

Chapter 1481 Expanding Collection

Before Ves attended the Circle of Mota's auction, he only discovered two spiritually-reactive exotics.

He dubbed them P-stones and F-stones. He deliberately named them in this boring and un-descriptive fashion in order to obscure their true purpose.

Even if a cultist of the Five Scrolls Compact heard mention of a P-stone, the crazy fellow would probably dismiss it as a stupid name for a random exotic.

Naturally, adopting these bland names also made it difficult for Ves to communicate their value and applications to others, but that wasn't a problem to Ves.

So far, only Lucky knew the most outside of Ves himself, but that was slowly changing.

He'd been dipping his toes into expanding his circle of trust by letting Nitaa watch over him as he worked. Even if he didn't speak out and explain about spirituality, she probably picked up some clues about the remarkable nature of the materials he prized so highly.

Now that Ves finished some of his tasks, he eagerly directed his attention to the two unusual items he and Finlay won from the auction.

"I better start with something easy." He muttered as he decided to leave Item #1255 aside for later. "Besides, the equipment I have on hand in this lab is too small to accommodate an object of this size."

The Ancient Sarcophagus was clearly the most powerful and impressive object he obtained from the Cinach System. However, Ves harbored a heavy amount of caution over this seemingly dormant object.

A crystal coffin that imprisoned an unknown humanoid alien being ought to be an artificial product rather than a product of nature!

"Whatever alien produced this crystal growth might have slipped all kinds of traps and safeguards into its structure. I can't treat it carelessly lest I break it or something!"

Another reason why Ves wanted to leave it for later was because of the unsettling amount of spiritual activity he sensed from within.

Could it be the remnant spirituality of the dead alien being?

A cosmic spiritual hitchhiker who randomly latched on to the coffin?

A formless collection of wild spiritual energy that sprouted from the environment where the Ancient Sarcophagus used to rest?

Ves had no clue, and that scared him. Sometimes, he even entertained fears that he might have unwittingly invited a powerful spiritual predator aboard his ship!

Fortunately, nothing unusual had happened while Item #1255 had been brought aboard the Barracuda. None of the crew or his staff acquired a different personality and no one suffered any nightmares.

Ves even occasionally swept his spiritual senses over every individual he came across. He detected no spiritual contamination or anything of that nature.

That still didn't make him feel relieved, though. The more he observed Item #1255, the more he feared its presence.

"This is a good thing." Ves tried to convince himself. "If it isn't so powerful, it's not worth 20 billion bright credits."

Rather than keep reinforcing his fears, Ves decided to ignore the Ancient Sarcophagus entirely in favor of something smaller and more manageable.

Item #613 consisted of an unknown exotic that reacted to his spiritual probes in a different fashion from his existing P-stones and F-stones.

"This means it's likely to be a third type of spiritually-reactive exotics!"

This was good news, if it turned out to be true! Ves eagerly grabbed the container holding Item #613 and practically ran from the vault and returned to his lab.

There, he began to subject the exotic through a whole host of scans and probes.

While his Vulcaneye and his miniaturized lab equipment didn't yield as much data as he wanted, he still managed to record a decent amount of energetic activity that confirmed that it was a powerful exotic.

"Interesting." Ves mulled over the readings he interpreted. "The P-stones I obtained barely contain any activity, though I've never studied them when they are filled with spiritual energy. The F-stone I've acquired is decently energetic to begin with, but it also starts off with a full charge."

In comparison, Item #613 exhibited moderate activity, which suggested that it was a completely new medium-grade exotic.

No wonder the Circle of Nitaa decided to put it up for auction! If not for its completely unknown applications, a lot more wealthy material researchers would have loved to uncover its secrets!

"Well, it's all mine now."

Though Ves subjected Item #613 to various scans, he had merely been studying the strange exotic with technological means.

He withheld employing his spiritual senses until after he covered the basics. If his spiritual probes ever elicited some kind of reaction or transformation, then he wanted to make sure he possessed the original parameters to compare the changes.

"Well, it's finally time." He smiled.

He made sure to take numerous precautions. He placed Item #613 in a protective chamber and made sure to wear protective lab equipment. While he didn't suspect that the rose-gold exotic was some kind of bomb, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Once he finished triple-checking all of the sensors and safeguards, he began to concentrate his mind and rouse his spiritual senses.

He maintained his distance at first. He switched on his spiritual vision and began to observe Item #613 without disturbing it in any fashion.

He spotted no sign that the exotic contained any spiritual energy. It didn't glow in his spiritual vision or throw up any unusual phenomena that signified the presence of a spiritual entity.

That did not mean that he was wrong about Item #613. The P-stones didn't appear unusual either in his spiritual vision because they didn't normally contain anything.

"Looks like I have to take a risk and probe it deeper."

Just looking at it from afar didn't cut it. He needed to touch it and pry it open in order to figure out its spiritually-reactive properties, and from there, its applications.

He extended his spiritual senses, which took on a faint real form due to the infusion of his spiritual energy, and began to extend it towards the exotic.

Enough time had passed since his mother's visit for his spiritual energy reserves to return to its peak. Ves had already begun to siphon bits of his excess spiritual energy into one of his five P-stones.

Ves was curious how much excess spiritual energy a P-stone could store. He wondered whether their capacity differed in relation to their mass, volume, density, material composition or other variables.

This reminded him that he should come up with a measurement for spiritual energy. For now, he already apportioned his spiritual energy by how much he replenished in a standard day.

In any case, he turned his attention back to Item #613. Before, he only briefly brushed his senses towards the object. Now, he was about to perform a deeper examination.

"Here goes!"

He extended a small spiritual probe and attempted to push it through the surface of the rose-gold exotic.

He failed!

"So my initial probe back then was right! Item #613 is capable of acting as a barrier!"

One common attribute about spiritual energy was that it passed through nearly any material as if it didn't exist. It was as if spirituality occupied a different physical phase from every other material object. Just like how many types of signals and other forms of radiation effortlessly passed through solid walls or human bodies, spirituality seemed to be able to go wherever it wanted!

"It can probably sink in the center of a planet if it can last that long!"

Though Ves always observed this kind of behavior, he never assumed it was universally true. Exceptions always existed, but he never imagined encountering one in the flesh today!

His interest towards Item #613 increased as Ves employed more and more of his spirituality against the solid rock. He wanted to see if he could break the barrier and sink his spiritual projections beneath the surface!

He became more and more reckless as he continually empowered his spiritual projections. He pumped them so full of energy that his reserves in his mind started to decrease at an alarming rate!

Even then, he never managed to budge the defenses erected by Item #613!

Though he hadn't conducted a full range of tests yet, he tentatively formulated a couple of preliminary assumptions.

First, he guessed that the entire composition of Item #613 possessed this spiritual blocking effect. If he cut the rock in two, both halves would still exhibit the same behavior, even along the surface of the cut.

Second, the strength of this blocking effect is proportional to the mass or volume of the object. The larger the exotic, the more strength he needed to exert to break through the barrier.

In order to test these assumptions, he needed to get physical, because what he was doing now yielded no new information. Even when he deployed nearly all of his free-floating spiritual energy, he hadn't managed to make a single dent in Item #613's defenses!

"It's strong! At least in this quantity, it's more than enough to block intrusions at my level of strength!"

Ves wondered whether a more powerful entity such as Qilanxo was able to smash it through using sheer brute force.

"I should focus on the tests that I can perform."

He began to activate some lab equipment and attempted to cut a sliver of rock from the surface of Item #613.

While the exotic was exceptionally resilient against spiritual energy, its material resilience was relatively mundane.

"It's toughness is no different from that of an average space rock." Ves mused as he didn't encounter any difficulties in obtaining his slice.

If the exotic was as tough as compressed alloy, then Ves would have a lot more trouble trying to cut a precise piece out of the exotic.

The portion he sliced off resembled a very tiny rectangular tile. One side was uneven as it bore the natural texture of Item #613's exterior. The other side was as smooth and straight as the cutting implement had sheared it off the main body.

"It's exactly ten grams!"

He didn't dare cut off a greater piece for fear of damaging Item #613's integrity. In order to reassure himself, he began to repeat his earlier experiments and attempted to push his spiritual projections through the surface of the exotic, paying special attention to the abnormally smooth surface of the cut.

"It's the same!"

Practically nothing changed! Slicing ten grams off an object that weighed many kilograms did not affect the exotic's ability to block spiritual energy in any significant way!

This increased his interest towards the rectangular sample he cut off. Was it as strong as the main body, or was it as weak as its diminutive size suggested?

"Let's see."

Ves began to probe it carefully with his spiritual energy.

It managed to block his weak attempts at punching through.

"So it still works even when cut out of the main body!"

That was a relief to him. He didn't relish trying to make use of Item #613 in its natural space rock form. In order to make best use of this material, he wanted to process and mold it into a more fitting form.

Emboldened by his initial attempts, Ves employed more and more of his spiritual strength.

However, just as he was about to ramp up, his spirituality finally pushed through the resistance and began to sink into the object!

In fact, after employing a tiny bit more strength, his spirituality began to pass through the rectangular sample with only a minor amount of resistance!

"It's like pushing my finger through a surface of water!"

As long as he employed enough strength, he no longer felt the resistance!

This result disappointed him a bit, though he already expected that something like this would happen. His hopes of creating a micrometer thick wall to form a barrier that blocked any spiritual intrusions were dashed.

"Well, at least this exotic behaves according to logic and common sense."

Ves performed some additional experiments. He cut additional specimens from the surface of Item #613. They differed from the first piece by either volume or mass.

Once he performed a raft of probes on all of the pieces, he confidently concluded that the strength of the spiritual blocking effect was proportional to its mass!

"The heavier, the stronger!"

Ves knew for sure now that he discovered a third type of spiritually-reactive exotics!

"I'm not sure if it's only my energy it's capable of blocking, but for now I've ascertained enough to bestow it a name!"

Seeing that its main effect was to block spiritual energy, he decided to stick to his current naming scheme and dubbed it the B-stone!

"Welcome to my collection, B-stone!"

Chapter 1482 Sparking New Insights

Item #613, which Ves dubbed the B-stone, exhibited simple properties. It blocked spiritual energy. The higher the mass, the more effective the blocking strength.

Ves could easily pierce a sheet of B-stone as thin as a fingernail with a spiritual jab.

However, layering several sheets of B-stone on top of each other increased the blocking strength as if they were a single whole. This made working with B-stones a lot more convenient.

He continually cut more and more rectangular sheets from the B-stone and kept layering them against each other. He kept doing this until his full-strength spiritual probe could no longer pierce through the material.

"It's kind of strange." Ves scratched his chin. "My spiritual energy loses a bit of force and energy if the B-stone isn't thick enough, but it's still able to go through. However, the moment I add in just a single sheet, the B-stone turns into a solid wall. I can't even get past the front door anymore."

Against weak opponents, a decent layer of B-stone offered total protection against spiritual intrusions. Even if Ves faced a powerful entity as strong as Qilanxo, the B-stone still weakened and sapped the strength of any powerful spiritual attacks.

"B-stone is really easy to use!"

Ves liked its straightforwardness. Compared to the abstruse mechanics of P-stones or the unfathomable source of charged energy in F-stones, a B-stone simply functioned as a shielding material against a specific type of energy.

As an engineer, Ves appreciated the simple rules behind the B-stone's spiritual blocking phenomenon. Because of its regular and predictable properties, Ves could make precise calculations on how much B-stone he needed to design and fabricate a particular application.

He began to record the parameters of the B-stone for the rest of the day. He took a specific quantity of spiritual energy and tested how much B-stone was required to block that specific amount.

All of this sounded like boring work, but Ves never lost his interest. The more he became familiar with B-stones, the more he gained a feel of its workings.

At the end of the day, Ves recorded all of the parameters in his personal database.

Of course, Ves did not stupidly describe the spiritual blocking phenomenon in a way that hinted at the existence of either spirituality or psionics. Crindon's frequent warnings always reminded him that no electronic system or database was truly secure.

