

Chapter 1161 Trail of Tears

Now that Ves took a backseat in Axelar's mind space, he began to relax and look forward to the show he meticulously engineered.

Ves took sadistic pleasure in Axelar's misfortunes.

It served the wastrel right for wasting Ves' time by continually indulging in stimulants!

"It's not my fault that you're forced to renounce your old life and return to piloting mechs. Blame yourself for being such a useless individual! Even if you're a Terran clansman, you should at least make something out of your life instead of validating every stereotype the Rubarthans had spread about your kind!"

At this moment, Axelar was almost completely out of it as his mind continually rebooted. The stimulant-deprived mech pilot simply couldn't fathom how he could ever derail his life so thoroughly.

What Benny just repeated about his decisions in the last day was unlike anything Axelar ever wanted out of his life!

It didn't make any sense!

"Being sober is scary! Please give me a fix!" Axelar shouted as a machine was scanning his body.

The voice of one of the doctors patched into the chamber of the scanning machine.

"My apologies, Master Axelar, but in the interest of preparing you for battle, we believe it is best to administer only essential medicines. Right now, despite the lack of sleep, your body is in a fairly healthy condition. Excessive use of stimulants will only cloud your mind and degrade your performance for the upcoming mech duel."

"That doesn't apply to me! The cloudier my mind, the better I fight! Come on doc, I know you have some pain relievers or sedatives on hand. Give me a dose, please, I'm begging you! I can't take it any longer!"

"No can do, Master Axelar. It's out of my hands. The Streon Clan is directly patched into our network. They want you to be as clear-minded as possible so that you will be able to fight in your best condition!"

No matter how much Axelar moaned and begged, neither Benny nor any of the arena staff would ever allow him to get his fix!

Axelar needed a lot of time to come to grips with the situation he ended up in. He struggled to get used to his clear-minded state. For the last couple of years, he never went by without at least one drug taking effect on his mood!

Stimulants made his perception of reality come to life. Stimulants gave his brains a nice buzz and kept him entertained for hours from the hallucinations he conjured up in his frequent hazes.

A reality without stimulants was a dull and colorless place to live in as far as Axelar was concerned! A strong psychological yearning for stimulants constantly played on his sober mind. He would do anything for a fix!

Yet his wish was being denied. Instead of receiving a fix, he was instead being prepped for battle against a formidable mech duelist that he couldn't afford to lose!

If it was just a single public mech duel, then Axelar would have considered putting up a half-hearted fight and surrender as soon as he 'accidentally' slipped up and cause his mech to suffer crippling damage.

His reputation would go down the toilet, and he'd let down the Streon Clan as well, but what did that matter to him? The clan was the clan! Its reputation would never go to ruin just from the conduct of a single clansman!

As for his own reputation, he never cared about it very much even before he became an addict. If he ever cared about his reputation for even a tiny bit, then he would have stopped taking stimulants all day and start discharging his responsibilities on behalf of his assigned elite mech corps.

Yet his future trajectory encompassed more than the mech duel that was about to start. Axelar wanted to beat up his sober self to a pulp for what it did to him! Why did he announce that he would be taking part in the Trail of Tears?! That was practically handing over his application to participate in the elite training program in front of billions of people! He would never be able to walk back that that decision no matter how many times he pleaded insanity!

"Come on, doc! If not a stimulant, at least give me glass of beer! Make it a huge glass while you're getting one!"

"We aren't sensing any signs that you are dehydrated, Master Axelar. If you are nonetheless feeling a little parched, we can supply you with 150 milliliters of water."

"Plain water?! What does that even taste like? Will it get me high?"

Axelar couldn't even remember the last time he drank water!

Benny's voice patched into the comm channel. "You should get accustomed to drinking water, Master Axelar. The Trail of Tears is a training program meant to unearth potential through hardship. The only form of hydration that they'll provide is plain water and the only food you are allowed to eat are dense and energy-rich nutrient packs."

"I'll die! I'll starve to death!" Axelar practically burst into tears! "I can't live on water and nutrient packs! That's a space peasant's diet! How can Terrans do that to each other?! Not even the poorest Terran beggar eats nutrient packs!"

Benny commented further as if he didn't recognize his charge's distress. "The Trail of Tears is very adamant about rewarding success and punishing

failures. Those who achieve the best results in the daily training sessions are bestowed with double rations while the worst performers have to make do with half rations. A considerable amount of trainees suffer so much from malnutrition that they are no longer able to keep up with the training."

Axelar's eyes held a ray of hope. If he could just underperform a bit and endure some hunger, would that mean he would be kicked out of the training program?

"The trainees at the bottom of the ranking list won't get any reprieve, however. They have already signed over their lives to the Trail of Tears! A considerable amount of deaths each year come from underperforming trainees who starved to death! Nobody is generous enough to share their food with the losers. Instead, their failures and deaths are used to motivate the surviving trainees to work harder in order to avoid the same fate!"

"That's murder!" Axelar shouted. "How can the Trail of Tears get away with killing so many promising Terran mech pilots!"

"Joining the Trail of Tears is a voluntary decision." Benny stoically replied, as if reminding Axelar that he made the decision out of his own volition! "No one forces you to participate in it. While the death rate is very high, it is one of the most successful training programs in the Confederation in producing expert pilots! Even the more well-off trainees who failed to advance to expert pilot have gone on to become notable leaders!"

The Trail of Tears was an unusually harsh training program, but it was actually rather modest compared to the outright torture the Rubarthans engaged in to draw out the potential of their own mech pilots.

Some of the leaders of the Terran Confederation recognized that they were being too soft on their own mech pilots. With the Rubarthans constantly

outshining the Terrans, the first-rate superstate decided to create the Trail of Tears as an attempt to match their most hated rival!

This was why no matter how much the Trail of Tears mistreated the elite clansmen mech pilots who signed up, the training program was never under threat!

The Streon Clan had no recourse at all if Axelar failed to perform up to the rigorous standards set by the Trail of Tears. The training program was very meticulous in being harsh but fair. Anyone who failed only had their incompetence and lack of willpower to blame!

Axelar knew this much at least, which made him all the more distressed!

"The Trail of Tears is also a good opportunity to exercise your social skills." Benny said. "I've heard that trainees who don't have enough food often turn into bandits who fight and steal the rations of other trainees. Even those who received double rations aren't exempt from getting robbed! If you don't make some friends very soon, a very unfortunate fate will befall you even if you are a talented mech pilot who can keep up with the initial training sessions!"

This little tidbit practically gave Axelar a heart attack! He at least took some comfort in his high genetic aptitude, even though the average standard among the elites who participated in the Trail of Tears was already high.

Yet to hear that he wouldn't be safe even if he performed at his best frightened him to no end! What kind of training program allowed their trainees to descend into bandits and savages just for some scraps of awful-tasting food and water?!

"It is not all that bad, Master Axelar." Benny mused. "If I was a mech pilot, I would have signed up as well. The Trail of Tears is called that way because the training camp is a roving fleet of mech carriers and support ships. The fleet follows a random route that takes it to all of the hotspots and danger

zones in Terran space. You will get to explore some of the most dangerous planets and regions of space that the Confederation has to offer! What an exciting adventure!"

"It's exciting enough to give me a stroke!" Axelar yelled back.

"I've heard one instance where the Trail of Tears dropped their trainees on a savage jungle exoplanet. Carnivorous exobeasts the size of mechs roam the planet, and in order to make sure they hunt down the trainees, the training instructors conditioned them to treat human flesh as a delicacy. Even though the trainees were informed that they would only have to survive for twenty-four hours, in truth the training instructors waited for an entire week and let the trainees despair in their abandonment before they finally sent out shuttles to pick up the survivors!"

"That's a war crime!? How can those training instructors still have their jobs?!"

"I've heard that the Terrans tried hiring normal instructors." Benny recalled.

"The problem was that they couldn't bring themselves to push the trainees to their limits. That is why the Terrans replaced normal training instructors with the worst criminal mech pilots they could unearth from their prisons. They even hired Rubarthan prisoners of war who would like nothing more than to kill as many Terrans as they can get away with it! Only these types of scum are ruthless enough to give the trainees a strong threat to their lives!"

This revelation practically made Axelar choke in his breath. He was just exaggerating a little back then. How could it be that the Trail of Tears employed actual war criminals as their training instructors?!

"The Trail of Tears is so successful in its runs so far that the Terran leadership are even contemplating whether they should double down on its extreme training methods. The Rubarthans have already shown that these elite training programs can still achieve better results with higher pressure. To that end, the

higher ups are debating whether they should increase the pressure until the death rate is doubled to fifty percent. Depending on how fast they resolve that debate, the changes might be implemented in time for your own batch!"

"Nooo!" Axelar screamed. "The politicians should take their time! And why do they feel the need to copy the Rubarthans all the time?! We're Terrans! We should stick to our own culture and customs!"

"I agree with you, Master Axelar. As Terrans, we should stick to our own identity. It's well-known that most of the survivors who managed to come back from the training program alive are mentally unfit to contribute to society. Rather than let them live, it is better for them to die in glory in the Trail of Tears. The training program should increase its targeted death rate to at least seventy-five percent!"

Axelar wanted to cry but had no tears!

Chapter 1162 Waltz Nexbern

The much-anticipated mech duel between Axelar Streon and Waltz Nexbern, the team leader of the Haspel Asps, was about to begin.

Nexbern previously piloted the heavy cannoneer, but that was not all he was capable of. Every professional in the Terran mech games circuit tended to be allrounders.

Adaptability was a requirement in order to pilot hundreds of different mechs a year. They also needed to learn how to cope against a thousand different mech configurations as their adversaries.

Whereas the mech duelists in the Bright Republic like Jarl Brenthill and Raella Larkinson often stuck to a single mech which gained fame alongside of them, the Terrans played a very different game!

"In the Bright Republic, both the mech and mech pilots are the stars." Ves mentally noted as Axelar was about to enter his new mech. "In the Terran

Confederation, the mech games are only stages for mech pilots to show off their versatility and their ability to outplay the endless amount of confounding challenges in their way."

In the Terran dueling circuit, It was rare for a specific mech configuration to last more than a single match, much less use it in another match. Once a dueling mech entered the arena, its strengths and weaknesses all became public knowledge. An opponent could easily tailor their mechs to counter a specific configuration as long as they received advance warning!

In the Bright Republic, the mech athletes adopted different customs. Everyone's specialty was known and it was extremely rare for a mech athlete to pilot a different mech type. In addition, they usually stuck to a single specific mech model in all of their matches in order to develop a deep familiarity with their fighting machines.

"Each side knows everything there is to know about their opponent. That often leads to interesting dynamics and mind games."

That said, while the mech athletes were loath to switch to a different mech model, they accepted the need for modification. Mech designers who specialized in modifying and customizing dueling mechs knew the mech models intimately and could implement preplanned modifications within an hour as long as the team stockpiled the necessary spare parts.

When Ves designed the Ouroboros, he knew it would be useless to predict what Waltz would bring to the next fight.

Rather than obsessing over Waltz's next mech configuration, Ves instead turned his focus towards making the Ouroboros as strong as possible while relying on only two weapon systems.

Right now, Axelar beheld his mech with stumped amazement as he entered its cockpit and booted it up. He couldn't believe Benny's claim that he designed such an abnormal mech!

"I already know I'm insane when I'm sober, but I've gone completely off my rockers this time! How can I design something as stupid as an antiquated hero mech! Two weapons! Just two weapons! That's five times less than what I normally put into my mechs!"

Anyone who designed a hero mech these days in the Terran Confederation was mad enough to be put into a psychiatric treatment facility! Axelar ought to be visiting one right now instead of using a hero mech to fight against a mech athlete!

"Waltz is going to kick my butt!"

Although he may act like he was hot stuff, Axelar was very cognizant about his fighting ability. His high genetic aptitude carried him far, but he hadn't been keeping up with his training lately.

He also possessed very little combat experience, which stood in stark contrast to Waltz who survived through thousands of matches over his long and illustrious career!

When comparing mech pilots, Axelar was clearly inferior to Waltz. As for comparing their mechs, it was an utter disaster to Axelar! A mech with just two weapons was about to step into battle against a mech with at least a dozen different solutions!

"There's no way I can win!" Axelar despaired!

Yet when he finally interfaced with the Ouroboros, his panic suddenly became more muted. A sense of intimacy and connection welled from his mech. It felt as if he reconnected to a piece of himself!

None of the mechs he ever designed made him feel this way!

From the corner of Axelar's mind, Ves' consciousness observed the interaction closely. Although the materialization process significantly weakened the presence of the X-Factor in the Ouroboros, it had not disappeared entirely.

