

## Mech 1541

### *Chapter 1541 Lying to Reality*

Though Ves reacted badly towards the notion of conceptual perception, he slowly began to admit that Gloriana may be onto something.

While he firmly rejected her stance on calling it a miracle, Ves nonetheless believed that spirituality was capable of many amazing feats. Spiritual energy was just one of many high-level energies of reality. Why should Ves be bound by the constraints of his limited perspective?

Something that he considered impossible may just be possible if he found a way to accomplish it through developing a specialized spiritual application.

"In the past, humans didn't believe they could fly."

Only until pioneers invented the first aircraft did those ancient humans expand on the list of what they could accomplish. People no longer regarded flying in the air to be a ludicrous notion.

What Gloriana essentially suggested was that Ves should keep an open mind.

"What a turnaround." He muttered to himself. "Normally, I'm the one who's trying to push Gloriana to become more open-minded."

The difference was that his girlfriend attempted to steer Ves towards hexism. Perhaps that was her original motive for sharing her idea for conceptual perfection.

"Lying to reality. How bold."

Yet the more he thought about it, the more he became fascinated by the notion. He felt excited about it the more and more he thought about successfully pulling it off.

Didn't he consider himself to be a proficient liar? This should have been right up his alley!

He wasn't a fan of framing it in miracles, though. Gloriana could think what she wanted, but Ves fastly preferred to think of it as lying to reality.

Still, as bold as Gloriana's idea sounded, they were very far from realizing it. At their current state, let alone lying to reality, they probably weren't able to attract reality's attention in the first place!

Ves picked up Lucky in his arms and stared at his pet for a moment while concentrating his mind.

"You are not a gem cat. You are an organic cat. You are a creature of flesh and blood instead of alloys and circuitry."

"Meow!"

Lucky took objection at the lies spewed by Ves! The cat quickly phased out of the grasp keeping him in place and flew out of reach!

"Well, that didn't work." Ves ruefully smiled. "Maybe I should start with something smaller."

He experimented with smaller objects, ranging from an empty cup to a hair he pulled out of his head.

Nothing worked. Even when he concentrated his mind and applied a considerable amount of spirituality, the process of lying to reality completely failed.

"Reality isn't so easily fooled." He concluded after wasting a considerable amount of spiritual energy.

To be fair, his earlier experiments were merely whimsies. They had very little grounding in reality or theory.

As much as Gloriana suggested to Ves to let go of his mental constraints, he still preferred to keep his thinking at least somewhat grounded.

After a bit of thinking, he concluded that he stood a much better chance of success when designing a mech.

Gloriana evidently thought the same way. Otherwise she wouldn't have come up with the notion of conceptual perfection.

Different from trying to turn Lucky into an organic cat, both Ves and Gloriana thought that it might actually work.

They only disagreed on how it might work. While Gloriana blabbered on about miracles, Ves simply believed that they just needed to get their design seeds to do the work.

To mech designers, design seeds encapsulated the bulk of their spiritual power. It held the essence of their design philosophies and sought to make their aspirations related to them into reality.

The reason why Ves would never be able to turn Lucky into an organic cat was because his design seed obviously didn't specialize in changing cats into different species.

He didn't specialize in turning mechs perfect either. That was Gloriana's domain. However, even she didn't believe that she could lie to reality in this way on her own. She believed she needed to borrow the power of Ves' spiritual manipulation abilities to accomplish this lie.

"It's a very interesting idea." Ves scratched his chin. "Will it work?"

He believed there might be a way to accomplish it if they expanded upon the idea and developed a better theoretical framework besides calling it a miracle.

Since the notion of conceptual perfection was way beyond their reach, they didn't attempt to apply it to their custom mech project.

For now, achieving synergy between their design philosophies through mutual strengthening was sufficient.

After several more days of refinement and optimization, they tentatively reached the point where they could no longer progress.

"It's so close to completion, but we can't quite close the gap." Gloriana commented morosely after another lengthy design session at the workshop compartment.

Ves was much more nonchalant about it. So what if they left it unfinished?

"We only need a couple of days to complete our design once the conditions are right. William Urbesh isn't going anywhere. We'll be able to study him and make the final adjustments once we get a hold of him in person."

Although they made huge strides in designing their custom mech, neither of them wanted to close this project.

Gloriana never designed a custom mech without meeting a mech pilot in person. Medical data and psychological analyses only provided so much input to her work. In order to make absolutely sure her work fit its intended mech pilot as perfectly as possible, she needed to study William Urbesh by herself.

As for Ves, he needed to make at least some effort to customize the spiritual component of the custom mech to William Urbesh.

He could have made a cheap effort by constructing an image of William Urbesh from his imagination before infusing it with his spiritual energy in order to make it more substantial.

Yet how well did he know William Urbesh? Not much at all! Any image he constructed of the man in his mind would never match with the real Urbesh!

If Ves wanted to tweak the spiritual foundation of the custom mech to be more in tune with William Urbesh, then he needed to find some way to siphon a minute portion of the cowardly mech pilot's spirituality.

That might be a little risky.

Unlike most mech pilots, William Urbesh possessed a very miniscule but noticeable trace of spirituality. Since he possessed so little of it, what kind of damage would Ves inflict if he took a chunk of it away?

Well, it would be fine as long as Urbesh didn't die on the spot.

Of course, even if he retrieved a mote of spirituality from Urbesh's spiritually-underdeveloped mentality, Ves did not intend to apply it directly.

Gloriana's notion of lying to reality inspired him to tamper with the mote of spirituality. What if he could he could distort the mote by getting rid of the cowardly attributes and replace it with courageous attributes?

If he implemented this tampered mote into his custom mech design, then would he be able to influence William Urbesh's personality through this fashion?

It sounded incredibly dangerous and unethical to Ves. He was working on some dubious theories and assumptions. If even one step went wrong, Urbesh would bear all of the consequences!

"You're making that goofy grin again, Ves. What are you thinking about?"

Ves shook his head. "Ah, nothing. I was just thinking about a test subject."

Since they couldn't find a way to bring their custom mech design closer to completion, they wrapped it up and put it aside for later.

As the both of them went their separate ways, Ves returned to his guest room and decided to get in touch with his favorite double-dealing assistant.

"Benny. How is the LMC doing?" Ves asked over the comm.

"Good. We've overcome a lot of obstacles in the past few weeks since the introduction of the Desolate Soldier and the Holy Soldier models. The latter is doing exceptionally well, but you already know that. The Ylvainans have already fielded the first Holy Soldiers in battle!"

That caused Ves to raise his eyebrows. "Send me the footage if possible. I'll review them later. How did the battle go?"

"It was an overwhelming victory for the Ylvainans. They were experimenting with three mech companies that consisted entirely of Holy Soldiers when a single sandman fleet dropped into the star system. The Kronons aborted their drills and moved to intercept the sandman fleet and easily managed to take it down."

A single sandman fleet wasn't that much of a challenge to defeat so long as the defenders held their ground.

"How many losses did the Kronons suffer?"

"Nine mechs, of which only three managed to eject in time. Their carriers also sustained moderate damage. The Kronons believe that they'll be able to reduce their losses once they become more proficient with the Holy Soldiers."

Ves became a little grim when he heard the results. Losing nine cheap mechs was no big loss for a state as large as the Ylvaine Protectorate.

What concerned him more was that the Kronon Dynasty lost six valuable mech pilots.

If Ves compared the relative strengths of a sandman fleet to 120 Holy Soldiers, then losing six mech pilots still amounted to a victory!

Yet even though many sandman fleets could easily be defeated, they always harvested at least some lives and mechs.

Those six missing mech pilots meant that the Kronons had less mech pilots at their disposal when the next sandman fleet arrived.

In the span of a month, more than twenty separate sandman fleets might invade a typical star system! Even if they arrived one at a time, the defenders inevitably bled more and more mechs and mech pilots after each victorious battle.

The most dreadful aspect about the sandmen was that even if a mech force kept winning every battle, there came a point where they would lose the war. With no way to stop attrition, eventually the umpteenth sandman fleet would succeed where dozens had failed.

While Ves grasped some hope at Gavin's mention that the Kronons were attempting to reduce their losses for next time, there was only so much they could do.

Both the Holy Soldier and the Desolate Soldier were cheap and disposable by design. Getting hit even once by a sandman laser strike often spelled instant death.

No matter how much faith the Kronon mech pilots held in their Holy Soldiers, it was impossible for them to conjure up a miracle that could block these attacks.

"Are the Ylvainans satisfied?"

Gavin grinned. "Very so. Reportedly, every Kronon mech pilot who received the privilege of piloting a Holy Soldier doesn't want to go back to their old machine. It's safe to say that customer satisfaction for our Holy Soldier is incredibly high!"

Of course they loved his variant. Ves expressly went out of his way to incorporate a mote of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment into its design!

"Have our sales projections for the Holy Soldier changed in light of recent events?"

"Not at first, boss. With how fast our partners are ramping up production, we're very confident we'll be able around 5,000 Holy Soldiers in the first month. As for the second month, our previous estimate of selling 10,000 Holy Soldiers turned out to be on the low side. We think we can at least sell 20,000 Holy Soldiers, if not more!"

"That fast?"

"The Protectorate's mech market is still relatively closed. You aren't facing as much competition there. Once your Holy Soldier entered the market, it has quickly become the only game in town when it comes to cheap and simple spaceborn rifleman mechs. Not even the mechs designed by their local Seniors can compete against your work!"

Ves felt a little bad about that, but only for a little while. Even if Ylvainan Senior Mech Designers were a little more backwards in his eyes, they were still very good mech designers. Ves wasn't about to put them out of business by stealing their market share!

### *Chapter 1542 Homecoming*

Home. After a lengthy journey, the combined fleet finally arrived in the Cloudy Curtain System.

Almost a year ago, the rural star system was not worth mentioning. Aside from housing the headquarters and the main manufacturing complex of the LMC, Cloudy Curtain only attracted attention for its cloud rice and other luxury crop exports.

Yet as soon as the Stellar Chaser transitioned into the star system, Ves immediately noticed dozens of starships travelling to and from the only habitable planet.

He recognized some of the ships as transports contracted by the LMC. Raw materials constantly flowed into the Mech Nursery while finished mechs constantly flowed out.

However, the amount of vessels in the system exceeded his expectations. As the combined fleet slowly traveled to the inner system, Ves browsed the local news to get up to speed on the changes that took place while he was gone.

"The state has already settled more than two billion refugees on Cloudy Curtain!" Ves gasped. "More refugees are being dumped on the surface every day!"

Gloriana pressed closer to him and read the article projected by his comm. "Sounds like your planet has just become more important."

The farming consortiums that long ruled Cloudy Curtain from behind the scenes stepped forward and gave the refugees something to do. They set up a multitude of towns built in a matter of days by erecting lots of prefab homes.

With so many refugees pouring into the Bright Republic, the state had a lot more mouths to feed all of a sudden. All of those people needed food, and the best way to stave off starvation was to cultivate lots of genetically-customized crops tailored for fast growth and maximum nutrition.

