

Mech 1981

Chapter 1981 Forlorn Hope

The blockading of the star system not just prevented the MTA from rapidly reinforcing the Bentheim System.

It also blocked the fleeing outfits from transitioning into FTL!

Fortunately for the cowardly mercenaries, the sandmen weren't interested in hunting them down. The huge number of sandman monoliths instead focused on advancing to the inner system while simultaneously exerting a huge amount of pressure on the MTA task force!

For all of their advanced technology and might, the MTA's Komodo Branch was hardly representative of the Big Two's might!

Underfunded and overlooked within the huge organization, the Komodo Branch had to do more with less.

Their warships were just a bit less fully featured than the warships stationed in the galactic center.

Their multipurpose mechs were a bit less powerful due to the widespread scarcity of high-grade exotics in the galactic rim.

Most of the mech pilots and personnel of the MTA in the Komodo Star Sector also belonged to a lower caliber. Many of the local recruits came from low-quality stock in the eyes of the Pure Humans and other elitist fraternities.

Those transferred to the galactic rim from the more prosperous parts of the galaxy had effectively been exiled from the more important centers of power. They did not represent the best what the Association had to offer!

All of these factors and more effectively resulted in a case where the MTA had been caught flat-footed!

The tech required to blockade FTL travel in a star system was not something that a low-class alien civilization was supposed to possess!

With the sandmen keeping outsiders from entering the Bentheim System, the MTA forces found out to their horror that they had to resist the sandmen mostly by themselves!

Though the mechs and warships had already managed to destroy thousands of sandman monoliths, they expended a considerable amount of energy and ordnance to accomplish these feats.

The problem was that there were thousands of sandman monoliths pressing forward! The huge armada of the sandman monoliths might be somewhat dispersed at the start, but a day after the start of the battle, some of their limits started to become obvious.

Mech pilots were forced to fight intensive battles without any rest. Though their physical bodies were more than capable enough to fight for days on end, their mental fortitude was not able to keep up as well!

Their skill started to slide and their mental acuity had begun to slip. When piloting a powerful but very advanced multipurpose mech, a loss of concentration could easily result in lots of errors!

Right now, the mech pilots were making more mistakes than usual, but with so many sandman seeking to destroy the MTA carriers and warships, there was little choice but to throw them into battle once again!

The warships meanwhile were much more capable of duking it out with the sandmen. These large and resilient vessels were able to resist lots of attacks due to their powerful energy shields and very thick armor. Their firepower also wasn't anything to scoff about as their large caliber weapons fired shells the size of mechs or unleashed beams of energy that contained enough energy to punch through large asteroids!

Yet for all of their formidable offense, defense and mobility, even they possessed certain limits!

The MTA finally had a taste of the attrition warfare that made the sandman race so dreaded by humanity. While the MTA task force could easily defeat the sandman monoliths as long as it concentrated its fire, the fact that there were always sandman monoliths ready to take the place of their fallen brethren turned their momentary victories hollow.

Just like the local forces, the MTA task force found itself forced to retreat and give up a lot of space!

With the MTA occupied with fending off the bulk of the sandman invaders, the ones left to attack the Bright Republic's crown jewel were still numerous enough to overwhelm the increasingly more ragged soldiers left to hold the last lines of the defense!

As the circle of envelopment tightened, the sandmen loomed increasingly closer to the planet where billions of citizens began to lose their hope at a rapid pace!

After her fifteenth sortie, Captain Orfan directed her half-destroyed Novabreaker inside the hangar bay of the Princely Jackal.

Even with the strength of an expert candidate, she found it difficult to stay on top of the battle!

With the fall of numerous mech officers, she was forced to take more and more responsibility until she became the most senior officer in the field!

"Fix my mech!" She yelled after she turned off her mech and hopped out of her cockpit. "My men need me! I'm not done yet!"

"It's not possible, captain!" A chief technician waved a soot-stained hand at the mech she had just brought back. "Just look at the damage of this machine! It's missing an entire arm and huge portions of its internal structure! We need at least a day to restore its battle effectiveness, and that is only if we jury-rig some hasty repairs!"

"Then give me another mech!"

"We don't have any! Just look at the other mechs parked in this hangar and count how many we have left. We lost over 60 percent of our mechs! In fact, the casualty rate is higher if we don't count the orphaned mechs that have been forced to land on our ship after the destruction of the Wolf Mother!"

The Vandals were running out of mechs and mech pilots! Captain Orfan gritted her teeth. She had lost far too many comrades since the start of the battle!

A chime sounded from her comm. She noticed that Major Verle requested a private meeting with her at a conference room close to the bridge.

"I've got to go, chief. Find some way to get me a mech. I don't care if you have to take it from another mech pilot. However good the other pilot is, I'm better!"

Moments later, she entered the conference room where Major Verle greeted her alone.

"Come take a seat. I know you're eager to continue the fight, but this battle is far from over. You can afford the rest."

"Just get to the point, major."

Major Verle knew that Captain Orfan wasn't one for subtleties, so he immediately brought up his suggestion.

"Though the crew has been doing its best to hide it, I've noticed that there has been a lot of talk about.. desertion circulating through the halls."

"That's nothing new. You know how we Vandals are. We are treated like garbage by the Mech Corps on a regular basis. That doesn't change the fact that we have proven in the last Bright-Vesia War that we are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to complete our mission. We've also fought the aliens during the entire stretch of the Sand War. We still have a lot of fight left within our bones!"

"I don't necessarily disagree, captain." Major Verle slowly responded and bent his head. "It's different this time. We can't constantly focus on our duty. We need to think about what happens afterwards."

A brief silence stretched between the two Vandal officers. Captain Orfan slowly narrowed her eyes.

"I thought better of you, Quinlist. You were always the one to keep our spirits high. If not for your leadership, we would have never been able to make it back from the Aeon Corona System!"

"This is different, Rosa!" Major Verle lost his cool and slammed his fist against the metal conference table! He quickly activated some commands that projected the current battle state of the Bentheim System. "Just look at this! Look at how many forces the Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps lost! Look at how many sandman monoliths are still left intact. We only chewed through a third of their monoliths, and that was with the help of the MTA task force!"

"The MTA isn't down for the count. They're strong."

"The MTA forces are doing their best to survive! They don't have the luxury to assist in the defense of Bentheim! All of the assets that we have left to fend off the sandmen are our diminished mechs and the defenses installed in orbit, neither of which are powerful enough to prevent the inevitable!"

Captain Orfan couldn't believe it. Major Verle had truly gone crazy. His defeatist mindset was completely anathema to the Major Verle in her memories.

"Do I need to relieve you of your command?"

"You won't enjoy the support of the remaining Vandals." Verle crossed his arms. "I'm not saying that we should follow in the footsteps of the mercenaries, but there are times when we are asked to sacrifice our lives when the gesture is futile. From my correspondence with high command, it has become increasingly clear to me that we may soon be asked to make a last stand for a planet that is already doomed. Not only would we be asked to throw away our lives, our gesture wouldn't even shift the final outcome!"

"We're soldiers!" She retorted. She patted her piloting suit. "It means something when we wear our uniforms! The battle is far from over, major. Maybe the MTA manages to

break through the blockade. Maybe the Bright Republic prepared a lot of reserves on the planet. Maybe the sandmen all lose steam once they expended their energy. There is still a chance that we can win!"

Major Verle shook his head. "I entrust the lives of our fellow Vandals on those overly optimistic assumptions. This is not about winning. This is about saving who we can and protecting those we consider comrades. The government may not like what I am saying, but I am long past the point of caring about the opinions of those who stabbed the Larkinsons in the back."

Both of them glowered at the mention of this dark incident. Captain Orfan may not have met many Larkinsons in person, but if they were anything like Ves, their honorable reputation was not in vain!

The meeting ended on an inconclusive note. Though Captain Orfan didn't want anything to do with desertion, the thought continued to linger in her mind as she wandered the Princely Jackal.

She looked at the passing Vandal crew members as they performed their duties through one of the most arduous times in their lives.

Some of them were shedding tears. Too many Vandals had died! The deaths of the mech pilots of the fallen mechs and the crew members who failed to escape from the collapsing Wolf Mother weighed heavily on the survivors.

How many more had to die? Would there be any Vandals left after this battle? Would the Bright Republic still be a hospitable home for them? All of these questions and more began to haunt Captain Orfan more and more.

"What is my duty?"

Officially, she was an officer of the Mech Corps. She took an oath to defend the Bright Republic from enemies from within and without. Defending the Bentheim System was a crucial objective to the state.

To turn her back on the planet and the billions of people living on it was unacceptable to her! In her decades-long career as a mech pilot and a mech officer, she never exhibited cowardice!

Yet.. she saw the writing on the wall just as well as Major Verle. It didn't take a genius tactician to see that the sandmen monoliths were simply too strong and numerous to be repelled by the MTA task force.

If the MTA couldn't take care of the sandmen, then how could the forces of the Bright Republic ever hope to do any better?

"Who should I protect?" She whispered to herself. "Do I fight for my people, or do I fight for my comrades?"

When she returned to the mech hangar, she looked out at the depressingly small number of intact-looking mechs. Nonetheless, the mech technicians worked around the clock in order to service them so that they could return to the field as quickly as possible!

"How many mechs will be left by the time the day is over?"

She was afraid there wouldn't be any mechs left.

Chapter 1982 Sand Storm

The MTA task force resisted the onslaught of sandman monoliths quite well.

The superior defense of their warships allowed them to withstand a continuous barrage of positron beams. Their shielding systems were exceptionally helpful in resisting the prodigious amount of positrons accelerating towards their hulls.

The advanced sunlight propulsion systems allowed the vessels to outmaneuver and outpace the large but sluggish sandman monoliths. Even the MTA feared what might happen if any of the sandman monoliths came close enough to engulf the ships!

As for the firepower, both the mechs and warships were capable of projecting an enormous amount of damage. If it was the old sandmen, the MTA would have already cleaned them by now!

Sadly for everyone involved, the sandmen of today were completely different from the sandmen of yesterday!

Against the immense firepower of the MTA forces, the sandmen simply merged their monoliths together to form larger amalgamations that were slower than their smaller counterparts.

However, what they gave up in mobility, they gained in power!

More specifically, the larger sandman amalgamations were capable of projecting much more resilient shields that could endure against anything the MTA mechs and warships were throwing at them! Even if a shield was reaching its limit, another sandman amalgamation would just fly forward and take off the pressure!

The uncharacteristically-intelligent actions of the sandmen wasn't limited to just this tactic.

More nefariously, the sandmen began to converge upon the MTA task force from different directions. It soon became clear that the sandmen focused less on the scattered mechs in order to surround the MTA carriers and warships!

Though the MTA officers could see the sandmen coming, there was hardly anything they could do to break the encirclement! No matter where their vessels moved, the sandmen matched their pace, especially when they broke up their larger monoliths into smaller but much more mobile swarms!

Though the MTA did its best to concentrate its firepower and overpower as many sandmen as possible, there were simply too many enemies!

The noose tightened more and more around the MTA task force's neck as the dozen of advanced ships began to run out of room.

No matter what tricks they utilized, they could only defeat a handful of monoliths at most! Even their most powerful antimatter torpedoes and other arsenal of doomsday weapons only slaughtered a few hundreds of monoliths at most!

Though the MTA managed to inflict more damage to the sandmen by launching these planet-cracking missiles than anyone else had achieved so far, there were still at least ten-thousand monoliths ready to take the place of their fallen!

When it came to attrition warfare, the sandman possessed no equal! The full might and numbers of the sandman race had converged on the Bentheim System to achieve victory at all cost!

The same couldn't be said for the MTA. Overburdened with responsibilities and occupied by many other priorities, the MTA's Komodo Branch refused to dispatch more than a medium-sized task force to Bentheim.

Without even a single battleship, the various cruisers and destroyers were unable to make up for the extremely lopsided disparity in numbers!

As the encirclement slammed shut, the MTA ran out of time and space.

With the sandman monoliths radiating a huge amount of gravitic interference, the ships were unable to engage their FTL systems to escape the net.