Somehow, the design spirit of the Ouroboros managed to power through the obstacles and make its presence known in the only existing copy of the mech!

That wasn't all. As Axelar began to deepen his connection with his mech, Ves inadvertently felt a pull on his Spirituality.

The X-Factor of the Ouroboros reacted to his presence in Axelar's mind!

"The Ouroboros carries my spiritual imprint as well! It's not surprising for the mech to recognize its maker!"

This was the first time that Ves charged the X-Factor of his mech with his spiritual energy. It was also the first time he rode in someone's mind as they interfaced with a mech he designed himself.

All of these changes led to several new interactions that Ves had never witnessed before!

For now, Ves couldn't quite figure out the purpose of his connection to the Ouroboros. He wasn't the mech pilot, nor did he interface directly with his mech like Axelar. The connection was rather weak as well so he doubted he could influence the mech's performance in his current state.

"There's something else going on as well."

His design seed had always been radiating spiritual waves without rhyme or reason. Ves was getting rather concerned about it because it seemed as if it was signalling its presence to dangerous predators like a lantern in the dark.

Now, he found out that the Ouroboros was actually absorbing the spiritual waves! Despite the very close proximity, the mech didn't absorb all of the waves put out by his design seed, but it was nonetheless eating up a considerable amount!

"What is the purpose of this interaction?" Ves questioned. "Is this something unique to my design philosophy or does every Journeyman's design seed interact with their mechs in this fashion?"

For now, Ves believed that this phenomenon along with all the other novel interactions would lead to some pleasant surprises.

As Ves mused about the possible effects, Axelar tentatively flew out of the gates and into the three-dimensional arena battlefield.

"Light atmosphere. One solid meteorite landmass. No gravity." He silently muttered immediately after passing through the arena shield boundary.

Light atmosphere meant his positron rifle would waste some energy with each shot. His mech would be able to disperse some heat through the thin air, but not very much. The lack of gravity meant that the feet of his mech wouldn't see much use in the upcoming battle.

The large, floating rocky meteorite placed in the center of the arena space was the only environmental feature of this impending duel. It was large enough to serve as solid cover, but according to the scanners of his Ouroboros, it was a plain nickel-iron asteroid, so couldn't withstand against a lot of firepower that first-class Terran mechs regularly unleashed!

However, as Axelar came off his analysis, he suddenly realized that the audience paused for a moment before erupting in laughter, shock, and ridicule!

"Do you have a split personality or something, Axelar?!"

"He's joking, right?! Why else would he bring out a mech with a jester's color scheme?"

"Look at the lack of ports on the mech frame! Is my sight bad or does that mech not have any other modules?"

That last detail overtook the reactions of the hero mech's unusual visual design. The large and highly detailed projections zooming in on the mechs gave most of the audience members a very good view of the dueling mechs.

While Waltz Nexbern brought out a heavy mech that appeared to be stuffed with modules from all the retractable ports spread over its entire frame, the surface of Axelar's mech was as smooth as that of a baby!

The audience couldn't actually figure out whether Axelar's mech did an exceptionally good job at hiding its weapon ports or if it really didn't carry anymore weapon systems!

At this time, the announcer began to rouse the crowd. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! Terrans of the Radiant Pulsar Star Sector, get ready for some action as two radically different mechs and mech pilots are about to prove whether Tyon or Haspel deserves to hold the crown!"

The crowd cheered for the mech pilot they rooted for! While a lot of people from different star systems made it to the Cuba Arena today, at least half of the audience were still locals from the Tyon System.

Yet despite having the home advantage, the stunned audience still hadn't gotten over Axelar's unusual mech! The enthusiasm coming from the Tyon citizens were noticeably lackluster!

"In one corner of the arena, we have Waltz Nexbern, the leader of the Haspel Asps! Right now, he is piloting a very big multipurpose mech called the War General! Just look at this huge mech! Unlike yesterday, Waltz isn't going to be relying on mobility to win his match!"

Most of the out-system visitors stood up from their seats and cheered for Waltz! Compared to an elite clansman like Axelar who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, they respected Waltz a lot more due to fighting his way to the top of the mech games!

"In the other corner of the arena, we have the esteemed Master Axelar of the Streon Clan! He has taken upon himself to defend the honor of the Tyon System yesterday, and has made the unusual step of bringing a hero mech into the fight! Yes, you heard me right, the Ouroboros he designed by himself is actually a hero mech!"

That led to a lot of surprised gasps and shouts from the locals. How could Axelar be stupid enough to bring an antiquated mech type into a modern mech duel?!

"It seems that Axelar is so confident in himself that he has metaphorically tied one of his hands behind his back! There's no doubt his choice of mechs is a clear, naked provocation to the Haspels!"

"No no no!" Axelar screamed from his cockpit. "I'm not trying to provoke anyone! I was just crazy when I designed this mech!"

"Let us see whether Axelar's can back up his boundless confidence! Will the clansman be able to prove his superiority or will Waltz be able to show that hard work trumps all? Let the mech duel BEGIN!"

With an explosion of light and sound, the duel formally commenced!

While Axelar immediately adopted a defensive posture with the Ouroboros, Waltz took the time to broadcast his voice through the public communication channels and in the air!

"Axelar, I don't know what you are thinking by bringing a hero mech into our duel, but don't think I'll go easy on you despite your clan affiliation! The mech games is a fair competition where only skill, preparation and sound judgement

matters! If you think you can mock me by bringing only two pitiful weapons to the fight, then think again! I won't hold back just because of your high birth!"

The Haspel team leader's War General finally exploded into action! A dozen different detachable modules exploded from the abnormally heavy and bulging rear module of his mech and spread out rapidly in each corner of the arena!

"Go! Lock down my opponent, my soldiers!"

The modules anchored in place before discharging wide-area fields that immediately disturbed and weighed down Axelar's mech!

"Damnit, I can't move my mech!" Axelar panicked!

Six modules left the War General's frame and quickly surrounded the immobilized Ouroboros from each cardinal direction!

"Blind my opponent, my soldiers!"

Heavy interference fields bore down on the Ouroboros, disturbing all of its sensor systems and some of its more sensitive electronics!

Eight modules exploded from the War General soon after. They spread out in the corners of the arena, allowing them to cover every angle!

"Overwhelm my opponent, my soldiers!"

The deceptively-small modules turned out to be neutron beam turrets! They fired powerful, penetrating neutron beams at the immobilized mech!

They were extremely deadly as neutron beams accelerated to a fraction of the speed of light possessed a very high penetration power!

Their penetration power was so high that the turrets outright ignored the nickel-iron asteroid if it blocked their firing angles!

If Waltz wasn't careful enough and if the Ouroboros wasn't tough enough, a neutron beam could easily pass through the cockpit!

Axelar would instantly die before the safety shields of the Cube Arena would have time to kick in to block the neutron beams!

Chapter 1163 Man Up

Axelar immediately fell into a crisis as the Ouroboros was being immobilized, blinded and chipped away by the twenty-six autonomous turrets and modules deployed by the War General.

Waltz Nexbern's War General truly lived up to its name! Even Ves expressed his admiration for its mech concept.

"The War General is clearly designed to deploy pieces of itself to surround and overwhelm its opponent!"

Ves heard of the concept of using mechs as drone or turret platforms but never saw one in action. They were highly unpopular in the galactic rim because their programming were easily susceptible to hacking.

They worked great against inferior opponents like bottom feeder pirates, but not much else. Against a technologically equal or superior foe who retained a dedicated team of hackers, the autonomous modules could very well turn their abilities against their original owners!

These concerns still existed in the Terran Confederation, but to a much lesser degree. After all, as one of the most advanced states in human space, their technological superiority was at the top!

Their Rubarthan foes were their equals in this regard, while the MTA and CFA held a slight edge.

However, the relative disparities were small enough that all four great powers confidently relied on a higher degree of automation. As long as they regularly

updated the security suites of their automated gadgets, they were at little risk of being hacked!

Right now, Ves knew that even if he included a standard hacking module to the Ouroboros, it was pointless for Axelar to try and hack their programming. The six interference modules that constantly directed its ECM towards the Ouroboros blocked any remote access attempts anyway.

The modules and turrets continued to entangle and bombard the hapless Ouroboros! Axelar's mech didn't even have the opportunity to move from its starting position before falling into a trap!

Despite the advantageous situation, Waltz Nexbern knew better than to look down on his opponent. Who knew what tricks Axelar's mech was trying to hide!

He nonetheless kept talking, if only to hype up the audience. Every mech athlete played to the crowd!

"My War General is not an armchair general that lets its soldiers do all the fighting! A true war general won't hesitate to enter the fray!"

The four weapon barrels extended out of the sides of the heavy mech. Ves quickly identified them as high-powered but compact gauss rifles! After a brief windup time, the four gauss rifles discharged four solid projectiles at amazing speed!

Axelar's eyes widened in his cockpit. His Ouroboros was a sitting duck! Even a three-year old child could hit a stationary mech from this distance!

The rounds all impacted the arm of the Ouroboros at nearly the same section! Since the hero mech was pretty much locked in a single position, Waltz could employ his ranged weapons with pinpoint accuracy!

His first target was to aim at the white-coated arm of the Ouroboros. As long as Waltz could take out the hero mech's rifle-wielding arm, Axelar would have no way of retaliating from range!

"No! Not my mech's rifle arm!" Axelar screamed and instinctively closed his eyes!

The Ouroboros shook from the kinetic energy transferred by the rounds made of extremely hard and dense exotic materials. While they didn't come with any other special effects, just their mass, hardness and penetration profile was extremely deadly to other mechs!

Yet when Axelar opened his eyes, he discovered to his astonishment that the arm of his Ouroboros only accumulated a small dent!

"The armor hasn't been breached? How?"

While the compact size of the War General's gauss rifles limited their potency, their firepower was not to be scoffed at! For them to leave a dent of this size was seriously absurd!

Despite the lack of effect, Waltz did not pause from the setback but instead continued to fire another salvo!

Four more rounds impacted the very same spot, enlarging the dent!

"If two salvos won't cut off the arm, then I'll fire two salvos more! If four salvos isn't enough, then I'll just have to fire four more times!"

Axelar froze. Without a way to move his Ouroboros, he couldn't do anything about the War General treating his mech like a stationary target!

Even if his mech was surprisingly more resilient than he was used to with his other mechs, so what? He was still going to lose this mech duel!

As Axelar's thoughts entered a vicious cycle where his fears continued to fuel his lack of confidence and vica versa, Ves mentally shook his head at the sight.

Axelar was a lot more pathetic than he expected! How could he call himself a man and a mech pilot when he already lost his confidence in winning after suffering a small setback at the start?

"Man up already!" Ves shouted openly inside the mind of his host.

"Huh? Who are you?!" Axelar asked.

"I'm your so-called insane, sober self who designed this mech." Ves lied. "If you want to know who is responsible for upending your life by throwing away all of your stimulants, selling your pharmaceutical company, challenging the Haspel Asps to a duel and committing you to the Trail of Tears, it was me, your sober self!"

For a moment, Axelar completely forgot about the dangerous straits his Ouroboros fell into. How could this be? Did he possess a split personality or something?!

After he got over his shock at hosting another personality in his mind, he grew incredibly angry at his other self!

"IT'S YOU! YOU RUINED MY LIFE! YOU PUT ME IN THE FOREFRONT OF DANGER! WHY ARE YOU SO EAGER TO GET ME KILLED?!"

"It's because I can't stand my other self continuing to waste away our life in meaningless highs! It's high time you get your butt back into gear and stand up for yourself!"

Axelar really wanted to raise his fist and beat his head until he suffered a concussion! He couldn't stand his other personality!

"Are you happy now that you put me in these straits?! I can't move my mech! Waltz is beating up the troll mech you designed like a practice dummy!"

"It's just some neutron beam turrets and gauss rifles!" Ves dismissed the threat. "Are they powerful? Yes! But look at the condition of the Ouroboros! A mech designed by your genius sober self won't be felled by just these tricks!"

The real Axelar drew his attention to the integrity of his mech frame. Despite being bombarded by all sides by neutron beams and getting focused upon by perfectly-accurate gauss rifles, the Ouroboros was still whole!

"So what if my mech is hard to kill?!" Axelar mentally retorted. "I'm still going to be defeated! You put so little weapon systems in my mech that I don't have a way to break out of this trap!"

Ves mentally shook his head. "You idiot. Stop trying to search for solutions that don't exist when your mech already possesses one in its right hand! Your positron rifle is all you need!"