It was better to start with the assumption that his records would always be accessed by a hacker, infiltrator or spy. For that reason, Ves merely typed up a bunch of gibberish that he had mentally encoded with his own form of encryption. His highly capable mind was easily capable of emulating the functions of a computer to this extent as long as the encryption wasn't too complex.

Of course, even if a genius was still able to decrypt his gibberish records, they would only be able to obtain a bunch of random code words and numbers that meant nothing to the wrong person.

Only a high-ranking mech designer who specialized in the same direction of research as Ves would be able to infer that the data described a material that hindered the passage of spiritual energy!

"I won't say a mech designer like that doesn't exist." He cautioned himself.

"Exceptions always exist. The galactic mech community is humongous and incredibly varied."

Even so, the chances of encountering another mech designer who specialized in spirituality was very low! At the very least, Ves believed he wouldn't encounter any of them in this corner of the galaxy!

Now that Ves recorded all of the properties of his B-stone, he stopped his investigations and took back the B-stone from the scanning machines. After continually cutting samples from Item #613, it now featured lots of rectangular cutoffs on its surface. He had practically skinned its surface in order to obtain enough sheets to block his spiritual probes!

What he had accomplished today not only increased his familiarity with a new type of spiritually-reactive material, but also advanced his understanding of the nature of spirituality.

"However, I'm still limited by my own strength." He idly complained.

His Spirituality Attribute had grown since he advanced to Journeyman, but the quantity of free-floating spiritual energy in his mind was still too weak. With his design seed hogging most of his Spirituality, the leftovers only enabled him to exert a small proportion of his strength in areas unrelated to mech design.

This also made it hard for him to imagine whether he even needed the protection afforded by B-stones.

This was a very valid question, as so far Ves had only witnessed spiritual energy being used to empower one's own abilities. In other words, it was like

a fuel that enabled a spiritually-strong entity to perform special abilities that bent or broke the rules of reality.

"However, if someone dumps a bucket of fuel over me and ignites it in some way, it can still be deadly!"

Nonetheless, Ves believed it was a bit far-fetched for him to utilize B-stones as protection against direct spiritual attacks. Not even Qilanxo utilized her formidable spirituality in such a fashion!

After a bit of thinking, Ves came up with a number of possible applications.

First, he could utilize B-stones to form a prison for uncooperative spiritual entities.

"The problem here is that P-stones already serve this function."

That did not mean that B-stones became redundant. The suction force exerted by P-stones was not omnipotent.

Unlike B-stones, the effect of P-stones couldn't be strengthened by layering them against each other. Ves had already cut off a tiny slice of P-stone during his previous experimentations in order to test that assumption.

Each P-stone formed a completely new nucleus. They were self-contained entities that didn't combine their forces with other P-stones in the vicinity.

This meant that even if he pressed a hundred identical P-stones together, he'd only form a collection of 100 smaller cells instead of one huge chamber!

In fact, when he attempted to melt the small sample of P-stone he cut off from one of the primary P-stones, it lost its effect!

"P-stones lose their properties when subject to heavy processing!"

All of this probably didn't matter if Ves only used his P-stones as spiritual energy batteries.

However, if Ves captured a very strong spiritual entity one day, his P-stones might not be strong enough to keep something powerful contained in place.

This was where B-stones could come in. Since it was easy to work with and retained its properties no matter how much Ves beat it up, he could easily shape the B-stone into a barrier around an P-stone.

"It's like building prison walls around the main prison building. It's a second line of defense."

As long as Ves possessed a sufficient quantity of B-stones, he could potentially imprison the most powerful spiritual entities in the galaxy! Even ace pilot-like entities like Qilanxo would have no choice but to stay put if Ves built a cell out of B-stones that was many meters thick!

"Perhaps even god pilots or comparable entities can be isolated in this fashion!"

The only downside was that B-stones only blocked Spirituality and did nothing else. P-stones still played a role in imprisoning spiritual entities because they formed an adequate substitute of physical bodies.

Without the sheltering function provided by P-stones, spiritual entities would slowly degrade because they lacked the nurturing of a real home.

The best home was a physical body, but now that Ves thought about it, he never thought about the fact that his designs and mechs also served as adequate homes!

Ves believed this was mostly due to bleeding his Spirituality over his mechs and mech designs. Because he subliminally invested his spiritual energy into his works, they gained the ability to shelter and maybe even nurture any spiritual entities that resided in their spiritual shells!

In fact, Ves even suspected for a very long time that his design spirits benefited more if his mechs grew more popular! The more mech pilots a design spirit connected with, the more symbiotic relationship it formed!

"Each proper relationship is mutually beneficial. Both the mech pilot and the mech derive benefits from their bond." Ves observed.

This was one of the core assumptions of his design philosophy, after all!

If Ves extended this line of reasoning, then forming more relationships meant that a design spirit harvested more benefits!

Of course, Ves assumed that low-ranking mech pilots only provided minimal benefits. A bond with an expert candidate or expert pilot was probably a billion or a trillion times stronger!

Ves grinned. "It's interesting how discovering new materials can elicit so many new insights!"

He observed many different phenomena related to spirituality, but he never paid attention to some of his more peculiar observations. Only when prompted by different stimuli did he begin to look back at his old observations and realize that something exceptional was happening right under his nose!

Each new phenomena he came in touch with expanded his grasp on spirituality. With a greater amount of context, his old observations began to fit into place like pieces in a puzzle.

"If I've already managed to obtain these gains from just three exotics that are relevant to my specialty, then what about six? What about twelve?"

He could scarcely imagine what kind of brain storms would ensue if he came in touch with so many different kinds of spiritually-reactive exotics!

One of the reasons why mech designers spent so much money and effort on certain exotics was to initiate brainstorming that substantially advanced their understanding in their own fields!

He basked in the new insights he just formed, each of which illuminated another facet of spirituality and spiritual engineering.

Once he came off his high, he turned his attention back to the present and stared at the chunk of B-stone.

He wondered whether he should preserve it in its current form or make use of it immediately.

"This is my only sample so far, but unlike P-stones I've already figured out what I needed to learn. There's no use keeping it in storage."

However, Ves couldn't come up with an immediate application.

"What do I need?"

Maybe he should make use of it to form a barrier against hostile spiritual intrusions and invasions. He already attacked or intruded upon several spiritual entities in the imaginary realm. While he always got away with his attempts, he might provoke a powerful existence into chasing him back to his body!

That would be really bad if the entity he provoked was strong!

Ves looked at his B-stone with a dubious expression. It had enough mass to form a thick helmet with plenty of material to spare.

"A helmet won't offer protection in every direction. Even if I make the entire faceplate solid, it will still have a huge hole to accommodate my neck!"

Unfortunately, the amount of B-stone he possessed fell short of forming an entire suit of protective armor. He'd have to spread out his B-stone so much that its layer of protection could easily be pierced by someone of his strength.

Eventually, he decided to make a protective container out of his available B-stone. He processed the raw B-stone through various machines and hand tools and quickly crafted most of its mass into a fairly thick lockbox with a purely mechanical door and locking mechanism.

Ves also drew upon the stores of other strong materials stored on the Barracuda and added some much-needed physical reinforcement to the contraption. While it wouldn't save the lockbox against being flattened by the foot of a mech, it was more than sufficient to survive someone shooting at it with infantry weapons.

The B-stone lockbox looked thicker than other lockboxes. Despite its size and lack of functions, it was the only container in his possession that blocked and isolated spirituality in both directions.

He proceeded to test it by placing one of his P-stones inside. The P-stone contained a decent charge of excess spiritual energy which Ves could easily detect with his spiritual senses."

However, once he closed the lockbox, he no longer felt any trace of the P-stone's spiritual activity!

He attempted to project his Spirituality through the lockbox and sense the P-stone that was stored inside.

He failed!

"It works!"

Not only did he form a container that could potentially assist him in imprisoning powerful spiritual entities, he could also store sensitive materials inside. Anyone who possessed the power to detect spiritually-active materials would not be able to peek what Ves had stored inside!

To be honest, Ves had another reason to make use of his B-stone to craft a lockbox. He wanted to shield his valuable treasures against the only person who stole from him on a regular basis!

His mother!

"Hahahaha!" He laughed as he rubbed his cheek against the surface of his new lockbox. "With you around, my mother won't have any clue!"

Chapter 1483 Still Human

Investigating and processing his sole B-stone took far less time than he thought. With the fleet still more than a month away from reaching the Hertog Dominion, Ves had a lot of time on his hands.

To be honest, Ves was afraid of tackling the most valuable object he gained from his visit to the Cinach System. The more his thoughts strayed towards the Ancient Sarcophagus, the more he became apprehensive about what he might encounter in his investigations.

The strange, red crystalline coffin loomed heavily in his heart. Strangely enough, his intuition didn't issue anything more than a vague and ambiguous hint, but his instincts and some of his other impulses exhibited an increasing amount of fear!

"What the hell is going on?!" Ves shook his head.

He suddenly realized that his creeping sense of fear towards Item #1255 might not be a natural phenomenon.

Instead, he began to suspect that some kind of external influence artificially increased his apprehension towards the Ancient Sarcophagus!

"Is it indoctrinating me? Is there something.. alive inside?"

Ves occasionally entertained the idea that the alien body that rested inside might not be dead.

Even after eons had passed, the red crystal surrounding the body might have been able to preserve or even nurture the lingering spirituality that remained after the death of the alien individual inside.

"This coffin was found in some kind of temple in an alien ruin." Ves recalled.
"Whoever is buried inside must be an esteemed individual in their civilization!"

It was akin to the crystal builder leader corpse he retrieved a long time ago. The most formidable individuals of their races always possessed something special that helped them stay in charge.

What kind of powers did the alien individual locked inside the Ancient Sarcophagus possess? How much of that remained after the alien's death? Had it mutated somehow after the passage of eons of times?

The most frustrating part about this situation was that Ves didn't have any proof to substantiate his guesses! He could work his overactive imagination all he wanted, but all he got in return was pure speculation!

"The only way I can resolve my doubts is to tackle the bull by the horns! I can't delay this investigation any further! Otherwise, I'll grow too afraid to even begin my investigation!"

Despite his urgency, Ves did not immediately pull out the Ancient Sarcophagus from his vault. He wanted to enter into his most optimal state before he started his examination.

He looked at the spiritual lockbox he just fashioned. The P-stone inside only contained a few day's worth of excess spiritual energy.

"That's not enough. I need to build up a larger reserve."

To Ves, spiritual energy was akin to the supplies of a mech regiment. When mechs deployed in battle, they used up a varying amount of fuel, energy and ammunition. They also sustained damage to their structure.

If the mech regiment brought an abundant supply train, then they could easily replenish what the mechs had expended, allowing it to return into battle after a round of servicing.

However, a mech regiment that brought an insufficient quantity of supplies quickly lost battle effectiveness. With continuing attrition, mechs returned from battle with low energy levels, serious battle damage and no ammunition. If these deficiencies couldn't be remedied, then that was the end!

Ves believed that this analogy might be relevant to this situation. If the Ancient Sarcophagus held some kind of hostile spiritual entity, then Ves may be forced into a spiritual battle of some sorts!

His experiences in confrontations against spiritual entities taught him that attrition still applied in this type of conflict. His attempts to disturb Zeigra's presence in the imaginary realm from suppressing Vescas to its breaking point could have gone a lot better if he wasn't so hesitant about expending his scarce spiritual energy!

"It's really hard to fight with limited supplies." He muttered. "I'll stand a better chance if I accumulate a deeper reserve."

He planned to wait a few days to store more excess spiritual energy into his P-stones.

Not too much, though. If he delayed for too long, the fear he held towards the Ancient Sarcophagus would become rooted in his mind.

"I'll see how far I can go before I have to make a move."

Until then, Ves had plenty of tasks to occupy his time with. This seemed like a good time to investigate the supposed gift his parents left behind for his recent birthday.

Ves retrieved a tiny box from the vault and opened it up. A pair of carbon-black rings rested inside. Both of them were small enough to wrap around a finger with plenty of room to spare.

Neither of them fit him in their current state, but that wasn't a big deal. His mother already suggested to him that he should use it as the base of a more sophisticated pair of rings. Wedding rings.