Everyone who had access to a feed of the plight of the MTA tuned in and watched with bated breath for the outcome of this titanic clash.

A myriad of lasers, rounds, missiles and more exotic weapons slammed against the approaching megamonoliths as the larger amalgamations were being called.

Though slow, their advance could not be stopped. Their size surpassed the size of a 12-kilometer long battleship and their defense was not that much worse!

The incredible amount of energy it outputted confused everybody. Even at this moment, nobody knew where the sandmen were able to generate so much energy!

The sandman race possessed a direct relationship with matter and energy.

The aliens hungered for higher qualities of exotics to empower their individual members, which subsequently translated to strengthening the collective.

The sandmen also hunger for energy, which was needed to sustain all of their activities!

It was a surprise how much of a difference a few months of retreat and consolidation made to the sandmen. Now, not even the second-rate states were capable of fending off so many upgraded sandmen!

It became increasingly more difficult to observe the dire state of the MTA task force. Everyone hoped that it held at least some weapons in reserve.

As one of the two most powerful human organizations in the galaxy, the MTA long made a name for itself for its overwhelming strength and advanced technology!

Yet even though the vessels were doing right by the MTA's reputation, it wasn't enough!

As the sandman monoliths and megamonoliths finally cornered the task force, the first ship finally got a taste of what it was light to fight the sandmen at point-blank range!

A small squad of multipurpose mechs attempted to retreat from the incoming sand storm, but the latter suddenly accelerated forward as if it received an energy boost!

Soon enough, the first-class mechs became engulfed by an increasingly denser sand storm!

"We need backup!"

"Eject!"

"We can't!"

"Aaahhh!"

Once an entire monolith formed around the trapped mechs, an incredible amount of heat and pressure slammed against their shields!

The rest of the task force lost contact with mechs soon afterwards, but the stricken mechs weren't paying attention to their lost mechs as an even greater emergency took place!

"The Splendid Archon is caught!"

The second-largest cruiser of the MTA task force failed to maneuver her way out of the approaching sandman megamonoliths. They approached from too many angles to avoid collisions!

The moment the megamonoliths touched the shield of the Splendid Archon, the sandmen began to surround it as if they were trying to glaze a turkey with honey.

More megamonoliths arrived to add more sandmen to the forming coffin. All the while, the Splendid Archon and the other ships and mechs of the MTA desperately tried to free the trapped ship, to no avail!

Eventually, the coffin had grown so big that the shield couldn't take anymore strain! It dropped, thereby giving the sandmen a golden opportunity to touch the hull of the ship!

Once they did so, the armor of the warships held out remarkably well, yet the sandmen specialized in breaking solid matter!

Hundreds of years ago, the sandmen managed to ambush and crash the Starlight Megalodon.

If the sandmen could already achieve this amazing feat so long ago, then how could a mere cruiser resist?

Even though technology had advanced a lot in three centuries, the sandmen attacking the Bentheim System weren't the sandmen of old!

"No! She's lost!"

The huge sandman megalith that formed around the Splendid Archon finally bulged inwards! This signified that the sandmen had succeeded in breaching or crushing the cruiser's outer shell!

The fall of the Splendid Archon marked a turning point in the Battle of Bentheim. While the sandman megalith eagerly enjoyed its 'meal', more were approaching from multiple directions in order to grab their own bites!

"The MTA task force is done for!"

"Bentheim is lost!"

Something unimaginable happened to the soldiers of the Mech Corps.

Some of the mech regiments started to pull out!

"Where are you going?!"

"Bentheim is lost! We need to preserve as much strength as possible!"

"Cowards!"

No matter what justifications they brought up, the soldiers and commanders of the surviving mech regiments no longer believed the battle was winnable.

After losing so many of their fighting assets and after seeing how decisively the sandmen took down the strongest defenders of the star system, many of them arbitrarily ignored their standing orders and sought to leave!

Once the initial units left the battle line, the pressure on the remaining defenders increased!

Soon enough, those overburdened mech regiments couldn't take it anymore! Having lost the majority of their fighting assets, they were hardly in a position to resist the thousands of sandman monoliths that remained intact!

More commanders ordered their units to retreat. Their actions led to a collapse that could not be stopped!

When it came down to it, hardly any soldier wanted to throw their lives away in vain!

No matter how important it was to defend Bentheim, when the mech pilots and mech commanders believed that victory wasn't possible anymore, their willingness to stand their ground evaporated!

Even the Flagrant Vandals eventually joined the ranks of the deserters.

Many of the Vandals felt ashamed for this dishonorable act. Even if their retreat was justifiable, their pride and honor took a permanent hit!

Captain Orfan wanted to continue to fight. She was not done yet with the sandmen!

Yet... her fellow Vandals weren't as eager. Exhausted beyond recognition, her comrades were unable to muster up any strength!

Even if they were able to regain their peak condition, what could they do without any mechs?

Almost seventy percent of their spaceborn mechs turned into scrap floating in space! The thirty percent they had left were far from capable of resisting the sandmen. Even though they only suffered some glancing hits, the incredibly powerful positron beams still caused the machines to suffer crippling damage!

Captain Orfan had no choice but to accept the inevitable. The Vandals fought as brave as any soldier of the Mech Corps, but it was hard to put up a fight without the weapons needed to make the sandmen bleed!

Eventually, she said nothing as Major Verle finally issued the command that every Vandal was waiting for. They were bailing out.

Perhaps deliberately, the sandmen didn't chase after the mech regiments that sought to flee their grasp. This only encouraged the remaining mech regiments to flee as well!

By now, the situation had grown completely out of control. With the formation of MTA warships engulfed by a sandstorm the size of a moon, no other source of help was forthcoming!

The citizens on Bentheim each looked up in the sky as faint shadows and flickers of lights started to grow bigger and bigger.

In the end, the people on the streets were even able to see solid objects in the skies!

Instead of the reassuring sight of metal ships and neat formations of mechs, they instead saw the face of their doom.

Bentheim experienced its first, only and final sandstorm in its history as a settled planet.

Throughout the rest of the star sector, everyone else was in the dark. Many people tuned in to the news portals in order to follow the latest course of events. The revelation that the MTA hadn't been doing so well in repelling the surprisingly-strong sandman invaders shocked a lot of people, including the Fridaymen and Hexers!

The abrupt communications blackout fueled everyone's speculations. The galactic net was filled with questions and uncertainty!

Yet despite all of the pleas for clarification, the MTA remained absolutely mum on what was taking place in the Bentheim System. Not even the politicians in Rittersberg knew what was going on in their most important economic lifeline!

Ves watched the same loop of news updates projected by his desk terminal with a numb expression.

"Meow."

Lucky pressed his paw against his forearm.

"I know, I know. I'm supposed to be working on the striker mech design. It's just.. I can't. Bentheim may not have been my home, but it has shaped my life for many years."

"Meow."

"The Comm Consortium wouldn't maintain the blockade for so long if the Battle of Bentheim proceeded well. I'm afraid.. the unthinkable has happened."

His intuition hinted that he was right. From all of the clues he gathered so far along with analyzing the quantity and quality of sandman monoliths, Ves knew that the MTA task force was way in over its head!

The supposedly primitive and backwards sandmen were far stronger than they had led everyone to believe! No one expected the barely-sentient aliens to pursue such a deep and long-running stratagem under the noses of the smartest military leaders of the star sector!

"What a surprise!" He gasped.

In hindsight, he shouldn't be surprised. If his guesses of the true culprit turned out to be true, then he should have expected the sandmen to pull off such a devious plot!

Chapter 1983 The Settling Sand

The Battle of Bentheim ended in tragedy.

No matter how much the MTA tried to hide the news, it could not shut down the Komodo Star Sector's access to the galactic net forever.

Even if the MTA tried to do so, the starships run by individual captains could just enter the Bentheim System, take a quick peek, and exit as soon as possible to ferry around the observation data to various people.

Therefore, the Comm Consortium soon decided to lift the blockade on the quantum entanglement nodes just in time for everyone tuning in to see the MTA swooping in with thunder and fury!

A much larger MTA battlefleet forcibly broke the system-wide gravitic interdiction field projected by the sandman monoliths through sheer brute force!

A portal that was more powerful and stable than anything anyone had seen before spewed out ship after ship and mech after mech!

Several MTA battleships in conjunction with an entire mech division of multipurpose mechs swept into the Bentheim System and showcased some of the might that made them so feared!

The Compliance Department invested considerably in this attack, and its local leaders did not make the mistake of underestimating the enemy again!

The sandstorms grinding every structure and life on the planet of Bentheim stopped as battleships fired some of their main armaments onto the surface from orbit!

The huge vessels showed no hint of subtlety as they pounded every concentration of sandmen with explosions that shattered entire cities and energy that was enough to glass a region!

Sure, the settlements on the surface often became unrecognizable in the aftermath, but it wasn't as if the sandmen had already done a fine job at wiping them out beforehand!

Entire formations of mechs zipped throughout the entire star system to take out the sandman monoliths that had given the previous task force so much trouble.

Better equipped with loadouts optimized for breaching the powerful shields of the upgraded monoliths, the mechs proved that the MTA still possessed the strength to dominate the galaxy!

The mop-up operation went remarkably easy. It appeared that the sandmen expended almost all of their resources and energy to winning the Battle of Bentheim.

To every other Brighter, this easy and overwhelming victory came too late. Hardly anyone celebrated the end of the menace that had terrorized the states close to the frontier for a year.

In such a short span of time, dozens of border states went extinct and trillions of humans succumbed after their planets became engulfed by sand!

The final sand storm that had enveloped the planet of Bentheim from all directions had been captured in perfect detail by many escaping mechs and vessels in the star system!

Even when the gravitic interdiction field finally fell, plenty of curious ships remained in the outskirts of the star system to capture all of the might showcased by the MTA.

Perhaps the MTA's Komodo Branch just wanted to reassert its dominance in the star sector. Their sudden and unexpected defeat was just a fluke!

Still, the damage was done. Already, the CFA were gloating at the obvious failure of the MTA to clean up the remnants of a supposedly weak and marginal alien race.

Even though the CFA's Archangel Battle Group had almost been done in by the sandmen as well, at least it didn't lose any ships!

To most citizens, the rivalry between the two trans-galactic organizations went far above their heads.

All they cared about was the immediate aftermath to their lives.

Suffice to say, the Bright Republic suffered an immense amount of damage.

The Bright-Vesia War had already taken a toll on the state, and the Sand War that followed afterwards devastated more than a third of its star systems!

Yet despite all of the losses, the star systems that fell didn't play a critical role in the running of the war-stricken state.

As long as Bentheim survived, the Bright Republic would rise from the ashes!

As long as Bentheim stood, the Bright Republic would continue to prosper!

Most of the propaganda of the state often emphasized the incredible value that Bentheim provided to everyone. As long as its economic engine could start again, everyone's lives would return to normal!

Yet now that both the sandmen and the MTA bombarded and scoured it to oblivion, almost everything that made the planet valuable was gone!

Its manufacturing complexes, its research institutions, its vibrant commercial trade hubs and its bountiful population of workers were all gone!

Though the Bright Republic had already evacuated all of the most precious people and assets from the planet as a precaution, it wasn't enough to make up for the losses!

Though the Bentheim System still retained its value as a port system, it would take an incredible amount of time and funding to rebuild it to its prime!

With the dire state of the Bright Republic, it was practically impossible for the government to achieve this within a century!

Naturally, the MTA didn't say a word about this. After it made sure to turn the sandmen into an extinct race, it pulled out its battlefleet, leaving the indigenous humans to clean up the mess.

A lot of meetings took place after the end.

Carlos Shaw wasn't important enough to be included in these meetings. Aboard one of the many combat carriers that managed to escape the Bentheim System, the Apprentice overlooked the repairs of one of the few military mechs that managed to return in one piece.

"What do you think will happen, chief?"

The gruff, middle-aged chief technician standing next to him spat on the deck. "The Bright Republic is done. It's over. Even if the Friday Coalition swoops in and funds the reconstruction of the planet, which they won't since they're occupied with waging their own war, it will take decades to regain a fraction of what we lost."