"But I can't aim! Those ECM deployables are screwing up my sensors and my targeting system!"

"Then use your own marksmanship skill to aim!" Ves yelled back. "Are you such a useless mech pilot that you are no longer capable of hitting a target without relying on aim-assist?!"

"It's not that simple! The gravitic bonds are impairing the aim of my mech! And those deployables aren't going to sit still while I aim my rifle at them! They're going to juke and dodge my shots like crazy!"

"Don't look down on the Ouroboros! Trust in yourself and your mech! As a mech designed by your other self, the Ouroboros is the best mech you've ever piloted! Open yourself up to it and it will help you out! Try it and you'll see!"

Ever since Axelar first beheld the mech designed by his other self, he never really accepted it in his heart. How could he take a hero mech seriously?

Even though he felt something special when he interfaced with the mech, Axelar's instinctive rejection of the Ouroboros prevented him from fully utilizing his deepening connection with his mech!

Although Axelar hated his other self and wanted to ignore the advice, he was pretty much at the end of his rope here. If he wanted to dig himself out of the hole his other self had dug for him, he had no choice but to try!

As soon as he dropped some of his apprehension towards his mech, Axelar indeed felt as if his Ouroboros became more responsive to his thoughts! It actually felt quite nice to interface with this mech!

Seeing as Axelar finally began to accept the Ouroboros, Ves moved on to correct his mistaken impression of his own mech.

"The Ouroboros is designed to be a God of Creation and Destruction in our hands! No matter how many troops a war general brings to the field, an army can never defeat a god! Its parameters are far beyond your expectations! Push through the hindrances and you'll find that you haven't come close to brushing against the limits of your mech!"

Axelar attempted to exert more force on the white side of his mech. Even though the Ouroboros was locked in the same position in space, the forces acting on the mech was spread throughout its entire frame.

Now that the Ouroboros utilized the full might of its mechanical power, it managed to resist the gravitic bonds and aim the rifle at one of the neutron beam turrets!

A powerful positron beam fired from the rifle! It rapidly traveled through the thin atmosphere, annihilating the gas particles along the way, causing lots of light and radiation to brighten up the entire arena!

"I missed!"

Although Axelar tried his best to compensate for the difficulties with his own aim, his positron beam soundly missed the turret as it recognized it was being targeted! The turret instantly employed an evasion pattern that made it exceptionally difficult for a narrow beam to hit the turret!

"You dolt!" Ves berated Axelar. "Why are you firing the positron rifle in its default setting? The range isn't all that far and those deployables don't look all that tough! This isn't your average positron rifle! Widen the beam so that it spreads out its particles in a cone!"

"Won't that drain my energy reserves faster?! My mech will run out of energy before I can even finish off half of the deployables."

"Your mech's energy reserves are much larger than you think! Without all those redundant modules taking up valuable space, you can fire your positron rifle all day!"

Axelar still treated his Ouroboros as a multipurpose mech, but that was absolutely the wrong approach to take!

Once Axelar implemented the suggestion, he began to fire at the turrets with a widening cone of positron particles!

The shot expended a considerable amount of energy, but by the time the cone arrived at its intended destination, the turret simply couldn't move out of the way fast enough to dodge the spread-out positrons!

The turret suffered heavy damage!

Ves was surprised the turret managed to survive. For such a small deployable, it was very resistant to damage!

Fortunately, it hadn't managed to resist the damage entirely. Most of its external components suffered heavy damage!

When Axelar fired his positron rifle again, the turret finally succumbed!

While it took a bit longer than he hoped, he finally saw a chance of turning the tide!

"An army is strong when you face it as a whole." Ves remarked. "Yet they are only made up of a large number of weak soldiers. Take them out one by one and the army is no longer a threat!"

Doing his best to endure the constant interference and bombardment from the War General and its many autonomous modules, Axelar trusted in the armor of his mech and began to take out the deployables one by one.

The more turrets and modules he took out, the more Axelar gained faith in his own mech! The feedback that resulted from his increasingly more immersive connection began to show its true strength!

The Ouroboros was starting to come alive! Even the audience became enthralled by the indomitable hero mech fending off the War General's army!

Chapter 1164 Hot Matter

Waltz was not a herbivore who would let his opponent kill off his soldiers one by one!

"I have to admit your mech is tougher than I expected for its size! If my gauss rifles can't penetrate your shell, then I'll just have to employ something heavier!"

The War General retracted its gauss rifles and instead wielded a melee weapon that unfolded into a huge halberd with a very prominent spike!

"A true war general won't hesitate to lead from the front!"

The heavy mech began to employ its flight system and additional flight modules to accelerate past the asteroid. It held out the tip of its halberd like a

lance and slowly built up its momentum as it closed in on the immobilized Ouroboros.

Despite its heavy mass and lackluster acceleration, the generous charging distance allowed the War General to build up a considerable amount of momentum! By the time the mech reached the Ouroboros, the tip of its halberd would be able to pierce through even the hardest of armor with unstoppable force!

While Ves paired up the Ouroboros with a very substantial armor system, even he began to shudder at the thought of getting hit by a charging mech whose momentum was comparable to that of a crashing starship!

"That's a Destroyer Halberd!" Axelar yelled in panic! He spotted the tell-tell glow around the blade and spike of the War General's weapon. "My mech won't hold up against this move! I have to move my Ouroboros!"

When Axelar started to take down the War General's soldiers, he focused first and foremost on the neutron beam turrets. They posed the most acute threat to his life as they could easily penetrate his cockpit!

Once he took down the turrets, he focused his aim towards the debilitating gravitic lockdown modules, but they were larger and tougher than the neutron beam turrets! Not only that, but they were protected by fairly powerful shielding! It took five shots with his positron rifle to take one of them out!

As dread continued to mount in Axelar's mind, he started to freeze.

Ves became frustrated again. His host possessed too little battle experience! How could he freeze at such a critical moment!?

"You've already taken out four gravitic lockdown modules, Axelar!"

"There's still eight more to go!"

"You don't need to take out every single deployable! The Ouroboros is more powerful than you think! By my calculations, the forces exerted by the remaining eight modules will only slow it down at best! They can't pin down your Ouroboros in place anymore!"

When the gravitic lockdown modules initially pinned down the Ouroboros, Axelar only tried to overpower it for a minute before giving up. There was no point wasting energy in a fruitless attempt to break free from an impenetrable prison.

Yet now that Ves reminded Axelar of the change in conditions, the Ouroboros alighted its flight system and flight modules anew!

Not only its main flight system, but also the smaller flight modules built into the arms, legs and other parts of the torso all engaged as well!

The black-and-white mech started to glow from multiple sections as it overpowered the forces exerted onto it through sheer brute force!

"Fly, Ouroboros, fly!"

Although the Ouroboros still suffered from some impairment, Axelar was able to build up just enough speed for it to move in an angle towards the asteroid in the center of the arena.

The asteroid was so big that it took up an eighth of the volume of the entire arena space! While it wasn't particularly strong against focused firepower, it posed enough of a hindrance that Waltz was forced to break off his attack run when it seemed he had to charge his mech through the middle of the asteroid to impale his opponent's mech!

Coward!" Waltz yelled. "Is this the courage of a Streon clansman!?"

Axelar couldn't help but patch into the communication channel. "What kind of idiot mech pilot would let his mech get run down by a charging enemy? For someone who pilots a mech called the War General, you sure are stupid!"

Half the audience laughed. They were glad that Axelar was at least able to put up a serious fight now! Perhaps his unusual hero mech might stand a chance against the War General!

The War General attempted to fly around the large asteroid to recover its line of sight against the Ouroboros, but Axelar made sure to keep circling around!

In the meantime, Axelar used this reprieve to shoot at the remaining deployables in the field. While firing his positron rifle in a cone-like spread put a massive strain on the weapon, it nonetheless held up. The Ouroboros also had plenty of energy to spare!

Once the number of ECM and gravitic lockdown modules decreased, Axelar shifted back to firing narrow, concentrated beams.

"Hahaha!" Axelar regained his confidence after taking out the last of the War General's army. "Now that I've slaughtered your army, you're a general without an army!"

"Do you think you've won, Axelar? You know nothing! My mech isn't this big for nothing! A War General fights best with his army, but they are not afraid to enter into a duel with an enemy champion! Let me show you the true power of my machine!"

On the other wide of the asteroid, the War General's huge rear module reconfigured itself. Previously, it served as a container and control system for its deployables. Now, it transformed into what appeared to be six powerful missiles!

"Fire!"

The missiles launched from the back of the War General and circled around the entire asteroid. Waltz immediately commanded his mech to turn around and fly as far away as possible to escape what was about to happen!

As for Axelar, while his sensors hadn't given him an exact view of what was happening on the other side, the Ouroboros didn't fail in detecting the missiles and their extremely potent payloads heading in its direction!

"Those missiles have enormous plasma payloads!" Axelar squeaked.

"Don't panic!" Ves immediately reassured his host. It was getting rather tiring to hold Axelar's hand all the time. "Those plasma missiles are configured for wide-area destruction! The damage will be dispersed over a huge area!"

"That just means I can't avoid the missiles!"

"Don't try to dodge the explosions! Just hug the surface of the asteroid and power up the shields of your mech to the maximum!"

Axelar almost forgot about the shields of his Ouroboros!

While pouring full power into the shield generator of his mech expended a huge amount of energy, the mech's ability to withstand damage increased by a huge margin!

Just seconds after Axelar made his move, the plasma missiles exploded all around the asteroid and his mech!

A torrent of superheated plasma engulfed the entire arena space! Even the War General wasn't exempt from getting hit as it employed its own shield generator to help fend off the damage that reached the periphery!

The War General only suffered a fraction of the energy and plasma unleashed from the simultaneous missile detonations!

Incredibly hot plasma matter burned through the nickel-iron asteroid and impacted against the oval shield encompassing the Ouroboros!

Axelar couldn't help but scream at the thought of getting burned to a crisp!

Yet once a dozen seconds passed and the glowing plasma stopped impacting his mech, he realized his mech still remained intact!

"I survived. The shield held up!"

Although the Ouroboros strained its shield generator to such an extent that it would struggle to withstand another huge attack, it nonetheless did its job!

Even the entire audience looked in awe as the Ouroboros managed to endure the powerful plasma explosions without employing any fancy systems to take out the missiles or neutralize the payloads.

Axelar instead had his mech withstand the attack upfront!

"Look at the Ouroboros!" The announcer excitedly commented. "There's nary a single scratch or scorch mark on its white-and-black exterior! After all the firepower the War General employed against its foe, Axelar has soundly shown his contempt at the attacks!"

Even though Waltz was dismayed the plasma missiles hadn't damaged the Ouroboros, he still maintained his confidence. "Do you think that's the extent of my attack? Hah! Look at your surroundings! You no longer have anywhere to hide! Your mech is completely in the open now!"

The asteroid was gone now! While some loose, molten chunks of superheated matter still flew about here and there, they were no longer big enough for a mech to hide behind!

The War General, now unburdened by its rear attachments, began to brandish its halberd before entering into another charge!

Waltz intended to move the fight up close!

"There's nothing to fear from the War General." Ves encouraged his host.

"The mech is still too large and cumbersome to hit you with its charge. The

Ouroboros can easily dodge aside before its halberd ever comes close to impaling it! Instead of fearing your opponent's approach, you should welcome him instead! A hero mech is as deadly up close as it is from a distance!"

The way in which the Ouroboros withstood the destructive plasma explosions with nary a scratch finally convinced Axelar of the power of his mech!

"I don't fear you, Waltz! You want to take the fight up close? Let's dance!"

The Ouroboros engaged its flight systems and countercharged! Even as its right side held out its sword in a ready position to strike, its left side began to pepper the War General's shields with positron beams!

The War General was a bigger and heavier mech than the Ouroboros, but its shield generator was actually smaller and weaker!

"Keep firing at the War General, Axelar!" Ves advised. "The energy the Ouroboros is discharging is less than the energy the War General's shield generator expends in withstanding the attacks!"

The duel entered a new phase in which both mechs engaged in a battle of attrition!

As the mechs closed in on each other, Axelar synced himself deeper into his mech. The Ouroboros exerted a powerful thrust from the side, causing the mech to veer away from the reach of the War General's halberd!

Both mechs began to fly in wide arcs as they adjusted their trajectory in order to continue to close the distance against each other!

The Ouroboros continued to fire its positron rifle against the War General. At this distance, the sluggish, heavy mech was trivially easy to hit!

Still, the War General wasn't without solutions, as it popped up its integrated gauss rifles out of its frame.

