Bright Republic and the sandmen prized this star system.

Having endured hundreds of attacks within the span of a few months, both sides bled heavily.

The Starfighter Corps continually supplied new starfighters and starfighter pilots to Sydney Superior, only for them to get crushed within five to ten battles.

The Mech Corps, already stretched thin due to the necessity of defending the entire front, had no more mech pilots to send. The best the military could do was to keep shipping supplies and replacement mechs.

As for the sandmen, they continued to dispatch more and more sandmen as if they would never run out! The sandman admirals arriving at Sydney Superior no longer stuck with the most primitive configuration.

Those that continued to adopt the basic configuration had all succumbed to the humans by now. The only sandman admirals that remained were those who had been taught by a more intelligent sandman leader or learned their lessons the hard way.

The defenders of Sydney Superior could have coped against the basic configuration. Even if the sandmen tried to overwhelm the defenders with basic sandman fleets, their incredibly poor effectiveness in battle was simply too easy to exploit!

However, the good times didn't last. Now that the sandman admirals had all evolved, they became much harder to deal with. The monolith configuration and the swarm configuration both became a terror for the defenders.

As waves of swarms and monoliths continued to pressure the defensive forces from all sides, the attrition mounted to a dangerous degree!

Starfighters fell too rapidly as the first generation starfighters were simply too fragile to last against the advanced configurations of sandman fleets!

The nascent Starfighter Corps that hadn't existed for more than a year became increasingly hard-pressed to replenish the losses along the entire front!

The Sydney Superior System was not the only star system in crisis. Many other strategic locations cried out for reinforcements.

As a result, the amount of starfighters and accompanying pilots sent to reinforce Sydney Superior only replaced half of the losses suffered by its defenders!

"We can't keep up with this rate of attrition!"

"What is headquarters doing?! We're drowning in sandmen!"

"How many fleets do the sandmen have left? It's like their numbers are endless!"

The tide of sandmen sweeping into the Sydney Superior System finally overwhelmed the defensive forces.

Every defensive fleet had to pull back and contract their defensive perimeters time and time again! From fighting off the invading sandmen in the outer system, the ships, mechs and starfighters had to retreated continuously until they were forced to hold their ground in orbit of the only inhabited planet!

With Sydney Superior VI pressing against their backs, mech regiments and starfighter regiments could retreat no further without exposing more than 400 million Brighters to the sandmen!

Sydney Superior VI used to be home to more than half a billion citizens. Since the start of the Sand War, the Bright Republic managed to evacuate over a 100 million people.

Yet it was not enough! With transportation capacity in very short supply, it was impossible to relocate so many people at once!

Right now, several huge swarms and monoliths commanded by over forty separate sandman admirals approached Sydney Superior VI from different directions!

The defensive platforms that the government continually erected in orbit of Sydney Superior VI began to unleash their might for the first time!

A continuous barrage of tens of thousands of ballistic shells and kinetic projectiles slammed against the sandmen looking to sweep over the surface of the planet!

Like a stone cast in a lake, the ripples of fire pushed against the approaching sandmen, causing them to suffer considerable losses!

A concentrated salvo of fire from over thirty defensive platforms all slammed against a single monolith! Huge chunks of sand and other grainy material splashed from the closest monolith, ruining its perfect spherical shape!

On the other side of the planet, the defensive platforms sprayed their fire in a tight zone that encompassed a buzzing swarm that consisted of tens of thousands of sandman drones!

The torrent of firepower rapidly diminished the swarm until only a third was left!

Due to the decreased concentration of drones, the defensive platforms no longer wasted their firepower against this specific swarm. Their commanding officer ordered them to shift their firepower against another swarm!

If the sandman fleets only tried to approach the planet, then the defensive platforms would have been able to weather the storm.

Unfortunately, the sandmen weren't vegetables!

Though ordinarily inclined to hoard their energy, the experienced sandman admirals held nothing back in their attempts to break through the opposition!

As long as the sandmen managed to drop to the surface, the planet was within their grasp!

For this reason, the invading swarms and monoliths unleashed their firepower upon the defensive platforms without mercy!

Unlike mechs and starfighters, the defensive platforms were basically structures floating in space.

Their mobility was limited as they were never meant to move aside from making adjustments to their orbits.

In exchange, they featured far more armor and firepower, causing them to be able to endure a significant amount of damage while dishing out just as much hurt!

However, their severe lack of mobility also turned them into sitting ducks!

The swarms and monoliths unleashed entire swathes of light lasers. While their firepower wasn't very coordinated, the sheer volume of lasers impacting the defensive platforms heated their surfaces until they glowed like red suns!

The heat and energy impacting the defensive platforms rapidly degraded the layers of armor protecting the internals and crew manning the guns.

In desperation, the defensive platforms rotated along their axis, trying to present as much untouched armor against the sandmen as possible to preserve their battle effectiveness!

"Too much! It's too much!"

"Hold back the sandmen as much as possible! Fight until your machines don't last!"

The mechs and starfighters that had repelled the incoming sandmen for several weeks tried to reinforce the defensive platforms as best as possible!

Scarred starfighters and shabby mechs reinforced the defensive platforms as best as they could manage.

These mobile units used to lead the defense of Sydney Superior. However, after fighting off constant battles, the mech and starfighter regiments were only a shadow of their former selves.

The losses suffered by the Starfighter Corps were horrendous. Only twenty percent of their peak strength in the star system was left!

In addition, many of the starfighters were fighting with limited ammunition and energy reserves. They had to slow down their rate of fire and limit their deployments because they couldn't last as long as before!

Due to all of the sandman fleets that had flooded Sydney Superior, it had become too dangerous to supply the defenders from the outside!

"FIGHT! FIGHT WITH ALL YOUR HEART! FIGHT UNTIL YOU DON'T HAVE NOTHING ELSE LEFT!"

Defensive platforms exploded or disintegrated into chunks with each second that passed. Starfighters turned into lifeless shells as several lasers burned through their systems. Dawnbreakers endured an unimaginable amount of fire before finally succumbing due to the rapid wear and tear their damaged frames endured!

Throughout all of the fighting, the Stripes of Humanity these machines used to show off with pride now turned into a final gesture of the determination of the defenders!

A starfighter wing that fought above the equator of Sydney Superior VI came under focused fire by a remnant of a swarm.

The small and vulnerable spacecraft exploded one by one as the swarm cleverly boxed the juking starfighters with an array of lasers!

Just as the sixth starfighter was on the verge of collapsing, a shining volley of projectiles slammed into twenty sandman drones at once, taking them out without fail!

"It's the Glittering Comet!"

"We've been saved!"

"Thank you, Venerable Larkinson!"

The Glittering Comet, the custom mech of Ghanso Larkinson, flew past the starfighters without transmitting anything in return.

He needed to put out too many fires!

Tears streaked from Ghanso's face as he knew that the starfighter pilots wouldn't survive for long. Even if he gave them a reprieve, more sandmen would take the place of those he took out a moment ago!

The Glittering Comet continually fired its rifle as Ghanso resonated with the weapon. Shining white projectiles slammed against numerous sandman drones without missing a single shot!

Only an expert pilot could accomplish perfect accuracy against the fast-moving sandman drones!

If Ghanso could whittle down the swarms over the course of a month, then he would have been able to clean them all up without suffering any losses!

Unfortunately, time was not on the Bright Republic's side!

The continuous attrition and retreat had battered the mobile forces to such an extent that Ghanso's presence was indispensable!

There was so much despair among the mech and starfighter pilots that the glows of the Desolate Soldiers weren't enough to keep them in the fight.

The men and women risking their lives to repel the sandmen needed the inspiration that only expert pilots could provide!

Several more expert pilots like Ghanso flew around and emboldened the hearts of every combatant risking it all to defend Sydney Superior VI!

Unfortunately, nothing they could do would save the planet and its inhabitants from the sandmen!

The best they could hope for was to evacuate the remaining children to preserve the legacy of the people of Sydney Superior VI!

Several shabby cargo haulers converted into improvised rescue ships formed into a convoy protected by a large proportion of surviving mechs and starfighters.

"Advance! Break through! We still have a chance of saving some lives!"

The final rescue fleet advanced and attempted to bulldoze its way through numerous swarms, lattices, monoliths, starfishes and other weird shapes!

The nearest defensive platforms in the vicinity all lent their firepower towards this breakout attempt.

For a moment, the sandmen in this section of battle were being pushed back!

However, the sandmen did not continue to batter against the defensive platforms in an attempt to make landfall on Sydney Superior VI as everyone thought!

For some reason, the sandmen in the vicinity stopped trying to advance towards the planet and all started to attack the breakout fleet!

"NO!"

Ghanso Larkinson immediately flew his mech towards the breakout fleet. The rescue ships carried hundreds of thousands of lives!

His Glittering Comet shone even brighter as his rifle slammed against a monolith, single handedly causing it to shudder and lose integrity!

It wasn't enough!

The rescue ships were too sluggish. Featuring very little armor to speak of, the sandmen easily managed to pour their fire past the scattered mechs and starfighters.

One vessel's massive cargo bay broke apart, causing an uncountable amount of human bodies to float out into space!

Even if the vacsuits worn by the children preserved their lives for a moment, the cold emptiness of space would eventually claim their lives!

There weren't any ships left to rescue the lost!

"NOOOO!" Ghanso screamed as his Glittering Comet emptied out its ammunition stores!

His intervention wasn't enough to change the outcome. The exhausted mechs and starfighters hadn't been in a good shape to begin with, and could never take out the sandmen fast enough to save the rescue ships!

Dozens of ships foundered, exploded or simply fell silent as the lasers raked over their entire hulls!

The breakout attempt had failed!

Sydney Superior VI had fallen for good!

Chapter 1643 Insubordination

The fall of Sydney Superior struck every Brighter's heart. A catastrophe of this scale could not be hidden from anyone!

Now that a critical star system had fallen into the hands of the sandmen, the star systems in the interior of the Bright Republic became exposed! The sandmen managed to crack open a hole in the wall, causing numerous battle-hardened fleets to attack the star systems that had never faced as much pressure as before!

The overstretched Starfighter Corps tried its best to supplement the nearby garrisons, but they simply weren't fast enough!

At one star system in the vicinity of Sydney Superior, a small force of Desolate Soldiers fought desperately against an approaching swarm of sandman drones!

Due to severe logistical constraints, the starfighter groups that should have reinforced the Trivian System had not arrived as expected!

Only less than a hundred starfighters remained to cover the two-hundred or so mechs that consisted of the main force!

Even so, the mech and starfighter pilots did not shirk their duty.

The Novabreakers piloted by the 4th Agon Chevaliers of the 7th Bentheim division courageously fought in the vanguard.

Ordinarily, the starfighters should have flown in front to attract enemy laser fire, but there were simply too few left! The defenders of Trivian simply couldn't afford to lose more starfighters and deprive themselves of additional guns.