"It's not just the star system that fell." Carlos sighed. "Much of our Mech Corps and Starfighter Corps is gone as well."

"Aye. Our military is weaker than ever. Do you know how dangerous that is? The Vesians and the Ylvainans don't have to lift a finger in order to conquer our state! They can just send a couple of reserve forces to swoop in and roll over the non-existent defenses of the worthless star systems that we have left!"

It wasn't that bad, actually. The Bright Republic still had Rittersberg, New Foundation and plenty of other prosperous star systems to sustain its remaining economy.

Yet.. the state's enormous dependence on Bentheim still hurt a lot. With all of the losses the military suffered and all of the debt the government accrued, the Bright Republic wouldn't be able to recover as quickly as the Ylvaine Protectorate or the Vesia Kingdom, both of which escaped the final counterattack of the sandman race!

"It's not fair!" Carlos cursed. "Why did the sandman target us?! Why not the Vesians? Why not the Reinaldians?!"

The chief technician patted Carlos' back. "Kid, there's no point in questioning the logic of aliens. The sandmen were a pretty weird bunch to begin with. If they just kept minding their own business in the deep frontier, we would have never been forced to exterminate their race. Yet they attacked human space anyway for reasons that don't make any sense to us. I think there's a lesson to be learned from this catastrophe."

"Which is?"

"The galaxy doesn't make any sense. Crazy stuff happens all the time. The best you can do is to be prepared."

The mech designer scoffed. "I already know that. If the galaxy truly made sense, then I wouldn't be here."

The two fell silent as the sound of mechs being serviced echoed throughout the workshop compartment.

Elsewhere, Captain Orfan stared down Major Verle with a piercing glance. She had just been summoned in his office aboard the Princely Jackal for a private discussion.

"Are you serious, major?"

"Flashlight's intelligence isn't wrong. There are already numerous signs that certain actors within the government are holding secret negotiations between various foreign diplomats. From what the spies have gathered, there are hints that the Friday Coalition is brokering a deal that is meant to compel the Ylvaine Protectorate and Vesia Kingdom to invest in our state's reconstruction!"

"That's impossible! Those two states are in a pretty bad shape as well! In fact, the Protectorate suffered almost just as much damage as us due to all of the rioting!"

"The Friday Coalition is pitching in some funding as well. They just don't want to do the heavy lifting themselves."

"Why not grant the money directly to the Bright Republic?"

"I'm unsure." Major Verle frowned. "I don't have the complete picture, and neither does Flashlight I believe. Whatever the case, the Friday Coalition seems determined to assign the Ylvainans and Vesians the responsibility of reconstructing much of our lost infrastructure."

"Will the Ylvainans and Vesians even accept this deal, sir?" Captain Orfan responded dubiously.

"They will. That's because the Friday Coalition may have forced our government to provide certain.. concessions to the two assisting states. Let's just say that we'll be seeing a lot of Vesian and Ylvainan influence in our state from now on. The foreigners won't be helping us for free."

Nothing was free. Even Rosa understood this concept.

Yet she believed the deal wasn't as simple as it appeared on the surface. Major Verle's concern was very obvious.

"There's more to it than that, right? What do the foreigners actually get out of this deal? How long will they actually stay and meddle in our affairs?"

"I see you recognize the potential threat in this development." Major Verle offered her a rueful smile. "Flashlight's analysts went to work and attempted to predict what will happen in the coming years. The projections aren't looking good."

"Tell it to me straight. I can take it, sir."

"In the most probable scenarios, the Bright Republic will still be an independent state on the surface. In practice, the economic and cultural influence of the two foreign states will both be deeply rooted into the fabric of our post-war society at that time! You can expect Ylvainan churches to pop up in every city. You can expect our founding families to adopt the strictures and customs of noble houses."

"This.." Captain Orfan looked shocked!

"The Bright-Vesia Wars won't occur again, because the Vesians have already conquered the Bright Republic in almost every way that matters!" Major Verle exclaimed! "Sure, they have to share us with the Ylvainans. Sure, they were denied the biggest prize in the form of an intact port system, but who cares? If you know those greedy Vesian nobles as well as I do, they'll be doing everything in their power to root their society in our state and make it stick!"

This sounded like a horror scenario to Captain Orfan! This was not only a betrayal of everything the Mech Corps fought for, but also the end of the state as she knew it! What was the point of wearing her uniform any longer if she would be starting to take orders from a Vesian noble instead of a proper Brighter commanding officer?

"I really hope your source isn't high on stimulants."

"My contacts are trying to verify this intelligence as thoroughly as possible. In the next couple of days or weeks, it will become clear what the future holds. I just wanted to inform you beforehand to provide some context for what I have to say next."

"What is it, major?"

"After corresponding with high command, I have picked up some very discouraging clues. While it's still early, I believe the Mech Corps will soon enact a comprehensive reorganization of all of its units. There are so many incomplete mech regiments that it makes sense to merge them all together in order to form a smaller, more consolidated structure. I'm afraid that the 6th Flagrant Vandals as we know it will exist no longer. The generals will probably choose to merge us with a bunch of other savaged mech regiments!"

"What?!" Captain Orfan stood up from her chair. "They can't do that! We fought through multiple wars! We earned a lot of honors! We even extended the life of that old bastard Senator Tovar!"

Major Verle calmly folded his hands. "That was then, this is now. Our strength has decreased enormously. Our factory ship and several other expensive vessels have succumbed to the sandmen. With the economy of our state in shambles, do you really think the Mech Corps can afford to bring us back to strength? Even if the Mech Corps

wants to do so, it will likely opt to reconstruct the premier mech regiments such as the Volari Starhawks or the Apocalypse Heralds!"

As much as Captain Orfan tried to deny it, she was sober enough to know that Major Verle was probably right! The Vandals had never been the darling of the higher ups!

"On top of that, captain, our existence will also become a bit awkward now that our state has to become friends with our former rivals. The Vesians will probably be happy to see us gone!"

"So just because the Vesians resent us from running wild through their own space, we have to disband? That was war! We didn't do anything worse than the Vesians had already done to us in our own territory!"

Major Verle shook his head. "Reality isn't fair, Rosa. To the Vesians, we are a living stain on their honor. If the Bright Republic wants to play nice with them, then disbanding our mech regiment is an easy gesture to earn their goodwill!"

"Do our bosses have any pride?! We're Brighters! We always stood up to the Vesians!"

"Pride doesn't pay the bills. Pride doesn't fill our stomachs. Our continued existence is no longer convenient. The opposite is true in fact. Ending our existence as an active mech regiment will reap plentiful rewards to the state! If you think the Mech Corps won't stand by this decision, then just look how the government treated Ves Larkinson despite all of his combat awards. Now, we're next on the chopping block."

A short pause ensued as Captain Orfan took in this explosive news.

"What will you do?"

"I think you can guess. There is only one way to preserve the Vandals."

Chapter 1984 In Our Hearts

The fall of Bentheim not only affected the Brighters living in the state, but also those who longer lived within its borders.

The Larkinson Clan, despite its attempts to form an independent spare-faring existence, still possessed a lot of roots to the Bright Republic.

The Larkinsons and many people hailing from the state couldn't help but mourn for the losses. The catastrophe dominated the conversation in the fleet to such an extent that the leadership simply couldn't let it remain unaddressed!

Even Ves couldn't take his mind off the fall of the planet that had once been the source of much of his prosperity!

Though the memories he held of the planet would forever be stored in his Archimedes Rubal implant, he would never be able to make any new memories. The Bentheim as he knew it existed no more.

Dorum, Haston, Ansel and many other iconic cities existed no longer. The famed sights such as the popular mech arenas on the campus of the Ansel University of Mech Design were forever lost.

Billions of people died. Even though the Bright Republic at least managed to evacuate all of the valuable mech designers and other skilled personnel, all of them had to start anew to an extent.

What was lost was lost. There was no way to restore Bentheim to its former glory any longer. Even if the Bright Republic received funding from every direction, the newer version of Bentheim would lack the heritage and accumulation of its earlier incarnation!

Many Brighters, especially those who lived on the planet or had their lives affected by its existence in some way, lamented the loss of such an important facet of their lives.

Due to all of these distractions, Ves decided to make the unprecedented decision to hold a full assembly of the entire clan.

As soon as his fleet dropped out of FTL, numerous shuttles flew back and forth, bringing every member of the Larkinson Clan to the roomy mech hangar of the Redfeather.

In order to make room for the hundreds of Larkinsons, a large number of spaceborn mechs deployed into space in order to patrol the vicinity.

Still, Ves made sure to command the Avatars to leave enough Bright Warriors behind to surround the venue with the powerful glow derived from the Golden Cat!

Every Larkinson, no matter if they remained committed to the clan or planned to leave it at the first opportunity, showed any division at this gathering.

Despite the encouraging glows of the impressive Bright Warriors piloted by their fellow clansmen, no one was able to muster up any cheer today.

The footage of the Battle of Bentheim, the sand storm that had engulfed the planet and the destructive aftermath after the MTA battleships pounded the surface with ordnance was seared in every Larkinson's minds.

None of them would ever forget what happened!

More than a few Larkinsons even felt that they should have been there to resist the sandmen! The guilt at leaving the Bright Republic when it most needed their help gnawed at their conscience and haunted them at night!

As Ves stood at the side of a broad podium, he observed his clansmen carefully while caressing the solid surface of the Larkinson Mandate.

"The mood among the members of your clan is very volatile, boss." Gavin told him. "If you say the wrong things, you can easily rile them up or turn them against you. No matter how much you tried to pull your Larkinsons away from the Bright Republic, it still exists in their hearts. I highly suggest you refrain from bashing our home state."

"Who do you think I am, Benny?"

"You're the Devil Tongue. Bashing others is what made you famous."

Ves directed an acid glare at his assistant.

"Meow."

Lucky lazily yawned as he floated besides his owner.

"Oh, shut up you greedy cat! You're overdue on your next payment! I haven't seen anything coming out of your rear end for weeks!"

"Meow!"

Gloriana touched his arm. "Hush now, Ves. Don't bully your own cat. You have more important business to take care of. The last Larkinsons are slowly taking their seats. It's almost time for you to address the clan."

"You're right." Ves took a deep breath. "I haven't even prepared a speech or anything really. I still don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say that much, to be honest. In fact, as long as you articulate yourself clearly enough, it's better to go for the raw emotional angle." Gavin suggested. "If you look at the faces of Larkinsons, they all look lost. The home they grew up in has changed forever, and not for the better. If you let these people wallow by themselves, there are bound to be problems down the line."

"I know what is at stake. If I don't manage this correctly, our Larkinson Clan will never be able to make a smooth separation from the Bright Republic."

He was not just addressing his clansmen for today. His various organizations employed a lot of Brighters who also felt as depressed as the Larkinsons at the disaster that had befallen Bentheim.

In fact, many of the people he hired came from the planet! To them, the loss struck them very deeply, as not only did they lose their home planet, but also some of their friends and family!

Right now, those Bentheimers were still in the early stages of the mourning process. In order to prevent them from entering into an irrational spiral of rage and self-loathing, Ves had to step up and make sure that they were mourning the losses the right way!

No matter what awful events had happened that affected the lives of his men, the galaxy continued its inexorable spin. It was all well and good to stand still and reflect on the loss, but life had to go on eventually.

After Ves mentally prepared himself, he stepped up to the podium with the Larkinson Mandate featured prominently in his grip.

To fit the occasion, Ves decided to don a black attire with a sharp cut but not distinguishing elements other than the emblem of the Larkinson Clan on his upper right chest.

He looked as close to what a patriarch of the Larkinson Clan ought to look at this occasion.

The crowd automatically fell silent at his appearance. Regardless of whether they were young or old, every Larkinson acknowledged that Ves was the leader of the clan!

"My fellow Larkinsons and Brighters who are watching this feed, today is a sad day. The recent news coming from our former state paint a very dire picture on the state of Bentheim. The battle that determined the survival of the planet and the people living on it has ended in disaster. Many of us have lived on the planet or possessed many memories of it. To realize that what we know and cherish in our memories is gone forever is a pain that cuts deeply in our hearts."