Not only that, but Waltz also activated another weapon system on his mech, causing the War General to zap the Ouroboros with powerful electrical discharges!

This attack was especially effective against its shield!

Ves noted the threat. "We're in trouble now, Axelar! This electrical discharge is wearing down our shield generator! Our positron rifle is powerful, but it won't defeat the War General fast enough! You need to up the ante!"

"I got it!"

With a wordless cry, Axelar stopped making his mech circle around the slower War General and attempted to charge up close!

The Ouroboros poured power into its Destroyer Sword, causing its blade to grow in a deathly greyish light!

CLANG!

The War General parried the attack by blocking it with its halberd that glowed in the same shade! It was also a Destroyer Weapon!

Expecting something like this to happen, Axelar didn't halt his offensive. His Ouroboros was smaller, lighter and more mobile than the War General! Axelar took full advantage of this difference by circling around the War General at close range in order to strike it from many different angles!

"That's it, Axelar! The War General's shields are depleting rapidly!"

Destroyer Weapons not only cut most alloys like butter, but they inflicted quite some damage against shields as well!

At this range, the angular velocity of the Ouroboros rendered the War General's gauss rifles useless. Its electrical weapons only sporadically locked on to the Ouroboros as well.

Yet Waltz did not feel any distress. "Hah! So you couldn't resist getting up close! Prepare to be roasted!"

Nozzles began to extend from all around the frame of the War General. As Axelar began to wonder what they were for, an inferno of plasma erupted from all around his opponent's mech!

The Ouroboros quickly became engulfed in all-encompassing plasma!

Even though its shield began to reach its breaking point, Axelar did let this new development pause his offensive. His immersion with his mech had grown to an extent where he no longer doubted the capabilities of his mech.

The Ouroboros could withstand the damage!

Even as the powerful attack finally overloaded its shield and began to burn at the artful reliefs on the surface of his mech, Axelar continued to fly through the waves of plasma and strike at the surface of the War General with a powerful overhand chop with the Destroyer Sword!

The War General was forced to disengage its shield generator to release the huge volume of plasma. This caused the Destroyer Sword to leave a very deep cut into its armor!

Attacks continued to land on the War General as the Ouroboros outright ignored the damaging plasma.

Its positron rifle also collapsed into a more compact form, which the Ouroboros placed onto the lower back of its frame. This helped preserve the surprisingly resilient weapon from all of the plasma!

The War General did not possess an endless supply of plasma. Once it finally finished discharging all of that hot matter, the mech looked like it had emptied out its reserves!

Not only that, but the continuous sword attacks from the Ouroboros had cut and damaged various parts of its exterior! As long as Axelar opened up those breaches with subsequent attacks, he could get past the armor and inflict significant internal damage to the heavy mech!

Yet Waltz did not express any concern at all. "Hahaha! Do you think that's the extent of what my War General can do? You've only been fighting its outer layer!"

At a single command, the War General's exterior components began to break apart and separate from the frame! Armor plating, weapon modules and more all spread out, revealing a slimmer and much more mobile light mech from underneath!

The mech spun its halberd. "The true dance begins now!"

Chapter 1165 Endless Depth

Throughout his stay in the Terran Confederation, Ves experienced some of the breadth and depth of Terran mech design.

It was as if scarcity didn't exist here. Mech designers faced much fewer limits with regards to cost, resource scarcity and manpower constraints.

This meant that mech designers could easily dump a lot of expensive parts into their mechs, jacking up their prices to insane levels and elevating the difficulty of piloting to inhuman levels.

Yet such insanely overperforming mechs still sold in droves!

Mech buyers in the Terran Confederation were some of the most affluent people and organizations in the galaxy. The mech pilots they hired exhibited capabilities that far exceeded their lesser peers in the galactic heartland and the galactic center!

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that mech designers in the Terran Confederation engaged in the very forefront of mech design!

The innovations they developed in the pursuit of greater performance slowly trickled down to the less-advanced regions of human space. Ves already foresaw that many trends in the Terran Confederation would spread to the galactic rim in time.

The current mech duel between Axelar Streon and Waltz Nexbern was a case in point! In this battle between an old-style hero mech and an ultramodern multipurpose mech, the latter showcased exactly why they became the dominant mech type in the most advanced states!

The War General piloted by the Haspel mech athlete shed its exterior armor plating and parts like taking off a coat! A much slimmer light mech emerged from underneath which flourished its Destroyer Halberd in an energetic manner.

A multipurpose mech possessed endless depth!

It took a lot of effort to exhaust their entire bag of tricks!

When the War General turned from a heavy mech to a light mech, Ves felt like puking. Terran mech designers were very creative with their mechs!

The technical challenges to design a mech within a mech were exceedingly difficult to resolve. To make both forms perform optimally in combat without negatively impacting each other required a lot of creative solutions!

"Whoever designed the War General is a great mech designer!"

Observing the War General in battle was like seeing a masterpiece of mech design up close. Ves wasn't sure whether the War General was designed by a Senior or a Master.

With the population base of the Terran Confederation, the latter possibility could not be ruled out!

Yet despite knowing that Ves faced a mech designed by a Master, he did not believe that defeat was inevitable!

Despite being designed with the aid of an auto designer, the Ouroboros consisted of very high-end parts and exotics. Axelar's status as a Streon clansman was not for show! The mechs he routinely designed and materialized may be crappy, but their sheer performance still elevated them into the upper ranks of mechs!

Therefore, from a material and technological standpoint, the Ouroboros and the War General stood roughly equal. Neither side used more superior materials and technology. The War General may have started off bigger and employed more sophisticated modules, but none of them gave the mech a decisive edge against its current opponent.

Only two factors really mattered in deciding the outcome of this mech duel.

First, the mech pilots.

Having fought so long, Ves gained a good measure of Axelar Streon and Waltz Nexbern's piloting skills.

Each of them stood head and shoulders above any non-expert pilot from the galactic rim. The genetic and biological augmentations they received accelerated their minds and strengthened their bodies firmly into transhuman territory, allowing them to mentally and physically keep up with extremely high-performing mechs!

Due to his high birth, Axelar attended the best mech academies in the Terran Confederation.

Although he hated every second of it, the mech instructors made sure that Axelar squeezed the most out of his A-grade genetic aptitude. He possessed very solid fundamentals and his operation of his mech was clean and efficient!

Waltz Nexbern did not possess the raw talent or privileged upbringing of someone like Axelar. Instead, he grew up from humble roots and managed to make a decent start in the mech games.

After decades of fighting and dueling, he grew up to become a considerably wily and tricky mech athlete! Age, experience and constant training allowed Waltz to hold a considerable edge over Axelar!

Although the mech athlete's piloting style incorporated a small amount of unnecessary flashy moves, Waltz was still superior to Axelar in every aspect aside from reaction speed!

If Axelar wanted to achieve victory, he needed to put his faith in the design concept of his mech!

Although the Terrans considered hero mechs to be overly simplistic, Axelar already witnessed first-hand that the Ouroboros took full advantage of this aspect!

The Ouroboros not only managed to withstand the overwhelming attacks of the War General, but also retain much of its battle effectiveness in the process!

Certainly, the War General's close-ranged plasma discharge inflicted serious damage to Axelar's mech. Most of the detailed reliefs of creation and destruction lost definition due to being subjected to a destructive shower of plasma.

In fact, the entire front of the mech lost its original two-toned color scheme and took on a scorched and bedraggled appearance!

"It's mostly surface damage, though. The internals of the Ouroboros is still in good condition!" Ves avidly noted.

The thick and resilient armor plating of the mech might look awful, but it did its job in protecting the more vulnerable parts of the mech from damage!

From resisting neutron beams to bouncing off gauss rifle projectiles, the considerable investment that Ves had put into the armor system of the Ouroboros paid off in spades! A regular multipurpose mech of its weight class would never be able to remain standing after suffering through so much hell!

While the Ouroboros didn't appear very fancy anymore, the audience nonetheless stopped regarding it with contempt. As Terrans, they weren't stupid, and they could recognize the inherent advantages of the mech type.

"Believe in yourself and believe in the Ouroboros your other self designed." Ves mentally spoke to Axelar. "You aren't piloting a mech, you are embodying a god of creation and destruction! One hand creates, the other hand destroys! No other power is required to defeat your opponent!"

Ves kept encouraging the mech pilot in order to keep his spirits high. If not for his constant pep talks, his host would have defaulted back to his cowardly ways!

He could tell that it was working. Axelar continually shed his apprehension and no longer doubted or second-guessed himself. His connection with his mech continued to deepen, and his operation of his mech became smoother and more fluent.

Unlike with Eloise Pelican, nothing exceptional happened. The conditions to elevate Axelar and his mech into something even greater simply weren't present.

Still, Ves sensed that the man-machine connection between Axelar and the Ouroboros grew increasingly more intimate. And due to his presence in Axelar's mind, Ves was also starting to feel a faint connection to the mech he designed!

The Ouroboros contained a piece of Axelar! It also contained a piece of Ves! It was like a child who just reunited with its parents after a long period of separation!

A three-way spiritual connection took place that united the mech, mech pilot and mech designer into a single formless identity!

Axelar acted as the main controller while the Ouroboros was the executor of his decisions. Ves played a very small role as he did his best to hide his true nature from Axelar. Only a faint connection tied him to Axelar and the Ouroboros, but it was enough for him to pass on some of the deep technical insights he gained on the strengths and weaknesses of the Ouroboros and the War General!

Right now, the slimmer version of the War General utilized its high mobility to its fullest potential! The mech flitted and darted around the slower and damaged Ouroboros and delivered fast and powerful strikes with its halberd that Axelar struggled to block with the sword of his mech!

A Destroyer Weapon was incredibly destructive, and with the damaged state of the Ouroboros, it could not withstand too many direct hits!

If that wasn't bad enough, the recently-emerged light mech also employed integrated weapon hardpoints built into the shoulders and torso of the mech! They fired a constant stream of projectiles at the Ouroboros which slowly degraded its damaged armor even further!

Even as Axelar did his best to withstand the onslaught, Ves kept analyzing the latest form of the War General.

"Don't be fooled by its high exertion and its overwhelming offensive power. This light mech is peaking its performance. As long as you can withstand its attacks for at least twenty minutes, it will run out of steam! The War General's endurance is substantially less than our Ouroboros!"

"I don't think I'll be able to last that long!" Axelar gritted his teeth. "Waltz is insanely skilled in wielding a halberd! I'm constantly being pushed back!"

That was true! Despite being the lighter mech, the raw force and momentum employed by the War General forced the Ouroboros back again and again! If this pattern continued, the Ouroboros would eventually be pushed into the corner of the arena where the active shields would block Axelar's mech from exiting the arena boundaries!

Once the Ouroboros was pushed into a corner, it lost all of its maneuvering room, allowing Waltz to beat it up with impunity!

"You aren't using the Ouroboros to its full potential, Axelar." Ves retorted.

"You're caught in your opponent's rhythm. Don't forget that your mech wields both creation and destruction! Right now, you are only making use of the destruction side of your mech. Have you forgotten that you wield the power of creation as well? Bring out the positron rifle and wield it alongside the Destroyer Sword!"

A hero mech employed two weapons simultaneously for a reason! Why should a hero mech limit itself to using a rifle against a ranged mech and a sword against a melee mech? That was like attempting to compete against an opponent on their strong points!

Even though the War General was constantly peppering the Ouroboros with its numerous integrated weapon hardpoints, the damage they inflicted were fairly low! A light mech was already small, so the weapon modules integrated into the War General's second form didn't pack a lot of punch!

"No matter how fancy the War General appears right now, it's mostly for show. Its basic engineering remains the same. Light mechs are fast and mobile, giving them great offensive power, but they're also fragile and susceptible to damage! Just one good hit can cripple the War General!"

"That's easier said than done!" Axelar replied to his other self. "The War General isn't sitting still long enough for me to make a counterattack!"

"Then pin it down or shoot it down with the positron rifle!"

"I can't! It's too big and unwieldy! The War General's halberd will cut it in half as I take aim!"

"The War General isn't the only object in this arena that can transform! The positron rifle that I've added to the Ouroboros possesses a second form as well!"

As Ves transferred some details on the weapon to his host, Axelar immediately acted on the information!

The Ouroboros drew out the partially-damaged positron rifle from the small of its back and activated a single command that caused it to shed its front half and some other components.

The positron rifle turned into a small and compact positron pistol!

Although its power, accuracy and energy capacity took a substantial hit, the pistol was small enough for the Ouroboros to make use of it in a close-ranged cash!