He frowned at the rings. Despite their plain appearance, there must be a reason why his father and mother chose these rings in particular.

"My parents didn't wear any strange rings if I recall."

When Ves inspected the rings with his spiritual senses, he didn't pick up anything peculiar at first.

However, the more he probed it with his Spirituality, the more he started to feel something strange about the rings.

"There's something inside one of the rings."

As Ves probed deeper, he finally discovered that it held a miniscule mote of spiritual energy. As soon as his spiritual projection touched it, a stream of data suddenly occupied his attention!

Seconds later, his attention cleared up. His eyes widened due to what he experienced.

His mother implanted another spiritual message into an object! As soon as his Spirituality came in touch with it, the message transmitted straight to his mind!

"How is she doing this?! More importantly, can I do this as well?"

This was the second time he encountered a spiritual method of communication. This time, he didn't hear his mother's voice. Instead, the information his mother left behind implanted directly into his mind.

In fact, the method shared several similarities with how the System imparted knowledge to him after he exchanged his DP for a Skill!

His impression of his mother as some kind of spiritual sorceress only increased. The more she revealed her abilities, the more Ves felt as if his own progress in this field was trivial in comparison!

"There's no point comparing myself to her." He whispered to himself. "I should focus on my own advancement instead of looking enviously at the accomplishments of others."

Mech designers were already taught to avoid comparing themselves to others. The existence of Seniors, Masters and Star Designers meant there were lots of people who clearly surpassed the vast majority in their profession.

"Besides, I'm still young."

That caused him to wonder about his mother's age. Was her record even accurate? What if her spirit was younger than her body?

The suggestion that his mother might be a centuries-old hag who hopped from body to body as if she donned new clothes sent a chill through his spine. The beginnings of an existential crisis threatened to take over his mind!

"Some secrets are best left in the dark!"

He shoved his mind of all superfluous thoughts and focused his attention back to the plain, black pair of wedding rings.

The message his mother imparted him only revealed a few scarce details.

First, the material used to make the wedding ring was actually a high-grade exotic that his parents came across in the Nyxian Gap. They obtained it at great cost and somehow managed to process the material into a pair of ring bases.

The reason why the ring bases didn't elicit any reactions to his probes at first was because they were somewhat similar to P-stones.

"They aren't special by themselves. They're akin to containers!"

Different from P-stones, they possessed an extra property. One that justified forming them into wedding rings.

Frankly, the implications of the message disturbed Ves a bit. He could choose not to make use of the rings, but that would be discarding a powerful tool.

"There's a lot of potential in their use, but the price I need to pay is not something I can ignore."

Ves was very surprised that his mother unearthed something so powerful. The Nyxian Gap was a treasure trove of spiritually-reactive exotics. Whatever material the wedding rings were made of turned out to be the fourth spiritually-reactive exotic he came across!

It was also the one with the most powerful effects that he discovered up to now!

He closed the box and placed it back in the vault. For now, it was way too early for Ves to commit to their use. Once he followed the instruction of his mother's message, he would pass a point of no return.

"Wearing the rings is literally a life-long commitment. I have to be absolutely sure I chose the right person to spend the rest of my life with. If I screw this up, I'll regret it for the rest of my life!"

Both he and his partner would have to pay a big price to activate the rings.

When Ves thought about proposing to someone like Gloriana, the spike of fear he felt exceeded his apprehension towards the Ancient Sarcophagus!

He could handle the latter, but he wasn't necessarily sure that he could handle his current girlfriend!

"I better keep these rings buried as deeply as possible. I don't want Gloriana to get in touch with them before I am ready to make a choice!"

For now, thoughts of tying the knot with Gloriana was way too premature. Despite her overpowering enthusiasm for him, they barely knew each other. Ves needed much more time to see if he could form a healthy relationship with the Hexer.

"Even if I can't.. I might not have a choice."

Any relationship they might form would be dysfunctional to say the least. Both of them were simply too weird to act normal.

"From this perspective, we fit together pretty well."

The point was that if their relationship turned out to be less than ideal, Ves may still consider tying himself together to Gloriana.

This was because he might decide to take advantage of the practical benefits she brought into the relationship. Her talent as a mech designer and her identity as a scion from a prominent Hexer dynasty extended a lot of protection.

Leeching off his girlfriend's wealth also assisted him in obtaining stuff he couldn't obtain on his own. The pure ASMAS that Gloriana arranged for him without an excessive price was one good example.

"At most, I'll treat her as my sugar mommy."

Ves wasn't satisfied with that, though. Though he loved his work more than anything, he still wanted to share his passion with a like minded partner.

A purely transactional relationship where both mech designers only came together in order to borrow from each other's design philosophies was not unheard of. Yet Ves scrunched his face at the thought of entering into a loveless union.

"I'm still human."

If his relationship with Gloriana turned out to be too dysfunctional or one-sided, then Ves should seek to disentangle himself from her. No matter how obsessed she was with him, he didn't want to waste his chances to experience genuine love!

Of course, rejecting someone like Gloriana was easier said than done. He'd have to make her detest him in order to get rid of her entanglement, but Ves had no idea how he could do that.

With her intelligence and determination, she'd easily see through his attempts to lower her opinion of him. Even if he was the ugliest man in the galaxy, her obsession with him would still be strong because of the potential benefits she stood to gain if they started working together!

For this reason, it would be better if he found some way to make his relationship with Gloriana work.

Chapter 1484 Good News?

Ves spent a few days catching up to his paperwork. He also diverted some time to talk with Gavin, Nitaa, Crindon, Commander Cinnabar and his subordinates back home.

Nothing unusual happened during the time he conducted his research, so he didn't hear anything new. His subordinates only passed on routine information to him which he quickly shoved to the back of his mind.

Both the LMC and the fleet were stable. Only the environment experienced some shifts. The escalating sandman invasion kept exerting more and more pressure. The border states bore the brunt of the assaults so far, and were so egregious that the CFA finally came into action!

"Good news, boss!" Gavin announced one day. "The CFA finally got their act together and are done with mobilizing a warfleet!"

"Do you know where the warfleet is heading?"

"They're dispatching their warships straight into the deep frontier! They're going to attack and wipe out all of the core settlements of the sandmen! By the time the warfleet is done with razing all of the sandmen settlements, their civilization will be completely wiped out! The CFA has promised to stamp out the sandman emperor and any other high-caste members of their race!"

A CFA warship was very formidable. Multiple modern battleships and numerous other capital ships formed the nucleus of a huge fleet that was capable of wiping out an entire civilization in a matter of months or years! The number of escort ships that accompanied a typical CFA warfleet numbered in the hundreds!

There was no doubt about the CFA's determination to shatter the sandman civilization. They were no longer willing to tolerate the presence of this hostile alien race along the border of human space!

However, details mattered. Something about Gavin's wording didn't sit straight with Ves.

He narrowed his eyes. "Benny, the CFA is only dispatching a single warfleet, right?"

"Right."

"And they're sending it straight into the frontier in order to uproot the foundation of the sandman empire, right?"

"Uh, right."

"What about the scattered sandman fleets that are crashing into the border states like locusts? Has the CFA sent any reinforcements to bolster the defenses of the states in the war theater?"

"Uhhh..."

"I guess that's a no."

Gavin stopped smiling. "According to the news I've gathered, the CFA left the job of defending interior to the MTA. It's a matter of jurisdiction, you see."

The CFA defended humanity beyond its borders while the MTA defended humanity from within. This summed up the essence of their power-sharing deal.

"What does the MTA have to say?"

"Uhh, I don't know."

"Then find out!"

Gavin quickly activated his comm and browsed the galactic net. After a bit of searching, his face started to fall.

"The MTA's Komodo branch just published out a new statement! You won't like it, boss!"

"Just tell me."

"The MTA say that they are 'unable to commit an organized response to the current alien incursion into human space'. The most they can do is to activate some of the garrison forces they've stationed at the star systems under threat to defend the local planets!"

Ves frowned. "Is that all?"

"Yes! The rest of their statement is filled with a lot of bureaucratic language, but they're essentially telling the states that they're already strong enough to resist the sandman threat on their own! It isn't worth the effort for the MTA to mobilize their Compliance Department on a massive scale to wipe out the sandmen fleets that are wreaking havoc in human space!"

The callousness of this message astounded the both of them. While the CFA at least mobilized an entire warfleet, all the MTA was willing to do was to activate the defense forces that were already stationed in the threatened regions!

"What the hell are they thinking?!" Ves burst out. "The Tomaris Federation and the other border states are practically drowning in sandmen!"

"Maybe.. they really don't have the forces at hand to mop up all of the scattered sandmen fleets that have infiltrated human space."

That was a very realistic possibility. Ves already witnessed numerous instances where the CFA failed to discharge their responsibilities. Their absence was keenly felt by many powers of the Komodo Star Sectors.

Regardless of how many people disparaged the MTA for failing to match the CFA's commitment, the Association didn't budge!

Gavin summed up the reality of the situation. "No one can force the MTA to commit more forces to our star sector's defense. Whatever their reasons, we have no choice but to accept their excuses."

"The only saving grace about the MTA's inaction is that they aren't wrong. So far, the sandmen fleets have opted to scatter and raid many different star systems. If they combined their forces into greater numbers, then they could have easily overrun the core systems of the Tomaris Federation by now!"

The invading sandmen exhibited no coherent strategy. Each individual sandman admiral commanded their retainers by themselves.

This had led to the occurrence of lots of smaller battles and skirmishes. The only times when a major battle broke out was if multiple sandmen fleets independently invaded the same star system at the same time.

As long as these kinds of coincidences didn't happen too often, the local mech forces were still able to defeat the sandmen fleets on their own strength.

However, the problem here was that there were way too many star systems under attack, and too few forces to defend them all!

Even if the Tomaris Federation and all the other states had conscripted every local mercenary corps and private outfit to help out in the defense, many small and unimportant rural planets were left without any adequate defenses!

The locals who lived there were left to fend for themselves, and the sandmen were never merciful towards human life. Attracted by the power generators and other energy sources of human settlements, the sandmen descended upon them like a tsunami of sand, devouring everything in their way!

Ves and Gavin both browsed the galactic net and read the analyses of the local publications. The Rimward Star Herald immediately published an article that painted a bleak picture for the near future.

"According to the Herald, the situation will grow worse before it gets better." Ves described as his eyes kept skimming over other articles. "The CFA warfleet will scatter some of its forces once they reach the space occupied by the sandman race. They'll quickly wipe out all the sandman settlements and colonies in the deep frontier, thereby cutting off the flow of invaders pouring into human space."

"I see. So we only have to hold out for a couple of years before the sandmen fleets that are already on route exhaust themselves?"

"Yes. Without their empire, the only sandmen that exist are the ones in space who are led by sandman admirals. These admirals aren't very smart or inventive by human standards. They only know how to follow their instructions, even if they don't make any sense due to new developments."

"So basically we need to weather the storm for a couple of years, is that right?"

"Right." Ves started to frown. "However, the problem is that the current intensity of sandman attacks is very high. It's doubtful whether the Tomaris Federation can hold out for more than a year. If the first line of border states fall, the second line of border states will come under threat. When the second line falls, the third line will face the brunt of the attacks."

"That means the Bright Republic will come under threat." Gavin glowered.

"Depending on how you look at it, our state is in the third line or fourth line of defense. If the sandmen fleets punch through the Coman Federation, our star systems will come under assault."

Both of them shared grim looks with each other.

This was because they realized very clearly that the Bright Republic was not in a good shape right now! Almost two years had passed since the Bright Republic concluded their latest war against the Vesia Kingdom. The state was still recovering from the aftermath of this intensive conflict!

Ves wondered if Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester received advanced warning of this invasion.

He shook his head. The sandmen were very distant and hadn't made any major movements during the time of the peace treaty signing.

Ves processed the news he read and put what he learned into context. "The war ended early, but that doesn't mean the damage is light. We can still put up a fight if we have to, but I don't think we'll fare any better than the Tomaris Federation if we face the same intensity of sandmen attacks. For now, it doesn't seem as if the main thrust of the sandman invasion is directed at the Bright Republic, but who knows if this will change."