A lot of Larkinsons bent their heads. A few of the younger kids had tears in their eyes while the oldest generation began to look wistful.

"The Bright Republic was our home. We cannot deny that. Even though we have chosen to forge a path that has led us away from the Republic, it is still an undeniable part of our identity. To see our own home state bleed and fall into decline due to Bentheim's razing is.. distressing. I know the pain you feel in your hearts. I feel it too. Every single beat, I bleed a little more for the planet that is no more!"

Ves dramatically clenched his free hand into a fist and bumped it against his heart on top of his chest!

"It is okay to mourn for the planet that is gone and the people who have died. It is not a crime to sympathize with your fellow Brighters who survived, who have to recover from

the aftermath of two devastating wars. We could all use a moment to remember what we lost and what others have lost. This tragedy will forever serve as a dark chapter in our growing tapestry of memories. No matter how much we will distance ourselves from the Bright Republic in the coming years, what has happened in our home state will always resound in our minds."

His words resonated with the crowd, and not just because of his empathic speech. Through conscious effort, Ves concentrated his mind and tried to simulate a glow that resonated with his words!

His audience couldn't help but get sucked into his speech. The Bright Warriors standing neatly at the sides all projected a glow that not only reinforced their Larkinson identities, but also resonated with his narrative!

He gripped the Larkinson Mandate tighter to his side. The Golden Cat who resided in the book watched and listened with rapt attention, and so did the other Larkinsons!

"However, this is not the end! The fall of Bentheim may have hurt all of us, but we are stronger than this! The Bentheim as we knew it may have died that day, but the Bentheim in our hearts and minds still lives on as long as we are there to carry them forward! We and many other survivors are just one of many people who can make sure that the legacy of this great planet will not be forgotten!"

If all Ves talked about today revolved around mourning, then his Larkinson Clan would never get out of its slump! Ves could not afford his Larkinsons and Brighter employees to persist in their mourning too long! Productivity had already dropped and Ves did not wish to see this pattern persist for months!

For this reason, Ves tried to grasp a possible way to turn this speech into a positive direction. He had to make sure he finished this speech on a high note!

Ves thumped his chest yet again. "Bentheim lives within us, and as long as we work hard enough, Bentheim will live again through us! As an enterprising clan, we Larkinsons can bring our Brighter values and the customs to the wider galaxy. Just imagine it. Perhaps a few decades from now, our fleet will look much more prosperous than this day. Our vast armada of tradeships and carrier vessels ply the stars in order to trade mechs and materials with local partners, hopefully within the Red Ocean Star Galaxy. Doesn't that sound familiar to you? This dream might very well come true as long as we look forward instead of backwards! The past may be set, but the future is still in our control!"

A lot of Larkinsons started to look more hopeful and sad! Their moods were already beginning to turn around!

"There is no point denying our connection to the Bright Republic." He said, trying to look at many Larkinsons in the eyes as possible. "Our home state may be bleeding and it

may turn into something unrecognizable to us in the next couple of generations, but as long as we exist, we shall never allow the Bright Republic in its prime to be lost! As a fellow Brighter who used to hail from this state, I say we should do our part in reviving Bentheim in our own way! What say you? Are you with me, Larkinsons?!"

"I'm with you, patriarch!"

"We will build our own Bentheim!"

Though not everyone was caught up in his lofty fantasy, the enthusiasm exhibited by the ones who were was enough. Every Larkinson eventually joined this shared vision.

The original Bentheim may have fallen, but a new Bentheim would rise!

Ves finally began to smile as he finally managed to lift the austere atmosphere.

"No matter where the future may take us, don't forget that we are able to make our own choices now. We are no longer bound by any state or superior. Cherish this opportunity and take advantage of it to realize your own visions! Don't linger on what you could have done, but instead focus on what you can do in the future! As long as our clan stands strong, we can accomplish anything we set our minds towards! For the clan!"

"For the clan!"

Chapter 1985 Little Fellows

Before he exited the podium, Ves made one more announcement. This happened to be the best time to break the news and make sure to give his fellow clansmen something positive to occupy their minds as they returned to their ships and resumed their work!

"My fellow clansmen. The Bright Republic may have been a source of continuous bad news to us, but at the same time the Battle of Bentheim took place, we achieved at least one victory!"

The Larkinsons all paid very close attention to Ves. In the backdrop of such an enormous disaster, what could ever constitute as good news?

Ves ignored their doubts and grinned. "I am finally able to announce that the Larkinsons that the government of the Bright Republic has rounded up have been freed! Certain.. allies of mine have broken into Spotlight's secret prison and rescued every Larkinson willing to leave! As we speak, they are being safely ferried to the Sentinel Kingdom, where they can meet up with our clan and the old family!"

The moment the clansmen realized the significance of his words, they jumped to their feet and cheered!

His unexpected but very welcome announcement decisively cleared away the dark cloud that settled over their heads. Though everyone still mourned for the loss of Bentheim, the Larkinsons cared much more about their relatives!

After he successfully turned a solemn mourning event into a jubilant rally, Ves considered his work to be done. He exited the podium with a smile.

He lingered a bit in order to talk and mingle with some of the Larkinsons in person. He spoke to Clinton, Raymond, Magdalena, Melkor and other influential Larkinsons in order to sound out their stances and figure out their priorities.

Overall, the leaders in his clan were very happy about the successful rescue attempt. Ves had a feeling that he won a lot of kudos from them and redeemed a part of his image in their eyes.

Once everyone started to return to their assigned ships, Ves, Gloriana, Gavin and a couple of others boarded a shuttle that brought them back to the Scarlet Rose.

Along the way, Gavin turned to Ves and asked a presumptuous question.

"About Bentheim.. were you being honest?"

Ves looked up from the Rimward Herald article he was reading.

The established news organization had written a very insightful analysis on the repercussions of the Battle of Bentheim. They were much greater than he realized, mostly because the prestige of the MTA took a substantial hit! The Rimward Herald predicted that the MTA would become a lot more proactive in the coming years in an attempt to undo the damage!

"Why ask this question?"

"You never articulated a clear goal for your upcoming Grand Expedition. Sure, everyone knows you want to make your clan prosper and grow more powerful. However, no one is actually sure what you intend to do in the Red Ocean. Are we turning into an intergalactic caravan? Are you trying to found a new state? Will our activities center around the interests of the clan, or will we all be solely working to facilitate your career as a mech designer?"

Those were some very impactful questions. They were also pretty sensitive as well, so much so that Ves shut off the projector of his comm.

"I don't have to answer you, Benny."

"I know my questions aren't entirely appropriate, but.. I'm not the only one who holds these questions and doubts. It would do you a lot of good if you can present a clearer vision to what we are all working towards."

He was right. Gavin interacted with lots of people every day in order to serve as a gatekeeper and conduit of information. Compared to Ves who mostly spent his time in the design labs in order to tinker up a new design, Gavin possessed a much deeper comprehension of the overall sentiment of his people.

If Gavin was starting to worry about the goals that his people were supposed to pursue, then Ves might have a real problem on his hands. Maybe not immediately, but the lack of direction would surely lead to a lot of division in the next couple of months and years!

Ves took a moment to gather his thoughts and figure out the best way to phrase his answer.

"Let me begin by saying that for the foreseeable time, the interests of the clan and myself are both aligned. This is by design. I founded the Larkinson Clan to further my interests. I never kept this secret. However, the Larkinson Clan is also a means of spreading my success to my fellow relatives and employees like you. I don't demand anyone to become my slave and I am not reluctant to share my earnings."

Gavin slowly nodded. "If you put it that way, then your workers will feel much more reassured in their continued loyalty to the LMC and other organizations."

"Everyone who joins my enterprise is one of my own. While our Larkinson Clan has not become a sovereign state in its own right, I intend to lead it in a responsible direction. I want to shape the governance of my expeditionary fleet in a way that is as beneficial and equitable as possible to everyone. While I can't promise to be fair in everything, I hope to make everyone, even the lowest worker, feel pleased in their decision to stay loyal to me. That is what you all deserve. Do you understand, Benny?"

His assistant made a very bad lapse in judgement some time ago, so this implicit warning also served to keep him on his toes!

Gavin coughed. "I understand, boss. I'm glad you are still thinking about the faces in the background who don't share your surname. We might not be a part of your clan, but we are still willing to go through many lengths to support you and the clan. All we ask is that you continue to show some consideration to us little fellows."

"I never considered you to be a little fellow or a face that is indistinguishable from the background." Ves lied. "I treat all of my employees as valued assets. I am very grateful for their loyalty. In a reality like ours, that is very hard to come by. I learned first-hand how duplicitous even your closest friends and allies can be. Even family isn't exempt from this rule as one of my cousins didn't hesitate to sell me out!"

"That's a very.. cynical way to see our society." Gavin displayed a strained smile. "I'm not sure if it's healthy for you to maintain such a distrustful stance. We need you to be our bridge builder. Rather than making new enemies, you should try and make new friends instead. There are more people who want to cooperate with you as long as you open yourself up for offers."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow as he was petting Lucky's back. "What kind of offers are you talking about?"

"Ever since you and Gloriana made a name for yourselves, we have been inundated with requests for collaborations and exchanges. There are also other offers that propose more extensive cooperation such as business alliances and research sharing and the like. I took the liberty of filtering out most of these offers since they are mainly opportunistic and lack sincerity. That still leaves a lot of valid requests that might very well be worth your time."

"How many are there?"

"At my current count, there are 84 offers. According to our research, it is very likely that they are all made in good faith, so you don't have to worry about getting taken advantage of. With the unstable state of the clan and the LMC, I think it is very helpful if you start to befriend more business partners and forge more relationships. The Larkinson Clan doesn't have many friends to lean on these days."

"You're... right. We don't have another fallback point in the event our relationship with the Sentinel Kingdom or the Hexadric Hegemony sours."

"My state will never turn against you!" Gloriana couldn't help but break her silence this time! "The Hegemony is not like the Bright Republic or the Ylvaine Protectorate! We stand by our friends! Even if you are a boy, as my lover you are entitled to our protection!"

If it was anyone else saying those words, then Ves wouldn't feel very worried. Yet the notion of protecting males took on a very different connotation in Hexer society!

If the Hexer idea of protecting a boy like Ves amounted to locking him up in a gilded cage, then he resolutely rejected this offer!

"I'm sure Benny doesn't mean to accuse your state of anything ill, Gloriana." He told her before turning back to his assistant. "I don't have the interest to sort through all of those proposals. Just tell me the most promising or interesting ones."

Gavin activated his comm and projected the first proposal. "Well, since we are going to spend some time in the Sentinel Kingdom, I think it's good if we build a better relationship with one of its established factions. Remember Lady Miralix?"

"I do." Ves didn't need his implant to recall the young but ambitious noble and the Crown Hunt they participated in. He succeeded in harvesting Zeigra's spirituality at the end! "If I recall, she joined the Sentinel Army or something, right?"

"That's correct. While she's currently serving as a mech captain of the Sentinel Army, she is still free enough to correspond with her noble house. Ever since she found out that we are on our way to the Sentinel Kingdom, she has suggested a more extensive cooperation between you and her house. With your current prestige and fame, House Laterna has grown quite interested in collaborating you with a major project."

"Oh? I thought that House Laterna is mainly occupied with running their cat paradise and selling their genetically-modified cats."

"You're not wrong, but House Laterna does employ some mech designers to outfit its members and its household troops with their own mechs. The house has developed a liking for your mechs, and wants to commission you to design a line of tiger mechs."

Ves sat up straighter in his chair. Even Lucky stopped purring in order to pay attention to Gavin's words!

"Did I hear that correctly? They want me to design an entire product line of bestial mechs!?"

"At least four at minimum and eight at maximum. Well, I suppose you can hash out the exact details with House Laterna if you decide to explore this commission. Just know that as long as you perform this commission, House Laterna is willing to repay you by offering a lot of assistance to us while we are staying in the Sentinel Kingdom."

That sounded very valuable, especially since his people experienced a lot of turmoil and disruption in recent times.

Yet... "I'm not so sure, Benny. After putting my trust in the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate, I don't want to be stabbed in the back by another state actor yet again. Sure, House Laterna shouldn't have any grudges with me, but who knows whether their opinion takes a complete 180-degree turn the next day?"