The Ouroboros began to fire back at the War General whenever it blocked another halberd strike!

Axelar realized that each time the War General attacked and got repulsed, the light mech momentarily paused in place. This presented him with a critical window of opportunity for him to nail a shot on the War General!

After five exchanges, Axelar managed to land three solid hits on the War General, burning three serious-looking holes in the latter mech's exterior!

"This is it, Axelar! This is how a hero mech should be employed!"

The Ouroboros looked unprecedentedly daunting as it slowly started to gain the upper hand against the War General!

"Do you think you can beat my War General with a mere pistol?! Think again!"

Waltz quickly abandoned his current strategy when he saw that the tide was turning against him. He piloted his War General away from the Ouroboros and rapidly built up a lot of distance!

Once he gained several kilometers of distance, Waltz activated a command that caused the Destroyer Halberd to shed its powered blade and spike!

The War General then inserted the hollow shaft of the weapon perpendicularly into a small hollow that opened up from its chest plating.

The tip of the long and narrow muzzle began to take on an ominous glow.

"If I can't take out your mech up close, then I'll just have to finish the job from afar!"

The War General unleashed a radiant beam!

Chapter 1166 The Critical Difference

The latest transformation initiated by Waltz turned his War General from a predominantly melee mech into a highly mobile marksman mech!

While neither Ves, Axelar or the sophisticated sensors of the Ouroboros identified the nature of the radiant beam attack, it was extremely accurate and corrosive!

Each time the radiant beam struck the Ouroboros, another chunk of armor plating disappeared!

Axelar did his best to respond to this latest change. He piloted his Ouroboros forward in an attempt to catch up to the War General. Now that the latter mech transformed its melee weapon into something else, it should be very vulnerable to close-quarters combat!

Yet the War General was far lighter than the Ouroboros, and easily circled around hero mech while it continuously unleashed beam after beam of corrosive particles from its chest!

The only way the Ouroboros was able to retaliate was by shooting at it with its positron pistol! Unfortunately, the War General's superior mobility and active ECM systems made it very difficult for Axelar to land a hit!

Nonetheless, Axelar no longer feared the War General. So what if his opponent's mech possessed a hundred different abilities? His Ouroboros already faced down most of them and still managed to stay aloft!

"Come on, Waltz! No matter what weapon system you employ next, my Ouroboros will take it all!"

Although the War General's latest attack mode posed a serious threat to the Ouroboros, how long would it be able to keep up its attack?

A light mech was still a light mech! Just because the War General was an incredibly versatile multipurpose mech didn't mean it could defy the fundamental weaknesses inherent to the weight class. Ves bet that the War General was expending its reserves a lot faster than the Ouroboros!

Even Waltz began to recognize that the Ouroboros was a very tough mech to crack! Its simplistic design meant that its armor plating was much thicker and heavier than usual!

While the Ouroboros did not possess the mobility to catch up to the War General, it was enough for it to rotate its orientation so that the War General could not focus its attack on a single section of armor!

By employing this simple strategy, Axelar managed to spread out the damage the Ouroboros suffered over the entirety of its damaged but unbroken armor coverage!

The Ouroboros only needed to last long enough until the War General expended its limited reserves!

"Disgusting!" Waltz yelled as he came to the same realization. "Surviving a duel by outlasting your foe is a cowardly way to win!"

Axelar let out a laugh. "Who says that mech duels can't be won by attrition? You only have yourself to blame for employing an overcomplicated mech like the War General! All of this weapon and auxiliary modules must be putting an enormous strain on its energy reserves, right?"

The mech duel between Axelar and Waltz was not only a clash between mech pilots, but also a clash between their mechs!

The War General embodied the principles of a multipurpose mech to a much greater extreme than normal! Hardly any other multipurpose mech conceived by the Terrans could match the War General in sheer versatility!

As for the Ouroboros, it experienced very little transformations throughout the entire battle! Aside from turning its powerful positron rifle into a weaker but more compact positron pistol, the only other change was that the condition of its armor plating continually worsened.

Yet the Ouroboros never flagged! Its basic parameters were so strong that the War General never managed to break Axelar's mech!

It took a lot more sustained firepower if Waltz wanted to pierce through its disgustingly simple but thick armor plating!

Seeing that Waltz would only exhaust his mech before he could ever defeat the Ouroboros, he commanded the War General to stop firing its chest weapon.

The mech pulled out the hollow shaft from its chest before separating the lower half from the top half. The two hollow shafts compacted in other each other, reducing their lengths but increasing their structural strength!

Two large slots opened up from the War General's thighs. Two axe blades floated out of the slots and flew to the two shafts, turning the shortened hafts into twin Destroyer Axes!

"I've underestimated you, Axelar." Waltz said in a calmer voice. "I've dueled overconfident clansmen before. I've beaten all but the most hardworking of them all. You're not one of them. The only reason you've lasted up until now is because I didn't employ the right strategy against your hero mech! I've wasted too much energy on ineffective or inefficient attacks! Only now I've realized that the best way to handle an opponent like you is to compete against you on technique rather than the capabilities of our mechs!"

Both Axelar and Ves realized the significance of those words. Waltz undeniably held the edge in terms of skill and experience! Out of all the possible careers a mech pilot could pursue upon graduation, becoming a mech athlete meant they accumulated the most battle experience!

Other careers provided much greater stimulation due to the higher stakes and the constant threat of death hanging over every battle. Yet the frequency of battles could never match the number of fights a mech athlete participated in during a regular competitive season! Many military mech pilots spent months or years in monotonous training before they would ever be deployed in an actual battle!

Even though Axelar was officially registered to an elite mech corps, he never reported in even once! Both his training accumulation and battle experience simply couldn't compare against a veteran mech athlete!

"Prepare yourself, Axelar! The final dance starts now!"

The War General utilized its superior mobility to rapidly close the distance to the Ouroboros! Waltz intended to force his opponent in a ferocious, close-combat offensive where skill played a much greater role than the parameters of their mechs!

Even a knight in full plate armor could be defeated by a peasant wearing rags as long as the latter possessed more skill!

Axelar welcomed the final exchange of moves. After dealing with so many tedious and annoying attacks, he was glad to see that the War General was nearing the end of its rope!

Although he acknowledged that Waltz was the better mech pilot, he had faith that the Ouroboros he piloted could make up the difference!

"Let's dance!"

The War General in its light mech incarnation swept towards the waiting Ouroboros while holding out its double axes!

The axe blades glowed in grey, signifying that they were Destroyer Axes which were every bit as deadly as the Destroyer Sword wielded by the Ouroboros!

As the War General charged towards the Ouroboros, Axelar did not entirely sit still. The Ouroboros aimed its positron pistol and fired continuous beams at the approaching light mech!

The War General avoided most of the incoming attacks, only suffering some sporadic hits that didn't impact its performance.

Just as the War General reached within five-hundred meters to the Ouroboros, it suddenly threw out both of its Destroyer Axes!

The weapons spun towards the Ouroboros in wide but controlled arcs! Even after they left the War General's hands, they still fell under the mech's control!

Axelar panicked a bit. The Ouroboros hastily managed to block one spinning axe with its Destroyer Sword. As for the other axe, Axelar had no choice but to let the axe leave a deep groove on the damaged surface of his mech!

Both axes bounced away after their impacting and returned to the War General's hands just as Waltz descended upon the Ouroboros in earnest!

CLANG!

This time, Axelar knew better than to face the furious attack head-on! His mech already started to jerk back with its flight system and modules fully engaged moments before the impact!

This allowed the Ouroboros to block one of the axes with its sword while moving out of reach from the other one at the same time!

"You won't be able to shy away from this dance!" Waltz furiously yelled.

The War General quickly recovered and threw out one of its axes in a spin while following up with another axe chop!

The Ouroboros hastily blocked the spinning axe, but was left out of position against the War General!

Only some last-minute maneuvering allowed the Ouroboros to mitigate the damage it incurred to its chest plating after Waltz managed to land a solid axe blow!

Even before the spinning axe returned to the grip of the War General, the mech already shot out its other axe!

Through alternating between throwing the Destroyer Axes and wielding them by hand, the War General quickly managed to put the Ouroboros on the defensive!

Axelar didn't get any opportunity to launch an attack as axes continually crashed against his mech! Even though he did his best to retaliate against the

War General by shooting it with the positron pistol, the Ouroboros was rapidly accumulating a lot of damage!

Right now, the situation between the two mechs had reversed! The Ouroboros possessed a lot more versatility than the War General due to its weapon loadout. In contrast, the War General abandoned all other weapon systems and modules and focused solely on achieving victory through overwhelming close-ranged assaults!

"It's too difficult for the Ouroboros to fend off two axes at once!" The announcer commented. "The War General may have exhausted most of its tricks, but it is undeniably holding the upper hand so long as it keeps entangling Axelar's mech up close!"

Utilizing all of his skill and battle experience, Waltz managed to land some of the Destroyer Axes on the sections of the Ouroboros that suffered previous hits. Through focusing his attacks on those vulnerabilities, he finally managed to crack open the hero mech's incredibly resilient shell and damage some of its internal components!

"The Ouroboros has landed in dire straits!"

Axelar knew that he was in trouble this time! Yet even as the pressure mounted on his shoulders, he gave himself more fully to his mech! His deepening connection with his own mech started to elevate his piloting ability to its peak and beyond!

The Ouroboros blocked and evaded the unrelenting axe attacks with greater skill. While Axelar didn't manage to negate all of the attacks, he at least managed to buy himself more time.

"I won't be defeated by Waltz! Not when I've come so far! I am better than this!"

His long-buried dreams of becoming a powerful and famous mech pilot revitalized. Did he truly want to drown himself in stimulants all day? No! That was not the life he wanted to live!

"I am a Terran! I am a Streon! I am not going to let a mech pilot of lower birth walk all over me! I'm better than that!"

Axelar put his complete trust in his mech and his other self! He knew he needed to draw upon them both in order to reverse this situation!

Both of them obliged. Even though the Ouroboros accumulated increasingly serious internal damage, it possessed a high degree of redundancy and compartmentalization! Even if its left torso looked like it was spilling out its mechanical guts, the right side easily managed to take over the load!

Even though one spinning axe decapitated a head, the Ouroboros still possessed another head!

When Waltz managed to outwit Axelar and cut off an entire leg, the Ouroboros still managed to counterattack with its other leg and land a very heavy kick against the War General that tore an irregular gash in its waist!

Throughout all of the exertion, Ves never stood still. He continually fed Axelar's mind with his analysis on the Ouroboros and the War General.

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles!"

Axelar possessed a unique advantage over the more experienced Waltz in that he had access to a genuine mech designer in his mind! With the information he gained from Ves, he finally acted on a critical insight!

As a spinning axe landed on the heavily-damaged chest plating of the Ouroboros and damaged several important internal components, the mech

ignored the painful attack but instead raised its positron pistol just as the War General was about to swoop in to deliver another axe chop!

The War General's speed and acceleration made it difficult for Axelar to land a solid hit on the mech, but up close its attack posture left it wide open for just a fraction of a second!

That was enough!

Axelar overloaded the power setting of the positron pistol just moments ago. As soon as he mentally pulled the trigger, its muzzle spat out a beam that was wider and more potent than the beams fired in its full-sized rifle configuration!

Even though the positron pistol exploded from the strain shortly after, taking out the entire hand of the Ouroboros with it its death, the powerful positron beam landed exactly where Axelar had aimed!

The beam passed straight through a narrow gap in the chest plating of the War General.

BOOM!

The mech suddenly blew up, separating its lower half from its upper half!

Chapter 1167 A Greater High

Before the War General took up its Destroyer Axes, the mech employed an unusual ranged weapon module, turning it into a marksman mech.

Waltz eventually abandoned the strategy seeing that his War General would exhaust its energy reserves long before the Ouroboros succumbed from the damage. Yet even as the mech pulled out the hollow shaft from its chest and turned them into compact handles for its Destroyer Axes, the weapon module in its chest still existed.

Even though retractable armor plating quickly closed up the hole in its chest, it still represented a structural weak point in the War General!

Even in this form, the War General was still very much a multipurpose mech! Although Waltz abandoned all other modes of attack in favor of overpowering the Ouroboros with an unrelenting rain of axe strikes, those other modules still remained in place!

Compared to the Ouroboros which possessed nearly no additional modules, the War General in its light mech form still possessed more than a dozen compact modules spread throughout its frame!

Of all of those modules, the weapon system integrated in its chest was the largest and most powerful of them! To Ves, the weapon module in its chest represented great offensive power.

"Great power always comes at a price!" Ves mentally repeated to himself. "The greater the power, the greater the price!"