"It depends on how quickly the CFA can smash the sandman empire." Gavin emphasized. "The faster they cut off the flow of invaders, the fewer sandman fleets we have to deal with. It's pretty crazy when you think about how many sandmen are committed to these attacks. They're probably hollowing out their empire at this very moment! By the time the CFA warfleet reaches sandman territory, I bet they'll only be bombarding a bunch of empty nests!"

If the entire sandman civilization truly migrated their entire race into human space, then the CFA's response was pointed in the wrong direction! They should have sent their warfleet to the border states instead!

"Those goddamn territorial elitists!" Ves cursed.

He knew enough about the CFA that they looked down on space peasants and disdained the impoverished star sectors of the galactic rim.

The MTA was supposed to be different and stand up for the common people because they were far more willing to hire locals. Yet the factional strife within their ranks left the supporters of the galactic rim on the backfoot!

In the end, the supposed protectors of humanity were far too lofty to be relied upon by locals. They had greater concerns to deal with, and were barely willing to direct their attention to threats they considered minor.

It was easy to guess why their responses had been so lackadaisical. The Big Two was so mighty that the sandman race represented a nuisance at best.

Ves believed that the MTA and CFA had long been preoccupied with more important matters. Whether that justified their relative inaction remained to be seen.

He turned to Nitaa, who quietly stood guard all this while. "What do you think about the Big Two's actions?"

She shrugged. "I'm not too familiar with them. It sounds like you know more about them than me, sir. I highly suggest you drop your plans to return to the Bright Republic and relocate somewhere deeper into the interior of the star sector. Visiting your girlfriend's home would be ideal."

"No way!"

"We can't!" Gavin echoed his boss. "The Bright Republic is our home! We have a duty to defend our state!"

That caused Ves to send a questioning glance at his assistant. "If I recall, the Mech Corps drafted me to support the war effort. You on the other hand remained at the LMC. If anyone is about to do their duty, it's me, not you. I've got the medals to prove my worth."

"I am still doing my part by assisting you in doing your work. Don't discount my contribution!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, Benny."

Even if the both of them were committed to assisting the Bright Republic in this sudden conflict, neither of them liked it. The recent war had left a lot of scars behind. Even a civilian like Gavin who escaped the brutality of the fighting had been affected by all of the recent suffering.

"You know. Since we're fighting a common enemy this time, is it possible that we'll fight alongside the Vesians?" Ves mused.

Gavin looked scandalized. "They're our archenemies! There's no way a Brighter mech division and a Vesian mech legion will ever tolerate each other's presence! There's too much bad blood between us to keep ourselves in check!"

"I'm not so sure about that. Old hatreds won't last in the face of a greater threat."

Chapter 1485 Preoccupied

The prospect of a sandman invasion sweeping through half the star sectors weighed heavily on the people aboard the Barracuda.

Ves already encountered the sandmen in battle during his Vandal days. While he did not rate their intelligence and reasoning abilities very highly, their peculiar racial abilities turned them into very formidable foes.

Fortunately, the sandmen were nowhere close to matching the strength of any of the Seven Apex Races. From a galactic perspective, they were a bunch of space vermin that humanity could squash like a bug any time they wanted.

The only problem here was that the Big Two discounted them so much that they barely lifted their fingers to address this crisis!

While it was true that the sandmen could be defeated by the local mech forces of the Komodo Star Sector, the aliens threatened to overrun a lot of states before they finally ran out of steam!

Practically all of the states in the vicinity of the frontier pleaded for more assistance. Yet the Big Two refused to take further action. In their eyes, the Komodo Star Sector was more than capable enough to fend off the sandmen by themselves!

"That might be true, but only if the entire star sector collectively takes action." Captain Silvestra opined when Ves visited the bridge. "If the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony both commit a fourth of their mech militaries to the defense effort, the line will definitely hold."

"They'll never do it. Any reinforcement fleet they send out to the border with the frontier is one less fleet they can rely on to attack or defend their neighboring rival." Ves immediately guessed.

The rivalry between the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony was as intense as the hatred between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom.

The only difference was that the two states hadn't fought a formal war yet since the opening of the Komodo Star Sector. The reason for that was that the firepower at their disposal was so destructive that the fighting would be incredibly ruinous.

Both sides bided their time kept accumulating their strength for the inevitable war that decided the fate of their star sector.

The winner of their titanic clash would gain complete dominance over the Komodo Star Sector as its sole second-rate state.

The loser faced complete dissolution and exile as all of their territories and most of their fixed assets fell in enemy hands.

No one dared to bet which side was destined to win. Both second-rate states hid a lot of cards up their sleeves. The mechs they showcased in public or revealed glimpses of only represented a portion of their might.

Still, even if they only exhibited a portion of their unfathomable depth, even a little bit of assistance could turn the battle at the border states around!

"I've recently came across a rumor about that, sir. According to the gossip that I have heard, the two second-rate states have already reached out to the border states of the first and second lines of defense."

Ves looked skeptical. "Are the Fridaymen and Hexers offering their assistance?"

"They are, but only a limited amount of forces. They have offered to dispatch some of their second-class mercenary corps to assist in the defense effort at their charge."

"That's not enough. They ought to dispatch their military mech regiments to blunt the invasion!"

"I haven't heard any word about that. The second-rate states have kept all of their military forces in place. They're only willing to contract their more dispensable and weaker mercenary corps to the border."

Neither of them understood the relative inaction of the second-rate states. Dispatching the dregs of their mech community against the sandman was hardly the commitment that Ves found acceptable.

The foremost powers of their star sector should have exhibited more leadership during this sudden crisis!

"The second-rate states were never under threat to begin with." Ves rubbed his chin as he formulated some guesses. "If the sandmen race overrun the Bright Republic and all the other states, they'll never be able to breach the defensive lines of the Coalition and the Hegemony!"

For this reason, neither states exhibited a lot of urgency towards this threat. While they could doubtlessly earn a lot of goodwill from the rest of the star sector if they selflessly deployed their premier mech divisions to the border, no amount of goodwill was worth decreasing their defenses against their hated rival!

"Your girlfriend is a dynastic Hexer, right? Maybe you should ask her for the inside story. I'm sure she's willing to explain the situation to you since your home state is in the invasion path of the sandmen."

"I'll try, but I'm doubtful whether she's aware of the inside story. She isn't affiliated with the military as far as I know."

The two chatted some more, but they gained little else. The lack of information hindered their attempts to figure out the bigger picture. All they could agree on was that they couldn't count on the Big Two or the regional second-rate states to bail out the border states.

Aside from some token assistance, the states facing the brunt of the sandman invasion were on their own!

When Ves exited the bridge of the Barracuda and walked back to his stateroom, Nitaa shared her own thoughts on the matter.

"The Big Two are concerned with greater threats. They have never prioritized individual lives. Even if the sandmen ruin half of our star sector, it doesn't affect the total strength of humanity at all. Eventually, the sandmen will exhaust themselves and go extinct. What has been lost can easily be rebuilt in a century."

"I know that." Ves sighed. "They're powerful, but their strength comes at a price. I think one of the reasons why they have reduced their presence in this region lately is because it's not economical for them to intervene."

A first-class mech might be able to defeat hundreds of third-class mechs in battle, but it cost vastly more to make and to deploy them in action!

"As for the second-rate states, you're right that they are guarding against the greater threat, sir. To the Friday Coalition, the Hexadric Hegemony is a far greater danger to them than the entire sandmen empire. They don't gain anything of importance if they commit their military forces to the border states."

"The appreciation of the third-rate states they've assisted is of little consequence in their struggle for dominance against their rival." Ves described the brutal truth. "Even if every third-rate state in the star sector hates their guts, as long as they defeat their archenemy, everyone else has no choice but to fall in line!"

The staring contest between the Hexers and the Fridaymen lasted for centuries. Neither side had made a move. Ves did not expect this pattern to

change. Launching an attack against their rival in the middle of a large-scale sandman invasion was extremely unwise!

Yet even if the two second-rate states kept all of their military forces on standby and in peak condition, neither of them were charitable enough to bail the border states out! Not if it affected their readiness against the greater threat!

"Even in the face of a common foe, humanity still can't let go of their grudges against their own kind. Infighting is a poison that has brought our race to the brink of extinguishing ourselves. The Age of Mechs is practically defined by internal struggles!"

That was a remarkably insightful opinion from Nitaa.

"It's true that we have stopped addressing external alien threats." Ves agreed.

"That has given races like the sandmen enough breathing room to become serious nuisances."

Since the end of the Age of Conquest, humanity stopped conquering new territory. Aside from sporadic cleanups, their race needed a lot of time to recover from the ravages of the previous age.

The question was whether they spent enough time at peace. Just as humanity rebuilt their forces and repaired their society, so did the defeated aliens who had been displaced from their old territories.

A centuries-long stalemate between the human race and the alien races in the galaxy was never supposed to last forever.

One day, the greatest conflict of the entire galaxy threatened to begin anew, forcing the Big Two to exert all of their strength to fight against the true threats they had been guarding against all this time!

With such humongous concerns weighing on their minds, 'minor incidents' such as the sandman invasion barely merited their attention!

Once he reached his stateroom, Ves sat behind his desk and began to rearrange his thoughts.

The remainder of his truncated tour through the star sector no longer served to expand his horizons. Instead, Ves planned to dedicate the rest of his time away from home towards studying and preparing against the sandman threat.

Since the Hertog Dominion was close enough to the frontier to begin getting targeted by the sandmen, Ves planned to learn as much as possible.

He wanted to study how the sandmen fleets attacked and how the defenders were best able to repel the raids and invasions.

Since this migratory invasion was so massive that it might take years before the sandmen exhausted their invasion forces, Ves believed he could take advantage of it by designing the right mechs!

"As a mech designer, the best way I can contribute to this conflict is to design mechs that are tailor-made to resist the sandmen!"

From his own experiences with this perplexing race, Ves knew that only a limited set of configurations stood a chance against them in battle.

The most annoying part about fighting this perplexing race was that melee mechs were almost always completely ineffective against them! The sandmen basically fought by animating their own bodies into huge amalgamations of sand-like particles that lacked a solid structure!

They were similar to smart metal and ASMAS in that fashion. However, a number of traits of the sandmen race gave them a distinctive edge. Their ability to absorb energy and engulf entire mechs in sand meant that any

melee mech would be committing suicide if they attempted to hit a sandman amalgamation with a sword!

Even if a melee mech managed to land a blow, it hardly mattered as only a negligible proportion of individual sandmen broke!

"Dispatching melee mechs against this formless threat is no different from putting the machines through a massive grinder!" He declared with certainty!

The near-total irrelevance of melee mechs in battles against sandmen practically rendered half of the mech forces of every state helpless!

The most a state could do was to station their useless melee mechs at various strategic facilities and sites to guard against human malcontents.

The best way to resist the sandmen was to deploy ranged mechs in battle. However, the damage type mattered a lot.

Kinetic weapons such as ballistic rifles and ballistic cannons fared the best. Kinetic and explosive weapons generally transferred a lot of energy in a dispersed manner against sandman targets.

Just like smart metal, a collection of sandmen was individually weak. As long as every single animated grain of sand or other substance received at least some damage, ballistic weapons could kill a lot of sandmen with every shot they fired!

The same didn't apply to laser weapons. Though effective against most human threats, the performance of laser weapons had been very lackluster so far.

All of the news reports from the border states described many instances where sandman vessels absorbed hundreds of laser beams and still remained aloft!

In fact, firing laser weapons at the sandmen partially charged their energy reserves! Though the sandmen weren't able to withstand extreme heat, the problem was that laser beams were generally thin and very bad at dispersing their energy!

"It's like poking a lot of hot needles through someone's skin. Though it hurts a lot, the actual damage dealt to the body is hardly impressive!"

Someone who poked their target with a dozen needles inflicted less damage than someone who wacked their target with a mallet!

All in all, the mech forces effectively had to set aside yet another portion of their battle strength. While mechs armed with laser weapons still inflicted some damage against sandmen, their influence was so minor that they might as well not be involved!