Gloriana interjected yet again. "That won't happen! Unlike the Bright Republic, the Sentinel Kingdom is firmly within the Hegemony's backyard! With me and my dynasty supporting you from behind, no one in the Sentinel Kingdom should have the courage to betray you! What happened in the Ylvaine Protectorate shouldn't be possible because the Fridaymen are simply too far away to pull off an ambush!"

"While I agree with you, the Friday Coalition isn't my only enemy. The Nyxian Gap is right next door to the Sentinel Kingdom and the pirates and other scum who reside there are a threat to everybody in civilized space. In addition, even the Hegemony isn't completely united, right? Can you really tell me that the Wodin Dynasty doesn't have

any internal enemies within the Hegemony at all? What if one of your Hexer rivals decided to target me? Can you guarantee that this will never happen?"

Gloriana squirmed in her seat. She looked very awkward at the moment!

Ves turned back to Gavin. "While this commission sounds very interesting, it's a lot of work to design so many tiger mechs. I also don't want to put us in a position where we are too dependent on a noble house or any other faction for that matter. Next offer, please. Try and find something that doesn't take much time and doesn't demand a lot of commitment. It doesn't matter if the rewards are fairly meager. I only want to do enough to turn us into a known and friendly group in Sentinel space."

Chapter 1986 Do As The Rubarthans Do

The Sentinel Kingdom offered a lot of work. The turmoil emerging from the Nyxian Gap combined with the ripple effects of the Sand War and the Komodo War meant that mechs came back in high demand.

Combined with the increased need to replace obsolete mechs with new generation mechs, the market for commercial mechs and custom-tailored commission mechs had risen to a point where the mech market was booming!

Both low-end mechs and high-end mechs sold like hotcakes. When Gavin showed him the charts showing the sales trends of mechs throughout the star sector, Ves noted that there was an especially high demand for mechs that either utilized laser weapons or countered them in some fashion.

"This is the laser generation, so it stands to reason that laser weapons are more popular than ballistic and kinetic weapons." Gavin told him. "We gained a rather distorted perspective on these wider trends because the Sand War revolved entirely around physical weapons. What this means is that our Desolate Soldiers may be selling well, but many of our buyers have decided to eschew the ballistic rifles that come with them in favor of laser rifles!"

Ves grimaced. "My Desolate Soldiers aren't optimized for laser weapons. Their targeting systems won't work as well, so the accuracy and target acquisition capabilities won't be as good as dedicated laser mechs. Their energy reserves are also rather paltry and their heat management systems aren't designed to cope with too much heat generated by the weapon, so the mechs will quickly reach their limits in combat."

"Most of your customers don't care. They just slap on some extra energy cells and heat sinks onto your mech and call it a day. This is what the market wants, Ves. I think it would do your company a lot of good if you divert some time to design an official laser rifle variant for the Desolate Soldier. Call it the Energy Soldier or something."

To be honest, Ves wasn't really sure he wanted to continue to work with the Soldier product line. He was very much aware that a lot of states had already adopted it for its supportive glow.

His intention for creating the Solemn Guardian was to bolster the morale of the mech pilots on the field and encourage everyone to work for the greater good by appealing to their sense of duty.

In that, his mech had succeeded. The entire Soldier product line had become the most iconic mech of the Sand War, and he would have probably been in line to earn a lot of awards from the various states if he didn't piss off the Friday Coalition!

Still, his mech outlived its original purpose and had become an increasingly more ubiquitous sight throughout the star sector.

Ves was sure that he would be seeing plenty of Desolate Soldiers in the Sentinel Kingdom! Despite the budget model's limited application against human opponents, many customers were buying it purely due to its glow!

"From a commercial perspective, you're right." He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "The Desolate Soldier is not that good of a mech against non-sandmen opponents, but that can change if I realise a variant that specializes in wielding laser rifles."

Gavin threw a suspicious glance at Ves. "I know that tone of yours, boss. I sense a 'but' coming."

"You know me too well." Ves smirked. "From a designer and creator's standpoint, I don't feel like doing it. First, I think the Desolate Soldier's glow is currently being abused for purposes that aren't in line with the mech's original visio. I designed it to facilitate the defense of the Bright Republic and other beleaguered states during the Sand War. I crossed a couple of lines that I wasn't comfortable about because the necessity of the situation required something drastic. Now that the war has come to a conclusion, I don't intend to revisit this product line unless another crisis occurs."

"Desolate Soldier sales are pretty much propping up the entire LMC and by extension the Larkinson Clan at this moment." Gavin pointed out.

"I know. I don't intend to stop that. However, remember that the Desolate Soldier is a lastgen design that came out right as the MTA announced the new mech generation. If you set aside its fantastic glow, it's a really mediocre mech even if you compare it to other mechs in its price range. What's its current price now?"

"Around 500,000 to 600,000 hex credits." Gavin immediately replied. "That's roughly the equivalent to 20 million pre-inflation bright credits. The exact prices vary considerably between markets due to differences in taxes, regulation, cost of doing business and

market demand. Surprisingly, unlike other lastgen mechs, we haven't been forced to lower its price, thereby keeping its product margin at healthy levels."

"Uhum. I get it. I still won't expand the Soldier product line, though. I don't want the brand identity of the LMC to revolve around this singular mech design. I'm not a Class VII mech designer who spends his entire life perfecting a single product. I have a lot of ideas that I want to bring to reality and I want to make a name for myself as a mech designer who can design anything that is in demand!"

It was a matter of principle and philosophy to Ves. He was very much aware of how dangerous it was for mech designers to tunnel vision around a single megahit. If Ves kept running back to his old wonder and continued to retread the same solutions, he would eventually lose the ability to solve new problems.

The mech industry was rife with one-hit wonders who turned from decent mech designers into lazy, washed-up losers who constantly tried to recreate the same success, with mixed results.

Though Ves definitely intended to refresh some of his older mech designs, it had to make sense both from a business perspective and a design perspective.

"By the way, you haven't accepted any of the proposals I mentioned to you, boss. Are you really sure you don't want to do anything to make your stay in Sentinel a bit easier? Gaining a patron is very convenient in states where authority is strong."

Ves shook his head. "None of the commissions sound particularly worthwhile. Now that I've become a masterwork mech designer, my value has shot up. While that isn't entirely reflected in the proposals we've received, I think it's best to move on from accepting regular commissions from random people."

"I.. understand. I'll be sure to filter them out from now on. What will you do, then?"

"There is always work for me. I'll revisit my options when I finish the projects that are currently in the pipeline. The two projects that I'm working on are more than enough to occupy me for months."

While he was technically capable of working on more than two projects at a time, his design teams couldn't quite keep up with all of the work. He would have to double his roster of subordinate mech designers if he wanted to handle multiple projects in a more efficient manner.

So far, Ves was holding off on expanding his design teams, but that might change once he reached the Sentinel Kingdom and settled down from the recent crises.

Eventually, Ves ended his meeting with Gavin without accepting any new commissions.

Later that day, he returned to the design lab of the Scarlet Rose to resume work on the striker mech design and to handle his other responsibilities.

Ever since he settled the future education of the four Larkinson seeds, the teenagers showed up to the design lab every day.

Most of the time, the seeds received basic tutoring from the members of the design teams. It wasn't necessary for Ves or Gloriana to devote their valuable time to teach basic knowledge and concepts to them. It was as overkill as using a Star Designer to teach a third grader how to multiply sums!

However, the two Journeymen made sure to devote at least half an hour to instill them with the proper mindset and principles of a mech designer. This was something that they both insisted upon because they wanted to set up the four kids up for success.

Since Maisie Ann Larkinson and Rennie Larkinson both decided to attend a Hexer university, Gloriana practically took them under her wing.

When Ves entered the design lab, he just caught a portion of her lecture.

"...Now, girls, when you arrive in the Hegemony, you must forget everything you know about 'men'. In fact, don't even use that word. 'Man' or 'men' is a taboo word in the Hegemony. If you get caught using it once, your Hexer classmates will begin to regard you as ignorant foreigners. You don't want that. From now on, start looking at every male as if they are boys. Please repeat this word to me with as much feeling as possible."

"Boy."

"Boy."

"NOT GOOD ENOUGH!" Gloriana thundered! "Don't treat the word as a joke. Treat it as if it is the literal truth! If you find it difficult to think of males as boys, just pretend that they are six to eight years old. As long as you can adopt this mindset, you are essentially half-way towards becoming a Hexer! Ah, look, Ves has just arrived! Tell me, is he a boy or a man?"

"He's the patriarch!" Rennie gasped. "I would never call him that! That's disrespectful."

"He's a boy. When in Rubarth, do as the Rubarthans do." Maisie flatly said.

Their teacher clapped her hands. "Good job, Maisie! That's exactly the attitude I'm looking for! If you truly want to ensure your studies proceed smoothly, then it's essential to play nice with my fellow Hexers! The ability to completely disregard the status, respect and accomplishments of any male is an essential skill in the Hegemony! I won't

allow you to attend a Hexer university until you are completely indistinguishable from genuine Hexers in this regard!"

As Gloriana gleefully tried to turn Maisie and Rennie into Hexers, Ves wanted to step in and stop this farce.

He didn't. The two had already divvied up the Larkinson seeds. Ves wasn't allowed to interfere with the curriculum of the female seeds. Gloriana claimed it was necessary in order to prevent Maisie and Rennie from getting bullied or ostracized by their teachers and classmates when they finally began their studies.

With the girls in Gloriana's hands, Ves could only console himself by setting the curriculum Maikel and Zanthar Larkinson.

The two boys, ahem, adolescent men chose the very risky option to forgo orthodox education entirely in favor of learning directly under Ves. Whether this was a stupid decision or not remained to be seen.

As far as Ves was concerned, he took his responsibilities very seriously. When the two men finished their studies, he wouldn't be able to provide them with MTA-accredited diplomas. This would severely hamper their future job opportunities, as possessing a valid diploma was one of the most basic but most essential requirements to gain employment in mech companies!

Certainly, Ves could hand them off to any virtual university to address this shortcoming, but a diploma from a virtual degree mill was worth as much as a nutrient pack.

Ves only hoped that his growing name and reputation would be able to make up for the lack of credentials in Maikel and Zanthar's records. Once he advanced to Senior, there shouldn't be any doubts about his teaching ability anymore!

He approached the two young men who were listening with disturbed fascination to Gloriana's lecture a few tables away.

Slap! Slap!

"Ouch!"

"Why did you hit us, uncle?!"

"First lesson, don't listen to Gloriana's nonsense! What she is teaching is only reserved for women, got it?! No man under my watch will start treating himself as a boy!" Ves placed his hands on his hips. "Now, since you have decided to enroll in my exclusive mech design class, I'm going to teach you how to become mech designers MY way. By the time I'm done with you, I hope you'll be able to at least do a bit of what I can do! Let's start with the history of mechs!"

Ves did not intend to take a neutral approach to the education of these two Larkinson seeds. Unlike with Ketis where he allowed her to find her own passion, Ves decided to take a more proactive approach and turn the two seeds into his pseudo-disciples!

Chapter 1987 The Meaning of Design

Ves always found something joyful in teaching.

He knew he was good in mech design. That did not automatically mean he was good at teaching.

In fact, from an objective standpoint, Ves was even sure whether he would be able to qualify as an able teacher at all. Yet the pleasure he derived from guiding others to become better mech designers was genuine enough to make him believe that he possessed an aptitude in this aspect.

Regardless of how schools would evaluate his teaching ability, Ves earnestly wanted to prep Maikel and Zanthar for the many challenges that awaited them once they began their true studies.

"Right now, the two of you haven't graduated from high school yet, so I won't hand too much coursework to you." He announced to the young men. "Even so, it is never too early to begin shaping your mentality towards mech design. The right mentality not only ensures you'll be on the right track when you graduate from my tutelage, but also ensures you are sufficiently motivated in your studies. The two of you have recently received some lessons from Mayer Torto, right?"

Maikel nodded. "Maisie and Rennie attended Mr. Torto's lessons as well. He's very smart."