Vast tracts of land had been cultivated into enormous farms. While all kinds of machinery did most of the work, human labor was still indispensable for various reasons. If not, a competitor could simply dispatch a single hacker to an automated farming operation and spoil an entire harvest!

The government also aimed to keep the refugees out of the way while giving them something to do. Who knew what kind of trouble these desperate and emotionally-wrecked people could do if left to their own devices.

Due to the sheer influx of people pouring into the planet, the Raleigh Consortium and Luvon Consortium no longer dominated the agricultural sector. They simply didn't have the capital and resources to set up all of the farming settlements that the government mandated!

Attracted by generous government subsidies, savvy investors from Bentheim and elsewhere founded eight more farming consortiums to erect thousands of settlements!

Through the help of these wealthy new farming consortiums, Cloudy Curtain quickly managed to settle two billion refugees in a matter of months!

In fact, if the flow of refugees pouring into the Bright Republic didn't abate, then it was very much possible that Cloudy Curtain became host to double or triple that population!

Ves could scarcely fathom the changes that would take place in the future!

"Cloudy Curtain has become very lively all of a sudden! What a difference a single year away can make!"

"Isn't that good for us?" Gloriana smiled and pecked his cheek. "It's depressing to live on an empty planet. Now that there are so many new people on your home planet, there



will soon be lots more to do for us! We don't have to divert to Bentheim in order to go out and have some fun!"

The influx of refugees and moneyed interests also meant that the planetary political equilibrium would soon be reformed.

Fortunately, the LMC still maintained a dominant grasp on the local levers of power. Its enormous influence on the local economy gave it enough leverage to obtain a lot of permits and exemptions.

Instead of landing on the spaceport at Orinoco, the Stellar Chaser, the Barracuda and some of the carriers of the Battle Criers and Glory Battalion all descended directly at a special spaceport erected by the LMC!

As soon as the vessels landed on a very expansive landing zone, the combat carriers began to spit out a multitude of third-class and second-class landbound mechs!

Half of the mechs spread out to secure the surrounding terrain, while the other half formed into rows and joined the rows of other mechs that had formed up beforehand!

As soon as the Glory Battalion gave permission to proceed, a ramp extended from the passenger hatch of the Stellar Chaser.

Ves and Gloriana emerged from the ship in full splendor.

Ves decided to wear his full Pride of Dusk ensemble. Already, his overcoat radiated a powerful aura, making him appear more imposing and important.

The woman clinging on his arm looked incredibly resplendent. Since this was her first formal introduction to the people working for Ves, she made sure to look as perfect as possible by her boyfriend's side!

Her blue ocean dress lovingly caressed her form. Exotics embedded onto its fabric elegantly sparkled in the diffused light of the planet's ever-present cloud cover. A stylish, open coat partially covered her upper torso, giving her a more sophisticated and professional look.

Gloriana also braided a portion of her hair in a crown-like braid, leaving plenty of curls to frame her imperious face.

The two of them appearing together in this fashion made a very powerful statement to the people gathered at the landing zone.

The only incongruous element that spoiled their imposing looks was the identical cat ears affixed to their heads!



The cat ears injected a very noticeable amount of silliness and eccentricity to their public image. The journalists invited by the LMC to witness the homecoming of its founder and lead designer looked gobsmacked.

"How adorable! Ves Larkinson and Gloriana Wodin aren't afraid to play around!"

"What a great catch! Ves Larkinson has won one of the greatest jackpots that a Brighter could win! With a wealthy Hexer at his side, his money problems are a thing of the past!"

"What a detestable couple! The Bright Republic has always been friends with the Coalition! Ves Larkinson has betrayed our state and sold himself out to the Hegemony!"

Neither Ves nor Gloriana took notice of the chattering of the press. They both walked side by side as they descended from the ramp.

Behind them, their cats obediently followed after their owners. Lucky had activated his CFA-grade sensors to scan for threats, while Clixie did the same with her own exceptional senses.

Nitaa, Melody and the guards of the Glory Battalion trailed after the cats. The bodyguards all fanned out and surrounded the two Journeymen in a half-circle.

The procession walked forward to a raised stage prepared for the pair. As Ves and Gloriana slowly walked up to the stage, they both studied the hundreds of mechs that had formed up into rows to greet their return.

Most of the mechs standing in formation consisted of the mechs of the newly-founded Living Sentinels Security Company.

The majority of people and assets of the old incarnation of the Avatars of Myth now wore the livery of the Living Sentinels. Four of their mech companies turned out in force, their silver and green mechs standing proud under the turbulent skies of Cloudy Curtain.

What impressed Ves the most about the Living Sentinels was that they incorporated many of his silver label mechs. Their landbound mech companies fielded a lot of Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords, granting the company-owned force a lot of offensive and defensive power!

The spaceborn mech companies of the Living Sentinels made an even greater impression. Due to the current crisis, the Living Sentinels furloughed almost all of their existing spaceborn mechs in favor of adopting the LMC's new Desolate Soldier model.

Concentrating so many Desolate Soldiers in a single place produced a powerful aura that overwhelmed practically every other aura in the air! An enormous sense of duty and purpose arose in the hearts and minds of every person present!

Under the influence of this powerful aura, the Living Sentinels became incredibly attentive to the return of the most important person in the LMC!

Without the existence of Ves Larkinson, the LMC was just a hollow shell! Only now did the Living Sentinels feel that they could perform their true duty!

"How powerful." Gloriana softly sighed as she witnessed so many of her boyfriend's mechs. "Our Desolate Soldier mechs are more impressive than I thought. Their divinity is so concentrated here that it feels as if I've stepped into a holy land!"

"My mechs do have the tendency to do that when grouped up in great numbers." Ves responded mildly.

As impressive as the Living Sentinels appeared, their mechs obediently gave ground to the gold-and-red coated mechs standing at the very front.

Blackbeaks, Crystal Lords, Aurora Titans and even a dozen Desolate Soldiers all greeted the arrival of Ves with an immense degree of pride.

The Avatars of Myth, a mech force that solely answered to him, greeted his return by stretching out their arms!

The mechs of the Living Sentinels followed suit a second later!

The sight of so many mechs saluting to Ves made him feel unprecedentedly powerful!

Though the Avatars of Myth and the Living Sentinels weren't as strong as the Glory Battalion, they ultimately answered to him! Even if the Living Sentinels technically answered to the LMC, he could always regain direct control by exercising his power!

That was much better than Gloriana's relationship to her Glory Battalion.

Once he finished taking in the sheer amount of mechs under his control, he began to speak.

"I have returned." His voice boomed over the entire landing zone.

With all of the local journalists reporting on the event, Ves was very sure that the rest of Cloudy Curtain witnessed his return as well. Since his homecoming had turned into a grand spectacle all of a sudden, why not take advantage of the free publicity?

"I have travelled the breadth of the Komodo Star Sector and visited amazing planets. Yet no matter how lofty Centerpoint seduced me with its wealth, Cloudy Curtain has always been my home. Now that the Bright Republic is in danger, the Living Mech Corporation is ready to assist in the defense of our state!"

The pervasive aura of duty radiating from the Desolate Soldiers put force in his words. Even the people watching his homecoming from a projection would inevitably be influenced by a portion of this aura.

Many people started to pay more attention.

"The Living Mech Corporation has always existed to serve the people." Ves confidently spoke. "During these dangerous times, the LMC is ready to step up. Our new Desolate Soldier model is tailor-made to defend our vulnerable star systems. Not only is it cheap to the point where we're willing to forego a lot of profit, it is also the only mech that can inspire the people and lift up everyone's hearts."

Many people had become aware of the Desolate Soldier model, but it didn't hurt for him to add his own voice to the discussion.

"We know that selling fantastic mechs with unique strengths is not enough." Ves added grimly. "For this reason, I am willing to contribute to the defense of the Bright Republic in a more substantive fashion. We have made agreements with the Mech Corps to accept several vital defense missions to cover vulnerable star systems situated at the border with the Coman Federation. My Avatars of Myth and Living Sentinels will soon dispatch some mech companies to bolster the defenses of the star systems under pressure and help resist the sandmen!"

To be fair, even if he didn't volunteer his mech forces, the government would have found some way to force him to. With more and more emergency decrees taking effect, the time where private outfits could do what they wanted had faded.

Even so, his lofty words strengthened everyone's sense of duty. No matter if they were his subordinates or people tuning in the broadcast from their homes, Ves appeared exceptionally noble and selfless at this moment!

"It's good to be home."

#### *Chapter 1543 Cloud Estate*

After giving an extensive speech in front of his Avatars of Myth and Living Sentinels, Ves and Gloriana finally departed to their new home via a well-armored shuttle dispatched by the Glory Battalion.

Escorted by the mechs of the Glory Battalion and Avatars of Myth, the armored shuttle made its way to a site close to the Mech Nursery. Instead of arriving at the headquarters of the LMC, the shuttle instead diverted to a site that was fifty kilometers away.

Lush forests and picturesque hills dotted the landscape. Atop the highest hill, an expansive manion complex stood out. This was the recently-built Cloud Estate that Ketis had been responsible for building!

Now, it became their new home!

As soon as the shuttle landed within the walls of the expansive state, Ves, Gloriana, their pets and their followers all stepped out and took in the sights.

Different from what he imagined, the Cloud Estate was not as empty as he thought. More than thirty young children ran and played across the grounds.

At a courtyard situated close to a large and regal mansion, a number of older people leisurely chatted with each other or watched the children enjoy themselves.

This sight was very familiar to Ves. In fact, if not for the different architecture and the pervasive cloud cover above his head, he would have suspected that he reached the Larkinson Estate on Rittersberg!

"Ves. You're finally home. We have all been waiting for you to return."

Ketis walked up to him in a formal business suit that made her appear far more mature than before. The certainty in her steps and the seriousness in her countenance gave Ves the impression that she had grown up in the year he was away.

She no longer looked like a lost girl from the frontier.

As she came close, Gloriana began to direct a sharp glance at the former pirate.

To her credit, Ketis did not respond aggressively. Instead, she offered a meek smile and stretched out her hand.

"My name is Ketis. Ves has mentored me for years. I'm pleased to meet you, Gloriana. I've heard a lot about you and I admire your skill. I hope to learn from you and work alongside you at the LMC."

Ves almost couldn't believe what he heard. Was this actually Ketis? Did someone replace the Ketis he knew with a poorly-grown clone?

She had never been so polite before!

Nonetheless, her subdued posture combined with her polite greeting won Gloriana over. Ves sensed that his girlfriend let down her guard.

"So you are Ves' first student, are you?" Gloriana smiled and shook the other woman's surprisingly strong and rough grip. "I've heard a lot about you as well. I'm curious to see how Ves has taught you. I will make sure to test you to see if you deserve to be known as his student."

Ves inwardly sighed now that he saw that Gloriana and Ketis managed to get along. He was afraid that his girlfriend might react poorly to other women, but it seemed that he had been wrong.

Certainly, the arrival of Gloriana completely changed the dynamic within his circle. Her status and the way she talked and carried herself made it abundantly clear that she expected to be in charge!