"No. The starring role will definitely go to the mechs armed with ballistic and kinetic weaponry! Mechs armed with missile weapons will also be vital!"

Chapter 1486 Black Swan

The sandman invasion did not come at a good time. Ves knew that the commencement of the next mech generation could happen at any day now.

He idly stroked Lucky's back as his cat had crawled onto his lap. "I highly doubt the MTA will delay the onset of the next mech generation because of a minor conflict in a single frontier star sector. Don't you think so, buddy?"

"Meow."

"It matters! One of my greatest fears is that I'll spend months designing a ballistic rifleman mech, only for the transition to happen halfway! What am I supposed to do with my project now that its core components are outdated?!"

"Meow meow."

"Replacing lastgen components with currentgen components is not as easy as you make it sound! A lot of changes and updates take place across almost every area related to mechs! While the major increase in the performance of laser weapons is rumored to take the crown, that doesn't mean the other components won't see a lot of smaller revisions!"

Every component, from power reactors, mech engines, cockpits, artificial musculature systems and more would receive some attention. This often came in the form of new standards, updated technologies, the introduction of new materials and so on. The changes were so comprehensive that trying to slot them in the place where their lastgen equivalent used to rest was not a good idea!

In effect, if Ves wanted to update an ongoing design project with newer components, he might as well scrap his entire project and begin from scratch!

If there was one thing Ves hated a lot, it was wasting his time!

"Goddammit! Can't the sandman at least delay their invasion until after the MTA announced the start of the next mech generation? Why can't they give me a break!"

Of course, considering the possible mastermind behind the massive sandman invasion, Ves suspected that it was no coincidence that the aliens inconvenienced him so much.

Ves didn't believe that Sigrund organized a massive invasion just to screw around with him. However, the sentient alien AI probably derived a lot of schadenfreude out of the events he put into motion!

The result of these unfortunate circumstances was that Ves faced a devilish dilemma.

He decided to summon Gavin to his stateroom to discuss his options.

"You called, boss?"

"Yeah. It's about the imminent future."

He briefly described the situation he faced as a mech designer who was about to get swept up in this crisis. Since Gavin knew the score as well as Ves, he quickly started thinking.

"Now that you put it that way, it's not that easy to make a choice." He frowned. "Everyone already knew that the sandman invasion kept growing more severe, but everyone in the way expected the Big Two to neutralize the threat before they inflicted too much damage."

"Well, that prediction sure didn't pan out." Ves responded dryly. "How have the mech markets of the states under threat reacted to these events?"

"Not good. The mech markets of the states that comprise the first four lines of defense are undergoing a massive upheaval. Sales of melee mechs and laser mechs have plummeted! Prices have sunk to rock bottom in order to empty inventories as fast as possible. The demand for mechs armed with ballistic and kinetic weaponry has ballooned to such an extent that customers are even buying up low-quality variants designed by struggling Novices in order to bolster their effective strength as fast as possible!"

Gavin passed on a couple of industry articles to Ves. The situation was worse than he feared. Not only did the demand evaporate for mechs that fared poorly against the sandman threat, a lot of outfits were even trying to sell their existing mechs on the second-hand market!

This massive dumping phenomenon further devalued melee mechs!

"The market for melee mechs is practically dead for the duration of this crisis. As for mechs armed with laser weapons, the sale of new mechs have plummeted, but the existing ones aren't entirely useless. Most outfits have replaced the primary armament of laser rifleman mechs with ballistic

weapons. A lot of manufacturing facilities are cranking out spare ballistic and kinetic rifles as fast as possible!"

Ves nodded in understanding. "That's the advantage of humanoid mechs. Since most laser rifleman mechs in the Bright Republic wield rifles, their owners can simply take them away and place ballistic rifles in their place."

It was not quite as simple as it sounded. Due to the strong emphasis on specialization, a laser rifleman mech inevitably performed worse when they wielded a ballistic or kinetic rifle. The added weight, the redundant energy reserves, the recoil, the lack of capacity to carry ammunition, the unoptimized targeting systems and more all posed a negative influence to laser mechs that forcibly made use of ballistic weapons.

Even if their owners invested some money into modifying their old machines to improve their handling of ballistic weapons, this was still a half-baked solution! A mech frame optimized for laser weapons would never be as good in wielding ballistic weaponry as a mech designed to handle them from the start!

"Market demand for ballistic rifleman mechs, kinetic rifleman mechs and various frontline mechs armed with the same weapon types have skyrocketed!" Gavin gushed. "You can't believe how much of a premium they command now. Prices of most mech models have risen by as much as fifty percent! Mech companies who have lost a lot of sales now that most of their mech catalog has become irrelevant are at least able to keep themselves afloat by retooling all of their production lines to produce the mechs that everyone wants! Unfortunately..."

Both of their faces fell.

"The LMC is not included in that group." Ves morosely observed. "Our mech catalog only consists of three mech models. The Blackbeak is a landbound

knight mech. The Crystal Lord is a landbound laser rifleman mech. The Aurora Titan is a super-medium space knight."

None of these mech models fared well against the sandmen! It would be practically criminal to deploy Blackbeaks and Aurora Titans against the alien threat.

As for the Crystal Lord, while Ves knew it was possible for them to wield ballistic weapons in a pinch, they were far too costly and performed far too poorly in this case. There was no way the LMC could justify their continued production!

In short, the LMC had fallen into a very severe crisis due to the lack of diversity in their mech catalog! All this time, Ves had refrained from expanding the catalog, figuring that it was a futile effort to do so while the onset of the next mech generation would instantly devalue his outdated work.

Gavin sighed and tried to reassure his boss. "It's not your fault. You made a good decision based on your predictions of the future. No one could have accounted for a black swan event to upend the entire mech market and turn our successful products into liabilities. The LMC is not the only mech company which has been burned by their exposure to the swings in the market."

"I know, Benny, but I should have prepared the LMC better. If I didn't take the time to go on this tour, then I might have designed a mech or two that could have saved my mech company from irrelevance."

Even though he said that, Ves did not regret going on this tour. He had harvested an immense amount of gains, most of which he would have never been able to obtain if he immediately returned home after he finished his pilgrimage to Centerpoint.

Though the LMC had landed in hot water due to the near-complete drop in demand for their products, the news was not all that bad. Gavin had already been in touch with Calsie and the top management of the company.

"The executives you put in charge of the LMC aren't running around like headless chickens. Once they analyzed the changing market trends, they immediately came up with a couple of solutions. The one that Calsie is pursuing right now is to cease production of all of our current mech models. Instead, she's in the process of acquiring a production license of a ballistic rifleman mech design."

The solution surprised Ves a little, though he quickly nodded. "Since the LMC doesn't have any mech that can sell well in our current catalog, the best way to remedy this deficiency is to license another design!"

According to Gavin, Calsie and the relevant staff began to shop around for a ballistic rifleman mech model that made use of materials or components that the LMC was already familiar with. The greater the fit, the easier the Mech Nursery would be able to adjust to the changes and scale up the production of the licensed mechs!

"I want to be involved in the selection of the license." Ves insisted. "Send all the relevant information to my terminal. I'll go over it when I have time."

Once he received the documents, Gavin made another remark.

"Pursuing this solution only serves as a temporary stopgap. It won't be good for the LMC to rely on a borrowed design. We have to do our best to return to producing our own mechs after a few months. The longer we stall, the more our company will lose its hard-earned reputation in the market."

Ves adopted a pensive face. "I know how important it is for us to retain our reputation. But this also where I'm faced with a dilemma."

He had two choices.

His first option was to begin designing a ballistic mech design immediately. Obviously, this risked getting his work getting devalued as soon as the mech community transitioned to the new mech generation.

His second option was to bet that the next mech generation arrived very soon and hold back from designing any mech until that happened. It might take a week, a month, a year or even more!

This was because the MTA constantly tweaked the package of standards, technologies and component licenses that made up the new generation. Until the powerful organization made up its mind, it would hold back from starting the great switch.

Both Ves and Gavin racked their brains for the right solution. Ves restlessly stroked Lucky's back while Gavin paced back and forth across the deck.

Eventually, Gavin halted and turned back to his boss.

"Why do you want to delay? What is the argument that is holding you back from starting your new design project this instant?"

"You know the answer. I don't want to spend my valuable time on designing a mech that will take an immediate hit in profitability during or shortly after the design period."

"Is this the time to chase after profits?"

"What are you getting at, Benny?"

"The Komodo Star Sector is under attack. The Bright Republic is under attack. This isn't the time to be greedy, Ves! There is a time and place to pursue maximum profits but this is war! Not only that, but our enemy isn't the Vesians this time. It's a larger, greater alien threat that has to be fought in a different way from what we are used to! Under such difficult circumstances, who cares whether your mech is lastgen or currentgen!? The LMC's profit margin doesn't

matter anymore! As long as we can break even and survive the following years, that's already a win in my book!"

Though Ves had been taken aback by Gavin's strident tone, he soon became swayed. "You're right. I was being too greedy for my own good. Even if I design a mech that will become devalued in a couple of months, it's still worth the effort. As long as I can design something good, the LMC will be able to contribute to the war effort. Not only will we be able to stay relevant, if our new mech model does well in battle, we can continue to grow our reputation."

"Once the crisis is over, we can reap the benefits! If there is one thing you are good at, boss, it's designing mechs that are reliable, stable and incredibly pleasant to pilot! The more mechs we place in the hands of our customers, the more they'll become our lifelong customers!"

The arguments presented by Gavin gave the LMC a way out of the crisis. Rather than attempting to maximize revenue or profits, the company should instead focus on building up its reputation and expanding its market reach!

Ves no longer obsessed over his need to incorporate the latest technologies in his mech designs. He belatedly realized that he had fallen into the trap of tech envy.

As a mech designer, he was very immersed in technology. It was very difficult for him to resist the urge to utilize the latest and most effective solutions.

However, mech buyers didn't necessarily adopt the same perspective.

During these difficult times, they merely wanted something that worked and didn't fall apart after a couple of uses. While they were willing to pay for quality, they were willing to settle for something they could immediately get their hands on that worked!

Chapter 1487 Crisis Mech

The Living Mech Corporation stood at a precipice. The implications of the sandman invasion transformed the mech markets overnight. States in the vicinity to the border with the frontier no longer wanted any mechs except those that were effective against the sandmen.

While the LMC currently didn't offer any mech that met this requirement, Ves believed he could remedy this problem very soon.

"If I put my full effort into designing a ranged mech that can beat the sandmen black and blue, whip something up in a couple of months." He stated. "It depends on the complexity of the design."

Pacing back and forth, Gavin mulled over the kind of mech that could help the LMC climb out of its hole and set a foundation for future growth.

"I think the first question that needs to be asked is whether you should design a landbound, aerial or spaceborn mech."

"Spaceborn."

"That's fast."

"I've faced the sandmen before. They're manageable to fight against in space, but incredibly difficult to resist on land."

"Why is that?"

"They move too fast on land. While landbound mechs are limited by gravity and terrain constraints, the sandmen don't face as many hindrances because the speed in which they traverse terrain and engulf everything in the way is faster than the sprinting speed of a light mech!"

"So if a sandman fleet lands on the surface, they become a lot more dangerous, is that right?"

"Yeah. It's much preferable to fight the sandmen in space because the immense distances involved means that mechs have more time to whittle them down. While ballistic and kinetic weaponry aren't very accurate at longer ranges in space due to the travel time of their projectiles, it's not as risky. The most a spaceborn mech force has to deal with is to maintain their distance against the sandmen and to withstand the occasional laser beams fired by the sandman vessels."

Though the sandmen were famous for their close-ranged engulfing attacks, they still possessed some teeth at a distance. The powerful lasers they fired from their sandman vessels were very powerful, especially when fired in a salvo!

"Okay. I understand. Spaceborn it is. What price range are we targeting?"

"It can't be as expensive as the Blackbeak or the Crystal Lord." Ves immediately determined. "However, I don't want to design anything that's too cheap. When the next mech generation arrives, I don't want my mech to be devalued to the point where its nonexistent profit margin dips straight into negative territory. This is much more likely to happen with bottom-tier mechs."