Every machine mattered, no matter if it was an expensive premium mech or an ultracheap starfighter!

Propping up the morale of the stressed and exhausted pilots, the gold-coated Desolate Soldiers tried their best to cover each and every part of the formation with their encouraging glows.

The duty embodied by these iconic machines barely managed to keep everyone in line.

This was especially remarkable when most of the mechs belonged to mercenary corps or other private outfits!

With the Stripes of Humanity trailing raggedly through space, the undisciplined formation of mechs and starfighters tried their best to defeat the swarm.

The problem was that few pilots saw the point of doing so! Why should they fight over a rural star system whose tiny population at the only terraformed planet had already been evacuated?

As the swarm of sandman drones continued to advance regardless of the opposition they faced, a volley of fast-firing laser beams randomly struck one of the Desolate Soldiers!

"Harvey!" Melkor Larkinson shouted. "Eject! Your machine is a goner!"

"It's too late, commander!" The voice of a middle-aged mech pilot sounded over the communication channel. "The damned sandmen managed to penetrate the armor and damage the cockpit of my mech!"

Melkor cursed and requested assistance from a nearby mercenary corps he managed to befriend.

"Just pull out the cockpit and bring it away if you can! Maybe it can still fly away under its own force!"

"We'll do our best, but we can't divert too much attention to your man! Sorry."

Over the course of the Sand War, many outfits assigned to defend the less important star systems learned how to cooperate with each other. The only way to survive longer than a month was to ensure that they managed to cultivate allies among the disparate outfits they fought alongside!

Melkor had learned many lessons during his deployment at the front.

This was already the fourth star system that he and his detachment of Avatars had been assigned to defend. The other three star systems fell when the sandmen proved too much to stop!

"Hold formation!" The commanding officer yelled over the comm. "We have to hold as long as possible to buy time for our reinforcements to arrive! We can't give up Trivian too soon!"

The battle against the swarm continued apace as Melkor shot his Sandbreaker rifle at a steady cadence.

His marksmanship, which he used to be proud of, proved to be highly inadequate against the agile sandman drones.

At this distance, he merely managed to hit thirty percent of his shots, which was respectable compared to mercenaries but inadequate compared to elites.

He regretted spending too much time on administration and not enough time on polishing his own piloting skills. Ever since he finished his Larkinson training and graduated from the mech academy, he reduced his training intensity to shape the Avatars into an elite mech force.

"Goddammit." He cursed as his visor blocked his frustrated eyes. "I'm wasting too many rounds."

He tried his best to cover for the disabled Avatar mech piloted by Harvey, one of his older subordinates.

Harvey was like a rock within the Avatars! Aside from the Larkinsons, his veterancy status was vital in stabilizing the ranks of his unit. Melkor couldn't afford to lose him at this juncture! The Avatars already suffered several tragic losses.

Unfortunately, the pair of mercenary mechs that flew to the rescue to the drifting Avatar mech came under fire themselves!

When their own lives were under threat, the mercenaries completely forgot about their earlier orders and did their best to merge back into formation so that they would not attract as much attention from the sandmen!

Melkor cursed again! He couldn't fault the mercenary pilots for seeking safety in numbers.

The problem was that Harvey's mech, having lost all propulsion, was drifting further and further away from rescue!

He desperately asked for help from other mercenary corps but received a unanimous denial.

Every other outfit had their hands full protecting their own comrades!

Melkor deeply wanted to dispatch his own Avatars to rescue Harvey, but his latest superior already gave strict instructions that their Desolate Soldiers should maintain position in the formation.

Even if the outfits already brought enough Desolate Soldiers to cover the entire formation several times over, the commander from the Agon Chevaliers wanted the glows to overlap as optimally as possible to keep everyone spirited!

As the window of opportunity was running out, Melkor had to decide whether he should disobey the orders of his superior on the faint chance of saving one of his precious Avatars.

In the end, before he came to a decision, one of his subordinates already left formation and flew to the drifting mech!

"Silent William! What are you doing?!"

No answer came from the comm. William never spoke. However, that was no excuse for remaining silent!

A mech's communication systems facilitated various means of verbal and non-verbal communication methods. A simple mental command was enough to compose a short message or transmit a predetermined code!

"Silent William, return to your post!" Melkor admonished. "You're disobeying orders!"

Even as Melkor rebuked the disobedient mech pilot, he secretly hoped his words fell on deaf ears.

He really wanted Harvey to get rescued, and so far only Silent William had the guts to leave formation. How could Melkor not be pleased?

The only disappointment was that Silent William wasn't really his own man. Ves made it clear that this odd mech pilot was only here to reforge himself in battle.

Nonetheless, Silent William had gained every Avatar's acceptance for his bravery and silent support.

Melkor looked on with hope even as he pretended to rebuke Silent William.

The foreign mech pilot, who showed no signs of acknowledging the instructions from Melkor and the commander of the Agon Chevaliers, finally reached Harvey's mech before it had drifted too far away.

Even though numerous sandmen took potshots at both Desolate Soldiers, somehow Silent William managed to cope with the damage. His Desolate Soldier spun around at various angles in order to spread out the laser fire over the entire frame.

Once his mech reached the disabled mech, the former first stopped the latter's spin.

Then, Silent William's mech temporarily put aside its Sandbreaker rifle in order to sink its hands into the damaged rear of Harvey's mech.

Since time was short, Silent William couldn't afford to be delicate. The hands of his own mech started to incur damage as he put them under a considerable amount of stress.

The hands of a melee mech weren't designed to exert so much force!

Fortunately, the Desolate Soldiers weren't very tough to begin with, and its rear armor happened to be the thinnest. It did not take much effort to pry off the flight system and armor panels that should have blasted away in order to make room for the cockpit's ejection.

While Melkor still tried his best to provide cover fire for the rescue attempt, he switched half his internal vision to a feed of Silent William's mech.

He watched carefully and studied the damaged exterior of the cockpit.

"Silent William! The damage to Harvey's cockpit is too severe! You'll have to pry it out of the torso of the mech and carry it back to the Greenfeather. Can you do that?!"

Though Silent William did not transmit any acknowledgement, his mech already started to pry the cockpit out, managing to succeed as not all of the systems of the cockpit had failed.

"Success! Bring him back!"

The Desolate Soldier piloted by the guest among the Avatars flew back with certainty while cradling the cockpit like a piece of furniture.

Though several sandman drones fired at the vulnerable rear and flight system of the retreating mech, Melkor and the Avatars instantly targeted the offenders and sprayed them with Sandbreaker rounds.

Eventually, Silent William's mech managed to make it back to the light carrier of the Avatars!

Melkor silently smiled while quickly turning back to the battle.

By now, the swarm had been reduced by a third. The threat they posed against the defenders had lightened considerably, which meant that there was less chance that other Avatars would suffer the same fate.

"My Avatars are too precious to die here." He muttered to himself. "I have to make sure everyone gets back alive!"

He knew that this went against the intentions of Ves, but right now he simply couldn't care about his instructions.

His Avatars were his comrades. They fought side by side and supported each other without fail.

Even Silent William, who wasn't technically an Avatar, did not hesitate to put himself at risk to rescue Harvey's life!

Fortunately for Melkor, the battle ended without any suspense. With the military's Novabreakers soaking up the bulk of the damage at the front, the rest of the mechs and starfighters endured considerably less damage.

The modest sandman swarm hadn't managed to pierce past the thick, compressed armor of the latest military mech model that spread among the mech regiments!

As the mechs flew back to their carriers once they made sure to kill every lingering sandman drone, Melkor briefly glanced at one of the Novabreakers returning to its mothership.

The entire surface of the mech looked scorched and deformed as a hundred or so light laser beams had tried to fell the machine.

Though it appeared that the Novabreaker suffered moderate internal damage, clearly that wasn't enough to cripple the tough and durable mech.

For a moment, Melkor felt jealous. Why weren't the Avatars allowed to pilot a Dawnbreaker or better mech? Why did the Avatars lose several comrades over the course of their deployment at the front due to the lack of defenses of the Desolate Soldier model?

"It's because Ves is in charge." He answered his own questions with a sigh. "As long as he calls the shots, he is in control of our lives."

With a heavy heart, Melkor's Desolate Soldier returned to the Greenfeather's hangar bay.

Once he emerged from his mech, he lowered himself to the deck and walked towards a small procession of happy mech pilots.

"Hooray for Silent William!"

"Thank you for saving my butt!" Harvey thanked the silent foreigner. "I owe you one!"

Once Melkor arrived, the Avatars shut up and turned to their commanding officer.

"Silent William." He began. "You disobeyed orders."

William Urbesh met Melkor's shielded gaze without any hesitation or remorse. In fact, he didn't communicate any message at all!

Melkor held out his hand. "For what it's worth, I support you."

Silent William shoved aside Harvey and moved past Melkor without accepting the offered handshake.

The foreigner from a different star sector left the hangar bay, leaving the rest of the Avatars perplexed.

"He's a weirdo."

"At least he's our weirdo."

Though Silent William never socialized with others, none of the Melkor took offense at his antisocial behavior.

That was because his battlefield performance was enough to win the Avatars over!

As Melkor lowered his arm and watched Silent William leave, he frowned for a moment.

"Why is he so strange?"

Chapter 1644 Dealmaker

While the Sand War intensified throughout the third line of defense, not everyone concerned themselves with the suffering taking place.

For some people, the latest developments opened up many opportunities ordinarily inaccessible to them. In particular, the lawless pirates and exiles of the frontier found it incredibly easy to sneak into civilized space amidst the chaos.

Already, plenty of sons and daughters of the frontier managed to blend in with the waves of refugees.

While it was easy for pirates to be mistaken as refugees, it was not as easy to assume a brand new identity, especially one that was more notable than the norm.

A specialist in identity falsification had to intervene in order to form a false identity with as few loopholes as possible.

Calabash happened to be someone who possessed the skill, knowledge and connections required to forge a reasonably foolproof identity.

She calmly stood and waited for her client to arrive at a grassy plain on an empty planet in the Reinald Republic.

Standing behind her was an entire company of mechs. Over half of them wielded swords, while the rest wielded various ranged weapons. The messy collection of mechs consisted of many different models, as if the mech company had been entirely pieced together at random.

However, the mechs exuded a certain kind of strength from the way they positioned themselves and readied themselves for action.

The Swordmaidens had undergone many trials and tribulations since their establishment. The death of their founder devastated them a lot, but the rise of her replacement managed to preserve what the all-female outfit managed to build.

"There is movement up front. Get ready." A voice whispered in Calabast's ear.

Soon enough, an aerial mech company descended from afar while surrounding a shuttle. The procession alerted the Swordmaidens, causing their mechs to grip their weapons tightly.

Calabast barely took any notice, though. She stood in the open without a care in the world.

She was confident in the deal she made.

Once the shuttle landed on the grass a distance away from the Swordmaidens, the hatch slid open, allowing a subdued-dressed middle-aged man to emerge.