Though Gloriana did not own any shares of the company, the LMC had already registered her as their second lead designer!

By assigning her this position, Ves had made his stance clear. Gloriana was here to stay and would help with designing the company's mechs!

How luxurious!

Many mech companies dreamed of adding a Journeyman of Gloriana's caliber to their design teams. Now, due to her relationship with Ves, she readily put her skills at the disposal of his company for just a nominal salary!

Once Gloriana and Ketis finished introducing themselves, the latter gestured them forward.

"The main mansion is up ahead."

As they walked forward, Ves began to ask the question that had been nagging on his mind.

"Ketis, what is up with the Larkinsons here? I thought I told you to build a private home."

"That was my original plan, but your grandfather, Melkor and some other Larkinsons made a very persuasive case. They wanted to set up a bigger estate for the Larkinsons living and working at Cloudy Curtain. Since you're all family, why not make your home livelier? The Larkinsons don't want you to grow too distant from your relatives."

Ves frowned a bit. The Larkinsons acted a bit presumptuously by turning his home into a copy of the Larkinson Compound.

Nonetheless, seeing the younger and older Larkinsons enjoying themselves on his private territory lessened his objections.

There wasn't much harm in living together with the Larkinsons. Ketis was right that their presence instantly livened up the place. The sight of his relatives brought back pleasant memories of the times he spent at the Larkinson Compound in his youth.

"I'm not very pleased you haven't checked in with me before making this decision, but I'll allow it. How many Larkinsons are living here right now?"

"Over six-hundred. Some have moved out to help the Mech Corps fight the sandmen, though."

Ves widened his eyes when he heard that. "Six-hundred?!"

No wonder the Cloud Estate was so large and featured so many structures!

"What are they all doing here?! Has the LMC really hired so many Larkinsons?!"

"Not all of them are working for you." Ketis gently shook her head. "The LMC, the Living Sentinels and the Avatars of Myth employ a lot of Larkinsons. The mech pilots of your family highly favor working for the Living Sentinels, though a number of them have joined the Avatars of Myth. Many of the norms in your family have decided to work for the LMC, though plenty of Larkinsons have also joined the support staff of your two outfits."

"What about the Larkinsons who aren't working for me? What are they even doing here? Cloudy Curtain is a rotten planet compared to Rittersberg!"

"Ah, a lot of retired Larkinson mech pilots have decided to work as mech instructors at the mech academy they have taken over!"

Ves recalled that he heard about this before. He didn't expect the Larkinsons had actually gone through with this commitment!

"What mech academy?"

"The one in Freslin. They've renamed it the Larkinson Basic Mech Academy! Thousands of young mech cadets are now learning how to pilot mechs by retired Larkinsons. There's even talk of expanding the campus and hiring additional teachers to accommodate the intake of mech cadets from the refugee body!"

The enterprise sounded a lot more significant to the Larkinsons than Ves suspected. If Cloudy Curtain hadn't been flooded by refugees, then the Larkinson Basic Mech Academy wouldn't have been a small and quaint institution.

Yet now that the population of the planet ballooned, the academy suddenly became a lot more significant!

The only other academy on Cloudy Curtain was in Orinoco. At the planet's previous level of population, the two academies were more than enough to accommodate the local potentates.

"The Bright Republic really wants to claim all the refugee mech cadets for themselves." Ketis remarked. "They've invested a lot of money into setting up more mech academies on Cloudy Curtain. They've also allocated a lot of money to the Larkinsons to expand the Larkinson Basic Mech Academy. Your grandfather has even told me that the Larkinsons are in the process of asking for approval to establish the first advanced mech academy on Cloudy Curtain!"

The news came as a shock to Ves. The Larkinsons had never put so much effort in running their own mech academies!

Mech academies consumed a lot of money. Not only did it cost a lot to build all of the expensive facilities and purchase a lot of practice mechs, but it also cost a lot to keep it all in shape and up to date.

There was hardly any profit in running a mech academy! The Larkinsons must have spent the bulk of the dividends they received from the LMC to this endeavor!

"I guess I'll have to talk with my grandfather as soon as I've settled in." He sighed in an exasperated manner. "Far too many changes have taken place while I was away."

"Look on the bright side, Ves. A lot of mech cadets attending your family's academy have become devoted to the LMC. The Living Sentinels and the Avatars of Myth won't lack for recruits."

"Perhaps. I'll reserve my judgement. The Larkinsons don't have much experience in running a major educational institution, let alone two. I'm afraid they're biting off more than they could chew. How many mech cadets do they expect to teach?"

"If the basic mech academy finishes its expansion, then it can enroll up to 20,000 mech cadets. As for the advanced mech academy, it will probably accommodate the same amount of mech cadets at the start."

"That's a lot!"

While Ves knew that there were bigger mech academies, he was worried whether the Larkinsons could even handle 20,000 mech cadets per institution.

Teaching future mech pilots was a big responsibility! While Ves had no doubt that the Larkinsons were more than capable of instructing mech cadets, that did not necessarily mean they were good at running schools.

Ketis noticed his apprehension and gave him a reassuring smile. "You don't have to be worried for your relatives, Ves. The Larkinsons know what they are doing and they're not running a mech academy by themselves. They're constantly hiring a lot of experienced teachers, administrators and support staff to shoulder the burden."



They arrived in front of the centermost mansion. Unlike the other structures, the grandest building of the Cloud Estate was devoid of Larkinsons.

"This is your new home." Ketis introduced and waved at the majestic building. "Only you and your guests are allowed to approach and enter the main mansion. The other Larkinsons who live at the Cloud Estate have already been instructed to stay away from it to avoid disturbing you. Is it to your liking?"

Ves studied the traditional facade. "It looks very stately. However, I remember asking for you to build a defensible home for me. So far, I haven't spotted any defenses aside from mechs."

"This place is tougher than it looks. Your Cloud Estate is far more defensible than meets the eye. The mansions may look pretty on the outside, but their inner structure is made from compressed alloys. There are numerous turrets and other defensive measures around us, but they're currently retracted beneath the surface. Finally, there's a highly-reinforced citadel built under the Cloud Estate that is rated to resist a fair amount of orbital bombardment."

That was just some of the defensive measures protecting the Cloud Estate from threats. Nitaa and the guards of the Glory Battalion listened carefully and nodded in approval.

They entered the palatial mansion shortly afterwards. Everything was very large, from the entrance hall to the stairs leading up to the second floor.

Though the mansion didn't feel very warm or cozy to Ves, that might change once he lived in the place for a while.

"Mhmmm." Gloriana hummed and pressed a finger to her lips. "The interior is a little shabby to my tastes."

Ves helplessly shrugged. "You can do whatever you want."

He knew her well enough that she would change things if she found something displeasing. She was already treating his mansion as her home!

"We need to study and upgrade some of the security measures as well." Melody added on behalf of the Glory Battalion. "Don't worry, Mr. Larkinson. The Wodin Dynasty will cover the costs."

How grateful of them. The Wodin Dynasty probably regarded him as a pauper or something.

"Let's get settled in. I've had a long day and I have a lot of work to catch up to. Ketis, lead me to my office. There's an office here, right?"

She nodded. "I know you like your offices. The mansion has more than enough space to allow you to work from home. Let's go upstairs."

### *Chapter 1544 A Good Time To Figh*

As Ves and Gloriana settled in the Cloud Estate, elsewhere in the Komodo Star Sector a massive mech fleet was about to transition out of FTL.

The Sundered Phalanx was the mech military of the Gauge Dynasty. As the most powerful partner of the Friday Coalition, the Sundered Phalanx enjoyed a high reputation.

Right now, the Gauge Dynasty dispatched two powerful mech divisions to address an emergency that suddenly took place on one of their populated planets.

The enormous fleet consisted of many fleet carriers and combat carriers as well as numerous support ships. The firepower it possessed was more than enough to terrorize a third-rate state!

"It's very strange, sir." A staff officer reported to the mech general placed in command. "Every quantum entanglement node in the star system disconnected from the galactic net without any warning. We haven't managed to get in touch with the Mindak System for two days."

"It's fishy." The mech general grimly nodded. His brilliant uniform shifted as he studied the intelligence reports. "We're almost certainly walking into a trap. Regardless of what a disaster has befallen the Mindak System, we need to be as alert as possible."

"It hasn't helped that we've been ordered to reinforce the Mindak System as fast as possible. The haste in which we left gave us no time to obscure our route. If the Hexers are responsible, then they'll know exactly where and when to lay an ambush."

"The Sundered Phalanx is not so easy to defeat. Our fleet carriers carry some of the best defensive shielding our Gauge Dynasty has developed. We shall see how well they fare."

Hours later, the formidable mech fleet was about to transition out of FTL. Every mech pilot entered the cockpits of their mechs. Spacers manned their stations with utmost seriousness, knowing that whatever was about to take place would certainly not be a drill.

As the time of transition neared, everyone entered their maximum state of alertness. As one of the premier mech militaries in the star sector, the soldiers Sundered Phalanx possessed an immense amount of pride and confidence in themselves!

"It's time!"

As soon as hundreds of ships transitioned out of FTL, the hundreds of thousands of Fridaymen that made up the mech fleet knew no more.

In a wide zone around their emergence point in the Mindak System, thousands of dark, floating pillars turned active just minutes before the arrival of the Sundered Phalanx fleet.

As soon as the huge and heavily-armored fleet carriers transitioned into realspace, they instantly tore apart as if they had been rammed through a gigantic cheese grater!

Dozens of capital ships that were tough enough to withstand many minutes of bombardment from enemy mechs instantly peeled apart without any opportunity to mount a defense!

The smaller but just as resilient combat carriers shared the same fate! Each and every vessel emerging out of FTL acted as if they were passing through an invisible net that was strong enough to cut an entire planet!

Since the fleet carriers and the combat carriers all succumbed in an instant, the logistics ships that followed afterwards fared no better. Ships that were almost as large as factory ships easily split apart and turned into separating noodles of alloys!

Within minutes, the horror finally ceased.

A silent tragedy had taken place in the Mindak System. Two complete mech divisions of the Sundered Phalanx had been completely annihilated without having enough time to mount a defense!

Worse yet, the Mindak System was not the only star system in trouble.

Half-a-dozen other star systems had fallen silent, prompting the partners of the Coalition to raise their vigilance. However, they also dispatched some ships and fleets to investigate.

The headquarters of the Sundered Phalanx and other mech militaries had been in constant contact with the reinforcement fleets. Upon the moment of their transition into the mysteriously silent star systems, something remarkable happened.

They lost contact.

No one managed to establish contact with the ships and fleets that had fallen out of communication!

Either their quantum entanglement nodes suddenly stopped working, or the ships had been destroyed!

Horror began to spread among the high command of the Friday Coalition.

"How many mech divisions have we lost?"

"The entire Coalition has collectively lost contact with sixteen mech divisions!"

Sixteen mech divisions! Though the Sundered Phalanx alone fielded many more mech divisions, this was still a painful loss!

The absence of 160,000 second-class mechs and the expert pilots, carriers and other ships to support them was enough to tip the balance between the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony!