Though Gavin understood this argument, he brought up a counterpoint.

"Under these circumstances, a lot of mech pilots who used to pilot melee mechs and such are freed up. Though not all of them are proficient in piloting spaceborn rifleman mechs, I bet they're all taking crash courses right now. Quantity matters more than quality, though the latter won't dry up due to this crisis."

"I see. You're right, Benny. Premium mechs are very expensive. It hurts a lot when one is lost during a battle. They're also more challenging to pilot. To a specialist in ballistic rifleman mechs, that doesn't matter, but to the impending waves of retrained mech pilots, they can't handle too much at once."

The two swapped ideas and eventually narrowed their choice.

"I think it's best to design a budget or an economy mech." Gavin suggested and swayed around his arm in emphasis. "We can sell a lot of copies for a budget mech that retails for about 20 million bright credits in the current generation. We can sell even more if we draw it down a notch to 10 to 15 million credits."

Ves winced at the latter idea. "A mech valued at 10 to 15 million credits won't be very good. Its performance will be very basic, in particular when it comes to armor."

"Then design a frontline mech. In emergencies like these, who cares if a spaceborn mech has legs? Leaving it out of your design will make your mech more cost-effective."

"It will also make my mech more uncomfortable to mech pilots." Ves replied. "Frontline mechs are for mech pilots that are expendable and have little practice or low genetic aptitudes."

"No one really liked piloting frontline mechs. If a mech pilot had a choice, they would always pick a standard mech for the added flexibility, range of motion and other reasons.

Though Gavin presented several arguments in favor of frontline mechs, Ves dismissed them all. He did not wish to design a frontline mech despite its distinct advantages in this situation.

"I get what you're trying to get at, Benny. Frontline mechs are simpler in design, so I don't have to spend a lot of time to design one. They're also easy to fabricate so we can pump out a large number of copies without tackling a steep learning curve. They'll also sell a lot because they're so cheap. But this is not a mech design that will last when the next mech generation begins."

"The competition for spaceborn rifleman mechs at the budget mech price range will be immense, Ves. All the Seniors and Journeymen you are competing against will probably be in a hurry to publish their own designs that can tackle this crisis effectively any time soon."

"That's not a problem. I'm not afraid of the competition." Ves confidently replied. "I've improved a lot over these last few years. Now that I've settled as a Journeyman, I'm able to design a mech that is better while taking much less time! In fact, I intend to design a winning product during our trip home. By the time we've arrived at the Bright Republic, I plan to introduce and begin production of my new spaceborn mech immediately!"

How ambitious! Gavin could scarcely fathom if Ves was capable of backing up his boasts!

It had to be mentioned that it took at least seven months for Ves to design the Aurora Titan! Of course, the mech was a lot more complicated than any other mech that he designed, but even half of that was still an incredibly long timeframe during a fast-moving period.

However, Ves possessed an abundant confidence that he'd be able to design a good budget mech that stood out in the market within two or three months!

Along with the advantages that he enjoyed as a Journeyman, he recently finished digesting Senior-level Mechanics and Metallurgy, bringing his knowledge base to an entirely new level!

On top of that, he also managed to increase his affinity for mechs due to fabricating his first masterwork mech. While the benefits of this change mostly affected his fabrication and assembly abilities, some of it over bled over to his design abilities.

With a greater 'feel' for mechs, he was able to rely more on his intuition and judgement to make the right design choices. He also became more confident

in his ability to detect flaws and suboptimal configurations in his mech designs, thereby lessening the demand for testing and optimizing his works.

Of course, some form of testing should still be necessary. Even if other Journeymen were able to design a mech as fast as Ves, they didn't necessarily choose to rush them into the market. A couple of months worth of testing and iterating helped refine a mech design, allowing it to attract a lot more popularity and market demand from customers who appreciated its quality.

Ordinarily, Ves was inclined towards this camp, but now that a crisis swept up the border states, he couldn't afford to dilly-dally around.

"What is impossible for others is not necessarily impossible for me." He spoke with force. "I'm more than capable of tackling this challenge! As long as I can succeed, I won't just be able to keep the LMC afloat. I can cause its star to ascend until it reaches the very skies!"

The sandman invasion and all of the pressure it exerted did not make Ves despair. Instead, the difficulties that plagued him only increased his drive to prove his abilities and design a mech that would become one of the favorites to resist the sandmen!

His increased drive to design a distinctive LMC mech that contributed greatly to the war effort also stoked his passion.

A lot was at stake! Ves couldn't afford to falter in his next design project. If his next mech design turned out to be a dud, then he would have wasted valuable months that he could have spent on bringing the LMC out of its slump and increasing its prominence.

Nonetheless, Ves always enjoyed it when the stakes were high. When his back was to the wall, he found it easier to draw out his full potential.

"Are you sure about this, boss? Once you go down this road, you have to see it through the end."

Ves grinned. "I'm sure of my decision. You can inform Calsie and the others at the LMC so they can make the necessary preparations. I want to obtain market analyses of how the mech market for spaceborn rifleman mechs armed with ballistic or kinetic weapons will shape up in the next few months. Contact Marcella Bollinger for assistance."

"Got it. I'll try and get those reports to your terminal within two or three days."

They discussed some other measures before Gavin left to make the arrangements. As Ves watched his assistant go, he went back to scratching Lucky's cheeks.

"I really appreciate Gavin's input. I think he deserves a promotion or a reward, don't you think?"

"Meow."

"I don't like your suggestion. He doesn't need to know my secrets. It's fine if I boost his paycheck. Perhaps I can change his job description to something more prestigious-sounding than executive assistant."

"Meow meow!"

"I know I'm not treating Gavin right for the loyalty he's shown me, but I'm really scared of making the wrong choice. I only have to slip up once in order to ruin my entire life and career. I think Gloriana deserves to hear the truth about my design philosophy a lot sooner than Gavin."

If it wasn't necessary, Ves preferred to keep his secrets to himself. Gavin already served as a great assistant to him while in the dark about how his mechs actually worked.

There was no reason to remedy a problem that hardly existed when the solution introduced a lot of needless risks.

Ves looked down on Lucky and reached over to scratch his belly. The cat instantly protested the move!

"You finished eating my P-stone, right? When can I expect you to crap out a new gem?"

"Meow. Meow!"

"You better not lie! Do you know how expensive they are and how hard it is to get a hold of them? I only have five P-stones left!"

"Meow!"

Lucky squirmed from his lap and floated above his head and out of reach.

Ves paid no mind to the actions of his pet and stretched his arms. After several years, Ves finally decided to end his hiatus on designing a new commercial mech.

"My next project won't involve a custom mech. Now, I'm back to designing a mech intended for the market."

Even during these difficult times, Ves knew he had to exert himself to the utmost in order to design a successful mass-market mech. It had to offer performance that was at least on par with the competing mech models in the same price range. It also had to offer distinct advantages that gave customers a compelling reason to purchase his product over those designed by his competitors.

"My upcoming mech design will be the first of an entirely new wave of budget mechs! It will be a herald of what is to come!"

One of the reasons why he decided to design a spaceborn rifleman mech in the budget price category was because he always intended to dip into the low-end mech market at some point.

Though the LMC initially rose due to selling some fantastic premium mechs, Ves wanted to reach a wider audience.

With his current level of strength, Ves finally believed he had what it took to compete over a significant amount of market share! He was no longer satisfied with capturing a small and neglected niche.

He wanted to play with the big boys in the mech market!

Chapter 1488 Crumbling States

Over the next couple of days, Ves immersed himself in current events. He read all of the news and analysis reports of the sandman invasion. He particularly read through projections and predictions of the future.

Most analysts painted a bleak picture. None expected the states in the first line of defense like the Tomaris Federation to last.

Though defeating an individual sandman fleet did not require too much effort, the frequency of sandman attacks prevented the defending forces from catching a breath.

"It's a constant, ongoing battle of attrition interspersed with brief pauses." One of the experts described on a live news program.

Though the Tomaris Federation could have lasted up to half a year or more if the state got its act together, who wanted to stay aboard a sinking ship?

An increasing number of citizens had already given up and wanted to go! An exodus of refugees had already begun. Anyone with a ship or paid the exorbitant amount of money to gain passage left the endangered border states in droves.

Even though billions of refugees had already left by cramming themselves into cargo haulers hastily upgraded with additional life support systems, an uncountable amount of humans remained stuck on isolated and increasingly abandoned planets!

An enormous tragedy began to unfold as the defending mechs in the besieged star systems either pulled back or stood their ground until they got crushed!

Ves closed his eyes in sadness while cuddling Lucky.

"This is the price for the MTA's inaction and the CFA's refusal to take responsibility." He spoke.

The Big Two enjoyed such a lofty height that they no longer saw the suffering of those at the very bottom.

Perhaps the only good news that came from the border states was that any planet or star system with a significant MTA or CFA presence escaped destruction.

For this reason, a tiny settlement like Mancroft Independent Harbor remained relatively safe due to the CFA fuel refinery operation orbiting one of the local star system's gas giants. Any sandman fleet that attempted to attack the human space stations promptly got blasted by the warships on patrol.

Nonetheless, the MTA and CFA forces mainly turtled up and refused to project their power to neighboring star systems. No matter how many star systems got engulfed by the sandmen, the Big Two insisted that the local forces of the star sector should deal with the problem themselves!

Ves let out a cynical laugh when he read the bland statements of the two humongous organizations. "What the hell are they so worried about that they can't deploy more than a single warfleet?!"

There was no use in speculating over the reasons for their inaction. Many people guessed that the Big Two were preparing for something big, but figured out little else.

In any case, the inaction on the part of the two second-rate states was a lot more understandable. Neither the Friday Coalition nor the Hexadric Hegemony dispatched anything more than scattered mercenary corps to the border states.

While their help was very much appreciated, by the time they reached the frontlines, the first line of defense would have probably fallen already.

"It takes too much time to travel from the center of the star sector to the periphery."

He knew this first-hand. His Barracuda was one of the fastest ship classes of the Friday Coalition, but even she required at least another month to reach the Tomaris Federation at her greatest speed.

In any case, a tsunami of refugees threatened to engulf the states in the second, third and fourth lines of defense. In fact, most ships would have attempted to travel deeper into the interior of the star sector if not for their straining supplies and life support systems!

Even the Bright Republic braced itself to receive a humongous number of refugees. Though the border states they came from weren't very populated, if everyone attempted to leave at the same time, that amounted to a very scary amount of people!

Ves briefly considered whether there would be mech designers among the refugees. Perhaps he could pick up a couple of new subordinate mech designers to fill up his design team.

Fortunately for the refugees, the Bright Republic, Vesia Kingdom and the other states already started to set aside room for them. The governments

already began to erect a lot of prefab structures and facilities in low-density planets to provide food and shelter to the people who had lost everything.

Attempting to provide the refugees a way to rebuild their lives could come later. For now, the Bright Republic already started to house the first refugees that had fled first on rural planets with plenty of room to spare.

Coincidentally, this also included Cloudy Curtain. The authorities already formed a plan that called for scaling up its agriculture. Instead of cultivating expensive, slow-growing crops like cloud rice over a few patches of highly fertile soil, the planetary government planned to convert a lot more landmass into farms.

While machines did most of the work, humans were still needed to supervise the farms and handle problems that weren't suited for bots.

"At least the refugees have something to do. I guess we also need the food."

The Bright Republic took the sandman invasion extremely seriously. The extensive movement by the government spoke of a broad and all-encompassing plan to defend its territory against the alien invasion that would arrive at its doorstep in a year or less!

Ves breathed a sigh in relief when he ascertained that the government fully committed to defending the Republic. The same couldn't be said for the states closer to the border. A lot of government officials and even entire mech regiments had gone rogue and abandoned the states they were duty-bound to defend!

"I'm glad I don't have to make this choice." He muttered while idly squeezing Lucky. "Unlike the Tomaris Federation, it looks like the Bright Republic actually stands a chance at withstanding the invasion."

"Meow."

"I'm not going to run and ruin my hard-earned honor and reputation. It's one of my most valuable assets! I'm only going to run if others start running in droves! At least I'll be able to hide my shame in the crowd!"