"As he should, or else I wouldn't have hired him to begin with. What did he teach you two, exactly?"

"We learned about the role of mechs in human society in the Age of Mechs."

"Ah, that's a good lesson that every mech design should know by heart." Ves smiled. "Tell me in your own words what purpose they serve in today's society. You first, Maikel."

The young man hesitated after being put on the spot so suddenly. "Uhm, mechs are war machines. They are tools used to fight and win battles. They're similar to swords, tanks and warships in that they give humans a much greater capacity for violence."

"That's.. correct, but not the answer I'm looking for." Ves leaned back on his chair and crossed his arms. "If you want to become an average mech designer, then this basic definition is sufficient to guide your approach towards your work. If you want to move

beyond that and become a creator on the level of a Journeyman or above, then you will have to develop a deeper perspective of mechs. This is in essence the first step towards developing your own design philosophy!"

Both Maikel and Zanthar looked incredibly interested at that! Ves inwardly shook his head at their enthusiasm. While he liked their eagerness, it was way too soon for them to form their own design philosophies.

That said, it wasn't too early to teach them some of the precursors in order to ensure they wouldn't be going askew when they were ready to explore their own way.

"Zanthar." Ves directed his attention towards the other young clansman. "Tell me, what is the definition of a designer? What do they do, and why do they exist?"

"A designer is someone who makes.. designs?"

Ves did not look amused. "Is that the extent of your definition?"

"Uhm, no! A designer combines art and science to produce a plan or drawing that outlines the construction of a certain object or process! They are creators who use their skills and talents to provide tangible solutions to their customers or clients!"

"That sounds a bit better. I think you are still too hung up on the textbook definition of design, though. You're kind of mixing them up. Anyway, let me tell you a bit how I look at design."

He leaned forward and lowered his tone. "Design is a process of creation. The common definition of mech design or any sort of design includes both art and science for a very good reason. This is because they are both the core prerequisites to making it all possible."

"First, the science aspect. Anything more complicated than a handheld slingshot requires at least some knowledge of the sciences to design and construct. You need to know how metals work, how energy works, how processors work, how actuators work, how gravity works and etc. All of that requires a solid grasp of the natural sciences. However, it is a mistake for mech designers to think that science is all you need to become a good mech designer. What is a mech designer who is only good in the sciences?"

A pregnant silence ensued.

"I call that an engineer." Ves answered on their behalf. "Is that bad? Not necessarily. There are many positions in the galactic job market that ask for someone who is good with numbers or good in the sciences to solve all sorts of complex problems. Now, what do you call a mech designer who doesn't know any science but is very proficient in art?"

"Uhm, an artist?" Zanthar guessed.

"Ding ding ding! We have a winner! An artist is exactly the sort of person who is capable of creating beautiful designs that are completely unable to function in reality. There are many people like this as well. In fact, a lot of large mech companies run by mech designers who aren't necessarily good in this department employ swathes of artists to come up with mech concepts or are tasked with refining the final exterior appearances of their new products. Now, let me ask you something important. Why do mech designers exist? Why must they be proficient in both art and science when you can just gather a bunch of engineers and artists and lock them up in the same room to pump out designs?"

"Has that been done?"

"Certainly! Many times in fact! However, this practice fell out of fashion once mech design universities started flooding the job markets with mech designers. What distinguishes a mech designer from a team of engineers and artists?"

"They can do the job of both. Isn't that more efficient?"

Ves shook his head. "I wouldn't necessarily say so. In an age where there is far too much knowledge that we can ever learn in our lifetimes, specialization is the name of the game in personal development. On the surface, it is much more efficient to teach one person to become a good engineer and another person to become a good artist and divide the task of designing a mech between them. The artist is responsible for creating a concept and vision while the engineer digs into the nuts and bolts and tries to turn the idea into reality. This model is still commonplace in every other industry aside from mech design. Why the exception?"

Neither of the two students could come up with an answer. They were completely stumped!

Fortunately for them, Ves expected this kind of response.

"Think of the great works of Master Mech Designers and Star Designers. Think of the brilliant, superhuman feats of god pilots. Do you think they can accomplish all of their reality-defying work by abiding by any kind of normal process?"

"The expert pilots in our family are different!" Zanthar piped up! "All of the older folk always told me that expert pilots are more than human, more than mech pilots!"

"Exactly. What they are hinting towards is that expert pilots aren't completely constrained by the conventional laws of reality. Let me tell you what a mech designer is and what makes people like me different. Both expert pilots and Journeyman like me are able to go beyond what regular engineers are able to accomplish."

"How?"

"We learn the sciences because we need to be as capable as any engineer in coming up with a viable technical plan of a complex, multi-part machine. We learn art in order to expand our creativity and learn how to go beyond problem solving. The critical reason to learn both is to combine them together! A mech designer cannot be one without the other!"

The young Larkinsons looked pensive. They didn't entirely understand his point.

Ves sighed. "Look, the meaning of design is creation. We create actual working machines for a living. Creation is the keyword here. I cannot emphasize this enough. Science enables us to create a working machine, but that alone is not enough to justify the existence of my possession. It is only when it combines with art that will result in true creation! While every engineer has learnt how to 'design' something, a mech designer is expected to do more. They are expected to design a practical mech concept, build a compelling vision around it and transform it into an actual design!"

"I don't get it, sir. Isn't that something that can still be done with multiple engineers and other people?"

"Ah, that should have been the case if not for the existence of high-ranking mech designers. You see, in the early days of the Age of Mechs, the most successful mech designers back then tended to be the most enthusiastic and obsessed of this newfangled weapon platform. In later years, the MTA honored these admittedly radical visionaries as the first Journeymen and Seniors of our profession! Their early success have contributed enormously to the rise of mechs in human society and legitimizing the special status of mech designers compared to other design and engineering professions."

"That must be because their design philosophies are able to accomplish something that automation can never equal, right?"

"Good answer, Zanthar!" Ves clapped his hand. "This is a critical point to make. The discovery of design philosophies and how they enhanced the capabilities of mechs was an essential step in the popularization of mechs as the premier war machine in this day and age! I don't think I need to tell you how many benefits they can provide."

"So.. mech designers exist because they can combine their art and science into a powerful design philosophy?"

"That.. is one of the worst definitions that I have ever heard, Maikel." Ves shook his head in exasperation. "It's a gross oversimplification, but the idea is close enough. In a nutshell, mech designers can become so good in creating inspiring and innovative mech designs that they essentially bend reality! It is not wrong to consider Gloriana and I the mech designer equivalent of an expert pilot! Just like how an expert pilot is able to crush

regular mechs by leveraging resonance, mech designers are able to create machines that possess powerful advantages by leveraging the effects of their design philosophies! No regular engineer or artist can achieve this! Only one who masters both are able to foster a powerful design philosophy!"

Both his students looked enthralled by his description! Ves had unconsciously employed the same tricks he used to manipulate his Larkinson clansmen during his previous address!

In essence, holding a speech and lecturing a bunch of studies was not that different from each other. In both cases, the speaker sought to indoctrinate his audience!

Perhaps that was why he possessed a talent for teaching.

"Now let us get back to the meaning of design." Ves tried to center his lesson back to the main point. "What exactly is a design philosophy and what exactly makes it so special? Don't answer that. You won't be able to at this stage. In fact, you'll have to reach Journeyman if you want to provide a somewhat complete answer. For now, all you need to know is that the development of your design philosophies is critical to your future success. While it is too soon to figure out what you want to specialize in, I want you to prepare the first building blocks by thinking about the meaning of design and how it will shape your future work. If you can't figure this out, you'll never become a good mech designer!"

One of the greatest shortcomings Ves had noticed in many Novices and Masters was that the schools they attended didn't emphasize the artistic and creation side of mech design enough!

Privileged mech designers such as Gloriana were able to attend excellent universities where actual Masters set the curriculum and knew first-hand the importance of creativity!

"Dare to design." Ves told his two students. "These words encapsulate my heart of mech design, and the hearts of any competent mech designer! Never constrain yourself too much by practicalities. Let loose a bit! Go a little wild! Anything is possible in mech design as long as you dedicate your entire being towards your goals! It is all up to your vision and how much you are willing to devote to realize your ambitions. When it comes to your design philosophy, as long as you commit to something, don't ever let anyone else convince you that you are wrong! Even if I tell you that you are wrong, as long as you work hard enough, you can always make it right!"

His words succeeded in inspiring Maikel and Zanthar Larkinson!

While many interpretations existed on the meaning of design, to Ves it centered around creation! He wanted to push this view on his two students in order to ensure they

would adopt a similar approach towards mech design as him! He did not wish for them to end up as mediocre, uninspired mech designers.

If Ves had his way, he wanted to make them just as brilliant as himself!

Chapter 1988 Sweet Spot

After handing his two pupils with a pile of homework, Ves waved his hand to dismiss them. Maikel and Zanthar scurried off to their own corner in the design lab in order to start their essays on how they viewed the meaning of mech design.

He watched them go with a wistful expression. "It's not easy to adopt the mindset of a creator."

Speaking of creation, it wasn't enough to talk the talk. He also had to walk the walk.

After sorting out his thoughts, Ves turned back to his work and continued to do his part in fleshing out the draft design of his upcoming striker mech.

Since it was a team effort, Gloriana and the other assistants had already made strides in turning it from a sketch into a workable design. Much needed to be done, but their progress was quite quick in the initial days.

Most of that had to do with his new implant. The Archimedes Rubal not only increased his memory and processing abilities, but also sped up his thinking to an extent!

All of this resulted in less wasted time and far more accurate results. His productivity had effectively doubled, and this was only the start!

"Gloriana."

"Ves." She greeted.

He sat down next to her and held her hand.

Tiny electric signals transmitted between their neurons and through their flesh and skin. The moment they established a semi-hardline connection between their implants, their attention no longer resided in the material realm.

Instead, a private virtual realm formed by the efforts of their implants began to host a facsimile of their bodies. Ves and Gloriana ended up in the backyard of a magnificent mansion on a planet with two dazzling red moons lighting up the night sky.

"What an interesting setting." Ves commented.

"I can take you to the real site if you want."

Ves looked around and immediately noticed the six-sided table, the bushes cut in the shape of hexagons and other objects that shared the same distinctive design style.

"No thanks. I think we would both enjoy experiencing settings that neither of us have experienced."

Her face dropped. "If you say so, Ves."

"Let's not waste any more time on these distractions. We're here to work, not play. Come on. Show me your progress."

They soon began to work on their design in the virtual setting. Due to the very advanced capabilities of their implants, time flowed faster in the setting than in real time. Though their implants could run the virtual simulation at unimaginable speeds, their organic minds couldn't quite keep up as well!

Still, both possessed some means of raising the limit. Ves was already filled with biological augmentations that increased his brain's ability to handle strain. The CFA's gene optimization treatments were especially tailored to improve this capability!

As for Gloriana, her Erestal-015 comprehensively elevated many mech design-related abilities. Even if she wasn't able to elevate her brain's raw thinking capacity, she was able to outsource much of her thinking to the robust and extensive processors of her implant!

Essentially, all of this meant that on a good day, they could achieve five days of work in a single day!

In practice, their gains were usually lower than that. It depended on the complexity and difficulty of the problems they faced. Some problems could easily be solved as long as Ves and Gloriana performed enough calculations and deductions.

Other problems required raw imagination and ingenuity. No amount of processing power could solve these kinds of conceptual problems. The most the pair could do was speed up their subjective perception of time to accelerate their lateral thinking processes.

Whenever the two finished a mental design session, they continually impressed their subordinate design teams.

None of the Novices and Apprentices were able to work this fast!

In fact, even if they installed a comparable implant in their heads, they still wouldn't be able to reach this level of productivity!

The special nature of this method of collaboration allowed for Ves and Gloriana to directly exchange their thoughts and internal calculations with each other.

Though Ves had to get used to this method of direct data transfer, he soon got the hang of it. With Gloriana guiding his usage of his own implant, they developed an approach that took more and more advantage of the possibilities their mental design session enabled to minimize delays and facilitate their ability to synergize with each other.