Escorted by some armed and armored guards, the man energetically strode forward in a powerful and confident gait.

The man had reason to be confident. Not only were the aerial mechs under his command much more powerful than the mechs of the Swordmaidens, he had plenty of forces at his disposal in space.

Once he arrived in front of the woman he scheduled to meet, the two paused for a moment.

Both of them dressed professionally. While Calabast blended in her business attire as if she was a born manager, the other man seemed very uncomfortable in his plain and unadorned business suit.

"Let us get this over with, Hexer." The man spat.

"As you wish, Fridayman."

"I am no longer a Fridayman!" He hissed with a threatening timbre in his voice.

"You are correct. As of now, you are a Reinaldan, a citizen and a mech designer of a crumbling state."

Calabast waved her hand forward, causing a floating box that hovered behind her to glide over to her client.

The other man took the box and opened it up to reveal a datapad, a secure data chip as well as some hair, blood and tissue samples preserved in transparent containers.

"Is this it? I expected more."

"As long as you follow the instructions I've outlined in the data pad, this is all you need, Skull Architect."

The dreaded pirate designer from the Faris Star Region sneered at Calabast before picking up the data pad.

After that, he shoved the floating box to a subordinate following behind him who took up a multiscanner and began to examine the biological samples.

"Hmm.. so you've arranged the identity of Professor Benedict Cortez for me. He wasn't high on my wish list."

"Your demands are too unrealistic, Skull Architect. Do you really think that we can operate with impunity in civilized space? Even if turmoil has swept the Komodo Star Sector, it is not so easy to lay a hand on a Senior Mech Designer without a trace. We've suffered some losses in the process of hijacking Professor Cortez's evacuation fleet."

The Skull Architect laughed. "Don't try to raise the price. Professor Cortez is one of the easiest targets on my list. What happened to him, by the way?"

"We've cleaned him up. Have no fear of that. Not a single trace of him and associates have survived. You'll have to come up with a way to reintroduce yourself to the public without arousing too much suspicion, though."

"I'll keep that mind."

After performing some inspections, the Skull Architect became satisfied with the arrangements made by Calabast.

While she was confident in her handicraft, she cautioned the Skull Architect to act with discretion.

"Even if you follow all of my steps, your new identity is not completely foolproof. I've only managed to message the records of every relevant record-keeping institution of the Reinald Republic. If the state falls, then no one will be able to verify the records except what the government managed to bring elsewhere or put them up on the galactic net. That does not account for the detailed biometric data the MTA has collected from Professor Cortez."

The Skull Architect crossed his arms. "No one in this star sector can falsify the MTA's records. You wouldn't be dealing with me if you have the capacity to access and alter their database."

"It's best if you stay far away from the MTA while you assume your new identity. I trust that you already know how to conduct yourself to avoid attracting their attention."

"You don't need to lecture me, young woman."

"Now that you have accepted my offering, will you still commit to your end of the deal?"

"Aye. You'll get what you want. I'm not the sort who burns my bridges with someone who is actually clever in a sea of idiots."

The deal that the two had made in recent months was fairly simple.

In exchange for arranging a new identity for the Skull Architect, he promised several concessions.

First, he promised to design and build an expert mech for any expert pilot that Calabast managed to acquire.

She made this demand in case Commander Dise managed to advance to expert pilot. She needed this concession because it was very difficult to obtain an expert mech through regular channels.

After all, expert pilots didn't pop out from nowhere!

Second, the Skull Architect promised to wipe away the debt that Ves owed him. Though the pirate designer found it to be a shame to lose his handle on Ves, it was not an equitable arrangement in the first place.

To the fugitive Senior Mech Designer, it didn't matter too much. Even without the debt, he was still confident he could find a way to associate with Ves Larkinson in some other way, especially now that the promising young Journeyman had risen to prominence.

To Calabast, arranging a nearly foolproof identity to the Skull Architect in exchange for these concessions was more than worth the effort. Not only did she gain a benefit for herself and her partner, she also established a friendly relation with a powerful Senior!

After a brief chat, the Skull Architect and his entourage briskly turned around and boarded the shuttle. Once his procession rose in the air and flew back to space, the meeting had come to an end.

Some time later, Calabast and the Swordmaidens deployed on the surface returned to space as well. When the woman entered the stateroom of her personal ship, Commander Dise already awaited her arrival.

"I'm impressed by how you've handled the Skull Architect. The meeting went smoother than I thought." The leader of the Swordmaidens remarked as she laid on the bed.

"The Skull Architect isn't as fearsome as you think as long as you give him a reason to respect you. His reputation in the frontier is not that relevant anymore now that the sandmen have overrun the old order there. He needs me more than we need him. If not for his potential usefulness to Ves, I wouldn't have bothered to offer my services to him. Obtaining the favor of a genuine Senior might come in handy one day."

"I'm not so sure whether it's wise to play with fire. Mayra once told me that she had to be very careful when she studied under him. He has a habit of blowing up on people."

"I'm pretty certain that some of it is an act." Calabast confidently stated. "While the Skull Architect is anything but a balanced individual, he needed to project strength while he was in the frontier. Now that he has reintegrated into civilized space, he ought to be rational enough to moderate his behavior."

The spy strode forward and sat down on the side of her bed. The two came very close.

"Want to have some fun?" Dise suggested.

"No thanks."

"Why not? We're lovers, right?"

Calabast slapped her supposed girlfriend's rear. "There's no need to keep up the act."

"Who says our relationship is an act?" The commander's eyes twinkled.

"We only agreed to go along this charade to assuage Gloriana's fears, Dise. If you want to earn my attention, then find some way to become an expert pilot."

"How is it so easy for me to make this step?" Dise helplessly shook her head. "Plenty of expert candidates have reached the limits of what they are capable of in this realm without finding any way to get past their bottleneck. My weird bond with the exobeast I've encountered at Aeon Corona VII doesn't help matters either."

"Find a way to resolve this issue. The sooner you advance to expert pilot, the more we can do by borrowing your strength."

Commander Dise rose from the bed and faced Calabast with a concerned expression.

"You're moving very quickly, you know that? Why are you in such a hurry to build up your strength and make so many deals with people?"

"Everything is changing, Dise. The Sand War and the Komodo War have smashed the existing order in the frontier and the Komodo Star Sector. The invasion of the Red Ocean is changing all of human space. Many gaps have opened up that we can take advantage of. The premise is that we have what it takes to secure our gains."

"You've been investing an awful lot in paving the way for that brat from the Bright Republic. I don't see why you even bother with him. Isn't he just a Journeyman?"

Calabast smirked. "He's not just a regular Journeyman. Trust me on this. We have to take very good care of him as he's our ticket to the top."

"Couldn't you have just built a relationship with the Skull Architect instead? After all, he's already a seasoned Senior."

"I don't have control over the Skull Architect. Didn't you just say that associating him is like playing with fire? I know my boundaries with him. It's not a good idea to get too close to him, especially when he has shown he is willing to cross a lot of lines to get what he wants."

"Is Ves any better?"

"You'll see why it's worth it to partner up with him sooner than later." Calabast confidently stated.

She never felt as confident in fulfilling her future ambitions before she encountered Ves. Though she knew that his actual identity was anything but simple, she dared to insert herself in his life because the opportunity was too precious.

This star sector was too small for someone of her ambition. Even if she was born a Hexer, and a member of the powerful Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty at that, she never held any pride over her origin.

A Hexer like Calabast might enjoy a lot of status in the Komodo Star Sector, but that was like a rat lording it over a cage.

Her true goal lay elsewhere!

Chapter 1645 Clouds Over Cloudy Curtain

The tragedy that took place at the Sydney Superior System stunned everyone in the Bright Republic!

After the sandmen managed to break through the defenses of Sydney Superior VI, the planet became flooded with animated sand!

While the citizens on the ground tried to fend off the sandmen with their newly-erected defenses, their firepower was simply too insufficient to resist the tides of sand that swept over entire cities!

Over 400 million people died in the following week! Without reinforcements from elsewhere, the stranded citizens were unable to prevent the sandmen from engulfing each and every populated settlement on the surface of the once-great planet!

The fall of Sydney Superior had far-reaching effects. No matter how much the Bright Republic attempted to plug the gap, it did not change the fact that the sandmen gained a much more solid route to the interior of the Bright Republic, including Bentheim!

The mood in the Bentheim System had grown much more severe as the entire port system shifted into an even greater state of war readiness. Martial law had come into effect and even more production facilities ceased producing consumer goods in favor of producing critical supplies.

Many people who had the ability to leave Bentheim had already done so recently. Hardly anyone thought it was a good idea to settle there when it was highly likely that it would come under heavy assault by the sandmen!

Ketis was not an average visitor.

Unlike most people, she did not fear the threat of the sandmen. Having lived in constant danger in the frontier for most of her life, the danger looming over Bentheim was like a walk in the park for a Swordmaiden.

Besides, if the situation at Bentheim really deteriorated, she was confident that Ves would find a way to pull her out. She wasn't blind to how powerful her latest mentor had become.

His support gave her the capital to face the challenges at Bentheim head-on!

As she emerged from the spaceport at Dorum with a floating luggage coffer hovering behind her, she looked around for her new host.

"Ketis! Over here!"

A woman with a strong military-esque bearing strode forward and embraced Ketis in a tight hug!

"Ooph! You're stronger than I thought!" The newcomer noted with surprise. "Did Ves lie to me or something? You're built like a warrior!"

"I'm just a mech designer." Ketis replied coyly. "Can you bring me to my new home? I'm a bit uncomfortable standing here in public."

"Sure! Follow me! I've already prepared your new digs! You'll love it! As long as you don't mind living among the Blood Claws, I'm sure we'll be getting along well!"

"That's great."

"By the way, are you sure you want to stick with us? We're about to be deployed in space in order to meet our obligations to defend this star system from the planet. There's going to be a lot of fighting in the future."

"This isn't the first time I've participated in a war, Raella. I've learned a lot from Ves. One of the reasons he sent me here was to gain more practical experience with working with mechs. I need this to push my comprehension of mechs to the next level."

"I see. I'll take care of you as much as I can. I owe it to Ves to see you through this war. By the way, how is he doing back on Cloudy Curtain?"

While Raella Larkinson welcomed Ketis with open arms at Bentheim, a heavy shadow cast over Cloudy Curtain.

Since Cloudy Curtain was right next door to Bentheim, there was a small but very possible chance that some of the sandman fleets might wander into the rustic star system!

The cloudy weather depressed the locals even more as they tried their best to resume their lives.

Fortunately, the locals did not have any reasons to panic. Their home planet was already home to two powerful forces. Along with Ves and his organizations, the Cloud Whalers weren't weak either despite having lost a lot of mechs and men in their failed attempt to wrestle away some turf on Bentheim.

The recent settlement of billions of refugees and the building spree that followed from that also raised Cloudy Curtain's importance. Various other powers hired a decent number of mercenaries to protect their investment.