Reputation was a double-edged sword. While Ves benefited substantially from the fame it provided, it also held him up to a pedestal where he was expected to conform to a specific image.

As soon as he broke the bubble, his reputation would come crashing down!

For this reason and more, Ves reluctantly decided to commit to the Bright Republic and do his best to contribute to its defense in his own way.

"Of course, it would be nice if I could burnish my credentials, earn a lot of goodwill and most importantly sell a lot of mechs!"

Currently, the LMC was poorly positioned to take advantage of this crisis. As its lead designer, Ves bore responsibility for this failure, but also bore the responsibility to remedy its inadequacies.

"It all comes down to expanding my company's mech catalog!" Ves told Lucky while patting his cat's head. "I've solved almost all of my problems in my life by designing mechs. This is no different!"

"Meow!"

Lucky threw a dubious glance at Ves.

"I know I can do it! Even if the competition is immense, I'm confident my work will be able to capture some market share!"

This time, he intended to compete in a very competitive and highly-saturated market. Rifleman mechs made up the biggest product category in the Bright Republic and elsewhere. While laser rifleman mechs dominated in space, a fair amount of good ballistic rifleman mech models were already for sale.

Ves exhibited a lot of courage by attempting to intrude in this extremely busy market. The difficulty of publishing a new mech design that stood out from the competition was ten times harder than attempting to establish a footing in more niche product categories such as offensive knight mechs.

"Let's get to work."

He leaned back in his chair and began to formulate a mech concept. Along with catching up on the latest news, he also read plenty of market research reports. He gained a pretty good picture on the kinds of mechs that appealed to the market in the coming months.

Ves started his latest mech design project by preparing logs and formal documentation. Unlike the Devil Tiger project, his latest project was completely legitimate.

In order to satisfy the MTA's demands, he made sure to document his thought processes behind most of his design choices. He only left out information that pertained directly to his trade secrets.

After filling in a number of administrative forms, he began to compose a short list of criteria for his next mech design.

- Cost-effective

- Specialized

- Rugged

- Easy to maintain and repair

- Low armor

- High mobility

- Medium endurance

- Low skill floor

The requirements he set for his next mech design all diverged remarkably from his previous mech designs. This time, the list made it clear that he wasn't designing a premium mech this time!

"In fact, according to the market trends, sales of premium mechs will plummet! Mech owners can't afford to splurge lavishly on luxuries when their very homes and lives are at stake!"

According to the impression that Ves had formed, he saw the need for a mech that resisted the invading sandmen as effectively as possible while still remaining affordable. For his reason, he prioritized cost-efficiency and specialization.

"It's fine if my mech doesn't necessarily perform as well against other human targets." Ves rubbed his chin. "By the time the crisis is over, my mech model will have served its purpose. The LMC can retire it or put it on the backburner to focus on selling other mech models."

One key aspect about the current mech models in the market was that they mostly excelled at fighting other mechs. They weren't necessarily optimized against the means of attack employed by the sandmen, and this was where Ves recognized a temporary hole in the market!

"If I can move quickly and publish a mech design that can do a better job at resisting the sandmen at a cheaper price, I can quickly capture a significant amount of market share!"

The key here was that Ves had to move quickly! The Bright Republic alone possessed more than a thousand native Journeyman Mech Designers and more than a hundred native Senior Mech Designers. At least half of them or more were probably working on their own solutions to the sandmen threat.

"That doesn't even count the low-ranking mech designers or the foreigners competing in the Bright Republic's mech market!"

With everyone racing to publish the first mech designs that adequately addressed the problem, Ves mainly had to rely on speed in order to gain an edge over his competitors!

This was also why Ves emphasized a simple mech design. Not only did he wanted to waste as little time in designing his mech as possible, he also wanted to make it easy to maintain and easy to repair.

"The latter has always been my strong point."

His extensive stint as head designer for the Flagrant Vandals and his recent progress made him very confident that he could design a mech that didn't take a highly-educated mech designer to service.

"With how desperate the coming war will be, standards will slip and a lot of mistakes will happen."

He witnessed varying levels of maintenance standards at various outfits. Ves had to make sure that his next mech model didn't demand too much in terms of tolerances. Even if mech technicians slipped up in repairing damaged components, his mechs should still be able to cope!

His mech had to be made of materials in abundant supply. With the war increasingly encroaching into the Komodo Star Sector, a lot of resource extraction sites at the border states and other states in the vicinity no longer supplied a lot of raw materials that many industries took for granted.

"I have to be careful to make use of materials that won't become scarce once the sandman invasion reaches the doorstep of the Bright Republic."

The advantage of using locally-sourced materials in abundant supply was that Ves could easily drive down the price for his upcoming mech model.

"I have to resist the temptation of adding gimmicks and unnecessary luxuries to my mech design. Anything superfluous will only detract from the cost-effectiveness of my latest product."

Rather than attempting to add more value, this time Ves prioritized reducing costs. It was a completely different approach compared to his approach towards his premium mech designs!

Chapter 1489 Affordable Mech

In order to maximize the cost-effectiveness of his mechs against the sandman threat, Ves had to make some hard choices.

Concerning the performance of his upcoming spaceborn rifleman mech, he decided to prioritize both offense and mobility over defense.

"In other words, a glass cannon with very powerful wings!"

Defense by far the biggest resource hog of a mech. Ves decisively gave up on expensive and hard-to-work-with compressed armor systems in order to save a lot of costs.

To resist the sandmen, a mech force had to take it out from a distance. By the time they got close enough to engulf a mech, all the armor slowing it down only delayed the inevitable by a few more seconds.

"Instead, it's much better if my mech can accelerate quickly! The faster it moves, the longer it can take potshots at the approaching sandman vessels!"

For mechs, speed was the only form of defense against the sandmen. Though the sandmen also possessed ranged firing options, the lasers the sandmen vessels tended to shoot out were powerful but recycled very slowly.

"More armor won't help in that situation. A mech will instantly get blasted no matter if they're light mechs or heavy mechs."

The sandmen mainly utilized their heavy laser attacks to cripple human starships. As of now, they hadn't adapted their armament to resist swarms of mechs, though this might change in the future.

"Even if that happens, as long as my mechs can maintain its range, the sandmen will have difficulty predicting their targets, though some unlucky mechs will always get shot down no matter what."

This was why many defensive forces closer to the border failed to cope with the frequent sandman raids. Fighting off a single sandman fleet wasn't necessarily difficult, but the powerful lasers the vessels shot out always eliminated a mech with a single shot!

A mech force lost at least several mechs and mech pilots in a single engagement. If a mech force had to fight numerous battles against more and more sandmen fleets, then the constant attrition quickly added up until there were not enough mechs to hinder the relentless sandmen from overwhelming a star system!

Though it pained Ves to fail in coming up with a better solution to this threat, he had no choice but to discount armor almost entirely because he had no good solutions on this front.

Most mechs except heavy knights stood a realistic chance at resisting a full-powered laser strike from a sandman vessel.

"Now that I think about it, My Aurora Titan might be able to withstand a hit as well." He mused.

While its mobility was abysmal, it excelled at defense. Its polarizing module massively strengthened his super-medium space knight's ability to resist energy damage!

"It will be interesting to see if it can actually take a hit!"

While this sounded like a welcome surprise, Ves did not expect that sales for the Aurora Titan would pick up. The mech could only withstand one or two hits at most before exhausting its reserves. For a mech that sold for at least 100 million credits a piece, the price was far too high and completely out of sync with current market circumstances!

In any case, for his affordable rifleman mech, its primary form of self-preservation came in the form of better-than-average mobility.

For a spaceborn mech, this meant investing heavily in the flight system of his mech. He had to pair up his mech with a powerful means to accelerate and outrun the hungry sandman vessels.

"My mech doesn't have to be nimble or agile. It just has to have the raw power to accelerate quickly. My mech also has to possess enough endurance to keep this up for at least an hour!"

A decent level of endurance was vital. Though mechs that ran out of power could always return to their carriers to replenish their energy cells and ammunition stores, this cycle took way too much time, especially during an ongoing battle.

"The greater the hassle, the less applicable my rifleman mech becomes." Ves judged. "No one wants to go through a half-dozen cycles just to defeat a single sandman fleet."

Sandmen vessels were ordinarily quite massive, and it took a lot of damage to wear them down. This wasn't a problem for military mech units as they often fielded hundreds of mechs at a time.

However, many outfits only fielded a single mech company or less. Even if they pooled their forces together, they might not have the firepower to eliminate an encroaching sandman fleet quickly.

In such cases, Ves wanted to offer a mech design that was still able to cope under those circumstances.

"If I want my mech to have a respectable amount of endurance and uptime, I'll have to make sure my mech has enough energy and ammunition to last in the field."

This essentially meant that his rifleman mech couldn't be a light mech. Ves had to add so much capacity to his mech that trying to keep his mech light was an exercise in futility.

Ves therefore defaulted to the standard of a medium mech. It offered an appropriate balance between capacity and mobility.

"Since I'm not spending a majority of the available capacity on armor, I can stuff my mech with a lot of energy cells and magazines."

With regards to firepower, Ves wanted to go for something cheap but effective against the sandman race. A simple ballistic rifle firing cheap projectiles could do a better job than an entire squad of laser rifleman mechs against this specific threat.

"I don't necessarily need to pair my mech with an extravagant weapon."

More powerful ballistic rifles and their oversized ammunition took up vastly more space. Lighter weapons performed adequately against the sandman since their defenses weren't based around solid armor.

A fast-firing ballistic rifle therefore inflicted a respectable amount of damage to the sandmen. Even if their caliber was lighter than usual, it made no difference against this specific foe.

"More importantly, it's also cheaper!"

By dedicating much of the capacity of his mech to storing ammunition, his rifleman mech would be able to fire at it without worrying about running out of shells in the first ten minutes.

This paired well with the final criteria on his list, which was that his new mech had to come with a low skill floor.

"Aside from affordability, a low skill floor is the most important selling point of my new mech!"

According to the news and all of the market research he studied, the military and a lot of outfits were frantically trying to retrain their mech pilots.

Since deploying melee mechs against the sandman was an absolute waste, a lot of melee mech pilots were made redundant in this crisis!

Though they didn't like it, mech pilots who specialized in melee mechs had no choice but to undergo hastily-organized crash courses in how to pilot ballistic rifleman mechs.

It took years for mech pilots to gain an adequate amount of proficiency in a new mech archetype. A couple of months of intensive training was not enough to turn a random melee mech pilot into an expert marksman.

"This is especially the case with melee specialists who aren't good at marksmanship!"

A lot of mech pilots specialized in one or the other. Rarely did they attempt to pursue both. Those that did were often elites among mech pilots.

If it was so easy to become good at both, then hero mechs would have been regarded as a legitimate mech type instead of a joke!

As a Larkinson who spent a lot of time alongside Larkinson mech pilots, Ves knew very well why mech pilots specialized early in their academy days. It

took this much in order to become good enough to be trusted to pilot a war machine that cost at least several million credits.

Any mech pilot who committed much less training in a chosen piloting field was likely to form a liability in the battlefield. In most cases, a melee specialist forced to pilot a ballistic rifleman mech could still contribute to a battle if it left most of the aiming to the automated targeting system.

"This is actually not that big of a downside."

Against mechs piloted by competent human opponents, a melee specialist would fare extremely poorly if forced to pilot ranged mechs.

Against the typical sandman threats, the prevailing rules no longer applied. The sandman admirals who led most of their fleets were very unimaginative and inflexible.

The extent of their tactics mostly amounted to dispatching their sandman brethren at their enemies in the form of large amalgamations in a straight line!

Due to their overall mass and size, sandman vessels were as large as regular starships and were very poor at dodging enemy fire. This meant that most automated targeting systems were accurate enough to deliver good results against typical sandman vessels.

Of course, this was not a good solution against all sandman threats. Most sandman admirals attacking human space appeared to be newborn and operated according to a standard manual.

However, as long as they grew older or accumulated more experience, they began to vary the deployment of their sandman. They might adopt different configurations such as splitting up their large and vulnerable sandman vessels into other forms that fared better against mechs!