The fact that they were able to get more in tune with each other's design philosophies and increase their synergies was a very big advantage!

By exchanging their thoughts directly along with some accompanying emotions in digitized form, they understood each other's perspectives on mechs a lot better than any explanation could provide.

Ves gained a much closer insight on what drove Gloriana to strive for perfection, while his girlfriend experienced his passion for the vibrancy and potential of life first-hand!

It wasn't always good, though. Sometimes, their views clashed against each other. Sharing their thoughts and emotions could easily lead to a backlash as their design philosophies strongly repelled the foreign thoughts and emotions!

To Ves, Gloriana's insistence on reaching perfection and her overall conception of the perfect vessel leaned too much towards determinism.

On a philosophical level, the perfect and most optimal mech design for a certain purpose existed. All Gloriana had to do was to become good enough to be able to make that possible!

Ves disagreed. To him, mechs were alive, and therefore subject to the whims of a living existence. Perfection could never be attained due to the existence of the cycle of life and death.

Anytime someone designed the 'perfect' mech, only a single generation had to go by for any competent mech designer to be able to design something that surpassed it in performance!

This constant progression proved that mechs were dynamic instead of static. They changed and improved over time. From the beginning of the Age of Mechs, an uncountable amount of mech designs emerged that constantly built from the accumulation of mechs published before!

Mech design had no more meaning once the perfect mech was designed. What else was there for people like Ves to do if he couldn't design anything that could surpass the perfect mech?

To her credit, Gloriana's design philosophy was slightly more nuanced than that. She based her design philosophy around designing the perfect vessel for a specific mech pilot, and that always looked from customer to customer.

Still, Ves fundamentally couldn't bring himself to accept all of her views. Life wasn't perfect, so mechs shouldn't be perfect. Simple as that. The best he could do was to strive close to it, but like Icarus flying towards the sun, ascending too high would only burn his wings!

Of course, he didn't share this analogy with his girlfriend. An enraged Gloriana was not something he ever wanted to experience!

So far, they had performed a lot of early work on the mech design. The striker mech took on a basic appearance, though much of its internals still had to be defined.

Their work was enough to form a decent expectation of the performance of the end product.

So far, Ves wasn't entirely impressed.

"The capacity problem is very difficult to deal with." He tapped his finger against his wrist. "If we try to increase its capacity a tiny bit further, the effectiveness of its armor will instantly nosedive. If we try to increase the thickness of its armor, its capacity and mobility can easily drop to unacceptable levels!"

After a lot of iteration and experimentation, the pair managed to find a sweet spot that offered a very decent balance between capacity, protection and mobility.

Capacity in this case pretty much correlated to offensive power as it determined how much energy cells and heat sinks the mech was able to carry into battle.

While finding a sweet spot sounded nice, not every one of them were necessarily good!

Some sweet spots landed at a position that sat below his minimum expectations! Right now, Ves found himself unsatisfied with the level of defense and capacity of his striker mech.

It ran out of propellant just a bit too quickly to make it through most battles.

In addition, its armor was not at a level that would allow it to comfortably confront multiple melee mechs up close. In fact, one of the best counters of striker mechs, ranged mechs, would probably have a field day pelting his striker mech with a flurry of lasers!

"This is the best we can achieve with the limitations we are working under." Gloriana told him. "I've explored this configuration extensively. I'm sure that a Senior or Master

may be able to come up with something better, but.. it wouldn't be our design. To us, this sweet spot is the best we can obtain. I think we should find performance improvements through other means. We're only in the early stages of this design project. A lot is still subject to change, and we can always find other components to license if we need different solutions."

This was the only way to mitigate this difficult issue. Despite their increased affinity for mechs and Gloriana's meteoric progress of her own design philosophy, it was very hard to wiggle around with absolutes.

"I have a feeling we are approaching the technical challenges of this design from the wrong direction." Ves suggested as he studied the projection of their current project from every angle. "It's as if we are treading on a road that leads to a dead end. What we are doing right now is trying to dig a hole in the wall blocking our way forward! That's not an efficient response to a problem of this nature!"

"Then what would you have us do, Ves?!"

"In order to reach our destination, perhaps we might need to turn back to a crossroads and take a different route instead! Who knows, maybe the alternative won't lead to a dead end!"

"I understand your point." Gloriana crossed her arms and directed a stern expression at Ves. "However, this is the way that all spaceborn striker mechs are designed. Their design principles are simple, which means there isn't a lot of room for variety. In fact, I think you will find that striker mechs is one of the mech archetypes that exhibit the least amount of variety on the market!"

Ves partially agreed with her statement. Striker mechs were so simple that it was very hard to justify a deviation from the standard formula of this mech type.

There was just.. something frustrating about their current direction! If Ves stripped it of its glow, the striker mech wouldn't be able to make a compelling splash in the market.

That was not what he wanted to see! He wanted to validate his own approach towards mech design by creating an appealing product that provided value both from its basic functioning and its unique glow!

He didn't want to create another mech like the Desolate Soldier where the average and exceptional performance of his design was carried entirely by its glow!

Such an approach would slowly corrupt and invalidate his determination towards designing well-performing mechs! Ves had already started slipping ever since he resorted to throwing money at his problems.

Designing a commercial mech for the third-class mech market was a test for himself. He needed to restore his ability to design efficient mech designs that were able to do more with less!

So far, the striker mech design did not meet his standard!

"This is not enough." Ves spoke in a dissatisfied tone. Perhaps he carried over a bit more of Gloriana during their mental design sessions than he thought! "I am tempted to scrap our current progress and go back to the drawing board, because this mech is not something that I want to sell under the LMC brand name."

Gloriana frowned. "I.. don't necessarily disagree with you, but if there is one thing that you've taught me, it's that we can't allow our needs to get in the way of what is truly necessary! This is probably the best design we can come up with. There is no way we can do any better!"

"I don't believe that! There has to be a better solution! We just have to think outside the box!"

Chapter 1989 Alternative Concept

Ves held a mech figurine in his hands. He turned it around and inspected it from various angles. He threw it in the air and caught it before it could clatter against the deck of the design lab.

The current conundrum involving the ongoing striker mech project prompted him to pause his work.

He saw a need to reevaluate their current design concept. So far, it fell short of the ambitious area denial mech he imagined in his vision.

The more he worked on the design, the more he chafed at its limitations.

It didn't help that his current project was completely different from his last project. The Bright Warrior modular mech platform might be at least five to ten times more complex, but its plethora of options and generous budget enabled him to add as many goodies as he wanted in its design!

As a bridge mech, a Larkinson mech and a package of four mechs in one, the Bright Warrior proved to be a massive success!

In fact, once his fleet reached the Sentinel Kingdom and stocked up on premium missiles, the lethality of his Bright Warriors would skyrocket to another level! The CRC mechs would never be able to last as long on the battlefield when his latest mechs were finally armed with missiles that cost as much as a budget mech a piece!

He was filled with pride every time he thought about how his Bright Warrior design ended up, but he had to admit that he had been a little too loose with his wallet.

Including the ordinarily unobtainable Breyer alloy and a money-draining missile launcher system were two of the most egregious instances of using his wallet to overcome his problems!

As Ves kept turning around the freshly-fabricated mockup of the unfinished striker mech in his hands, he continued to grasp for inspiration on how to overcome his current design's capacity problem.

"It's all about volume. There's simply not enough space to reach the parameters I want."

A given mech could only carry so much stuff. Past a certain point, adding additional mass and volume to a mech would comprehensively result in a very severe drop in performance.

This was why it was important to find an optimal sweet spot where a mech's offense, defense and mobility all reached satisfactory levels.

Right now, Ves wasn't satisfied with his striker mech's offensive power. If he continued to flesh out this mech concept, he would only end up with a design that only lasted ten to fifteen minutes in battle at most, maybe even less if the mech pilot was rather liberal with the flamethrower.

That wasn't good enough. He knew quite well that the lasting power of his mechs could make or break a victory.

His striker mech was not designed for the mech games circuit where peak performance mechs were the name of the game. He designed it specifically for actual battles in space where most skirmishes in space where battles could stretch for hours in some cases.

While he didn't demand his mech carry enough supplies to last for an entire hour, he at least wanted his striker mechs to last for a decent amount of time before they were forced to return to their motherships in order to replenish themselves.

He knew that comparable striker mechs weren't necessarily better off than his current mech concept. Even so, mechs that lasted a bit longer during active engagements obviously sold better than the ones that lasted shorter.

According to market research, endurance and longevity were in high demand. They were named as one of the persistent complaints by most customers.

While there were plenty of mechs on the market that offered a lot more capacity, these models weren't very attractive due to their lackluster defense and mobility.

"Customers want it all. They want a mech that is deadly, long-lasting, tough and decently fast. Oh, it also has to be affordable!"

No mech designer was able to satisfy all of these demands at once. Ves wasn't arrogant enough to think that he would be able to do what even Master Mech Designers couldn't do! As reality-defying as their capabilities might seem, even the best weren't able to stuff twice as much mech in a single frame!

"Meow."

While Ves was trying to figure out how to solve this problem in his own way, Lucky kept floating around his hands while staring at the figurine with curiosity.

"Are you hungry, Lucky?"

"Meow!"

"You want to eat my figurine?"

"Meow meow!"

A dark expression came over his face. "Mechs aren't made to be your food!"

"Meeeeoow!" Lucky yowled in his face with his mouth stretched open. Ves could see straight through his throat!

A sudden realization came over Ves. He grabbed Lucky from the air and brought him closer in order to inspect the dimensions of his pet!

"Meweoweow!"

"Hold still, Lucky! I'm not doing anything to you! I just need to make some comparisons!"

He held Lucky in one hand and his mech figurine in the other hand. Now that he thought about it, if he pretended that Lucky was mech, his scale was similar to the scale of his mech figurine!

Ves carefully tried to envision the mockup of his striker mech design as an actual mech. He then compared it to another vision of a tiger mech fulfilling the same role!

"Hmmm.."

The tiger mech frame offered various advantages and disadvantages. They worked best on land and solid ground as their quadruped limbs offered a lot of maneuvering options, but it was not unheard of to see them in space.

"A tiger mech can actually function as a decent striker mech."

In many cases, the mouth of a tiger mech incorporated at least some ranged weapon. Ves couldn't help but recall his first tiger mech design, the Kinslayer he designed to fulfill a commission for Lady Miralix of House Laterna.

The landbound mech was a peak performance mech designed to take down one of the most formidable Crown Cats on Felixia. The custom mech succeeded in bringing down Zeigra after an arduous hunt, and part of its success was thanks to its killer move!

Ves could never forget the sight of seeing the heavily-damaged Kinslayer bite the heavily-injured Crown Cat by the neck and unleashing a sea of flames from its throat!

He shook his head. "The Kinslayer is a different mech from my current project."

Not only was its budget at least ten times bigger, the Kinslayer was also melee mech. The range of its flamethrower breath was so short that it was only effective when it bit its target!

Still, perhaps Ves might be able to adapt a tiger mech into an area denial role! A bestial striker mech might be a little more difficult to pilot, but there were several ways he could use its distinct properties to his advantage!

"Meooow!"

"I said hold still!"

Ves began to visualize various means to adapt a tiger-shaped mech into a striker mech. He quickly realized that his bestial mech would have to carry various external components in order to make it function the way he wanted.

His visualization ability was strong, but he felt the need to be a bit more hands on at this time.

He directed his gaze towards the minifab placed at the side of the design lab. Instead of standing up and walking over to the machine, Ves decided to let loose a bit and exercise his implant.

He activated the remote connectivity option of his implant, aware of the risks that this action brought. The risks were negligible though since the Scarlet Rose was completely under his control and the design lab was one of her most secure compartments.

Once he connected to the minifab, he began to prepare it for a hasty fabrication run. Using his implant, he designed a few mock components on the fly and ordered the minifab to pump them out as quickly as possible.

A handful of bots came online. They floated to the material stores and returned a moment later to feed the minifab with the necessary resources.

Shortly afterwards, the bots served up a number of parts to Ves. He took them and began to apply them onto Lucky's back.

"Meow meow meow!"