Mech designers continually engaged in balancing tradeoffs. Increasing one aspect of a mech always led to decreasing another aspect of a mech.

While the Terrans were able to elevate every parameter of their mechs through the use of superior materials and technology, no matter how advanced first-class mechs turned out to be, they still followed the fundamental rules of mech design!

A design choice that increased the offensive power of a mech inevitably decreased its mobility or defensive power.

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According to this paradigm, the War General in its heavy mech form was a machine that excelled in both offensive and defensive power to the detriment of its mobility.

It was very hard for the Ouroboros to defeat it, let alone come close to it to engage in a close-ranged brawl!

Yet once Waltz shed the outer layer of his mech, the War General adopted a very different set of attributes!

The War General in its second form obviously relied on evasion rather than armor to withstand attacks. Therefore, mobility was paramount and its mech designer put a very heavy emphasis on making it as fast and agile as possible!

In addition to upping its mobility, the War General retained most of its offensive power as well. Various integrated weapon systems as well as the myriad transformations of its main external weapon allowed the War General to employ various powerful offensive modes of attack against a variety of threats!

Whoever designed the War General put a very high emphasis on versatility as well to increase its offensive power. In fact, this property defined the entire design!

While its versatility boosted the offensive power of the mech to a very high level, all of this came at a cost.

"The heavy mech form possesses low mobility while the light mech form is lacking in defensive capabilities."

Although the War General was clad in very strong armor plating, enough for it to withstand several potshots from a positron pistol, its design did not make full use of its armor system!

"The War General can't provide optimal armor coverage with all of the weapon systems and other modules integrated in its frame!"

From the gauss rifles and the radiant beam projector integrated in its chest, the War General's defensive power was frankly awful. The only reason why it managed to last this long against Axelar was that it was simply too mobile to expose its many weak points to accurate attacks.

Yet as long as Axelar managed to land a single substantial attack on one of those weak points, the War General would definitely suffer! Each weapon system was covered up by thin and imperfect retractable armor plating. It was a compromised way of covering up the surface of the mech when its weapon hardpoints weren't being used.

Previously, Ves mentally calculated the amount of power required to pierce through those retractable armor plating and came to the conclusion that it took at least two positron pistol attacks to overcome their defenses.

After that, it took a third hit to exploit the glaring hole in the War General and inflict crippling internal damage.

Axelar wouldn't be able to land three consistent hits on a fast-moving mech. The Ouroboros wouldn't even last long enough to complete that arduous challenge!

He needed to overpower the defenses put in place to protect the War General's frontal weak points within a single attack!

Ves therefore devised a way to do so by overloading the positron pistol. Even though he knew that the pistol would blow up, it at least granted Axelar a single opportunity to unleash a very powerful ranged attack!

With his current level of skill, Axelar wouldn't be able to land his Destroyer Sword on the War General. Not when he was already being suppressed by his opponent's superior skill!

Therefore, the positron pistol was his only choice.

Ves identified the closed weapon port in the chest of the War General as the most critical target.

However, it was easier said than done for Axelar to hit this narrow point on the War General with a single attack!

The Ouroboros only had one chance to fire its positron pistol before it exploded from the strain. Axelar had no second chances once he missed!

At the final moment, it was all up to him and his mech!

Neither disappointed Ves! The Ouroboros managed to land a critical attack on the weapon port of the weapon system integrated in the chest of its opponent. The potent positron beam not only penetrated past the closed weapon port, but also inflicted serious damage to the module and whatever lay beyond!

Something critical such as the power reactor or some other volatile component got struck. This led to a devastating reaction in which the War General blew up from within, separating its upper half from its lower half!

Seconds after the battle, the arena's shield generators deployed a remote shield around the cockpit of the War General.

Despite being in close proximity to the explosion that tore the War General in half, the cockpit was made of incredibly resilient materials! Even though it suffered enormous dents and a number of breaches, the cockpit still managed to preserve the life of its mech pilot!

The audience were stumped. How could the War General get taken out so easily by a single hit? Even if it was a light mech, shouldn't it have lasted a little longer?

The announcer was quicker on the uptake. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! The verdict is clear. Axelar Streon has won his challenge against the Haspel Asps and defended the honor of the Tyon System!"

The majority of the audience instantly erupted into cheers and applause! The devotion of millions of people in the Cube Arena along with billions if not trillions more watching the live broadcasts of the event all poured into the winner!

Axelar hardly believed he managed to pull off that insanely difficult attack at the end! Yet his skill and his mech both pulled him through!

Using the intact sensors of the remaining head of his damaged Ouroboros, he zoomed in his view on the audience sitting around the cube-shaped arena space.

Beyond the active shielding that did an admirable job in containing all of the destructive weapon emissions, Axelar could hardly find a person in the audience who wasn't cheering him on. Even the out-system visitors who didn't have a stake in the fight congratulated him for his victory!

Axelar never felt like a true mech pilot before this moment. Only now did he see the joy in his profession. The intense struggle and the close victory he secured made him feel alive in a way that his recreational stimulants never achieved.

The appreciation he received from so many spectators of this high-profile mech duel elevated his mood and motivation to unseen heights. The high he enjoyed from applause was much more enjoyable than any highs induced by artificial stimulation!

"I've been missing out on this! Piloting mechs is a lot better than drowning myself in stimulants!"

For the first time in his life, Axelar began to appreciate his piloting training. Perhaps piloting a mech was not all that bad!

Even as the arena took hold of the immobile Ouroboros and towed it out of the arena space, Axelar was still engaged in this extraordinary moment in his life.

As for the 'other self' responsible for pushing him to unearth his potential, Ves mentally sat back in order to process his own gains.

While Ves did not make a lot of important observations at the start of the mech duel, his gains increased when Axelar became more immersed in the duel. As Axelar opened himself up to the Ouroboros, his thoughts and thinking processes became more involved and more concise!

Ves captured many small details on how Axelar operated his mech! Although the mech pilot wasn't all that used to piloting hero mechs, it was much less complicated to pilot one than a standard multipurpose mech!

"It's very interesting to see the approach of a Terran mech pilot to a hero mech."

To a Terran like Axelar, piloting a hero mech was trivially easy. Yet that did not mean the mech pilots of the Komodo Star Sector would be able to employ the same degree of multitasking as Axelar just employed.

The piloting capabilities of a Terran mech pilot was too far ahead compared to a regular mech pilot from a third-rate state!

Ves observed plenty of regular mech pilots before in his previous Mastery experiences, so he wasn't ignorant to their overall level of performance. What Ves picked up from Axelar was how far mech pilots could go in terms of multitasking and other essential piloting abilities.

"Axelar is more than capable enough to keep up with a high-performing hero mech like the Ouroboros. I can't expect a mech designer from the Bright Republic or the Ylvaine Protectorate to do the same!"

While Axelar made it seem easy, Ves knew that piloting a hero mech was still incredibly complicated! The act of employing both a sword and a rifle at the same time put considerable strain on mech pilots.

Unless they underwent some form of genetic and biological augmentation, normal mech pilots would never be able to bring hero mechs to their full potential!

"That's not necessarily a bad thing." Ves mentally muttered. "A hero mech isn't meant to be an accessible mech pilot."

Only exceptional individuals were meant to pilot hero mechs. Not everyone equalled Lord Javier or Venerable Foster in piloting skill or advancement speed.

One of the most important conclusions he made after witnessing Axelar in action was that hero mech designs should always be private designs.

"Hero mechs are unsuited for mass production. It's absurd for any mech designer to believe they can manufacture heroes en masse!"

How could a hero mech still carry any symbolic meaning if thousands of copies existed at once?

A hero mech should be a unique machine that defined the hero who piloted it! Right now, Axelar's brave performance turned his Ouroboros into his iconic mech!

"Did I really design this mech?" Axelar idly questioned as he slowly disengaged his connection to his mech and powered it down. "How crazy is

my other self to design a hero mech, and one that fits so perfectly to me? Am I prodigy in mech design? Maybe I should start designing mechs for a living!"

Ves wanted to palm his face.

Chapter 1168 Deadbeat Mother

"What an idiot." Ves muttered as soon as he woke up again in his real body.

Lucky, who was idly resting on top of his chest, suddenly floated in the air and greeted his revival. "Meow!"

"Hahaha! I'm back!"

His consciousness didn't stick around in Axelar's mind for long. As soon as the mech duel ended, Ves already harvested the insights he initially set out for. The System evidently agreed, as it pulled him out soon afterwards.

Aside from learning some very important truths about hero mechs, he also came into touch with an entirely different society.

The Greater Terran United Confederation deserved to be called a first-rate superstate. Ves personally witnessed its full splendor. With all of their might, wealth, power, technology and manpower at their disposal, he fully believed that they once held dominion of most of humanity across the stars.

"That time is over now." He remarked as he checked his life-support machine. He had been out for more than eight days, which was exactly what he expected. "The Terrans are still great, but they are too content to expand their ambitions."

Experiencing the Terran Confederation from within allowed him to verify all the rumors that others have said about the oldest existing human power in the galaxy.

Despite their superior might, wealth, power, technology and manpower, most of their potential was being wasted on needless internal conflicts and

hedonistic pleasures. While the Confederation was not an entirely decadent state, the lack of drive towards pursuing greater goals made the state too insular and focused upon themselves rather than any greater ambitions.

This stood in stark contrast to what he heard about the New Rubarth Empire, which avidly pursued hegemony over the entirety of human space!

What Ves found the most remarkable about the Terrans was that they spent a lot of effort on upgrading their genes and biology. Baseline humans practically didn't exist anymore within the borders of the Confederation as even the lowliest citizen inherited highly-optimized genes from the ancestors who first underwent genetic therapy.

Despite this drive towards elevating Terrans into a higher form of life, they were very much human. At most, their upper limits had been raised to double, triple or even ten times their original capabilities.

Yet did most humans actually make full use of their potential all the time?

No.

Even Axelar, someone who could have been much stronger than any mech pilot of the Komodo Star Sector, wasted far too much time on drugging himself stupid all day.

"Humans are humans." Ves concluded. "Being stronger and smarter doesn't change that. As long as the genetic modifications haven't removed their humanity, they will always be afflicted by the flaws of our race."

This rule also applied to himself. Even though his body had been upgraded and messed around with multiple times, Ves never considered himself a more perfect human being. He might be a lot more capable compared to others, but he could easily descend to Axelar's level if he grew complacent.

"No matter how rich or poor you are, you need to fight to obtain a life worth living!"

When Axelar won his mech duel against Waltz Nexbern in public, he experienced an unprecedented amount of fulfillment! It was through actions like these that that he could turn around his life and make his existence meaningful!

Ves always thought enviously about the fortunate lives of the Terrans and Rubarthans enjoyed. Who in the galactic rim wouldn't?

He still considered them fortunate, but he no longer considered humans who lived in other parts of the galaxy inferior.

"There's no need to put myself down in front of a Terran or a Rubarthan."

As Ves physically recovered from resting on his bed for more than a week, he contemplated whether he should look up Axelar's name on the galactic net.

While he abandoned Axelar shortly after the mech duel, the clansman was still in trouble! Ves couldn't help but grin at the thought of signing the junkie up for the Trail of Tears.

"Serves him right for wasting so much of my time!"

In ordinary circumstances, a wastrel like Axelar should never be able to do well in the Trail of Tears. Yet Axelar showed he could be greater than his addicted self during the duel. If he continued to reform his life in this direction through the many trials the elite training program forced him to, it wasn't impossible for him to transform his entire life!

A creeping sense of foreboding swept over him. Had Ves inadvertently changed the life of yet another Mastery host?

Curiosity drove him to investigate.

Ves activated his comm and entered the galactic net. As soon as he inputted Axelar's name, he immediately encountered a profile published by the MTA.

"Only high-ranking mech pilots enjoy this treatment!"

The moment he entered the page and skimmed through its content, he felt like he read through the biography of an entirely different person!

VENERABLE AXELAR STREON, THE HERO OF NEW TERRA

It quickly became clear that Axelar not only survived the incredibly arduous Trail of Tears, but also thrived! While he hadn't managed to advance to expert pilot during the training program, it only took a couple of years after he returned to advance to expert candidate!

After that, he gradually sharpened his piloting skills and advanced to expert pilot. That wasn't the extent of his progression, as he also managed to advance to ace pilot roughly half-a-century later!

This was the second ace pilot that emerged after Ves paid a visit to their minds in the past!

"What is it about me or the System that turns these mech pilots into exceptional figures?"