"This is bad! The Hexers have just declared war!"

The Hexadric Hegemony bombastically made their declaration as soon as the Sundered Phalanx and the other mech militaries of the Friday Coalition stopped sending in more ships.

The Hexers immediately began to send their own mech fleets across the border. They had long been preparing to launch an offensive!

As soon as the Friday Coalition learned of the offensive, even more bad news poured in! Several strategic and highly-populated star systems suddenly began to fall into chaos!

Billions of citizens started rioting for no apparent reason! Although not everyone had gone berserk, many mech pilots and armed guards counted among the ones that lost their minds. As soon as they became affected by the chaos, they began to unload their weapons in every direction, including their fellow soldiers and innocent civilians!

Only nine critical planets had been affected, yet their military and industrial importance was incredibly paramount! Their loss hurt the Fridaymen severely in their rapidly-escalating war against the Hexers!

In fact, six more planets had almost befallen the same fate, but the local forces managed to discover the plots in time. The hidden machines that caused the surrounding population to go crazy had been found and destroyed in rapid tempo, saving many billions of people from death and damnation!

In the first move of what would become known as the Komodo War, the Hexers succeeded in inflicting a severe blow against the Fridaymen!

The Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony were two of the most powerful states in the star sector.

They also hated each other with a passion. The only reason why they hadn't gone to war in the hundreds of years of standoffs was because it was too risky to initiate.

As long as any war broke out between these bitter rivals, neither side would back down!

Considering how many mechs and how many preparations they've made against each other, a war would certainly last until one side decisively beat the other side!

The conflict between the two sides represented a pivotal war for supremacy that decided which of the two would become the final ruler of the Komodo Star Sector! Neither the Coalition nor the Hegemony wanted to tolerate the existence of their rivals any longer!

As soon as the fighting between the two powerful states broke out, the rest of the star sector immediately reacted with shock!

"The sandmen are just about to overrun our states! Why have the Coalition and the Hegemony decided that this is a good time to solve their grudges? We need their firepower to save our lives!"

"Crazy! Crazy! Crazy!"

"This is bad! Those female supremacists have managed to gain an advantage! What if they win? I don't want to lick the shoes of every woman that I come across!"

To the Bright Republic and the other states fighting against the sandmen, the incredibly destructive war between the second-rate states couldn't have come at a more inopportune time.

Many of them had been hoping for a change. Perhaps the Coalition and Hegemony felt charitable enough to send some of their powerful mech forces to the beleaguered states.

Yet now that they became fully preoccupied in fighting with each other, there was no way they would ever dispatch any help!

Even worse, the outbreak of war disrupted the existing pattern of trade. The amount of resources the second-rate states consumed was vastly more than all of the third-rate states put together!

While none of the third-rate states were expected to fight on behalf of one of the second-rate states, they were still expected to export valuable exotics and other materials!

There was no guarantee that third-rate states would be left out of the conflict. Perhaps the Fridaymen and Hexers would force them to take sides and fight among themselves!

As the news reached the Bright Republic, Ves learned of it as soon as possible.

He had barely settled into his new office at the Cloud Estate when the news scared him out of his wits!

"Gloriana! What is the meaning of this?!"

His girlfriend did not exhibit any surprise upon hearing the news. She leaned against his imposing desk and idly twirled a lock of her hair with her finger.

"Operation K has succeeded. The war that will decide the fate of this star sector has finally started."

"Did you know?!"

"Yes." She grinned like a shark that had just smelled blood. "In fact, I contributed by customizing some of the mechs that have gone to war. I wonder how many Fridaymen they'll manage to kill. The more, the better!"

Seeing her girlfriend revel in this stupendously ruinous war as if it was her birthday practically floored Ves!

He had forgotten that she was an unrepentant Hexer!

As Ves read the articles about the opening moves of the Hexers, a powerful chill went through his spine.

He recognized the means the Hexers used to strike a painful blow against the Coalition.

"Project Void Calamity."

"Project Pandemonium Descent."

He immediately dredged up the details of these two projects from the depths of his mind.

A long time ago, Ves and Calabast snuck into the restricted sections of the Starlight Megalodon. Calabast spent a lot of effort to retrieve the files relating to these two ancient CFA research projects.

Back then, Ves learned enough about the two projects to make a horrible realization.

Both projects were purely designed to break a state!

With all of the awful events unfolding right now, Ves felt as if his worst nightmares came true. The classified project files that Ves helped retrieve had been used to an incredibly deadly effect.

If Ves hadn't helped Calabast at the time, then this war might have never happened!

Shortly after Ves connected Project Void Calamity and Project Pandemonium Descent to Operation K, he made another incredibly vital realization.

"Calabast.. is a hexer!"

"Correct." A familiar voice sounded out from the side.

"Who's there!"

A hidden entrance built into the side of his home office opened up. Calabast emerged and walked up to the desk with a confident stride.

Surprisingly, the Glory Battalion guards guarding the office did not make any attempts to halt the intruder!

Nitaa looked lost and questioned Ves whether she should intervene.

"Calabast! Aren't you supposed to be in the Ylvaine Protectorate?!"

"I'm no longer needed there." She grinned. "Don't worry, Ves. My absence from the Ylvaine Protectorate won't affect our arrangements there. I've trained another operative to take over my cover identity as Madame Cecily to act as a caretaker. Right now, I'm much more needed here, by your side."

Calabast returned to her old guise. She no longer disguised herself as a mild-mannered scion of the Curin Dynasty.

The truth had finally come out. Calabast was a Hexer. Ves should have known. He wished he never met her back at the Harkensen System! If not for that, how would he get so entangled with the Hegemony?!

It was already bad enough that his girlfriend was a Hexer, but now his strategic partner turned out to be one as well!

"AAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Both Calabast and Gloriana looked at each other and chuckled.

"He's such a boy." Gloriana smiled affectionately at her boyfriend as he was suffering a mental breakdown. "What did you do to him? He looks like he's at his limit."



Calabast nonchalantly shrugged. "I only used him for a bit, that's all. It's not my fault he's allergic to our state."

*Chapter 1545 The Woman From DIVA*

The outbreak of the war between the two major powers of the star sector sent Ves into a tizzy. Discovering Calabast's true allegiance had finally pushed him over the edge!

Ves lay on a couch set by the grand windows of his home office. Both Clixie and Lucky cuddled up next to his chest to comfort him. The two playful cats succeeded in pulling him back to his senses.

"Meow."

"Miaow."

"The two of you are too cute." Ves smiled and stroked both cats by their heads.

As much as he wanted to play with the two pets, he couldn't ignore the women staring at him. They both sat on a couch placed on the opposite side of a coffee table with plenty of room in between.

The way they sat suggested that even if both of them were Hexers, they didn't belong to the same dynasty or faction. That reassured Ves a little.

He looked around and noticed that the guards that usually guarded Gloriana had strangely left. A powerful interference field emanated from Calabast, ensuring that they enjoyed total privacy.

"Gloriana.. who is Calabast?" He asked his girlfriend first.

"I don't know her personally, but I'm aware of her background."

"Tell me who she is, then! No more secrets!"

"Calabast isn't my real name." The former spy spoke up, taking over from Gloriana. "I once told you that you're better off not knowing my background. However, now that Operation K has taken place, I suppose the cat is out of the bag."

Ves stared icily at the older woman. "For the sake of our long-term cooperation, I think you owe me an explanation."

"Fair enough." Calabast smiled and crossed her arms in a confident manner. "Calabast isn't my real name. I used to go by another name when I was born in a branch house of the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty."

Ves grew shocked!

The six matriarchal dynasties reigned at the top of the Hexadric Hegemony! The Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty held as much sway as the Evern Matriarchal Dynasty, to whom the Wodin Dynasty answered to! The power they wielded was immense!

Throughout her explanation, her accent shifted from what was common in the region to a more clipped one that resembled that of Gloriana!

Though the shift was subtle, the difference it made was huge!

"Why did you change your name?" He asked.

"Do you think that it is good to be born as a Vraken? Our matriarchal dynasty is so large that there are millions of Vrakens who share the same blood. I didn't enjoy a pampered upbringing like that of your girlfriend. I needed to fight my way upwards. I did that by working really hard to get into DIVA."

"DIVA?"

"DIVA is one of the Hegemony's intelligence agencies." Gloriana explained. "Don't ask me what the acronym stands for. I don't have a clue."

Calabast chuckled. "I don't know either. I won't tell you about what I did while I was in DIVA other than that I managed to become an elite intelligence operative. After completing my mission on Aeon Corona VII, I managed to meet with my boss and buy my freedom."

"Buy your freedom? I think you told me once that you quit your old job."

"I wasn't a slave, Ves, but my debt to the Hegemony was considerable. The Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty has provided me with many resources to enhance my growth. Even if I was an average family member back then, a Vraken is still entitled to treatment that would make you jealous. In addition, DIVA's training regime is one of the best in the star sector. Working for DIVA has forged me into the woman I am today."

"So that means that means the Vrakens and DIVA expect you to work for them. They invested so much into turning you into this elite intelligence operative that you're never able to get rid of your shackles under ordinary circumstances."

Her situation sounded similar to that of Gloriana. The only difference was that Gloriana was more than glad to continue to stay under the Wodin Dynasty's umbrella.

"I see you understand, Ves. In the society that Gloriana and I live in, obligations are vastly more restrictive than physical bonds. As much as I've benefited from being a

Vraken and a DIVA intelligence operative, I was destined to act as their pawn for my entire life."

"Yet you quit, right?"

She grinned at him. "Thanks to you, I managed to return with valuable CFA research data and other gains from the Starlight Megalodon. The treasure trove of data I've submitted to DIVA earned me so many merits that I didn't hesitate to buy my freedom. Not only that, but I also used my remaining merits to buy a higher standing within the Hegemony. This puts me on par with a member of a dynasty without belonging to one."

"Why is that important? Isn't it better to upgrade your standing within the Vrakens?"

"You aren't thinking enough ahead. Certainly, I could have used the merits I earned to upgrade myself to the same level of prominence that Gloriana enjoys in the Wodin Dynasty. Yet what use would that be to me? The higher my position in the Vrakens, the greater the expectations and obligations placed on my shoulders! That is not conducive to my plans for the future."

"You mean your plan to force a partnership on me so that you can leech off my accomplishments." Ves grimaced and briefly flitted his eyes over to Gloriana. "Does she know?"

Calabast shook her head. "Not yet, but I suggest you do something about that. Gloriana may not be entirely to my liking, but she's clean."

"What's that supposed to mean!" His girlfriend burst out. "And what's this about coming clean? Are the two of you hiding a secret or something?!"

Inwardly, Ves sighed in relief. Calabast hadn't spilled the beans about the Metal Scroll.

"All in due time, Gloriana." Calabast pressed the female mech designer down before turning to Ves. "Do you understand my circumstances now, kid? I could have gone far if I continued to stay in DIVA or the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty. Instead, I decisively paid back my debts and amicably cut off my ties with them because there is a much greater tree I can shelter under."

"Me." Ves spoke.