The Mech Corps also stationed some forces in the star system to coordinate the defense effort.

Cloudy Curtain was anything but defenseless!

Commander Magdalena Larkinson of the Living Sentinels greeted Ves as he arrived at a training facility. A lot of Sentinels along with a couple of Avatars were exercising their bodies or training their skills.

While it wasn't entirely necessary for mech pilots to train their bodies, it undeniably helped for various reasons. Subjecting mech pilots to simulated combat and live practice sessions all the time would eventually lead to disjointment and other detrimental outcomes.

"Are the Living Sentinels ready to defend what we've built here?" Ves asked.

"As I've already mentioned, sir, just because my Sentinels aren't eager to deploy to the front doesn't mean they'll run when the war has reached their homes. I've surveyed each and every Sentinel in my employ and already filtered out those who are unwilling to do their part when they are truly needed."

"How many people have you fired?"

"Not as much as you think. Many of the Sentinels have already embraced their new lives here. Don't forget that many Larkinsons are a part of the Sentinels. The prosperity you've provided to the family is a key reason why they are determined to protect its source!"

Ves smiled. "I'm gratified to hear that. How are the Avatars who have stayed behind fared in Commander Melkor's absence?"

"They're doing well. Melkor has mostly left behind the younger Avatars and the recent recruits. While we haven't been able to facilitate their training as much as we want, they're all highly motivated to prepare themselves for the tough battles ahead."

Both of them directed their attention to a small sparring ring where a couple of young Avatars in training outfits jumped at each other under the watchful eyes of older Avatars.

Ves expected more from the Avatars. They knew that, so they readily embraced the their higher-intensity training regime!

"It's almost about time for Melkor and the detachment of Avatars and Sentinels to rotate back from the front." He remarked. "Do you think the second detachment of Avatars and Sentinels are ready to confront the sandmen?"

"We'll be fighting the sandmen regardless of whether we are deployed to the front or remain at home here. No one here is exempt from fighting, sir."

The Sentinel Commander had a point.

As Ves and Commander Magdalena discussed the security arrangements, they strode forward until they reached the sparring ring where the Avatars demonstrated their martial prowess.

Ves sensed a lot of determination and fighting spirit from the Avatars. Each of them heard of the arduous circumstances at the front. Several Avatars had already lost their lives in the noble fight against the sandmen and plenty more would lay down their lives in the future.

Despite the risks, none of the Avatars showed any signs of shirking their responsibilities.

As soon as Ves made himself known, the Avatars paused and saluted their boss!

"Resume your training, Avatars."

Though none of the Avatars could dismiss his presence, they did their best to get back to their own activities.

Ves swept the entire crowd and spotted plenty of new faces. Evidently, the Avatars welcomed a considerable amount of new recruits.

Fortunately, the cadre who had been with the Avatars for years maintained control over the rest.

After reassuring himself that the Avatars were firmly in his grip, he approached a specific Avatar resting at the side.

The young man immediately stood up. "Mr. Larkinson!"

"Joshua King. How are you doing? Are the Avatars of Myth to your liking?"

"I love it here! Piloting your mechs all day has always been my dream!"

"That's good to hear." Ves smiled, though inwardly he felt a little disturbed by Joshua's excessive enthusiasm. "I recall that you wanted to pilot a custom mech, right?"

Joshua nodded. "I'm familiar with all of your mech designs. I've even piloted all of the models the Avatars and Sentinels have on hand. They all have their own unique strengths. I became a fan of your glows before the LMC started calling it that. In my heart, I've always longed to pilot a mech that possesses a glow that belongs to me. That's why I've joined the Avatars without any hesitation!"

"That's remarkably honest of you." Ves blinked. He patted Joshua's shoulder. "Keep up the good work. As long as you perform well in the Sand War, your future with the Avatars will doubtlessly be bright. I'm more than willing to design a custom mech for you if you have the strength to make it worthwhile for me to do so. I don't design custom mechs without a reason."

"I'll definitely prove myself worthy, sir!"

"Haha! You're good, kid."

He sensed the strong and vibrant spiritual potential within Joshua. While it was still in an undeveloped state, it could bloom at any moment if he received enough stimulation.

With how the Sand War was intensifying, Ves was very confident that Joshua would unearth his potential. As one of the few mech pilots with spiritual potential in his crew, Ves depended on this young Avatar to shoulder greater responsibilities in the future.

After checking up with some other promising Avatars, Ves parted ways with Commander Magdalena and left the training facility.

He tilted his head upwards and beheld the clouds covering the entire planet. "The weather will grow worse in the future."

According to the information he obtained about the war situation, the Bright Republic's situation had deteriorated a lot with the fall of Sydney Superior.

While the military planners always expected the border systems to succumb, they hadn't anticipated that the sandmen would have evolved so quickly.

Fortunately, it wasn't all bad news. The Starfighter Corps recently announced the release of the second generation of starfighters. Tougher and more resilient than before, the starfighters were designed to last much longer against the deadly shower of lasers the sandmen deployed increasingly more against their opposition.

The Sandbreaker rifle which has fared well against the aliens had also been adopted at a very wide scale. The extra firepower and other optimizations eased the disparity in numbers somewhat.

When Ves returned to his office, Gavin walked up and updated him on the latest developments.

"Remember the charity you founded? It's doing better than expected. I don't know, but Director Clinton Larkinson managed to hire some excellent doctors and specialists from the refugees. The Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans has already begun to treat hundreds of patients at a time!"

Ves grimaced when he heard that. "That's way too fast. What is Clinton thinking?"

"Your Foundation has even attracted some positive media attention. The press think you are being generous on account of your prior service."

"Whatever." Ves waved his hand in dismissal. "As long as Clinton doesn't bite off more than he can chew, he can do what he wants as long as it is within his budget. Is there anything else going on that I should know?"

"Well, the Vesia Kingdom and the Reinald Republic are both faring increasingly poorly against the sandmen. We only had to deal with the collapse of Sydney Superior, while the Vesians and Reinaldians are both trying to plug multiple gaps in their defensive lines."

"What do you think about their chances?"

"The Vesians are strong." Gavin immediately replied. "I don't think they showed their full strength yet. We know they are capable of more since we've fought them so much in the past. It's the Reinaldians that is really concerning. They haven't been battle-hardened at all, and much of their internal situation has become a mess from all of the leaders and business magnates that have abandoned their responsibilities and fled."

"Are you saying.."

"I don't see much hope that the Reinald Republic will last. Everyone believes it's only a matter of time before this state will succumb. Once that happens, the Vesia Kingdom will have to fight on two fronts. If the Vesians can't handle the pressure..."

"The Bright Republic will doubtlessly be next." Ves finished the sentence.

Both of them looked grim at this possibility.

Chapter 1646 Combining Domains

The fall of the Reinald Republic accelerated the fall of the Vesia Kingdom.

The fall of the Vesia Kingdom hastened the end of the Bright Republic.

For better or worse, the Bright Republic needed these foreign states to be strong. Strong enough to resist the sandmen and strong enough to protect the flanks of their neighboring states.

Ves felt a new urgency in his work. He was certain that his Deliverer design would live up to its promise and make it easier to resist the sandmen.

The sooner he finished its design, the sooner they could start sniping down sandman admirals!

He shook his head. "Am I being delusional for thinking that I can single-handedly save the Bright Republic and the other states under attack?"

It felt a bit unreal that he had grown to this point as a mech designer. As long as he could realize the Deliverer according to his vision, the mech would definitely be able to match the impact his Soldier product line managed to make!

Despite the pressure piling up on his shoulders, Ves felt more passionate and determined than ever to realize the Deliverer design. He pretty much treated it as a passion project due to its limited commercial appeal and restrictive piloting demands.

It wasn't enough for the Deliverer to be piloted by a random Ylvainan mech pilot. The mech's powerful gauss rifle was difficult to handle in untrained hands. Only a highly-trained specialist in ranged mechs would be able to lay down accurate fire in the direction its design spirit pointed out.

After all, how could a Deliverer ever hit a sandman admiral if its mech pilot possessed shaky aim?

Time began to pass as Ves immersed himself in his work.

Together with Gloriana and his design team, the Deliverer and Adonis Colossus projects progressed briskly.

Despite their lack of manpower, the sheer ability displayed by Ves and Gloriana prevented many problems. Their mutual understanding of each other's design style had deepened as well, causing the friction between them to be substantially reduced.

While they worked together, Ves and Gloriana made sure to continue to work on their synergy.

Right now, they experimented with all three types of synergy they managed to identify.

While they hadn't been able to make much progress at all in improving their synergy, each design session paved the way for a future breakthrough.

What fascinated Gloriana the most was her attempt to apply Conceptual Perfection on the Adonis Colossus design.

"I think a custom mech like the Adonis Colossus is the perfect testing platform for Conceptual Perfection." She stated to Ves. "Just think about it. It's not only a custom mech, but also one with a generous budget by third-class mech standards. It should be well within our means to design the perfect vessel for Vincent Ricklin from the resources we have on hand."

Ves looked skeptical. "While I don't necessarily disagree, our client is less than ideal. As a mech pilot, his skillset is too mediocre and spread out. How can he bring out the potential of any mech with his lackluster piloting ability?"

"I thought we already talked about this. We'll just have to make the Adonis Colossus easy to start with and leave a lot of room for growth. Trust me, Ves. The value of a custom mech, especially one that fits a mech pilot perfectly, is incalculable to them. I

have changed the lives of plenty of clients who used to muddle along before I designed a custom mech for them. I'm sure you understand what I'm talking about."

It was similar to someone purchasing a luxurious new gadget. Because they invested so much money on it, they unconsciously felt compelled to get their money's worth.

However, there was still a difference between wanting something and being able to achieve it. Vincent's inconsistent piloting ability heavily constrained their design choices for the Adonis Colossus design.

"If only we had a better mech pilot as a client." Ves grumbled resentfully.

They went back to discussion on how to apply Conceptual Perfection on the Adonis Colossus design.

"I think it's worth a try to pray for a miracle with this mech." She asserted. "What we're doing is pretty creating a god from scratch. How can a god be worthy of their name if their existences aren't miraculous?"

This was the lying to reality part that Ves had never really gotten a handle on. The entire concept sounded too fantastical and devoid from his existing understanding on how reality worked.

Yet just because he didn't know if it worked did not necessarily mean it was impossible. Ves already lectured the Tovars about keeping an open mind, so how could he not practice what he preached?

He was willing to go along with Gloriana's obsession over Conceptual Perfection, since it didn't appear it would do any harm.

"How will we apply its principles, though?" Ves frowned. "If it's merely engaging in wishful thinking, then that's little different from what we are already doing. Conceptual Perfection has to be more deliberate than that to achieve genuine synergy between our design philosophies."

"I was thinking about applying it in a more limited scope to begin with. Even I don't feel confident in our ability to make our Adonis Colossus perfect just because we wish it so. I think it's best to start perfecting a narrow aspect of the mech in order to achieve a real gain."