Regardless of the cause and effect, Ves felt a strange well of pride surging in his heart. It was him who forced Axelar to get off the couch and make something out of his life!

The one notable surprise he encountered in the biography was that Axelar continued to make use of the Ouroboros. In fact, he still piloted it to this day as his ace mech!

As Ves followed some links and watched some of the rare footage of the Ouroboros in action over the past few decades, he almost didn't recognize his creation anymore!

Little remained from its initial form as an advanced first-class hero mech created with the help of an auto designer. Its subsequent incarnations all incorporated different elements from Senior and Master Mech Designers!

The Ouroboros had been upgraded to such an extreme extent that perhaps not a single part was left of the original Ouroboros!

Ninety years had passed. Both the mech pilot and the prevailing mech technology underwent a lot of progress. It was logical for Axelar to desire to pilot a better mech.

Whereas most mech pilots would have switched to a newer and better mech model, Ves at least felt content that Axelar decided to stick with the Ouroboros. The affection he held for his own mech must have grown even stronger over the years!

There was only one big snag that ruined his mood.

Axelar took credit for designing the Ouroboros!

"You plagiarist!"

Ves wanted to puke. Although he left Axelar's mind with no explanation, it seemed the mech pilot genuinely believed that he was responsible for designing the original incarnation of the Ouroboros!

Right now, the Ouroboros had gained an unimaginable amount of fame in the Terran Confederation! As Axelar's fortunes rose, so did the fortunes of his mech!

While Ves didn't recognize any of the parts and materials of the ace mech version of the Ouroboros, Axelar still retained its conceptual and visual design!

The Ouroboros, the Serpent of Creation and Destruction, was the only hero mech from the Terran Confederation that achieved galaxy-wide fame! Wherever it went, creation and destruction followed in equal measure!

And Axelar shamelessly took credit for something that Ves conceived on his own!

"This is my art!" Ves yelled.

That wasn't the extent of Axelar's theft. As he gained more fame as an expert pilot and ace pilot, he also stole one of Ves' phrases, adopting it into his signature adage!

"Two weapons are enough! The power of creation and destruction triumphs over all!"

Even against the most advanced ace mechs developed by the best Terran or Rubarthan mech pilots, the Ouroboros proved Axelar's signature adage over and over again!

Ves felt the urge to travel to the heart of the Terran Confederation and smack Axelar's face with his own palm!

He quickly abandoned the thought. The current Axelar was nothing like the old one!

The modern Axelar looked much more mature and distinguished. With his cropped, auburn beard and his strong military bearing, Axelar enjoyed an exemplary status within the Terran Confederation.

Not only did he become an ace pilot, he also became a mech general! He worked his way up the ranks of an elite mech corps until he became its ultimate leader!

This meant that Axelar not only possessed considerable personal strength, but also the mind and maturity to lead over one of the most powerful military units of the Confederation!

Axelar also engaged in politics, using his growing influence to good effect. He became known as the Hero of New Terra for joining a faction that advocated for Terran supremacy.

He wanted to reform and revitalize the Terran Confederation! While this faction gained a lot of strength over the recent decades, the overwhelmingly conservative old guard resisted the advances of the upstarts as best as possible.

For now, the Hero of New Terra and the Serpent of Creation and Destruction still had more ways to go. A lot of people expected Axelar to achieve greater heights in his very long lifespan!

"Forget it. What Axelar has achieved is his own merit, not mine." Ves shook his head.

While Ves might have given Axelar the initial push, the Terran earned everything he achieved through his own hard work!

Even the Ouroboros no longer belonged to Ves. His Spirituality didn't react at all to seeing its latter incarnations, though the footage available on the galactic net wasn't all that clear in the first place.

He wasn't sure what would happen if Ves ever reunited with Axelar and the Ouroboros. Did his spiritual imprint still exist in the mech he originally designed but gained a life of its own?

For some reason, Ves imagined himself as an absent mother who abandoned her husband and her newborn child! As a single father, Axelar was stuck with the responsibility of raising the Ouroboros by himself!

In such a situation, the Ouroboros likely wouldn't appreciate a reunion with its deadbeat mother!

"I don't have anything to do with them anymore. Our differences are too great."

Axelar became an ace pilot and a mech general, turning him into a grand figure in the Terran Confederation. The Ouroboros grew alongside its pilot and underwent a huge metamorphosis.

As for Ves? He was just a young Journeyman Mech Designer! People like him never even came within touching distance to an ace pilot or an ace mech!

What really mattered was digesting the lessons he learned through his latest Mastery experience.

He didn't know whether his beliefs about hero mechs conformed to the prevailing standards of this mech type. Yet his opinions matched all of the observations he made on hero mechs.

He summed up the three most pertinent points.

"A hero mech is only fit to be piloted by a hero!"

"Hero mechs shouldn't be produced en masse!"

Not everyone was cut out to pilot a hero mech. Even in a very advanced state like the Terran Confederation, most mech pilots there wouldn't be able to make hero mechs live up to the name of their mech type.

That brought Ves back to the nature of the private commission he accepted. Right now, his mind was filled with inspiration! He had entered the best state for designing a hero mech. However, whether he could make use of any of his ideas depended heavily on the wishes of the client and the mech pilots assigned to pilot his next works!

"Can ceremonial bodyguards even be heroes?"

Chapter 1169 Staying True

Ves leisurely held Lucky in his grasp as he exited his stateroom on the Barracuda for the first time in more than a week. He entered the lounge of his private yacht and met Gavin and Ketis.

"Ves!" Ketis called with evident surprise. "You're finally out of your cave! I thought you were starting to forget yourself or something."

"Hero mechs are very interesting. Can you blame a mech designer for getting enthralled by their existence?"

Lucky jumped out of his grasp and moved over to Ketis in a cute manner. The cat wanted to be spoiled!

As Ketis played with Lucky, Ves moved over to sit next to Gavin.

"How's the company, Benny?"

His assistant furrowed his brows. "Uh, is your memory okay? My name is Gavin, not Benny."

"I know. Starting from now, I'll call you Benny, though."

"Are you sure you haven't been up something this past week? Have you been taking stimulants or something?"

"NO!" Ves avidly denied. "Pff! I'll never become an addict!"

After experiencing the torment of Axelar's previous life, Ves vehemently rejected such an unfulfilling lifestyle!

"Then why call me Benny?"

"Just consider it as a private joke."

"Okay..."

An awkward silence fell between them. After a while, Gavin accepted that he would just have to deal with it like he did with his employer's other

eccentricities. Ves was beginning to grow weirder and weirder every day as he slowly shed his mediocrity!

"The LMC is doing well for now." Gavin began to report. "The sales of the bronze and silver label Aurora Titan models have peaked. While it benefited from a considerable amount of hype and publicity due to the sensational events that happened during its product reveal, not a lot of mech buyers actually need a super-expensive mech that is sold for at least 100 million credits."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I've always positioned the Aurora Titan as an upscale mech. Collecting over a thousand orders for our new mech model in the first week of its release already exceeds our expectations."

"Now that the initial hype is starting to fade, we don't expect the Aurora Titan to do well in the following months. There are two reasons for that. First, the 'independent' reviews for your mech design is not very flattering. Second, while the Aurora Titan itself gained a lot of positive publicity in the media, it is tainted by its association to you. Ves... please do me a favor. Don't look up your name."

"What is the media saying about me? Nothing too bad, I hope?"

"It's complicated. You've become a very polarizing figure in the mech community." Gavin admitted. "Within some government and military circles, you've earned their support. Within the vast AUMD alumni network and some parts of the mech industry, you are everything they don't want to see in a mech designer!"

This was the price Ves paid for denigrating a Senior Mech Designer in public. Seniors should always enjoy the respect of their lessers in the profession! Ves not only broke this custom, but he stepped on it until it became a flattened mess!

"What's your take on it, Benny? Is my personal reputation tarnished?"

Gavin shrugged. "The news cycle is very short. After a month, most of the public will forget about it. However, the mech industry doesn't forget as fast. You've acquired the reputation of a brave but combative and impulsive mech designer. Some people might like that, but other people are questioning whether the mechs you've designed are sound."

The conduct of the lead designer always affected the perception of the products they designed. If Ves gained a smelly reputation, then all of his mech designs acquired the same stench!

However, Ves recognized that this relationship went both ways. As long as the designs he published were all excellent mechs, he could rehabilitate his reputation as a mech designer!

Regardless of his personal quirks, as long as a mech designer possessed the ability to design good mechs, then the mech market could forgive every transgression!

"I'm a de facto Journeyman." Ves stated. "Becoming an official Journeyman is just around the corner. That should count for something, right?"

"It's true that it's better to be a controversial Journeyman than an Apprentice. You're still young and the mech market hasn't seen enough of your work to form a solid opinion. You still have room to change public perception."

"Do the best you can, but I'm not going to change myself. I am happy with who I am and I have no plans to change myself."

"Is that wise?"

"I'm confident in my mech designs. No matter how awful the media portrays me, they can't beat my work!"

If he was still a Novice or an Apprentice, then he would have cared a lot more about his personal reputation. Now that he advanced to a Journeyman, he no longer worried about selling too little mechs.

As a Journeyman, each of his mech designs were viable products! The only way they designed a bad mech was if they faced too many limitations or deliberately wanted to troll their clients.

The first mech he designed after becoming a de facto Journeyman was a case in point. Even though Ves depended heavily on an auto designer to rush the design of the Ouroboros, his hero mech still fared well against a mech designed for professional mech duels!

Rather than pay too much attention to something as ephemeral as reputation that blew from one direction to the next, Ves would rather stay true to himself. How could he design a great mech if he wasn't comfortable in his own skin?

When he designed the Ouroboros, Ves already observed something remarkable about his connection to his design seed. With his spiritual senses, he kept track of how it fluctuated based on his mood.

He tentatively determined that his connection to his design seed strengthened and weakened according to how close he conformed to the personality traits it absorbed during its formation!

He concluded that Journeyman Mech Designers stopped staying true to their old selves benefited less from their design seeds!

Ves wondered if this interaction still played out when a mech designer gradually grew older and more mature. Change was inevitable. No human retained the same personality over decades.

Did that mean that older mech designers found it increasingly more difficult to advance because their personality and their attitudes naturally shifted over time?

It was an interesting hypothesis that Ves would have to test out for himself. Perhaps the MTA already knew of this relationship. It would explain why so many high-ranking mech designers didn't hide their eccentricities.

Ves and Gavin continued to discuss some other matters that emerged during the week.

"Calsie informed me that the Larkinsons are planning to change some of their customs." Gavin noted.

"What is my family up to now?"

"You've become an increasingly more important figure to the family. You're already being regarded as one of their leaders, you know. Calsie heard from your grandfather Benjamin that the Larkinsons plan to erect a new family compound on Cloudy Curtain!"

"What?!"

"They want to expose more Larkinsons to your branch of the family. Many Larkinson mech pilots dream of joining the Avatars of Myth. The norms among the Larkinsons want to build up a career in your growing company. From what I've heard, the Larkinson Family is pretty insistent on playing a greater role in your network."

Ves always knew the Larkinsons were casting greedy eyes on him and his company, but for them to decide such a matter while he just left for the Ylvaine Protectorate was very rude!

He already made his opinion of involving the family in his matters known to his grandfather! Benjamin and the other Larkinson elders should have known better to butt their heads into his business!

"I'll go call my grandfather later and hear what he has to say." Ves sighed.

He knew it would be hard for him to reverse a decision like this because his grandfather always acted decisively. It was hard to say no to family!

From the skeptical look that Gavin directed towards his boss, he didn't have much hope that Ves would get his way!

"Anyway, during our journey, we maintained regular contact with the Ylvaine Protectorate. Madame Cecily Curin's staff helped us complete the last bureaucratic arrangements that allows us to enter, stay and work in the Protectorate."

Visiting a closed state like the Ylvaine Protectorate was a lot harder than entering an open state like the Reinald Republic.

The Reinaldians welcomed almost everyone, including outright pirates, as long as they brought money!

The Ylvainians on the other hand rigorously patrolled the borders of their state. While border patrol in space was full of holes and empty space, every starship needed to pass through a star system if they wanted to sneak into the Protectorate. The Protectors of the Faith became very proficient at catching lawbreakers who avoided the very restrictive visa application process.

Still, someone as powerful as Madame Cecily shouldn't have any problems inviting a foreign mech designer to work on her commission. Her directorship wasn't for show!

"Do you have more details on the commission, Benny? What I've read so far isn't very explicit in its details."

Gavin shrugged. "The client wanted to keep the details close to her chest. She'll only explain her full demands to you in person once you arrive at Kesseling VIII."