"Yep." She grinned. "Even though you're merely a sapling at your stage, your growth potential is limitless! DIVA, the Vrakens and even the entire Hegemony are trivial compared to where you will be in a few hundred years from now! You can't blame a woman for not letting this opportunity pass me by. The potential you hold is far in excess to anything this stinking star sector can produce!"

"Wow, Calabast! I thought I was the first one to recognize Ves' potential, but it seems your eye for mech designers is even better!" Gloriana cheerfully clapped before releasing a low hiss. "He's still mine, though!"

"I already told you, Gloriana. I am not interested in little boys."

Calabast briefly interrupted the functioning of her jammer so that she could transmit a message from her comm.

Seconds later, a woman wearing an unmarked mech officer uniform appeared into view, alarming both Ves and Gloriana!

"Who?!"

"Don't worry, she's friendly."

The athletic mech pilot strode forward while Ves tried to piece together her identity. The newcomer looked vaguely familiar to him, and her dark skin reminded Ves of some of the women he met in his life. As the figure came closer, his spiritual senses started to sense something remarkable.

"She's an expert candidate!" He called!

Not only that, but the expert candidate was in a very advanced state! Her willpower-infused spiritual energy had almost reached the threshold of apotheosis, which meant that becoming an expert pilot was just around the corner!

As the newcomer came close, Calabast stood up and immediately embraced the expert candidate in an intimate manner.

Locked in passion, their lips hungrily ravished each other! Sensuous moans escaped from their throats as the lovers enjoyed their reunion!

Ves and Gloriana wordlessly stared at the spectacle with their mouths gaped open. Even their intimate kisses hadn't reached this level of passion yet!

Once the two women separated, Calabast smiled with a bit of rosiness on her cheeks. "Ves, remember Commander Dise of the Swordmaidens?"

"Uh, hi commander."

So that was why the expert candidate felt so familiar! Even though advanced surgery changed her appearance to the point where Ves no longer recognized her, Ves couldn't mistake her spiritual fingerprint!

Ves remembered that Commander Dise and Captain Orfan both developed a strong mental connection with Qilanxo!

So long as Qilanxo still existed, Commander Dise was still her beast rider!

As Ves tuned his spiritual senses carefully, he managed to identify plenty of spiritual attributes that closely aligned with Qilanxo.

Strangely, they only made up a part of Commander Dise's spiritual makeup. Her spiritual attributes possessed a much more offensive mix. The defensive and protective influence from Qilanxo didn't entirely align with the pirate commander's fighting style, which probably hampered her growth somewhat.

Ves suspected that as long as Commander Dise managed to resolve the contradiction between Qilanxo's spiritual attributes and her own, she would finally be able to enter the ranks of demigods!

"Thank you for taking care of Ketis for us, Ves." Commander Dise smiled in approval. "She's grown up to become a good kid under your care. I hope you can continue to take care of her. Right now, she's not suitable to accompany us. My lover here has big plans for the Swordmaidens."

Though Gloriana maintained some wariness towards Calabast, her attitude changed now that the latter revealed her lover.

As long as Calabast made no moves towards Ves, she was fine with her presence!

The former intelligence operative coughed. "Gloriana, I summoned Commander Dise in order to prove that I'm not a threat to you. I'm going to have to ask you to leave now. I need to discuss some private business matters with Ves."

A few moments of silence passed as Gloriana directed a suspicious glance towards the other Hexer.

"..Okay. Just don't get into any funny business, all right?"

"Bring your cat out as well. I know she's smart enough to understand what we're saying."

"Fine." Gloriana grumbled. She had been seen through! "You Vrakens are always too sharp."

Commander Lydia led Gloriana and Clixie out of the home office, leaving Calabast alone with Ves.

"So." He began as he calmly held Lucky in his grasp. Now that his girlfriend had departed the room, Ves no longer felt as constrained. "You're a Hexer."

"Yes." Calabast grinned in amusement. "As someone who spent a lot of time outside the Hegemony, I can understand your apprehensiveness. I'm not like Gloriana, though. The Vrakens are largely secular. We don't buy into hexism."

Her words reassured him a bit. At least he wouldn't have to deal with two Hexers who wanted to impose their crazy religious beliefs on him. He already had a hard time maintaining his principles in front of Gloriana!

"What do you really think about my relationship with Gloriana?"

"I preferred you went for a more wholesome girl like Ketis. Gloriana.. while I have no comment on the love you share with her, in terms of entanglements I don't think you know what you're getting into. The closer you pursue a relationship with Gloriana, the more you'll enter the orbit of the Wodin Dynasty."

"I'm not marrying into her family!"

"That still doesn't exempt you from getting involved, kid! A promising mech designer like Gloriana is a treasure to the Wodins. Anyone who is worthy to capture her heart won't escape their attention!"

"Why is that so bad?"

Calabast let out an exasperated breath. "Forget about it. What is done is done. The situation is not entirely unsalvageable. As a foreigner, you only need to show off your capabilities in order to be treated as an ally rather than a servant."

"Gloriana and I are already planning to earn their acknowledgement."

"Good. It seems Gloriana is not blind to your situation."

"I think she just wants to keep me for herself." Ves scoffed before changing the topic. "Let's get to the point. Why are you here?"

"That requires some explanation." She sighed before adopting a serious expression. "The war that has broken out between the Coalition and the Hegemony has turned our star sector into a dangerous place. The Bright Republic won't remain unaffected."

"What is driving you Hexers to wage this war at this time? Please help me understand. With the sandmen bearing down on us all, I truly can't figure out why your state picked this time to resolve its grudges with its rival!"

As someone pivotal to Operation K, Calabast surely understood the Hegemony's decision to declare war.

Ves still remained awfully. He desperately needed more answers!

*Chapter 1546 Star Sector on Fire*

"The Komodo Star Sector has long enjoyed a period of relative stability. Do you think it's easy to start a war when order reigns?"

Calabast's question prompted Ves to consider her words from a different angle.

So far, Ves reacted to the war from the perspective of a hapless Brighter. How would he look at the conflict if he sat in the shoes of a Hexer?

"The MTA and CFA are apparently preoccupied.. many third-rate states are facing extinction from the sandmen.."

"Good. You're heading in the right direction, kid. Wars don't happen out of the blue. There are rules and customs that dictate when you're allowed to wage a war. Technically, the Big Two heavily frowns upon wars between human states when an alien race is bearing down on a star sector."

"Then why have the Hexers decided to pull the trigger anyway?"

"Because the sandmen are a distraction to us. The true powers in the star sector have never considered the aliens as a serious foe. Their threat level is simply too low. It's actually favorable to us that they have decided to attack human space because the star sector has become chaotic all of a sudden, which gives us enough of an opportunity to wage a decisive war without risking the intervention of anyone else."

Ves furrowed his brows as he tried to parse her answer. It was very difficult for him to approach the circumstances at this level.

"I'm not a statesman, Calabast. Can you explain it in a way that I can actually understand?"

"Let me give you a simple example. Let's say that you are in a classroom with thirty children. If the two smartest and most promising students suddenly start fighting each other, the teacher and everyone else will immediately try to separate the two. That's good for the classroom, but that's not what the pair want to see, especially if they are confident in winning."

"So..."



"Imagine if the teacher that normally keeps the pupils in line is called to the principal's office. Let's say that during the teacher's absence, a foreign class of students from another school suddenly barges into your classroom and picks a fight with your entire class. What will happen?"

"All of the students will fight the foreign class of students except the two who hate each other more than the foreign intruders." Ves expanded upon the analogy. "They're strong enough to beat up the foreign class by themselves, so they don't fear them at all. Instead, they consider each other to be a much greater threat!"

"Yes! And since the teacher and all of the other students are distracted, this is the best time to start a fight and see it through the end!"

"All of that rests on the premise that you can win." Ves remarked. "If the Friday Coalition turns out to be stronger than you Hexers thought, then your state risks complete annihilation!"

"If it happens, it happens." Calabast dismissively waved her hand. "It will just mean we were too weak to deserve to win. The Hegemony has been readying for war for hundreds of years, Ves. We fully know what we are getting into, and the same applies for the Coalition. Neither states are willing to tolerate each other's presence in the same star sector."

"Why, though? Why hate each other so much? Plenty of powerful second-rate states are able to live with their rivals in peace in other star sectors!"

"That's because those star sectors are older and more set in their ways. Their rulers have lost their courage and became too risk averse to pursue their greater ambitions. Neither the Coalition or the Hegemony is old enough to forget how much we fought each other since the opening of the Komodo Star Sector."

"So past events are sufficient grounds for an all-or-nothing wager with trillions of lives at stake?"

A cruel chuckle sounded from her throat. "Essentially, yes. We don't want to wage a timid war and end it with a peace treaty that only resulted in a change of ownership of a couple of star systems. We want it all, and we are confident enough that we can defeat our opponents. Even though the Hexadric Hegemony is ruled by six different matriarchal dynasties, we are much more united than the partners that make up the Coalition. With the opening blow we struck with Operation K, we're confident we can shatter their tenuous unity apart and pick them off one by one!"

"Is that all?"

"There's also another reason why we decided to launch our attack at this time. Operation K takes a lot of setup. A lot of Hexers were involved in putting the pieces into

place. Though we are confident in keeping everyone quiet, there is always the risk that the Coalition might discover our efforts."

All of this sounded simple, but Ves could scarcely imagine the huge amount of death and destruction that might ensue from this conflict!

The Hexers were truly out for blood, and they didn't mind putting their entire state at risk to realize their ambitions!

That was the most courageous and reckless decision that Ves ever heard of! Many thoughts started to flit in his mind as he gained some comprehension.

"Was that what you were doing when we first met at Harkensen I in the Reinald Republic?"

She nodded. "The Hegemony has made many preparations to sow chaos. Destabilizing the Harkensen System was just one of many steps to stir the waters in the Komodo Star Sector. To be frank, the sandman invasion took the Hegemony by surprise. That said, it's a very welcome surprise, because it is doing a much better job at sowing chaos than our secret measures."

"I see. Does that mean you guys will leave us alone?"

"Very likely. Neither the Coalition nor the Hegemony wants to attract attention by getting caught in sabotaging the states that are desperately fighting off the sandmen. While we don't fear the third-rate states, if too many of them condemn our actions, then the MTA might be persuaded to step in and mediate our conflict."

"You make that sound like a bad thing."

"Because it is. In any case, the third-rate states don't warrant our attention anyway. The only reason for us to pay some importance to the Bright Republic is to keep an eye on their exports."

Ves grimaced. "The Bright Republic is very obviously aligned to the Friday Coalition. Most of our high-value exotics and other valuable exports flow through the Coalition. Some of the companies in our state are backed by powerful entities from the Coalition. Many mech designers and other professionals have ties to the educational institutions of the Coalition."

Though the Bright Republic didn't sign a major defensive pact with the Coalition, the two states shared a lot of smaller ties.

It was enough to make Ves concerned about his future in the Bright Republic! After all, not only did he cut ties with his Master from the Vermeer Group, he also started associating with a Hexer!