Ves paused and turned to his girlfriend with some astonishment. "Are you serious? I thought you were never satisfied with anything except the best!"

"Silly Ves." She patted his head as if he was a child. "I know my limits, especially since I started working with you. The road to perfection can't be traversed with a single step. I realized that it's better to focus on making smaller gains."

"That.. is remarkably insightful of you. How are you planning to put your idea to use?"

"By selecting a single conceptual trait and trying to make it as perfect or real as possible, of course! By starting with a small miracle, we can see whether this method of synergy is viable. Whether it works or not will be clear as long as we can sense a difference in the design."

"What aspect do you want to perfect?"

"Think about what the Adonis Colossus is all about. What is the single most important trait to Vincent?"

"Masculinity." Ves instantly answered. "The mech is all about showing off Vincent's qualifications as a man."

"Exactly! What I'm thinking about is a way to elevate Masculinity from an ordinary divine nature into an extraordinary feature that is worthy of a miracle!"

Ves fell silent for a moment as he considered Gloriana's proposal.

Focusing on enhancing the masculinity aspect sounded kind of overboard. He had already formed a plan to add a raw, masculine charm to his mech through creating a suitable spiritual product to act as its design spirit.

However, that was something produced from his own power. The point of lying to reality was to combine their respective specialties to enhance a mech beyond conventional means.

To put it in simpler terms, Conceptual Perfection revolved around combining life and perfection to produce something real and fantastic.

Though it sounded grand and ground-breaking, in truth it was far from simple to combine their strengths in such a transcendent fashion.

It was a highly-advanced act of creation that completely encompassed the essence of him and his girlfriend.

He scratched his head as he thought about how to approach this challenge.

"The problem is that we haven't established a proven technique to achieve this outcome. We are two different mech designs with two different outlooks on mechs."

Gloriana grinned and held his hand. "You don't have to do all the hard work yourself, Ves. I've already thought about these problems and came up with some theories."

"Let's hear it, then."

"As Journeyman Mech Designers, we are essentially humans transitioning to a state of godhood, do you agree?"

They talked about this before, but Ves never took it so seriously.

"I'm not entirely sure I agree, but let's go with that. When do you think someone is a qualified god?"

"Becoming a Master should be sufficient. At that point, a mech designer has managed to realize their design philosophy. Some Hexers believe that every Master is a living god!"

Ves shrugged. "Okay..?"

"Anyway, if you adjust your mindset and acknowledge the truth, you should embrace your domain."

"Domain..?"

"Your divine domain. It's life, right?"

Ves nodded. That was hardly a secret to someone who knew him too well. "I'm not sure if this word accurately describes my design philosophy."

"It's good enough. My own divine domain is perfection, obviously. Ordinarily, the two aren't related to each other. However, it's ridiculous to think that gods can't combine their powers. There ought to be a way!"

"This.. Gloriana.."

The woman rose up and faced Ves with burning passion in her eyes! "I've only realized it recently, but perfection in itself is too empty and colorless to chase after! If I want to design the perfect vessel, then I need to accentuate my domain with another domain! And what better than to borrow your domain of life!"

What was she talking about? Ves grew confused. Were they still talking about designing mechs?

"What does this have to do with the Adonis Colossus, Gloriana?"

She grabbed his shoulders and pressed her face right in front of his! "Don't you see! THIS IS THE KEY TO GREATER SYNERGY! WE MUST SHED OUR FLAWED PERCEPTION OF OURSELVES AS HUMANS AND EMBRACE OUR TRANSITIONAL STATE AS GODS IN THE MAKING! DON'T THEY CALL EXPERT PILOTS DEMIGODS?! JOURNEYMEN LIKE US DESERVE TO BE REGARDED IN THE SAME LIGHT!"

Ves grabbed her arms and desperately tried to put some distance in between them. "Let's not make any hasty claims."

"No! This isn't the time for caution, Ves! This new theory of mine is certainly true! I can feel it! We should test it out right away!"

After haranguing Ves like a stubborn badger, Gloriana eventually managed to persuade Ves to try out her new method on the Adonis Colossus.

"I'll spare you from adopting the same approach to the Deliverer." She said. "We can design it normally and treat it as a control sample. Once we complete the two projects, we can compare the two and see whether my new method has any merit!"

"I don't think that comparison will be useful, Gloriana. The design spirit for the Deliverer is very mature and highly-developed. Its effects on the design will likely skew any comparisons. Besides, commercial mechs and custom mechs are fundamentally different machines. There is little point in comparing apples to oranges."

"It doesn't matter! Let's just begin right away and see what we've managed to achieve!"

The method that Gloriana outlined to Ves sounded simpler than he thought.

In her perspective, the two of them were transitional gods who already possessed an underdeveloped prototype of the domains they would possess when they became Masters.

Each domain possessed their own remarkable effects, but they weren't exactly impressive by themselves.

In order to achieve greater results, they needed to combine their domains to enhance a certain aspect of a mech.

This was masculinity in the case of the Adonis Colossus.

What Gloriana proposed was to hold the same ideas on masculinity and apply their respective domains to them in an attempt to empower them. As long as they shared the exact same ideas, they could attempt to merge their domains together in order to achieve an extraordinary outcome.

The key to combine two distinctly different domains was to use their common subject as an interface to connect the two! The more their ideas on masculinity aligned with each other, the easier it was to make a successful connection!

However, Ves immediately spotted a problem with this method.

"You're a Hexer, Gloriana. Not only that, you're a completely different person to me. How can we hold the exact same ideas on something when we are not that much alike?"

"What are you talking about?" She frowned.

"Is your perception of masculinity the same as mine?"

"Uh.."

Chapter 1647 Veronica Larkinson

"What is a man to you?"

The question stumped both Ves and Gloriana because they each held different ideas on men and masculinity.

To Ves, a man was supposed to be brave, courageous, responsible and strong enough to protect his family.

These were the ideals his family and his culture instilled in him. While they sounded a bit old-fashioned to some, the state often made use of them to get men to volunteer for military service.

Complete gender equality didn't exist in the Bright Republic. While men and women both enjoyed near-equal treatment these days, for various reasons the military branches enlisted more men than women.

Some things never changed.

In contrast, Gloriana possessed a completely different outlook on men. Her beliefs literally elevated women to a supreme level compared to men!

Ves had been with Gloriana long enough to develop an understanding how a Hexer like her regarded men, or 'boys' in their parlance.

The Hexadric Hegemony was a state explicitly founded by female supremacists who developed all kinds of awful ideas about the other gender.

To Hexers, men had been in charge for too long. Almost everything that humans did wrong in the history of their civilization could all be attributed to men!

The women ignored the backgrounds, personalities, historical norms and every other context surrounding the deplorable behavior of some men and tied all of their evils to one common refrain.

Their gender.

To someone like Ves, this was a ridiculous and flawed use of logic.

In a proper scientific study, researchers needed to come up with arguments to argue that a cause-and-effect relationship existed between two variables.

"This mass murderer from one country is a man. This tyrant who led his country to disaster is also a man. Hey look there, this inventor of a horrible weapon that went on to kill a lot of people is also a man! Do you know what this means? Men are evil!"

An argument as spurious as this only suggested correlation at best. There were plenty of women who behaved just as worse, but did any Hexer even acknowledge their existence?

To a Hexer, logic and scientific rigor mattered less than confirming their own biases.

Because they were predisposed against men, their research and cultural evolution all started with assumptions that cast them in a bad light. The biases and prejudices of the Hexer researchers all ensured that any academic paper they published completely affirmed their warped beliefs.

Naturally, the Hexers completely ignored or discredited the contradictory studies from other researchers outside the Hegemony.

In their eyes, their conclusions were pure and honest while the conclusions of others were tainted by the chauvinistic values held by the ignorant foreign researchers!

Only the Hexers had managed to liberate themselves from the shackles of toxic masculinity! In their eyes, almost all of human space was still firmly in the grip of the nefarious men who kept the rest of humanity under their heel!

Even if Gloriana came to know the different outlook on men and women in the Bright Republic, she was still inescapably a Hexer.

To her, every man was actually an immature and irresponsible boy. Some just hid their naughty traits better than others.

Gloriana even expressed some disdain to powerful men such as Senator Tovar and the male leaders of the Big Two!

In the perspective of a Hexers, these men happened to be more capable pigs than the norm, but only came into power due to unfair advantages.

On an even playing field, women would always be able to triumph over men!

Women were smarter, gentler, calmer, more thoughtful and more suitable to be in charge!

As for boys, Hexers did not treat them too poorly. Rather than see them as slaves or redundant reproductive partners that should have gone extinct, Hexers tended to treat boys in the same manner as pets or immature children.

Even grown men were just boys!

It was already bad enough that female Hexers bought this mindset.

The worst thing was that the men that had been born into Hexer society also bought this mindset! While there was a large variety of how men turned out, most of them carried over a profound sense of inferiority and subservience to women!

Gloriana grew up in this strange, matriarchal culture for almost thirty years!

Only recently did she spend some years abroad at Centerpoint and Cloudy Curtain. This was not enough to shake her view on men that had solidified in her mind during her childhood!

"Tell me the truth." Ves faced Gloriana seriously. "Do you have anything good to say about masculinity?"

"Uhm.."

To her credit, Gloriana's time abroad had exposed her to the fact that not every person bought into Hexer beliefs.

Both of them were aware that they possessed vastly different opinions on men and women.

It should have been a huge problem in their love lives. It was a problem so severe that it risked shattering their relationship!

Neither Ves nor Gloriana wanted this outcome to happen, so they just ignored the contradiction and pretended it didn't exist.

As long as the two focused on their similarities rather than their differences, everything was okay. Whenever a confrontation occurred, both of them simply agreed to disagree and drop the topic.

In their beliefs, this was a solution adopted by science-minded people after applying logic and probability analysis.

Arguing about their differences would almost certainly lead to bad outcomes.

However, Ves knew that they couldn't avoid their differences forever. At some point, they had to address the elephant in the room!

If they didn't, the elephant would eventually crush everything!

However, Gloriana cared a lot about their relationship. She valued it so much that she would never think of risking it by forcing a confrontation!

She was very risk-averse in this regard!

Ordinarily, Ves was inclined to avoid detrimental outcomes, but his reckless streak happened to come into play at this moment.

He guessed that as long as they avoided reconciling their views on men, the Adonis Colossus would never be a success!

The central theme of this mech was masculinity!

Vincent Ricklin cared so much about masculinity that his custom mech had to affirming his male qualifications!

Naturally, as the designers who accepted this commission, Ves and Gloriana had to implement a version of masculinity that aligned with Vincent's belief in their work!

While Ves considered the ideal man in his own way based on his father, he was confident that his own views overlapped considerably with Vincent's views.

The problem here was Gloriana. A Hexer was probably the worst mech designer to be put in charge of the Adonis Colossus project!