"Surely you did some research on your own, right?"

"Who do you think I am?" Gavin grinned. "I managed to dig up a couple of more details. First, while Madame Cecily is a member of the Curin Dynasty, her bodyguard mech pilots are predominantly members of the Kronon Dynasty."

Ves frowned. "Why doesn't the Curin Dynasty provide their own bodyguards for their own officials?"

"The Kronons are the Protectors of the Faith. They hold a monopoly on military power. They take it upon themselves to protect every member of the three leading dynasties, not just their own."

"Does the client trust her own bodyguards?"

It would be very difficult for Ves to design suitable hero mechs for mech pilots that the client didn't want to empower.

"I'm not into Ylvainan politics, so I can't say, but the Kronons are very serious about their duty and responsibilities. Many Kronons are known as warrior monks. They value their integrity and their faith. Besides, the more progressive members of the Kronon Dynasty are in favor of reform."

That last remark was the one that really mattered. Warrior monks or not, Ves never put too much stock in someone else's integrity unless he met them in person.

"Do you have any details about her bodyguards?"

"Not much. No one pays much attention to bodyguards."

The client hadn't revealed a lot of details to Ves. If not for certain guarantees added into the initial contract, Ves wouldn't be so ready to travel to the Protectorate.

Once Gavin finished bringing up everything he needed to hear, Ves dismissed his assistant and walked up to Ketis and Lucky.

While the cat enjoyed his pampering, Ketis looked up to Ves. "Hey."

"Are you looking forward to this trip?"

"Not really." She replied. "You're just going to lock yourself up again to design your next mech, right? I appreciate that you've given me a chance to be involved in the design of the Aurora Titan, but I don't really see a lot of my work in the final version of the design."

"Ah, I know I've been a bit unfair to you, Ketis." Ves apologised. "I'll make sure to pay more attention to your involvement in our next design project. However, your contribution ultimately depends on whether you are able to perform up to standard."

"I know. You're not the only mech designer who constantly improves! Just give me a chance and I'll prove myself to you! I'm tired of being relegated to the side this time!"

While Ves did not expect very much from Ketis, it didn't hurt to see what she was capable of. He could sense her motivation and he wanted to encourage her drive to learn and improve herself.

Validating her passion was essential if Ves wanted to nurture her in a useful assistant in his design projects!

Chapter 1170 Sanctity of Belief

The Barracuda passed through the borders of the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate after a thorough inspection. While the Protectors of the Faith came off as intense and distant, they didn't mistreat the Brighters.

The permissions that Ves and his entourage obtained were all authentic. An important member of the Curin Dynasty invited them over, so the Protectors of the Faith didn't have any cause to halt their entry into their state.

The head inspector did pass on a warning before he boarded the inspection shuttle docked alongside the Barracuda.

"Foreigners, especially Brighters like you, tend to question our faith. In the name of the Prophet, I advise you not to push the boundaries of our hospitality. Our beliefs are our beliefs. We know better than to expect the rest of the galaxy to convert to our faith, but we at least expect our guests to keep their noses to themselves."

Leland answered in Ves' stead. "We are aware of the cultural differences between our states. We respect the Ylvainans and would never jeopardize our relations with your state."

"For your own sake, I hope you are sincere. It is a crime to criticize the Ylvainan Faith within our borders." The inspector warned in an ominous tone. "Despite issuing this warning to every visitor, at least five percent of all the foreigners who enter our state nonetheless run afoul of this law."

"What happens to them, inspector?" Gavin asked.

"Foreigners are exempt from following some of our laws, but not all of them. It is a capital crime to turn our citizens into apostates! If any Ylvainan attempts to corrupt the beliefs of the faithful, then they will suffer the most painful torment we are capable of inflicting on their bodies! Don't worry, though. Foreigners who are guilty of the same crime receive clean executions. We don't want to aggravate the relationship between our states any further."

The team of inspectors left the Barracuda after that, leaving everyone aside from Leland unsettled.

The disguised intelligence operative smiled. "While the Protectorate isn't eager to publicize these kinds of incidents, they do execute a lot of foreigners. The Bright Republic has protested the draconian treatment our citizens receive whenever they become caught up in 'enlightening' the local believer, but the Protectorate has never budged on this matter. Don't expect our state to bail you out if you ignore this warning."

Among the paperwork they signed to enter the Protectorate, they voluntarily acknowledged that they would be subject to some of the Protectorate laws pertaining to the Ylvainan Faith.

The fastest way to piss off an Ylvainan was to mock, criticize and question their faith!

Ves looked at his companions. Gavin and Leland knew better than to run afoul of this law. He didn't worry too much about Ketis either as she was used to living alongside various cultists with extreme beliefs.

He still wanted to say something. "This business trip is very important to the LMC. It's important to me as well. I hope that all of you pay attention to your conduct while we are among the Ylvainans. I know they're weird and that some of their beliefs are rather.. extreme. I hope you can maintain a respectful front no matter what we encounter during our visit. I'll do my best to fight on your behalf, but my influence here is nonexistent."

In the Bright Republic, Ves could rely on his own influence and his connections to the Larkinsons, the Tovars, Flashlight, the Mech Corps and Professor Ventag to fight back against an accusation.

Here, none of those influences held much sway. The Protectorate was a very closed state who deliberately isolated themselves from even their closest neighbors. Ves could only put his trust in Madame Cecily Curin to lend a hand in case he ever faced any trouble from the locals.

The journey to the Kesseling System proceeded without any further delays. While the Kesseling System wasn't a port system, the binary stars it contained made it easier to reach, especially for an upscale corvette like the Barracuda.

During the journey, Ves supplemented his own gains from his recent Mastery experience by perusing some of the literature written by other mech designers.

He quickly noticed that not everything he read about hero mechs conformed to his beliefs.

[...As technology and living standards increase, mech pilots are becoming increasingly capable of piloting more complex mechs. The demand for mechs that only come with a single application will inevitably decrease. The rise of multipurpose mechs in the most developed parts of human space already foretells the death knell for narrowly-specialized mechs in the galactic rim....]

[...Hero mechs will therefore become increasingly more popular as a stopgap between specialized mechs and multipurpose mechs. It is expected that hero mechs will become the prevailing mech type during the transition to prepare mech pilots for the inevitable transition to multipurpose mechs....]

"A hero mech as a training tool? Absurd!"

While the mech designers who wrote these books all designed hero mechs before, Ves wondered if they truly understood the point of hero mechs.

"A hero mech can't be called like that anymore if they are mass produced!"

If Ves studied these books before undergoing his Mastery experience, he would have adopted a similar mindset as the authors. Now that he acquired the beliefs he came up on his own, he was much more skeptical of opinions which clashed with his own.

His interpretation of hero mechs had become his private faith! He would not allow others to question his faith!

Ves snorted. "Maybe this is how the Ylvainans feel whenever a pompous Brighter comes along and disparages the Ylvainan Faith."

Compared to all the crazy religions in the galaxy, the Ylvainan Faith didn't really stand out. They used to be more fervent when Prophet Ylvaine was still

alive, but his death along with the death of the entire Ylvaine Dynasty taught them that the galaxy wouldn't tolerate any instances of intolerant fanaticism.

The Ylvainans tasted defeat before, and it humbled them ever since.

"Every state in the Komodo Star Sector shares a similar past. We are all descended from exiles."

As Ves went back to reading some of the virtual textbooks he acquired from the galactic net, he increasingly felt as if he wasted his money. He paid several hundred-thousand credits to acquire these copies from the MTA's virtual library on the basis of their high ratings and good reviews!

"Hmph. It turns out they are all ignorant sheep who are blindly following a stray donkey."

While there were several authors who shared some of Ves' beliefs, they didn't go far enough. Almost every mech designer believed that hero mechs were bound to explode in popularity in future mech generations!

To his dismay, Ves couldn't entirely dismiss the possibility. Mechs armed with two weapon systems might very well become viable enough for the market to demand them in great numbers.

As long as the demand was there, mech designers would do their best to meet them regardless of what they thought about hero mechs!

Ves foresaw that the hero mechs published during this time would take on a different meaning.

"Hero mechs will become an empty term by then. Maybe the mech industry will have some decency and use a different label to refer to their mech type."

Regardless of what everyone else thought about hero mechs, Ves was determined to design a hero mech that conformed to his own beliefs for the upcoming commission.

While Ves wrestled with his beliefs on hero mechs, the Barracuda finally arrived at the Kesseling System.

Its twin stars emitted a lot of heat and radiation. The Ylvainans who initially colonized the Kesseling System left the inner system alone and settled the most outward planets instead.

Kesseling VIII rose as the local seat of government as it was the most comfortable planet to live upon. The Curin Dynasty even solidified its importance by placing the headquarters of the Ministry of Industry and Trade on this planet.

When the Barracuda arrived in high orbit of Kesseling VIII, the corvette could fly no further. The Protectors of the Faith barred any shuttle or ship that did not belong to an Ylvainan from landing on the planet.

Ves prepared his outfit and his luggage. He inspected his form through a mirrored projection and nodded in satisfaction. The stylist bots in his stateroom did a good job in making him appear presentable in his formal business clothing.

As he exited his stateroom with his floating luggage coffers in tow, he joined the others who were bringing along their own luggage.

Madame Cecily already arranged a shuttle for them all. As soon as the vehicle docked alongside the Barracuda, Ves, Lucky, Ketis, Gavin and Leland all stowed away their luggage and took their seats.

The shuttle separated from the Barracuda and carefully descended down to the surface of the planet that they would be staying upon for the duration of the trip.

"They say that Kesseling VIII itself is split between the reformers and the traditionalists." Gavin noted as Ves watched out the porthole at the ocean and land masses of the terraformed planet. "Although the planet is largely under

the administration of the Curin Dynasty, the Poxco Dynasty maintains a presence on every planet."

The Protectorate wouldn't be much of a religious state if they didn't spread their churches everywhere. The Attendants of Ylvaine avidly made sure that every Ylvainan attended services!

"What's the current trend, Benny?"

Gavin sighed in exasperation. Could his boss at least remember his name?

"The higher classes who stand to benefit directly from opening up the Protectorate are largely in favor of reforming the state. The lower classes are much more resistant. Even though their welfare will also improve with increased trade, they don't expect to receive many benefits. That makes it a lot easier for the Attendants of Ylvaine to keep them in their camp."

"I would be more careful of your utterances if I were you, Gavin. Remember where we are now." Leland noted from the other end of the Ylvainan shuttle. "You insult every Ylvainan when you equate the strength of their piety to their personal benefits. Don't generalize the citizens of Kesseling VIII according to their social class. There are extremely pious believers among the highest government officials and there are very casual Ylvainans among millions of average farm and factory workers."

"Ah, I'm sorry." Gavin said, recognizing his mistake. "We're lucky to have someone connected to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in our business delegation."

Ves couldn't help but bite his lip. "We are indeed blessed by the addition of Leland. However, I hope that all of you remember who's in charge here."

Leland turned his head and threw a subtle glare at Ves. "Of course, Ves. I would never do anything to contradict your goals."

That remained to be seen. Whether Leland was messing around or not, Ves hoped he wouldn't get caught in any messes!

After some time, the shuttle eventually descended onto a landing pad next to the grandiose villa-like structure that housed the Office of Strategic Mech Management.

"Wow!" Ketis said as she stepped out of the shuttle with her poofy beret on her head. "The Ylvainans sure have style! It kind of reminds me of some of your work, Ves!"

The Ylvainans had a penchant for architecture derived from the ancient baroque style. It was a surefire way to make their state and religion appear more stately and dignified.

As Ves and his entourage were guided inside, they underwent a routine security check that forced them to relinquish all of their weapons and most of their gadgets aside from their comms.

Only until Ves had taken off his toolbelt and the holster holding the Peaceful Repose did the guards allow him to meet with the client.

"What about my staff?" He asked when the guards directed the others elsewhere.

"Madame Cecily wishes to meet you in private, Mr. Larkinson. Your staff will be directed to a waiting room during your initial meeting."

"Can I at least bring my pet?"

"My apologies, Mr. Larkinson. Madame Cecily maintains a strict prohibition against bringing any pets inside. No matter if it's mechanical or organic, your cat must remain in the courtyard."

While it wasn't a weird rule considering that pets could be stuffed with all kinds of spying gear, Ves still felt it was a pity.

"Remain outside and do go off on your own, got that, Lucky?"

"Meow!"

Once he settled Lucky, Ves proceeded to follow one of the guards as they moved to the upper levels. After weeks of travel, he was finally going to meet the client!