"This is exactly the reason why I've left the Protectorate and moved to your side. You will need my assistance and my advice to navigate the turbulent waters that you have entered when you returned to the Bright Republic. Your home state is no longer as safe as you think, at least not for you. All of those organizations and entities that have ties to the Coalition won't make any open moves towards you, but they might be persuaded to move against you in the dark."

Sweat started pouring from his brow. Ves became aware that his position in the Bright Republic may not be as solid as he thought.

"Don't worry too fast, Ves. Don't you have ties with Flashlight? I expect that they will soon clarify their stance towards you. They won't sell you out."

"Really?"

For some reason, Ves could scarcely imagine such a situation.

"Look, the Bright Republic aren't allies with the Friday Coalition. Your state hasn't declared war against the Hegemony either. What do you think will happen if the Coalition loses the war?"

"Any ties to the Coalition will suddenly turn worthless." Ves guessed before shaking his head. "No. It's worse. They'll turn toxic! Any lesser state that has been leaning towards the Coalition will enjoy less regard compared to lesser states that have supported the Hegemony from the start!"

"Exactly! While individuals such as you who have become friends with a Hexer are rare, it's in the best interest of the Bright Republic to keep you around, if only as a contingency plan. Once their favored side has lost, your value to your state is immeasurably great! You'll be expected to reduce the bad blood between the victorious Hegemony and your puny little state."

"I.. see."

Ves still thought his position in the Bright Republic was precarious. If not for his extensive business and family ties to his state, he would have packed his bags and moved to the Ylvaine Protectorate or something!

He recalled that unlike the Bright Republic, the Ylvaine Protectorate maintained light but friendly ties to the Hegemony! The Ylvainans wouldn't sell him out! In fact, they would probably welcome him with open arms!

This was still a bit too much to bear for Ves. He loved his home state. It took a lot of mental adjustment for him to regard it as a potential threat.

"So what exactly will you be doing?"

"I'll be around, and so will the Swordmaidens under a different name. It's best if I work in the dark, so I won't associate with you in the open. I'll regularly be visiting Cloudy Curtain, Bentheim and any other location that requires my attention."

"You haven't explained to me yet what you'll be doing."

Calabast sighed. "Let's just say that I will be putting out fires and handle threats directed against you before they become a problem. There are already elements in the Bright Republic that seek to gain the Coalition's favor by assassinating you or ruining your business."

"Won't it be better to leave such problems to Flashlight?"

She looked at him as if he was an idiot. "Flashlight answers to the government and has to balance many different interests. They may appear to act with impunity to you, but they are anything but impulsive. Unlike Flashlight, I'm completely on your side."

"It doesn't really feel that way."

"You should be more grateful, kid. I've done a lot of work to facilitate your rise and remove some of the obstacles in your way. I know you have a hard time understanding my line of work, but just trust me, you wouldn't have been nearly as successful if you don't have someone like me watching your back."

As much as Ves wanted to deny it, he knew she was right. He already noticed hints of her influence, particularly in relation to the Ylvaine Protectorate.

"So what do I do?" He asked.

"Just continue as normal as if the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony isn't locked into a heated conflict. It's not your business, Ves, so don't even attempt to intervene there. Just stay put and keep designing new mechs. Your growth matters the most. Even if the entire Komodo Star Sector is burning down, don't stop improving."

"Is that it? What about Gloriana? Is she in danger here?"

"No." Calabast shook her head. "The Wodins are certainly aware of Operation K and our intentions to wage a decisive war in this period. They have already assessed the risks of sending Gloriana to the Bright Republic. No one will dare to attack her in the open. With the deterrence of the Glory Battalion, nothing will happen to her. In fact, their presence here will make you even safer, because no one wants to tangle with them directly!"

Ves didn't completely buy that explanation. It was one thing to allow a very valuable Journeyman to leave the Hegemony during peacetime. Now that a war broke out, Gloriana suddenly turned into a tempting and vulnerable target!

"Damn Hexers." He grumbled beneath his breath. "How many schemes are you hiding?"

*Chapter 1547 Rooting For The Wrong Side*

After Calabast finished briefing Ves on what he needed to know, she stalked off to parts unknown. The secret entrance to his home office closed as if it never existed in the first place.

The fact that Ves wasn't even aware of it signified that he still had a lot to learn about his new mansion.

He moved to his desk and began to organize his thoughts. Lucky climbed up the surface of his desk and began to stretch in place.

"Calabast is right." He spoke while reaching out to stroke Lucky's back. "The war between the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony is none of my business. Master Olson and the Wodin Dynasty can take care of themselves."

Thinking about his shallow but memorable relations with certain individuals from the Friday Coalition put a very sour taste in his mouth.

He never really wanted to cut ties with the Friday Coalition. However, ever since he started a relationship with Gloriana, there was no way he could realistically maintain them any longer.

"Master Olson actually did me a favor by kicking me out of the Coalition." He realized. "Maybe she knew that trouble was on the horizon."

Even if the Hegemony caught the Coalition by surprise, the latter wouldn't have been blind to the possibility. They simply misjudged the timing and the strange technologies employed by their opponents.

Ves did not worry too much about the fate of Master Olson. Even if the Friday Coalition lost, a Master would never be under threat. While Ves did not know how the Hegemony would treat its captives and the citizens of conquered territory, it was unlikely the Hexers would kill them all off without remorse.

"The MTA will never allow such slaughter. The point of forcing human states to wage war with less destructive weapons like mechs is to prevent too much loss of life."

The Hegemony clearly wanted to conquer the territories occupied by the Friday Coalition and rule the Komodo Star Sector as a true hegemon.

If all they took over was ash and ruins, then it might take several centuries for the Hegemony to repair the damage!

At the very least, the common citizens of the Coalition wouldn't face any serious consequences. They just exchanged one ruler for another, that was all. The changes to their society would happen gradually in order to make sure the conquered citizens assimilated into Hexer society without too much resistance.

As for military officers, senior officials and the like, they would probably face worse treatment.

Ves guessed that Master Olson also happened to fall under this category. For someone like her who likely possessed very strong ties to the Coalition, it was better for her to evacuate the star sector and start anew far away from the reach of her old enemies.

A Master Mech Designer did not fear a fresh start! With their immense reputation and design ability, as long as there weren't any inherent contradictions, there was no state that would refuse their business!

"Well, who knows if Master Olson will be compelled to flee. It might be the Hexers who have to flee instead."

It was true that the Hexadric Hegemony started off the war with an immediate advantage. However, he was very well aware that both states possessed an extremely deep accumulation. There was no way that the loss of sixteen mech divisions significantly altered the Coalition's chances of winning.

Their foundation still stood strong!

The Fridaymen would definitely take revenge after suffering so much damage from Operation K. They surely prepared their own devious attacks against the Hexers! If they wanted to shore up their brittle morale, then they needed to make a huge move to reassure their shaken citizens!

Even so, Ves believed that the Hexers would not have initiated the war if they did not possess an advantage. Their odds of winning was probably a little bit higher, enough to make the gamble feasible, if still incredibly risky.

What would happen if either side won?

"Well, it won't be good for me if the Friday Coalition comes out as the final victor."

Ves would have to depart the star sector ahead of time. There was no way the Fridaymen would forgive him for turning his back on the Coalition and hooking up with a Hexer mech designer.

In addition, he didn't want Gloriana to come to harm. He would rather exile himself from his home state than to risk her safety and freedom.

Still, the hard part about this situation was that Ves privately rooted for the Friday Coalition. Though its partners each propagated different beliefs, they were all relatively normal.

"Compared to the abomination that is the Hegemony, the Coalition is pretty enlightened as a whole."

The Friday Coalition was a completely secular state that did not allow any religion to gain significant influence!

A star sector dominated by the Friday Coalition didn't sound so bad to Ves. Other than the fact that he and his girlfriend would become hunted by them, he would have liked to live under its regime!

"Well, who knows if the Coalition will stay in place by then. The only reason the partners got together in the first place was because none of them are strong enough to defeat the Hegemony on their own."

The Coalition would probably break apart if its partners no longer faced the pressure of a common, external enemy. Just trying to decide the allocation of the conquered territory was enough to make them have a falling out!

"It's actually much better for me if the Hegemony wins the war instead." He grumbled.

He did not like the Hegemony at all. Its strong culture that strongly propagated female supremacy sounded awful to a man like Ves.

He'd be fine if he was born a woman, but since he was a man, he highly objected to the Hegemony's stance on gender!

What was more, the Hexers also adopted a religion that reinforced their insane beliefs about men and women even more!

If there was one thing that Ves wanted to remove from his girlfriend, it was her fanatical adherence to hexism!

When he thought about the Hegemony winning the war and taking over the star sector, Ves started to get goosebumps.

Even though he would probably stand to gain a lot of profit for associating with the 'winning' side, he really couldn't imagine living under a Hexer regime!

As a man, Ves drew the line at any cultures or beliefs that denigrated his own gender!

"What do I do if the Hegemony actually wins?"



Right now, the odds were slightly in their favor, so Ves seriously considered the consequences.

He didn't have to think too much to come up with a solution.

"Haha! I'll just embark on my grand expedition and never go back! Take that, Hexers!" He laughed.

If he stayed, he would definitely transform into one of those pathetically servile males who worshipped the ground that women walked upon. No matter where he went, as long as he was in the same star sector, there was no escaping the spread of Hexer culture!

Rather than staying and allowing himself to get contaminated by their beliefs, Ves would much prefer to make his expedition fleet his new home and travel the galaxy!

Perhaps he might bump into an attractive foreign state and decide to settle down. Perhaps he would continue to live aboard a ship and permanently adopt the life of a spaceborn citizen. Both of these possibilities were much more preferable to living in a Hegemony-ruled star sector!

He would do anything to escape Hexer indoctrination!

"People say that running from problems is bad." He told Lucky. "Well, they've never had to face the prospect of living among Hexers!"

"Meow."

"Pff! You're just a cat! You'd just get pampered by their rich ladies if you fall into their hands."

"Meow meow."

"That doesn't mean you should abandon me! I'm a much better cat owner than those cat ladies!"

Interacting with Lucky brought some much-needed levity to his heart. He felt much better now that he thought the situation through. Regardless how the war between the second-rate states progressed, there was no way he could influence its outcome.

"My time is better spent on thinking how to lead the LMC through the sandman crisis."

Now that the Desolate Soldier model took the mech market by storm a month after its release, the LMC had become an indispensable part of the local mech industry. There was no way the Bright Republic would treat the LMC unfairly due to his Hexer associations!

"At most, my company will just suffer some suppression, perhaps." He guessed.

However, that wouldn't actually accomplish anything aside from pushing Ves away from the Bright Republic. That might be what certain Brighters with ties to the Coalition wanted to see, but the government couldn't afford to play along.

If the Bright Republic ever acted against Ves, then they would probably suffer from retribution if the Hexers ever won the war!

"The last thing the government wants to do is to take sides! It's best if they stay as neutral as possible to avoid offending either side!"