Seeing that Gloriana wanted to avoid the topic, Ves kept pressing her regardless of the consequences.

"Am I a man or a boy to you?"

"Erm.. both?" She sheepishly answered.

"What do you think about Vincent?"

"He's a boy, obviously."

"What makes him different?"

"His self-esteem relies entirely on his perception of himself as a 'man'. Take that away, and you have nothing. You're different, Ves. Regardless of whether you are a man or a

woman, you are still a fantastic mech designer. I would have fallen in love with you regardless!"

Ves briefly imagined himself as a woman and shuddered.

The reason he shuddered was not because he disliked living as a woman.

Now that Ves thought about it, it would have been better if he was born as Veronica or something.

It made no difference to his mech design career. His upbringing would have been the same as well as the Larkinsons never treated boys and girls differently.

His father's influence on his childhood would have been the same as well. Even if some divergence took place due to growing up as a female, he doubted that Veronica Larkinson would have ended up with a different personality and outlook on life.

If everything that happened to Ves happened to Veronica, then his female alter-ego would have been a much better partner for Gloriana.

Ves was very well aware that Hexers fully accepted pairings between females. With all the advanced reproduction technology available to humanity, some states readily became single-gender societies for various reasons.

Technology that facilitated gender transitions also existed. From growing complete new bodies to transforming an existing body into another gender, all kinds of options existed to turn men into women or something in between!

Naturally, Ves never contemplated the option of turning into Veronica Larkinson. He was content with being born a man and could never imagine himself as a woman!

Falling into a relationship with a Hexer did not change his resolve. Some Hexers believed that men transitioning into women were still boys at heart.

"So you admit you still think of me as a boy, right?"

Gloriana sighed and patted his hand. "It doesn't matter if you're a boy, Ves. There are good boys and bad boys. Vincent is a bad boy. You're a good boy. I like you a lot more for that reason!"

What kind of argument was that? Her words momentarily stumped him! Was that a compliment?

"Tell me honestly, then. What will it take for you to call me a man?"

"I don't know why you keep harping on this. Your worth as a person isn't defined by your gender. Admittedly, most of my fellow Hexers don't agree with me, but I don't care. I love you, Ves."

Now it was his turn to sigh. Ves had a feeling that she was as much of a Hexer as before.

The only thing that changed was that she patched her mindset with a few new details in order to fit him in with her largely dismissive attitude towards boys.

In her eyes, Ves was a boy! He was merely a special boy, a good boy! One that happened to be very compatible with her! All the other boys were bad and deserved to be treated as such!

He repressed the impulse to blow up in her face. While he felt quite resentful at Gloriana's inflexibility, it was not really her fault.

He stretched out his hand and placed it on her shoulder.

"Look. Let's forget about achieving Conceptual Perception and just try and make the Adonis Colossus work."

"How can we do that?"

"I think... it doesn't matter if we have differences in belief. Do you know how resonance is achieved?"

She nodded. "Resonance takes place when the amplitude in a system is magnified when the frequency of vibration is the same or nearly similar to its natural frequency."

"I've worked with resonance in various applications already, Gloriana. One of the lessons I've learned is that 'the same or nearly similar' is the key here. We don't have to hold the exact same opinions to resonate with each other. As long as there is enough common ground, the differences we hold might even result in a richer degree of resonance than if we simply copy each other's views entirely!"

Her eyes lit up as she realized his point. "You're right! I was so hung up about matching domains that I overlooked this point!"

"Let's just try it and see whether it will work out on the Adonis Colossus. If the results are less than ideal, then it's no big deal. We will still be able to deliver a technically-sound product to our client. Trial and error is often a necessity to achieve something difficult."

His solution might not be the one he hoped for, but it was one that successfully brought them together. The contradiction still remained, but they began to see it as an asset if employed correctly.

Gloriana immediately ran with his idea and extrapolated it further. "Maybe we don't have to adopt a single view on masculinity. Maybe it's better to hold different views on it but try to bring them together in a way that fits. As long as we achieve the right fit, the result will be greater than if we stuck to a single view! The key is achieving resonance!"

Chapter 1648 Boy Toy

Whenever Ves and Gloriana worked on the Adonis Colossus project, they no longer avoided discussing their views on men, boys and masculinity.

Neither of them expected to change each other's views.

Ves considered himself a man. Period.

Even if he knew that this assertion essentially fell on deaf ears to Gloriana, he tolerated her views anyway.

It helped that they both shifted the crosshairs away from him and placed it on Vincent instead.

Ves had much less qualms about disparaging Vincent's qualifications as a man than his own.

He cared little about betraying every other male as long as it wasn't him who suffered!

"Boys like Vincent are too self-absorbed to realize that they're no good." Gloriana self-righteously explained. "According to my personality analysis, his sense of self as a man is nothing more than a sop to prop up his fragile ego. His early life and his violent breakup with the Ricklin Family would have broken him if he hadn't turned to masculinity for support."

"You have a good point." Ves nodded in agreement. "From what I've witnessed, Vincent is much less of a man than he thinks. Compared to the male relatives in my family, Vincent is too inferior. He was lucky to become a potentate, but what did he do? He dickered in his training and when he finally grew a little serious about piloting mechs, he defected to the Bentheim Liberation movement!"

As a result of their disregard for Vincent's masculinity, the Adonis Colossus project suddenly went off the rails. Ves and Gloriana completely discarded their original intentions and the intentions of Vincent to pursue a crooked direction!

Instead of trying to make the custom mech personify the perfect masculine ideal, the Adonis Colossus now centered around appeasing someone they both considered to be a manchild!

Since the Adonis Colossus was just a custom mech meant to be paired with only a single person, Ves and Gloriana merely had to narrow the theme of the Adonis Colossus.

Instead of designing a mech that embodied the perfect masculine ideal, the mech now centered around Vincent's masculine ideal.

This crucial difference prevented Ves and Gloriana from pressing each other's views too much. They managed to hold onto their own views and tried to fit them together.

Strangely enough, it worked.

The project proceeded harmoniously as neither Ves nor Gloriana clashed any further. The common element that connected their diverging views together was their penchant for badmouthing Vincent!

Ves mainly concluded that Vincent was all about false bravado. Compared to the heroic Larkinson mech pilots who selflessly served in the Mech Corps in the name of duty, Vincent was much more pathetic.

His battle record was mixed and frankly disappointing. Whenever Vincent was in a battle where his side was ahead, he eagerly behaved domineering.

Whenever his side fell at a disadvantage, he was one of the first to retreat and save his own skin!

"Vincent has little courage to speak of." Ves remarked as he adjusted the shoulder launchers of the Adonis Colossus design. "The strong image he portrays in public is merely an insubstantial image. As long as you apply a sufficient amount of pressure, the image breaks."

As for Gloriana, she adopted the predominant Hexer mindset that men were all immature at heart.

This patronizing attitude towards the opposite gender colored the Hegemony's entire perspective on the male gender. Every Hexer routinely diminished every grown man by treating them as boys who would never grow up, unlike wise and clever women!

No matter how smart, strong or dignified a man became, Gloriana automatically converted each and every one of them into a boy!

Ves wondered if Calabast still looked at men in this light. For a woman as frighteningly competent as her, it was probably natural for her to dismiss most men!

At the very least, Ves felt that Calabast's attitude towards him had always been similar to a mother admonishing a naughty boy!

He gritted his teeth as he recalled his past interactions with the Hexer spy. Ves never had the impression that she treated him as an equal.

Even their supposed 'partnership' was just Calabast imposing herself in his orbit without his consent!

After all, a mother never needed to gain her son's permission to intervene in his life! As long as the boy was too premature to take care of himself, it was the duty of a mother to care in his stead!

That was the essence of Hexer views on the male gender!

If boys were left to fend for themselves, then all kinds of awful outcomes would ensue!

Boys becoming in charge of a state would doubtlessly become tyrants who exploited their subjects and pursued destructive conquests!

Never mind that the Komodo War broke out when the Hexadric Hegemony struck the first blow by commencing Operation K!

While Ves still felt offended in some ways, as long as Gloriana directed her views elsewhere, he could tolerate them. He felt no obligation to defend other men from Hexers as long as it didn't affect his interests!

Traitor of men? Hah! Whether he was Ves or Veronica Larkinson, his gender never played a major role in his self-esteem!

In other words, Ves regarded himself as a mech designer rather than a man!

Sticking to this principle made it a lot easier for him to brush aside Gloriana's views on his gender.

"How would you treat me if I was born as Veronica Larkinson instead of Ves Larkinson?" He curiously asked her one day.

"Huh? Where did that come from?" She looked at him oddly for a moment. "I would love you all the same. Is Veronica the best name you could come up with if you were born a woman?"

Even Gloriana valued him as a mech designer rather than a man or a boy!

Their pride in their profession and their compatible design styles bound them in a way that made every other difference manageable.

The fact that they managed to reconcile some of their differences on the Adonis Colossus project was proof that they could work together.

The only problem that ensued by adopting this changed direction was that the custom mech might not match their client's intentions anymore.

To a professional, this was a severe violation of trust and contract.

Gloriana became increasingly disturbed.

"We have a responsibility as mech designers to deliver the product that satisfies our clients. It's one thing to design a commercial mech that doesn't please many mech pilots. They have the freedom to reject our product and turn their attention elsewhere. This market interaction doesn't exist with private commissions. The client approached us with a set of demands that we have promised to implement in our product. How is it acceptable for us to turn around and deviate from our client's intentions?"

Ves grimaced as she brought up this problem. The issue had been weighing on his mind for a while. The professional part of him agreed with her stance.

The proper course of action to take was to inform Vincent of their problems and try to seek some sort of accommodation.

He predicted that this would go very wrong. Vincent possessed a very strong and specific view on masculinity that clashed with the immaturity and false bravado injected into the Adonis Colossus design!

It was impossible to reconcile these contrasting views!

Since nothing good came from acting professionally, Ves decided that he would rather act like a scoundrel!

He leaned into Gloriana and pressed her close to his body, causing her to blush.

"Look, Gloriana, boys like Vincent don't like being told the truth. He thinks he's a man while he's really a boy pretending very hard to be one. Instead of breaking this illusion, it's better for all of us if we indulge it instead. The ultimate goal of the Adonis Colossus is to make Vincent Ricklin happy and to enhance his performance on the battlefield."

"I don't know, Ves. It sounds a lot like lying and misdirection. Didn't we swear an oath to the MTA to be transparent and honest towards our customers and clients?"

Ves awkwardly chuckled. "I don't believe any successful mech designer managed to abide by those oaths. Sometimes, we need to be more.. adaptable. Isn't that what your design philosophy is all about? This is a case where a different solution from the norm happens to be the more appropriate one. We aren't here to enlighten Vincent Ricklin to the sad truth that he's nothing but a pathetic boy. We are here to craft a mech that meets his needs. Right now, the most convenient way to do that is to reinforce his fantasies."

"Fantasies are lies. Isn't that a bad thing?"