"Yes, you're right." Ves grinned. "I could have fabricated a tiger mech figurine in the first place, but why should I when I have you? In my eyes, you're the perfect model for my tiger mechs! You should feel honored to serve as the inspiration of my mechs!"

He foisted scaled-down attachments onto Lucky's back before letting him go. The aggrieved gem cat helplessly floated in the air while he tried to get used to the extra 'limbs' installed on his long and sinuous back!

The pale bronze-like plates that covered Lucky's body were usually interspersed with faint black tiger stripes.

Now, his appearance looked completely different now that he gained his attachments! It was a lot easier now for Ves to imagine Lucky as a bestial striker mech.

He activated a design program in his digitized mind and began to sketch a more viable mech in this configuration.

"Meeow!"

"Don't you dare go away! I still need to observe you a while longer to finish my sketch!"

As great of an example as Lucky served for his tiger mechs, Ves still saw a need to design a 'fatter' mech.

Strikers mechs were fairly broad and thick by default as they eschewed mobility for defense.

Ves applied the same paradigm to his new sketch as he broadened and thickened his new draft until he came up with a mech that looked a bit more.. obese than his pet.

Of course, Ves did not design an outright fat cat. An ugly product simply wouldn't sell as much as a more aesthetically-pleasing product unless the performance gains were truly phenomenal.

If Ves had to describe it, he just bulked Lucky's original cat shape up until it resembled that of a tiger, with a little extra padding here and there. The sketch took on a distinctly masculine impression due to how he placed all of the additional bulk.

This was a ferocious-looking draft design. The tiger mech he sketched consisted of a formidable-looking bestial striker mech with its main armaments mounted on its back.

Ves partially broke up the 34F Enison Spreader and incorporated two mounted barrels on flanks of the tiger mech. Doubling the number of barrels increased the cost of the mech, but Ves figured it was a worthwhile tradeoff.

He began to access the internal space of his sketch and began to draw some loose components.

Compared to humanoid mechs, tiger mechs mostly contained the same amount of internal volume, but this was not always the case.

If Ves was willing to sacrifice the agility and mobility of his tiger mech, he could increase the capacity of his mech without making it too unwieldy!

"Meow!"

Lucky rolled in the air while trying to gnaw off the mock flight system and twin flamethrower barrels mounted on his back. He eventually succeeded after rubbing his back against a nearby terminal.

"Meow meow!"

His cat angrily left the design lab after dumping the extra accessories, but Ves didn't need his cat to serve as a model any longer.

The sketch he developed in his mind was a lot more in line with his intentions!

He quickly drew himself back from his mental design space and regarded the humanoid mech figurine in his hands.

"I don't need you any longer."

He chucked the metal figurine over his shoulder, causing it to clatter against the deck. A cleaning bot swooped in a few seconds later to drop it off at recycling.

Ves already turned his attention inwards again. He completed his sketch with the power of his digitized mind and added a few more technically-accurate details after importing the components he licensed.

Though not all of the components were optimized for bestial mechs, Ves could just adapt them or replace them with something else. For now, he just wanted to see whether his idea was viable.

"I hope this alternative concept works."

Chapter 1990 Low Expectations

When Ves met up with Gloriana, he showed off his latest efforts. He handed over another mech figurine that served as a mockup of his alternative concept for their striker mech.

Gloriana looked nonplussed. "Is this what you were talking about when you stated you wanted to think outside the box? You could have at least resorted to a bestial shape that works better in space! Why not a dragon mech?"

"It doesn't matter." Ves shrugged. "A dragon is merely a mech with a large flight system and a bit more arcing in its body shape. I decided upon a tiger shape because it's already familiar territory to me. It also helps that it fully conforms with its intended design spirit. I think Zeigra always works best when he's matched with a tiger mech design."

Though his arguments made sense, Gloriana knew that there were a lot more implications that her boyfriend hadn't mentioned!

"There's not much point to quadruped mechs in space. There is hardly any solid soil for the legs to grip in. This is all wasted resources."

"I don't think so." Ves replied. "The legs make up for the lack of swords to the mech. When any humanoid mech comes close, they'll have to fend off the mech equivalent of a tiger! As long as the tiger mech is piloted by someone competent, my striker mech can be quite a beast in close combat!"

"You're talking about turning our striker mech into a hybrid mech!"

"Not exactly..." Ves shook his head. "It's not a powerhouse in melee combat. Compared to conventional tiger mechs, most of the capacity of the mech is devoted to empowering its flamethrower mounts. With the way I've configured this draft, it features the same amount of internal volume of a humanoid mech, but actually offers a lot more space for external mounts. Did you notice that my alternative concept has a decent amount of room on its back?"

She turned her gaze back to the mech figurine in her hand and touched its back. "With humanoid mechs, the flight system occupies at least fifty to eighty percent of the available space on the back. It's different for tiger mechs since they are quadruped machines with more but comparably smaller legs."

The flight system and the twin flamethrower mounts only occupied around forty percent of the mech's back. While that didn't mean that sixty percent of the real estate could be used to mount external modules, his alternative concept was at least a lot better off in this regard!

Nonetheless, Gloriana immediately pointed out the critical flaw to this alternate design.

"This mech is a bit worse off in terms of defense. Compared to a humanoid mech which is able to present its entire strong side towards the enemy, your bestial striker mech can easily expose its vulnerable flight system and back-mounted components to the enemy. If the enemy attacks from multiple angles, it's difficult for this mech concept to guard all of its VULNERABLE external modules."

Ves reached out to the figurine in her hands and oriented it so that its snarling maw directly looked in her face. "Its front profile is a lot smaller as a consequence. Against distant opponents who are all approaching from a single direction, it's difficult to target its broader side profile. The only way to target its back-mounted modules is if they gain a favorable angle, which won't be easy."

In most space battles, the enemy closed in from a single direction. Only when they came close enough did the distance shorten to a point where flanking maneuvers actually resulted in greater angles of approach.

"I don't know, Ves." She continued to frown as she put down the figurine on a table. "I understand what you are trying to accomplish, but an excessive amount of back-mounted modules is nothing different than exposing its internals. The point of armoring a mech is to protect the critical but fragile components that make it work. Both melee mechs and ranged mechs can easily cripple your bestial striker mech's external modules if they attack from the sides. In comparison, our original humanoid striker mech design is better off since its back is firmly oriented to the rear, which is much more difficult to reach."

She was right. Ves deflated a bit as he tried but failed to muster up a good counterargument. Though he already anticipated this problem to an extent, it was very difficult to determine whether the humanoid version or the bestial version fared better in actual combat.

"Let me think about it some more."

"No." Gloriana lifted her palm. "A lot of times, your ideas have merit. This is not one of those times. If you wanted to design a melee mech or an artillery mech, then the tiger shape makes a bit more sense. A striker mech is not as fitting. You're casting aside the advantages of a tiger mech in the form of its superior mobility on solid surfaces for marginal benefits that bring their own host of problems."

"It features a higher capacity!"

"That capacity comes at a greater cost! Unless you are willing to turn your tiger mech into a camel mech, there is no way to adequately protect its back exterior!"

The two argued a bit further, but Gloriana succeeded in gaining the upper hand. She pointed out all of the critical conceptual and practical flaws related to trying to turn a tiger mech into a striker mech.

With the requirements and limitations they were working under, Ves' alternate concept simply failed to bring enough advantages to convince his girlfriend to adopt it. To her, it was a failed experiment.

"Don't take it too hard." She said and pressed the side of her body against him. "Your mech is still viable, but not enough to pass muster. It's just that there aren't a lot of bestial mech pilots in the Komodo Star Sector, which will certainly affect its immediate market appeal. Striker mechs are supposed to be quick to learn but slow to master. Turning to a tiger mech shape will just increase the skill floor of our mech while keeping its skill ceiling just as high, if not higher. It won't be a good sell."

Ves took the mech figurine from her hands and studied it a bit further. "You're right."

If he had his way, then he would have attempted to design both mech designs and compare their actual performance through extensive testing. He could adopt the best-performing one as the definitive design while throwing the other into his archive of unfinished work.

The problem was that this entailed a lot of work. While there were plenty of mech companies and mech designers who adopted this labor-intensive approach towards mech design, the extra work and effort needed to deliver two high-quality designs instead of just a single one was not something he could afford to do. He had way too much work on his plate and doubling his design workload without yielding any obvious gains was far too wasteful!

All of this meant that Ves had to make a choice. He could choose to acquiesce to Gloriana's recommendation and drop his tiger mech idea. He could also choose to force everyone to adopt his alternative concept.

When Ves glanced at Gloriana, she looked back at him with expectation. It was as if she already knew his choice and was just waiting for him to open his mouth to issue his surrender. Nothing about her demeanor suggested that she was in the mood for any nonsense!

This situation did not sit well with Ves. He felt as if he was faced with an insanely difficult puzzle. Instead of solving it completely, Ves and Gloriana settled on a partial answer.

In a school test, the two would probably be able to gain 60 points out of a 100 points. While that sounded like a passable grade, Ves was not satisfied with his lackluster result!

He wanted a higher score! Even if obtaining 100 or even 90 points was out of reach, he still wanted to score at least 70 points, which would already put his striker mech design above most of the competition in technical performance alone!

Ves rubbed his eyes in thought. "Maybe.. We don't need to adopt a tiger mech. We don't need to adopt a humanoid mech either. What if.. we can merge them together? What if we detach ourselves from the boundaries of established mech shapes and just come up with our own?!"

"You're talking about designing an aberrant mech." Gloriana curled her mouth in distaste. "They're very difficult to design. They don't equate to any of the standard humanoid or bestial mech shapes, so we have to research all of the fundamental mechanisms concerning its unique shape from scratch. That is a lot of work, and it's not evident that we'll be able to obtain any compelling gains. If a mech designer already came up with a compelling aberrant mech concept for a striker mech, it would have already been popularized in the mech industry."

"You're right, but let's not knock this idea before we try it. Every mech designer's circumstances are different. Who knows, we might really be able to find an aberrant form that accomplishes all of the goals we set out to achieve!"

Gloriana scooted away from him and crossed her arms. "If you are really set upon this course, then by all means go ahead. I won't take part in your foolishness, though. The formula for striker mechs may be simple, but it's solid. You can't go wrong if you adopt the standard humanoid form."

After a bit of discussion, the pair eventually came to an agreement.

Ves had a week to come up with an aberrant mech concept for their current project. If his efforts failed to pass muster after a week of exploration, then he would be forced to give up his search for a better mech concept and rejoin Gloriana in designing their humanoid version.

"If it was up to me, I wouldn't give you more than a day." Gloriana huffed. "I know you wouldn't be resigned if I didn't give you enough time to ram your head against the wall. You need to experience true failure before you are ready enough to admit the futility of your current direction."

How charming of her to beat down his hopes.

"You could have wished me good luck, Gloriana."

She smirked. "When it comes to work, I'm always serious. I can't bring myself to lie to you about your chances of success. Personally, I think you have enjoyed way too many successes recently. You need to be taken down a peg, and there's no better way to do so than allowing you to try and fail to climb over an impassable hurdle."

He tried his best not to take her words to heart. Ves wasn't the kind of mech designer who gave up before he made an actual attempt. A week was a lot of time for him to explore further alternate concepts.

He already developed some initial ideas.

"We'll find out after a week."

The two separated after Ves accepted this challenge. Gloriana would continue to work on the main design with only occasional input from him in order to make sure its spiritual development was still on track.

Ves sat down behind a different terminal and began to think. How could he come up with a mech concept that possessed all of the strengths of a humanoid striker mech but offered a bit more capacity at no significant cost?

"Nothing comes for free." He whispered to himself. "I have to make some sacrifices to the mech design in order to obtain the necessary capacity."

He began anew by loading in the humanoid version into his mental design program. He snipped off the legs, freeing up a lot of space but at the cost of removing a lot of potential buffer and crippling its mobility in gravity conditions.

Nonetheless, legs weren't as critical in spaceborn mechs as landbound mechs, so it was not unusual to see mechs with incomplete limbs, though admittedly they mostly tended to be cheaper products.

"What can I do with this starting point?" He wondered.