In fact, a small number of sandman admirals in the border states had already adapted to the prevailing opposition. They began to deploy thousands of smaller sandman drones that were as agile as human-built mechs!

Ves shrugged. "I can't handle everything. It's enough if my rifleman mech fares well against standard sandman vessels. As for anything else, the Mech Corps will probably deal with the more troublesome sandman fleets themselves."

What the market demanded was a mech that did not impose too much of a burden to off-role mech pilots.

"I only have to make sure that the weapon system is easy to work with. As long as my mech is simple, I don't have to dumb down anything else. The operation of the limbs and the flight system of the mech can stay on the same level, as most of the users of my new mech will easily be able to carry over their skills from piloting melee mechs."

Ves had no illusion that the mechs he designed would be used as cannon fodder. Their affordability and ease of use came at the cost of skill expression. There weren't many ways for skilled mech pilots to make a cheap mech to outperform its expected parameters.

"Not that a lot of skilled ranged specialists will pilot my mech in the first place. There are better alternatives available that do a much better job at drawing out their potential."

This was something very opposite to his first three commercial mech models. The Blackbeak, Crystal Lord and Aurora Titan models only performed properly in the hands of advanced mech pilots.

Ves suddenly realized that his product strategy was very suited in times of stability and abundance. However, during a crisis period, many customers had to tighten their belts and try to do more with less.

"There is no place for luxury during an existential crisis!"

Due to the abnormal circumstances of the current market environment, a lot of unskilled mech pilots desperately required simple ranged mechs. Only a small number of mech models in the markets met their needs, but even then these machines excelled mainly against nimbler human mech forces rather than sluggish but overpowering sandman fleets.

"There is a hole in the market, but this window of opportunity will only last for a brief amount of time before my competitors publish their new designs!"

Though Ves wasn't used to targeting the lower end of the mech market, he believed he was still up to the challenge.

"However, if I can come up with this list of criteria, every other clever mech designer can do so as well!"

He discounted the competition from low-ranking mech designers and solely regarded Journeymen and Seniors as his main rivals. The latter were especially formidable due to their abundant experience, extensive knowledge base and highly-developed specialties.

"If I want my product to stand out from the crowd, then I need more than a basic mech concept. I have to tie all of the requirements together into an attractive and compelling vision!"

Chapter 1490 The Heart of a Mech

"All of this looks great, but I feel like you are missing something." Gavin commented after Ves explained his mech concept. "Compared to your previous mechs, the budget mech you want to design sounds.. generic. It lacks the distinctive flair that your products are known for. I know it's hard to make your mech stand out in the budget mech category, but you should really find a way to make your product stand out from the crowd."

Ves rested his chin against his fist while he thought. "I know, Benny. I am aiming to design an affordable and simple mech. That doesn't give me a lot of room for maneuver. I've been spending days on trying to figure out a way to make my rifleman mech unique in one of the most saturated product categories in the mech market. All I can count on for now is my specialty."

"About that.. do you remember the problem the LMC faces back home?"

"My mechs aren't brainwashing my customers! They just like my mechs! That's not a crime!"

"You sound just like the chief culprit of the Farund Affair. You're repeating the exact same excuse!"

"That's different! The Farund Affair literally involved rewiring the brains of mech pilots. My mechs do no such thing! The MTA can attest that the neural interfaces of my mechs are completely standard and unmodified!"

"That's what the company has been telling the public over and over again, but you know how people are. Rumors and conspiracy theories have more sway than facts and expert opinion."

Both of them looked cross at this. No matter how they disliked this tendency, this was the nature of human behavior.

Companies exploited the emotions and biases of their customers all the time in order to milk as much money from them as possible.

The LMC could hardly complain when they were on the receiving end of irrational human behavior!

"I think the proof is in the pudding." Ves eventually spoke. "As long as my mechs continue to perform well in battle, I think much of the market will eventually lose their apprehension towards my products. A portion of the market will always be opposed to the LMC. That's fine. As long as there are

enough customers left who are receptive to our brand, we'll sell plenty of more mechs."

"You have to make sure your mech finds a receptive audience in other markets as well."

Ves smirked. "I think we can at least count on the Ylvaine Protectorate to buy my new mech in droves."

Though he hadn't engaged with the religious state since the three leading dynasties kicked him out, that didn't mean his influence had subsided. The reforms he instigated were still going strong. No one forgot about the Bright Martyr, especially when the six Transcendent Messengers resonated so effectively with their faith.

"Bright Martyr or not, the Ylvaine Protectorate will only really adopt your mech if you adapt it to their tastes."

"Don't worry. After I complete the base model, it won't take much effort for me to develop a variant that we can exclusively market towards the Ylvainans."

Ves preferred to outsource this chore to others, but he didn't have any subordinates he could trust to do a good job. His previous plan to recruit a local Ylvainan mech designer to develop variants of his base model had stalled.

Hiring skilled, competent and obedient mech designers was a lot harder than it sounded!

"If you adhere to your current design style, then I think your work will do just as well as your previous mech designs in most foreign markets." Gavin predicted. "We don't have a major presence there anyway, so it doesn't take much effort to surpass our current sales figures."

"Selling my new mechs in foreign markets is nice, but I won't shed any tears if that isn't possible. My biggest priority is servicing the Bright Republic's mech market. Every other market comes second."

Ves knew that most of his mech designs possessed wide appeal. It was a trait he had been developing from the start.

Even so, he did not wish to stray from Brighter design principles in a misguided attempt to make his rifleman mech more universal.

After an extensive discussion, Ves collected a lot of feedback as well as a few tips and suggestions. Talking with Gavin always helped him gain a better perspective on how his mechs might fare on the market.

However, his assistant couldn't help with every problem. Ves had to handle some of them on his own or with his fellow mech designers.

The initial criticism that Gavin brought up continued to linger after the assistant left the stateroom. Ves leaned back on his chair and tried to figure out how he could turn a generic mech concept into a compelling vision.

"Each of my mech designs is driven by a theme that gives them a unique personality."

The Blackbeak personified aggression and rebirth. The Crystal Lord yearned for power and dominance. The Aurora Titan exemplified defense and protection.

Even without the X-Factor, the overall design aspects of his prior works already reflected their strengths.

"The heart of a mech conforms to the strengths of a mech."

Since Ves hadn't figured out the heart of his upcoming mech design, he should first look at its strengths to figure out his premise.

So what were the strengths of his upcoming mech?

"Cheap. Easy to pilot. Easy to produce. Easy to maintain. Specialized against fighting sandmen. And uhhh... what else?"

That didn't really sound like much, but Ves had worked with worse. The Enduring Protector came to mind.

The issue that Ves had with this list of traits was that it all sounded rather weak. It was very difficult to boast about designing a cheap and easy mech that offered an attractive price-to-performance ratio against sandman fleets!

"At least with the Blackbeak I can point out how suited it is for long engagements." He muttered. "As for my upcoming rifleman mech, what am I supposed to say? My mech is the best cannon fodder in the market? That won't go over well."

Ves had to paint his new mech design in a good light without detracting from its basic qualities. The strengths he listed out were always going to be the fundamental selling points of his upcoming product.

Despite leaning on his overactive imagination, he failed to come up with a compelling idea. Ves figured he had spent enough time on his project and needed a break in order to gain inspiration.

He frowned and rubbed his forehead. "Although I have to design my rifleman mech as fast as possible, I can't rush the creative process. I have to set a solid vision before I proceed with the next steps. If my starting point is flawed, the rest of my work will go astray. I can't let that happen!"

Since he temporarily halted his work on his project, Ves looked for other ways to keep himself busy. His thoughts quickly wandered to a latent danger that he'd been neglecting for a couple of days.

"I still haven't done anything about the Ancient Sarcophagus." He frowned.

It cost the equivalent of 20 billion credits for Finlay to obtain Item #1255 on his behalf. Stalling his investigation of the red crystalline coffin for so long was starting to get ridiculous!

"I can't outrun my fears forever!"

The apprehension he felt towards the Ancient Sarcophagus continued to build up during the time he spent on his latest design project. Just as he predicted, it became harder and harder for him to think about trying to investigate the weird alien artifact.

"I'm running out of time. If I continue to stall, I'll reach a point where I'm unable to bring myself to approach this coffin!"

Something weird was taking place! Ves didn't believe his psychological fear emerged organically. He heavily suspected that the Ancient Sarcophagus deliberately influenced his mentality!

"Is this the reason why its previous owners put it up for auction?" He mused. "Hardly any treasure hunters are willing to let go of such a fantastic find under ordinary circumstances."

Though Ves held fears like any humans, he also valued his courage. Since when did he let an unknown risk hold him back from pursuing greater benefits? His current attitude towards the Ancient Sarcophagus did not match his ordinary mindset!

Ves slammed his desk with his fist. "It's decided! I'll start my investigation today! No more stalling!"

He rose from his desk, picked up Lucky and immediately left his stateroom with Nitaa quietly on his heels. He hastily marched towards the vault of the Barracuda and entered it after passing all of the security measures.

Once inside, he turned towards Nitaa. "What I'm about to do might be dangerous. Try to refrain from intervening unless I call for help or if I look really bad, is that clear?"

His bodyguard didn't look pleased. "If you're about to investigate the Ancient Sarcophagus, I highly suggest you wait. There is hardly any crew on hand on the Barracuda who can help you if anything goes wrong. We don't have a doctor, which is what I consider the minimum of what is necessary to guard against accidents."

"I can't wait that long." Ves dismissively waved his hand and turned away. "Besides, if I ever sustain an injury during this investigation, a doctor won't be able to treat my wounds."

Ves strongly believed that his investigation amounted to a contest of spirit.

Since that was the case, he needed to rely on spiritual means in order to succeed. Before he drew out the Ancient Sarcophagus, he first drew out his spiritual lockbox.

Contained within sat a P-stone which he recently started dumping his excess spiritual energy every day. After several days of accumulation, it held a decent reserve of backup energy which Ves could draw upon in case he fell up short.

Alongside the P-stone, he also drew out his sole F-stone from his vault. He had been refraining from doing anything to the F-stone because he only possessed a single sample of this spiritually-reactive exotic.

Its ability to augment his spiritual energy with a charge and an extra offensive attribute might come in handy if things went awry.

Lastly, he drew out the Ancient Sarcophagus, though currently it rested inside a container. Ves moved all of the objects he drew out from the vault and brought them to the Barracuda's lab compartment.

Once there, Ves drew out the Ancient Sarcophagus from its container and placed it in a shielded chamber.

With his P-Stone, B-Stone and F-Stone within reach, Ves believed he prepared enough tools for his upcoming operation.

After exchanging one long look with Nita, Ves settled down on his chair with Lucky hovering nearby and began to concentrate his mind.

As soon as he settled in the right mode, he began to observe the Ancient Sarcophagus with his spiritual vision.

It looked as bright, warm and active as ever. While Ves did not perceive any increased activity since last time, his inexplicable fear towards the strange object had abruptly grown more pronounced.

The more he looked at the coffin, the more his intuition starting blaring alarms.

Something incredibly dangerous rested inside the coffin! Ves might regret it if he tried to peek inside!

"Ah, whatever! I'm a Larkinson! I've never been afraid to take a little risk! Let's go!"

Instead of letting his fears and doubts wear down his determination to investigate the Ancient Sarcophagus, he decisively pulled the trigger and sent extended a powerful spiritual projection towards the alien object.

The only way to defeat the fear of the unknown was to shed its veil of secrecy and cast a light on the truth!

As soon as his spiritual projection encountered the red crystal, Ves immediately felt the familiar sensation of becoming mired in a swamp. The exterior material of the crystal coffin reminded him of the murky sensation of trying to pass his spiritual projection through a thin layer of B-stone.

Nonetheless, unlike a genuine B-stone, the red crystal did not block spiritual energy as effectively.

His spiritual projection continued to sink through the red crystal material. The further it reached, the more he began to sense an uncomfortable spiritual sensation.

Though the crystal material substantially dampened his spiritual senses, he nonetheless detected that something deep inside was beginning to stir...