"Lying to reality is bad unless reality conforms to our lies, right?" Ves retorted. "Lies aren't always bad, Gloriana. Lying is a virtue when the outcome is better than the alternative!"

She still looked a little troubled. "I don't know..."

He leaned his head until it pressed against hers. "We're mech designers. Nothing more. It's not our job to psychoanalyze our client and correct his misconceptions. As professionals, we should abide by our competences and leave other matters to the professionals. If we want Vincent to become a better person, then he should seek help from a counselor or a psychologist."

"Should we refer him to one, then?"

"Nah. If Vincent has a problem with himself, he can ask for help on his own accord. Let's just leave him be and build the greatest toy that he can play with! Our work so far is already shaping up to be a remarkable mech!"

He wasn't lying. Now that they found some common ground, the Adonis Colossus had become increasingly more formidable.

Once Gloriana cast aside her doubts, her enthusiasm for the project returned. She worked vigorously to make the Adonis Colossus in the best 'toy' for a boy like Vincent!

Never mind that Vincent was a grown adult and the Adonis Colossus was a fully-functional war machine that could unleash a lot of devastation in the wrong hands!

At their current design capability, the high complexity of the Adonis Colossus was hardly a problem. Not only were they both capable of designing compact and efficient internal architectures, they also had a lot of room to work with, allowing them to be even more unconstrained than usual.

"It's actually to our advantage that Vincent wants us to design such a beefy mech." Ves remarked. "We can expand the mass and volume of the mech to the limits of the medium weight class."

"And due to our budget, this limit is a lot higher than usual!" Gloriana added.

There was no single mass or weight limit that defined whether a machine was a medium mech, a super-medium mech or a heavy mech.

The industry definition instead determined the weight class of a mech by a combination of factors that included both mass and acceleration.

A fairly standard spaceborn mech paired with a lackluster flight system possessed a much lower weight class limit than the same mech paired with a powerful flight system!

This led to the phenomenon where more expensive flight systems considerably raised the weight class limit of mechs!

As long as a mech accelerated fast enough to dodge a certain degree of enemy fire, then that mech was a medium mech!

It didn't matter if the mech was heavier than the Aurora Titan. As long as its flight system was powerful enough to boost its acceleration to a respectable height, then it was no problem to label it as a medium mech!

That hadn't quite happened with the Adonis Colossus. The Aurora Titan was a very hefty mech that moved and accelerated like a snail.

Nonetheless, by pairing the Adonis Colossus with an expensive new generation flight system that offered considerably greater propulsion than last generation models, the mech offered considerably more capacity than they initially expected!

The result was that the Adonis Colossus easily accommodated all of the weapon systems and other modules that ordinarily made every other mech crowded!

"A toy indeed." Ves murmured.

Chapter 1649 Designing for Value

All of the intensive design work on the Adonis Colossus distracted them a bit from the Deliverer.

The latter design project received much less attention as Ves and Gloriana both became engrossed by combining their different views on Vincent's masculinity in their design project.

They also enjoyed the relative freedom of choice they enjoyed by the mech's excellent capacity.

"Most second-class mechs are like this." She lectured to him. "From what I've noticed from my time of working with you, cost, material capacity and tech are far greater constraints in third-class mech designs. While our Adonis Colossus is not a second-class mech, its relatively high budget significantly closes the distance."

Ves recognized her point. "I guess why I'm a bit more reluctant to work on the Deliverer project. Its budget is much more constrained since I plan to make it cost as much as the Blackbeak when I initially released it. Focusing everything on offense and neglecting every other priority has turned it into a very challenging design."

"Second-class mechs are so much more diverse and offer so many more capabilities and systems because they have the room to implement them all. When you can stuff many of the things you want in a second-class mech design, you need to adopt a different approach to design a successful mech."

"Instead of pursuing efficiency, you instead try to amplify their value." Ves recited one of her past lessons.

"Exactly! You can stuff all kinds of systems and modules in a second-class mech, but that doesn't mean the end product is useful. There are many clever mech designers in the Hegemony and other second-class mech markets who mix and match complementary systems until they achieve an outcome that is more than the sum of its parts! Only such mechs are worthy to be sold on the market!"

In a way, there wasn't necessarily a difference between maximizing efficiency and amplifying the value of a mech.

However, the implications of the two approaches lead to different outlooks on how to design a good mech.

Maximizing efficiency emphasized being as sparing as possible. A mech had to fulfill its primary functions with the least amount of waste. Anything that did not contribute this had to be left out as much as possible!

In a third-class mech market, this design approach covered almost every commercial mech. The only exemptions were super-expensive custom mechs and expert mechs. Every other mech below a certain cost had to be good in what it did without carrying any deadweight.

For this reason, the Bright Republic's mech market generally did not go wild with gimmicks. Many mech designers left them out entirely and preferred to strengthen the fundamental aspects of mechs as much as possible!

This contrasted significantly when a mech designer wanted to design a mech for second-class mech markets.

The improved tech and materials on hand as well as the vastly higher budgets at a mech designer's disposal opened up so many new possibilities.

The key to designing a good second-class mech was to avoid getting lost by countless options and form a clear idea on what a mech had to accomplish. Starting with a basic mech type and mech concept, the mech designer's next step was to enhance their initial idea by adding various modules to augment its capabilities.

For example, a second-class light skirmisher could be turned into a more elusive machine by adding modules that boosted its acceleration to a ridiculous degree in short bursts!

Another mech designer might want to turn the light skirmisher into a more rounded mech by adding a small shoulder-mounted retractable gun barrel onto its shoulder. This allowed the mech to handle threats from afar and up close!

"Designing for value is an approach that emphasizes synergy, coordination and coherence." Gloriana explained. "We happen to have a lot of new generation component designs at our fingertips due to your association with the government. We should take full advantage of the broad catalog to see how we can enhance the performance of the Adonis Colossus in a targeted and deliberate manner."

In other words, they should make use of the spare capacity to add a couple of fitting gimmicks to their mech design.

Ves studied their current so far. Right now, they already integrated the shoulder-mounted missile launcher and wrist-mounted nail drivers into the structure of the mech. Neither of the two systems demanded too much accommodation and were pretty much self-contained.

That left plenty of spare capacity, some of which they already apportioned for additional ammunition and energy cells. The powerful flight system that enabled the Adonis Colossus inevitably consumed considerably more energy, though not to the point where it was too inefficient to bother.

As Gloriana warned, the sheer amount of choices available momentarily overwhelmed Ves. "I rarely faced a situation where I have the luxury to add extra modules without paying a heavy price. I'm actually uncomfortable with this situation. My design instincts tell me it's better to use up the extra capacity on strengthening the core function of the mech such as extra armor plating or even more energy and ammunition to increase the deployment time of the mech."

The latter was a very practical choice to Ves. While it sounded boring, it might make a difference as Vincent would be able to last at least twice as long on the battlefield without worrying about his mech running dry.

His girlfriend didn't see it that way, though.

"The battles against the sandmen don't necessarily last very long. Most of them turn out to be short-lasting high-intensity confrontations that result in a lot of casualties. It's more important for the Adonis Colossus to achieve the greatest within thirty minutes than trying to keep up its battle effectiveness while most battles have already ended by this time."

"I get it. The marginal value of adding more energy and ammunition is small past a certain point. Depending on the circumstances, we can achieve greater improvement by devoting the spare capacity toward other modules. However, the question still remains what we should improve."

They both considered this question for a moment. Since Gloriana was a lot more practiced in this approach, she answered first.

"We have to look at the concept of our mech design first. Leaving aside the issue of masculinity, the Adonis Colossus is a well-armored spaceborn medium hybrid mech. Its armaments are predominantly ranged because the Adonis Colossus is primarily meant to be deployed against the sandmen. It features high offense, high defense but low mobility. Our first choice is to determine which of these three areas we ought to improve."

When Ves looked at their mech design, he came up with several possible ideas.

"I've always been unsatisfied with the mobility of our mech. While its flight system is already powerful, it can barely make our mech keep up with a formation. Its sluggish acceleration and awful agility due to all of its mass will not do the mech any favors in high-speed encounters."

"Then how do you propose augmenting its mobility? The flight system we've selected already hits the sweet spot in terms of size, cost and energy consumption. More powerful ones not only take up vastly more room, but also guzzle too much energy. For a mech that is primarily meant to be an inspiration and employed in frontal assaults, there is not much use to improve its mobility any further."

"Maybe so, but perhaps we can mount internal boosters along various points of the frame to add some extra dodging capability to the mech. They don't have to last very long. They just have to push hard and often enough to make the Adonis Colossus capable of dodging in different directions."

Gloriana shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea either. The Adonis Colossus is so massive that it requires a lot of effort to alter its trajectory in space. The boosters will either have to take up too much space or use up far more fuel than normal, thereby shortening their uptime."

He reluctantly agreed with her judgement. That still left them with a lot of choices, though not as much with regards to mobility.

"So in your opinion, it isn't worth it to augment its mobility at all?"

"In this case, yes. That doesn't mean I disagree all of the time. If we were designing a second-class mech, we would have a lot more options at our disposal. There are augments that can temporarily reduce the mass of a mech by half, amplify the propulsion of the flight system at the cost of burning a lot of energy and deployable space warping rails that can be deployed into a channel that significantly accelerates any mech that flies through this path!"

In short, there were too little viable choices available for third-class mech designs.

After ruling out mobility, they turned to the other two areas.

"Considering the role of the Adonis Colossus, it's more useful to augment its defense than offense." Ves scratched his smooth-shaven chin.

Gloriana concurred. "The offensive contribution that an individual can make is extremely negligible when it is fighting alongside hundreds or even thousands of mechs and starfighters. Adding extra weapons or augmenting our mech's existing offensive capabilities by thirty percent or so will not shift the outcome of the battle at all. Besides, with Vincent's mediocre piloting skills, he won't be able to utilize the added deadliness to its full potential anyway."

"So that leaves defense."

"Uh huh. The intention of this commission is not to design the most combat capable mech. It's to design a mech that impresses the public and shift their opinions. Don't forget that the government wants to integrate the former members of the BLM into mainstream society by employing Vincent as a role model. In order for the government to achieve the most out of him, the Adonis Colossus has to protect his life well enough to make him last the entire Sand War."

"Ah! Recently, the Sand War has escalated! The sandmen have grown smarter and deadlier while constantly barraging our defenses with their fleets! Any encounter against the sandmen is a harrowing affair that always results in at least some casualties! Sometimes the casualties amount to over thirty percent against particularly awful opposition!"

In this difficult situation, any mech pilot would be hard-pressed to preserve their lives. Only by piloting a better-armored mech would a mech pilot be able to increase their chances of making it back alive.

While the Adonis Colossus was already a well-armored mech that offered good protection to its mech pilot, Ves would never say no to extra defense.

The only question was whether the options came at a price they were willing to pay.