Most of the ties between the Bright Republic and the Friday Coalition consisted of smaller relationships. The state wouldn't bleed that much if they were forced to penalize the people who engaged in these relationships.

"I should follow Calabast's advice and talk to Flashlight." Ves scratched his chin.

He sent a brief message to Gavin. Some time later, Leland Toll traveled from the headquarters of the LMC to the Cloud Estate.

When the spy finally entered the office, Ves greeted him with a partially-sincere smile. "Leland! Long time no see! How is my resident Flashlight agent doing?"

Leland emphatically raised an eyebrow before approaching the desk and sitting down across Ves.

"I take it the Komodo War has shaken you up, Ves. To be honest, we already started to smell the blood in the water. It was only a matter of time before one of the second-rate states ran out of patience."

That surprised Ves. "You suspected? And you didn't tell me?"

"We only had suspicions." Leland innocently spread his hands. "If we ever decided to voice them, how do you think the Coalition or the Hegemony would respond?"

"They wouldn't like it if you spread accurate rumors."

"Exactly. This is why we kept our suspicions to ourselves. Only the highest officials were privy to our speculations. That is also how the recent peace treaty came about."

Ves suddenly recalled the circumstances surrounding the abrupt end to the latest generational war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom.

"So that is why Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester acted so chummy with each other! You guys knew that the Fridaymen and Hexers would clash in the near future!"

Leland sighed. "I told you, Ves. Flashlight and our Vesian counterparts only held suspicions. There is only so much we can learn from observing the second-rate states."

He was right. Ves shouldn't blame Flashlight for withholding such information.

"If the second-rate states started fighting, does it actually matter if our state stopped fighting the Vesians?"

"It matters a lot, Ves. While second-rate states normally don't interfere in the running of lesser states, war can push anyone to desperation. The Bright Republic needs to conserve as much of its strength as possible to handle any eventualities."

"Well, that certainly came in handy now that the sandmen decided to run us over."

"We didn't anticipate the sandmen invasion of human space. They haven't done anything for hundreds of years." Leland honestly admitted. "The state didn't push to end the war to conserve our forces against the aliens, but you're right in that it turned out to be a very prescient decision."

They chatted a little bit about the early end of the war before moving on to the topic that Ves wanted to discuss.

"What is the Bright Republic's stance towards me?" Ves plainly asked. "As you know, my girlfriend is a Hexer, and not an average one."

Leland adopted a serious expression. "We are aware. Let me reassure you that the government doesn't regard you as a pariah. In fact, we welcome this development!"

"Really?"

"Senator Tovar has personally outlined the government's stance on you and your relationship with Gloriana Wodin. Officially, we don't have an opinion."

"What does that mean?"

"We won't harm you, but we won't help you either. To us, you're just a Brighter who happens to have a foreign girlfriend."

Ves scratched his head. "Okay? What's your unofficial stance, then?"

"That will take some explaining..."

*Chapter 1548 Different Standing*

In the end, Leland did not tell Ves much beyond what Calabast already outlined.

The Bright Republic's unofficial stance completely matched her predictions.

"You're our insurance policy." Leland set forth. "In the event the Hexers win a decisive victory against the Fridaymen, our ties with the latter will turn into liabilities that will weigh us down. Hexers aren't known to be charitable to those who oppose them, so our state will certainly be subjected to significant penalties and sanctions in a possible post-Hexer star sector."

Ves pursed his lips. "I'm just one person, though. I can't overturn centuries of friendships and trade relations by myself."

"We hope you can convince Miss Gloriana to plea for leniency on our behalf."

"I think you are overestimating my girlfriend's influence. Even if she's a part of the Wodin Dynasty, she's purely a mech designer and an engineer. She is completely uninvolved when it comes to politics."

"Mech designers can be influential as well." Leland smiled at Ves in an unsettling manner. "We have very high hopes for you and Gloriana."

"You think very highly of me." Ves narrowed his eyes.

"Your rise has been meteoric. How can we not take closer notice of you? Flashlight has always looked upon you as a promising young mech designer, but our regard for you has always been due to your potential. We did not expect for you to realize some of your potential in such a dramatic manner recently."

"My Desolate Soldiers seem to have made a very powerful impression on you all."

"Yes." Leland smiled. "We had suspicions about your specialty, but it is only when you released your Desolate Soldier model that we have learned it is more horrible than we thought! The latest mech you've designed is unlike anything we have seen before!"

While Ves intended to make his Desolate Soldiers appealing to authority, it still surprised him to hear Leland praise him to heavens!

If there was one thing Ves learned about spies like Leland, it was that they never showed excessive emotions unless it furthered their agenda!

"It sounds like the government appreciates my work."

"Very much so." Leland readily admitted. "Rest assured that we will protect you and shield you from any backlash directed against you. Whether it's your ties to the Hegemony or the controversy surrounding your mech designs, we'll make sure you can operate your business openly and fairly. We have already stopped several initiatives intended to force suppliers and distributors to stop working with the LMC."

"I see. Thank you for that."

"We are Brighters. The quarrels between the second-rate states should not spill over to our territory. It's unfortunate that some of our fellow Brighters haven't gotten the message."

The two talked some more. Leland constantly heaped up praise while offering various reassurances that Ves only grew more and more suspicious.

Leland's friendly attitude towards him reflected the Bright Republic's current stance towards him. They were so afraid that Ves might feel unwelcome in a hostile state and decide to emigrate to another state.

That would be a disastrous occurrence to the Bright Republic! The state wouldn't gain anything except to further affirm its loyalty to the Friday Coalition.

Such a gain was extremely marginal compared to the potential benefits if they kept Ves within its sphere.

His value was two-fold. While Ves already expected the state to value his ties to the Hexers, he underestimated their enthusiasm for his products.

Even though the Desolate Soldier was just a cheap spaceborn rifleman mech design, its unique aura was practically unheard of in the galaxy.

This was the power of a Class IX design philosophy! Even if most weird and unorthodox design philosophies produced worthless effects, Ves was different!

With the early adoption of the Desolate Soldier by the Bentheim Planetary Guard, millions of people became aware of its now-famous ability to inspire duty in mech pilots and bystanders!

Ves previously thought that the government would only slightly raise his appreciation of him, but now he began to sense that he underestimated his impact.

If Ves continued to mature and advance to Senior, his mechs would become even more valuable to the state! Even if he never managed to advance to Master, he definitely held the potential to become the top mech designer of the Bright Republic!

However, what was worrisome was that this valuable mech designer might not stick around! Ever since Ves started dating Gloriana, he risked getting further into the orbit of the Hexadric Hegemony, which was to the detriment of the Bright Republic!

Ves was no longer a trivial Apprentice, nor a promising Journeyman!

Even though he was still a Journeyman, his value to the state became more and more obvious!

He was a treasure!

With mechs like the Desolate Soldier, the LMC could sweep through the mech markets of every third-rate state in the star sector!

In fact, the appeal of his specialty was so great that many other star sectors would clamor for his mechs if they became aware of his products!

Such a quality in a mech designer was rare. While every Senior from the Bright Republic possessed their own strengths, none of them carried as much universal appeal.

This was the power of holding a spiritual component monopoly!

Even if the Bright Republic couldn't exactly figure out how Ves was able to make his mechs exert a noticeable impact on people, they recognized its rarity.

Something good that was also rare was valuable! Incredibly valuable! So much so that the government began to take a great amount of interest in Ves' attachment to his home state.

After all, Flashlight owned a 21 percent stake in the LMC! As long as Ves continued to leverage his unique specialty, his mech company would some day turn into a behemoth with sales that surpassed the scope of mech companies led by Seniors!

Even though he knew his own worth, Ves was surprised the state was astute enough to recognize some of it as well. Even though the Desolate Soldier was merely a taste of what was to come, the government already made overtures to him as if they were afraid that Ves would slip from their grasp if they remained aloof!

"I see. Thank you for clarifying that for me." Ves nodded to Leland. He felt much more in control now that he knew he held more leverage in his relationship to the state. "In the event the Hexers gain the upper hand, I'll be sure to vouch on our state's behalf."

"That is great to hear." Leland smiled before changing the topic. "Let's discuss something more acute. The war between the second-rate states won't be resolved for years. The sandman invasion is a much greater threat to us right now. If we botch our defense, we risk getting overrun by the end of the year. I think neither of us wants to see that happen."

Ves nodded seriously. "My company and I are ready to do our part, within reason. If you expect me to don a uniform again..."

There was no way Ves would accept getting drafted in the Mech Corps again. Though he cherished his experiences with the Vandals, that didn't mean that Ves wanted to return to subject themselves to the whims of someone else.

One time was enough!

As if sensing a problem, Leland quickly raised his hand. "We don't expect you to! You have already done your time. A mech designer like you can do so much more when you are running your own company as opposed to rejoining the Mech Corps. We already have a sufficient amount of mech designers to fulfill our design needs."

"That's good to hear." Ves relaxed.

The sandman invasion invalidated a lot of mechs, especially melee ones. Too many mech designers lost their livelihoods due to this. Joining the Mech Corps was the quickest and most convenient way to do something useful, especially since the military promised rich rewards to any volunteers!

Contributing to the state was not only the right thing to do, but would enormously further the careers of anyone who answered the call of duty!

The last thing the Bright Republic could afford to do was to sit on top of its reserves!

The examples of the border states had taught the other states in the firing line the dangers of spending too little resources!

As for the debts and obligations the Bright Republic owed to everyone after the crisis had passed, that was a problem for later! At the very least, the state would still remain standing and be in a position to profit from the aftermath of the invasion!

"We do appreciate it if you and your company fulfill some of our requests."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Are you speaking on behalf of Flashlight or another branch of the government?"

"Technically, the requests come from the Ministry of Defense." Leland waved his hand. "You'll receive an official missive from MinDef very soon, I'm sure, but I might as well fill you in so you can get to work as soon as possible. Time is very precious right now, as you know."

"Let's hear it then."

"We'd like you to develop several more variants of your Desolate Soldier design. We've already seen your Holy Soldier perform exceedingly well in the Ylvaine Protectorate."

"Ah."



Ves instantly understood. As much as his Desolate Soldier was selling exceedingly well right now, its applicability was limited.

"MinDef doesn't necessarily have to approach me. My Desolate Soldier design is readily available for licensing. Just pay 10 billion bright credits to the MTA, and the license is yours!"

He would not turn down an easy opportunity to earn some extra money!

However, Leland quickly shook his head and sighed. "Don't you think we've already done that? Not only us, but several other mech designers have licensed your design in the hopes of designing variants that can fulfill different roles!"

"I take it their results don't match their expectations." Ves guessed.

Leland sighed. "Much of the charm of your mechs are lost when others begin to alter your mech design. The greater the changes, the more its advantage fades for some reason. We know that this shouldn't happen since your Holy Soldiers function just as well as the originals. Tell me, Ves. Is this deliberate?"

"There's nothing I can do." Ves innocently smiled. "The qualities I impart to my mech designs are intrinsic to my design philosophy."

"Our partner mech designers have guessed that much. They're very cross about obtaining a mech license that turned out to be of little actual value."