"It's not that beneficial to add extra armor plating to our mech." Gloriana concluded. "The armor system is quite substantial and it will weigh down our mech far too much if we fill up the extra capacity with armor plating."

"We'll have to find a way to augment our mech's defense without increasing its weight."

"It's too bad that polarization is not a viable option here. We'd have to design a mech as large and massive as the Aurora Titan, and that's not good. The Adonis Colossus has to retain at least some mobility."

They had to resort to another defensive module that did not weigh the mech down that much.

Ves came up with a suggestion. "What about active ECM?"

"It's possible, but not very efficient. However, the effectiveness of active ECM directly corresponds to how easy it is to detect a mech by itself. The Adonis Colossus is a big example of a medium mech and it's too difficult for any ECM system to hide or reduce its signature."

This was why stealth and active ECM systems were mainly utilized in lighter mechs. While those mechs offered less capacity than larger mechs, it was a lot easier to hide their signatures.

Since active ECM was not a very good option here, what other defensive system could they employ to increase Vincent's odds for survival?

Chapter 1650 Empty Hear

"Meow."

"You're so cute, Lucky!" Lanie Larkinson grinned and embraced the cat. "Ves is so lucky to have you. Do you think he'll buy me a mechanical cat like you for my birthday one day?"

"Meow!"

While the Sand War intensified, the Cloud Estate had become host to less Larkinsons than before.

Many Larkinsons, whether retired or in the prime of their years, reenlisted in the Mech Corps or volunteered in some other way.

Even without the family explicitly exhorting them to do something, the Larkinsons embodied duty.

All of the Desolate Soldiers fielded at the Cloud Estate and the Mech Nursery were pretty much redundant for the members of the family. Their heritage and expectations of their fellow relatives was enough to move them into action!

The absence of so many Larkinsons made the Cloud Estate a lot less crowded.

Nonetheless, the liveliness remained largely the same. Plenty of spouses of those serving in the Mech Corps remained behind. While they merely married into the Larkinson Family, they already started to embody some of their virtues.

Old, disabled or tired veterans counted among those who remained behind as well. They had already sacrificed too much and wouldn't be able to help much in the war anyway.

Many of them preferred to pass on their wisdom and experience to the next generation of mech pilots at the Larkinson Basic Mech Academy. Their competence in teaching mech cadets had already won plenty of praise from their pupils.

Naturally, the bulk of the Larkinsons left behind consisted of the youngest generation of Larkinsons.

Many young Larkinson potentates moved to Cloudy Curtain in order to attend the Larkinson Basic Academy. Not only would they be able to receive the same level of focused, individual tutelage from all of the Larkinson veterans at the Cloud Estate, they also received excellent instruction at their family's own mech academy.

The teaching conditions at Cloudy Curtain had become so good that most Larkinson potentates preferred to stay at the Cloud Estate rather than the old Larkinson Compound at Rittersberg!

Even though the capital planet of the Bright Republic was one of the most pleasant places to live on, attending an academy run by experienced Larkinson veterans beat many of the other prestigious mech academies at Rittersberg!

This was why children such as Lanie Larkinson, who recently discovered that she was a potentate, resided at the Cloud Estate.

In her opinion, Cloudy Curtain was a much better planet than Rittersberg!

The Larkinsons and the LMC pretty much dominated Freslin. No one dared to despise the Larkinsons in this local area!

In contrast, Rittersberg hosted many other powerful families and influences. Lanie felt suffocated whenever she visited a city or attended school.

"Meow."

"What's that, Lucky? You want more company?"

"Meow."

The cat thrust a paw at a tree. More specifically, the person sitting empty underneath it. Lanie immediately recognized the woman.

"That's our guest!"

Davia Stark was no stranger to the Larkinsons residing at the Cloud Estate. Ves practically dumped her on their laps without much of an explanation besides telling them that she was a foreign mech pilot who had lost her state to the sandmen.

No one made the initiative to approach Davia at first. However, the fearless Larkinson children eventually grew curious enough to approach the stranger.

Right now, one of Lanie's youngest cousins toddled over to Davia.

Afraid that the obviously traumatized veteran might hurt the young boy, Lanie walked over in order to make sure to protect him if necessary.

Much to her relief, Davia did not react to the young child's presence. She merely looked up for a moment and grimaced.

"You shouldn't be here, kid."

"Why not?"

"I don't want your company."

"You look lonely. Do you want a flower?"

With befuddled eyes, Davia accepted the flower that the boy clearly plucked from a nearby flower garden.

When Lanie reached over to the boy, she watched Davia becoming increasingly more fascinated by the flower.

The boy grinned. "See? My parents told me that presents always make you happy!"

The older woman softened a little. "Thank you. This is the first present I've received in years. You're a good kid."

"Yay!"

"Madame Stark. How are you today?" Lanie respectfully asked.

Though the woman did not appear very notable, she carried the same air as the other veteran Larkinsons. In fact, now that she came close to Davia, she felt as if there was more to the foreign mech pilot than she initially realized.

She grew curious.

Davia's eyes raked over Lanie's academy uniform. "You're a potentate?"

"Yup! It's my dream to pilot a mech one day!"

"That's.. admirable."

"I'm a Larkinson after all! We aren't true Larkinsons unless we serve in some way!"

"That's not a healthy attitude. I've never encountered a group who is so eager to fight and bleed for others than your family."

"We're different!" Lanie proudly exclaimed. "Don't get me wrong, though. I'm not going to enlist in the Mech Corps. I've set my sights on the Avatars of Myth! I want to pilot the best mechs designed by the best mech designer of our family!"

"You..."

"I want to join the Avatars too!" The little boy echoed.

"Wait until you're ten, cousin. Don't set yourself up for disappointment." Lanie lectured him, though she had been secretly guilty of this as well.

Just as expected, the boy stubbornly shook his head and scowled at her. "I'll become a mech pilot for sure!"

As Lanie and the little kid argued with each other, Davia looked on with a hint of bemusement.

The empty void in her mind stirred a little bit as she witnessed the two young kids tussle with each other.

Sights like these happened every day as the rambunctious kids treated the gardens of the Cloud Estate as their own playground.

Her heart couldn't help but warm each day she spent outside. Despite the depressing clouds that covered the skies, the cheer and exuberance from the Larkinsons were infectious.

However, each time she was about to smile, the awful memories of the war reasserted themselves.

The memories of losing her comrades, her commander, her home planet and her entire state burned in her mind as if they were searing brands!

The helplessness she felt at the time despite advancing to expert pilot was something that broke her utterly. If not for a passing evacuation ship that picked her up because they wanted the protection of another mech, she would have thrown herself against the sandmen to join her comrades in the afterlife!

A profound sense of weakness swept over her body, causing her to slump against the trunk of the tree.

She never wanted to experience those harrowing events again. The sandmen were too terrible to face, not because they were strong, but because they were heartless.

Perhaps other aliens might enjoy slaughtering innocent humans, but the sandmen didn't feel the way other sentients did. They were barely sentient at all and people still weren't sure if they felt any emotions.

One thing was clear to Davia. The sandmen did not kill all of those humans at the border states because they liked it. They killed them because they were in the way. Nothing more.

Her resentment against the sandmen had reached a peak because of this. While most humans such as the Hexers and Fridaymen were preoccupied with fighting against their own kind, too few were left to deal with the true threat!

The dormant soldier within her wanted to come alive, but the crushing sense of loss and despair quickly squashed this impulse.

She was too broken to fight anymore!

While his 'rescuer' mistakenly thought that she was an expert pilot, Davia knew better. She had barely been a demigod when she was at her peak, and she lost it all when she saw her state succumb to the sandmen first-hand.

A failure like her didn't deserve to be called a Venerable!

To Davia, another day went by without much change. Her mental scars stifled any attempts to rouse herself to fight her demons and avenge her fallen comrades.

Elsewhere on Cloudy Curtain, Leland met with Gavin at a cafe in downtown Freslin.

Though no one should have realized it, the cafe was fully under the control of Flashlight. It was one of the many properties the spy agency prepared on the planet in order to keep an eye on Ves and the LMC.

"Hey." Gavin nervously greeted as he sat down on the other side of the circular table. "Is it alright to meet like this? You told us we're being tracked."

"It's exactly because Ves' resident security experts are scrutinizing us that we have to meet. Do you really think you survived the recent firing spree because Ves is ignorant of your hidden duties?"

"What?!"

"We've analyzed your employer's behavior extensively. We can conclude with 90 percent certainty that Ves is definitely aware of your associations with our organization!"

"Why didn't Ves fire me, then?! He terminated Mr. Altern's employment without remorse!"

"That's because he likes your company." Leland smiled. "You're not like the other workers, who are just names on a list to him. You're a confidant. He remembers your face. He appreciates your advice."

"And that is reason enough to exempt me from getting the boot?"

"Yup. That's how people work sometimes, Gavin."

"That doesn't make any sense from what I know of Ves. He's ruthless. I'm sure he's willing to stab his own mother in the back to get ahead."

The Flashlight agent chuckled. "People are inherently contradictory, and those who are exceptional are even more so. Mech designers, especially those who have advanced far in their careers, are all abnormal. It comes with the profession. Normal mech designers never have what it takes to get very far. Those who want to become Journeymen must balance between genius and madness."

"That sounds just like Ves."

"This is also why he's so successful. His design philosophy has received much attention from many factions and groups these days. Many of them are rather irritated that Ves indiscriminately fired all of their spies and moles within the LMC."

"They wouldn't have been able to find much, anyway. Everyone knows the true secrets of the company are locked within Ves' mind."

"They know that, but they still hoped that their agents would have picked up some clues."

"So what now, Leland? My cover is blown. My time with Ves has become increasingly more awkward. Lately, he's been consumed by his latest projects. I don't have much work to do now that Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson has taken the helm of the company."

"Oh, just because you're being put aside for a while doesn't mean your role has ended. Ves will travel once more, and hopefully you will be able to accompany him as his dutiful assistant. Tell me, has he told you anything about participating in the invasion of the Red Ocean?"

"Not really, but from what I've observed, he's definitely thinking about it." Gavin answered after a moment. "The Red Ocean is the perfect destination for his grand expedition. I think he's a lot more excited to mix in an entirely new dwarf galaxy rather than touring the settled star sectors of the Milky Way."

"That's what we think as well. The question is whether he has the qualifications to pass through a beyonder gate. Earning the astronomical amount of merits required to exchange a beyonder ticket is beyond most people, including most of the respected Seniors of our state. A Journeyman should be even less capable!"

"He has Gloriana though."

"That's a good point." Leland replied. "While we don't think his chances of obtaining passage are very high, he can't be judged with common sense. In case he somehow manages to accomplish something that is out of reach to most of his colleagues, we need you to be in place to participate in his grand venture. Whether he remembers it or not, Ves is still a Brighter. Do you understand?"

Gavin reluctantly nodded. "I understand. I'm not sure if I'll be with the LMC at the time, but I'll make sure that Ves doesn't forget his roots."