Ves continued to smile but said nothing. This pertained to his spiritual component monopoly. There was no way he was willing to share the good stuff. Even if he stood to gain a lot of money by licensing his mech designs to many different competitors, it wasn't as lucrative as selling mechs under his own brand!

Not only that, but variants developed by other mech designers didn't earn him any DP!

The Bright Republic couldn't coerce Ves to give up his secrets, as the MTA would surely step in. Even if Ves coughed up some of his secrets, his weird Class IX design philosophy probably required a very unique mindset to reproduce.

Since no one else except Ves could design the variants that MinDef needed, the Ministry could only issue requests rather than demands!

Ves recognized that his relationship with the Bright Republic had changed upon his return.

The state no longer held all the cards. His rapid rise, his unique design philosophy, his excellent standing in the Ylvaine Protectorate and his intimate relationship with Gloriana

all served to increase his value to the point where the Republic could no longer dictate orders with impunity!

The more he realized his leverage and power over the state, the more he became satisfied with himself. He understood a fundamental truth today.

The Bright Republic needed him more than he needed the Bright Republic!

All of his advantages elevated him beyond the control of his state!

*Chapter 1549 Show Who's Boss*

Leland left him with a list of four variants that the Ministry of Defense wanted Ves to design. The sooner he completed them, the sooner they could be put to service.

"Hmm. This changes some of my plans."

Ves originally intended to design another mech that was suited to fight against the sandmen, but the variants requested by MinDef didn't sound so bad.

He knew it was better for him to fulfill the requests. Not only did they fall in line with his own goals, but he also wanted to prove that the Bright Republic was right to treat him with deference.

Once Leland departed from his office, Ves mulled over the variants. He would need to think over how he wanted to approach their designs.

"For now, I have a lot of business to catch up."

In the next few days, he did his best to familiarize himself with the changes that took place at home.

The LMC attracted his attention first. He invited Gloriana along as he commuted from the Cloud Estate to the Mech Nursery. As soon as they arrived at the combined headquarters and manufacturing complex, Gloriana took in the surroundings with a critical eye.

"Adequate." She judged. "It's a little bare here, but your display models make up for the lack of grace."

The elegant architecture and the precisely-manicured gardens failed to arouse her interest. She only appreciated the Blackbeaks, Crystal Lords and Aurora Titans that basked the Mech Nursery with their distinctive auras.

Two new additions added extra influences to the people working at the LMC.

First, a fair number of Desolate Soldiers had been placed around the campus. Distributed in a way to ensure maximum and even coverage, the Desolate Soldiers constantly inspired duty in practically every everyone who worked at the Mech Nursery!

In fact, Ves began to fear if employing the Desolate Soldiers in this fashion was excessive. The permanent presence of these mechs effectively indoctrinated his employees to do their duty to the LMC!

"This is playing with fire!" Ves cursed.

The second significant addition was the trophy he obtained from Felixia. Zeigra's enormous stuffed corpse had been placed in the foyer of the headquarters. Anyone who entered the main office would inevitably be greeted with the remains of a ferocious Crown Cat!

Though the sight impressed every employee and visitor who entered the headquarters for the first couple of times, it quickly grew old after a time.

Part of it was due to the lack of aura contained within.

"It's an empty shell." Gloriana observed with a frown. "Your mechs are much more impressive because of their divinity. This.. is a letdown."

"Perhaps I can do something about that later. Right now, I have other work to do."

If he wanted to, he could transfer Zeigra's spiritual fragment from his overcoat to the trophy. Perhaps separating a mote would be enough.

He didn't do so right now because he had more important things to do than to augment a vanity piece.

Ves and Gloriana both went past the foyer while carrying their cats.

Since Ves was about to meet with a lot of people, he decided to wear his full Pride of Dusk ensemble. The LMC had gone for a year without his presence, and it was time for his subordinates to realize who was truly in charge.

As for Gloriana, she wore a formal suit that complemented his own outfit. Just like Ves, she wanted to make a powerful impression on his company.

Of course, both of them also wore their decorative cat ears, which spoiled some of the professionalism they exuded. Ves did not mind, and neither did his girlfriend.

In the eyes of others, their shared eccentricities bound them closer together. Gloriana played along because she wanted to keep him in her clutches, while Ves wanted to make himself appear a little more irrational.

If Ves presented himself as a sane and boring mech designer, people would inevitably start to have designs on his trade secrets!

Until he managed to gain more solid backing from the Rim Guardians, presenting himself as slightly unhinged was the most effective way he could protect himself from the jealousy of others!

As soon as the pair reached the penthouse office, Calsie and Gavin greeted their arrival.

"Good job taking care of my company." Ves nodded to Calsie as he moved to sit behind his desk.

"Thank you, sir. I don't claim to have done a good job, but I've done my best to keep everything together. Will you be taking over as CEO now that you have returned?"

"No." Ves shook his head.

"No?"

"I've realized that I'm far too busy to run a company of this size. The LMC has expanded so much over the years that it deserves a dedicated leader."

"I'm not a qualified executive, Ves."

"You're improving, though, right?" He smiled.

"I've been studying. Some of the Larkinsons and their retainers have also been helpful in getting me up to speed. To be honest, I think our current COO is far more suitable to lead the company in our stead. He's good with numbers, good with people and he projects stability."

Ves remembered Jake. He would meet him and the rest of the top management team later.

"Even if you think you aren't entirely suitable, you've been with the company from the start, Calsie." He reassured her. "I trust you, which is something that is indispensable to me. I'd like you to hold your current position. Can you handle the responsibility?"

"I'll do my best, sir."

Though Calsie did not express much confidence, Ves did not expect that much from her in the first place. She merely acted as his agent to represent his interests within the LMC. The senior management could continue to handle the actual running of the company.

As Ves spoke with Calsie, Gloriana curiously inspected the office and the items placed on the display shelves. She curiously picked up the mug which had been stamped with a cartoonish image of Ves in his Devil Tongue guise.

She scrunched her nose. "What poor taste."

Even though the mug's awful depiction of his boyfriend offended her, she carefully placed it back. She didn't want to cross any lines set by Ves by tampering with the possessions he cared about.

She directed her attention to something more egregious than an amusing mug.

"Is that.. A nutrient pack?!"

The moment she studied the seemingly-aged nutrient pack, she physically grew ill.

"Disgusting!"

The day progressed quickly as Ves met with a multitude of people. He personally met with every member of the senior management. Some of them had changed and had never met him in person.

Once they saw Ves in person and experienced the pressure emanating from his Pride of Dusk, they soon left with an unforgettable impression of the most important person in the company.

After that, Ves attended a virtual board meeting along with Gloriana. Just as with the top management, some of the directors had been replaced by others.

To be honest, Ves barely paid attention to their suggestions and their proposals. The directors also acted unusually subdued due to the presence of his girlfriend.

Even if she wasn't doing anything except looking attentive, her powerful identity could not be ignored.

Ves found it funny that Gloriana's presence acted as a much greater source of pressure than the aura of his overcoat!

Those who belonged to the upper echelons of society reacted far more strongly to his girlfriend than someone with a simpler background like Calsie!

The only ones who held their ground were his grandfather Benjamin and Marcella Bollinger. Both of them used to serve in the Mech Corps so their spines were made of sterner stuff.

Once the board meeting ended and the projections of the directors switched off, Gloriana snorted with disdain.

"Some of your directors don't seem very honest."

"It's fine." Ves dismissively waved his hand. "Everyone knows that I'm in control. The LMC is nothing without my mech designs."

They retired for a quick lunch before taking a lift underground to visit the manufacturing floor of the Mech Nursery.

They toured the entire floor and talked with several chief technicians such as Cyrill Hockett.

Though the scale of production didn't impress Gloriana very much, she admired the work ethic of the mech technicians.

"Everyone is of a similar mind here." She noted with a bit of admiration. "Not only that, the mech technicians are all focused on their work."

"I insisted on that." Ves grinned.

His efforts to push for a strong corporate culture that could unite all of his subordinates together under a common identity had borne fruit.

Not only that, the mech technicians all embraced the approach that Ves had pushed for in order to strengthen the X-Factor of the mechs rolling off the production lines.

The main reason why his silver label mechs sold at a higher price was because of their better-preserved X-Factor!

"I can see why you have opted for an inefficient manufacturing process in your own company." She remarked.

The same team of mech technicians built up a single copy from start to finish. This was different from other production facilities which mainly divided a specific task to a dedicated team.

For example, one team was responsible for fabricating mech engines. Another team was responsible for inspecting them. A third team was responsible for them onto a mech frame.

Though Ves saw the merits in dividing different tasks to specialized mech technicians, the problem was that it wasn't the best for his mechs.

A single team of mech technicians ordinarily consisted of eight to twenty people. Having that many people work on a single mech led to a moderate amount of disruption in the X-Factor of the end product.

However, if the Mech Nursery switched over to batch production, then the amount of mech technicians involved in the production of any single mech was in the hundreds!

That was why a silver label mech always earned more appreciation than a bronze label mech.

It was virtually impossible for third party manufacturers to emulate the LMC's methods. Even if they did, the LMC would never allow them to use any other label than bronze!

Ves always cared a lot about quality. Even if the LMC had to produce as many Desolate Soldiers as possible to meet market demand, he insisted on remaining true to his principles.

At worst, the reputation of his bronze label mechs might decline due to the inconsistent quality of the output of third-party manufacturers.

Ves already started hearing stories of struggling manufacturers attempting to cut corners in order to save on cost.

For a mech that was already as skinny and cost-conscious as his Desolate Soldier, further cost-cutting would drastically hurt its performance!

One of the reasons he personally attended the board meeting earlier was to ram through a proposal that punished this kind of conduct.

Any third-party manufacturer that tried to play games could kiss their license goodbye!

Of course, the LMC could only revoke their licenses if they signed a special contract that waived the massive up-front licensing fee.

Certain mech designers and mech companies obtained a standard license of the Desolate Soldier. Even though they had to pay 10 billion bright credits to the LMC, they gained a lot more rights.

"Fortunately, those who can afford to pay 10 billion credits aren't bottom feeders." He murmured.

Though this sum no longer confounded Ves, many other mech companies struggled to borrow or accumulate so much cash!



This was also why the LMC gained the leverage to impose restrictive terms on its contracts to third-party manufacturers. A lot of struggling mech companies saw how profitable it was to produce the Desolate Soldiers.

Yet because they were struggling, they could never come up with the money on their own!

Of course, mech companies could also try to obtain the cheaper Holy Soldier license. At just 6 billion bright credits, a mech company didn't have to bleed so much to obtain the rights to produce or develop a variant of this mech.

What surprised Ves the most was that many mech designers actually licensed the Holy Soldier!

Even though most of them consisted of Ylvainan mech designers, some of them turned out to be Brighters, Vesians or Reinaldans!

Ves laughed. If they thought they could wipe away the holy aspect while retaining its ability to inspire duty, they had another thing coming!

"Well, it's free money, at least! I don't accept refunds!"

The rule in the mech industry was that if you paid to license a mech design, you wouldn't be able to return it! The best you could do was to sell the existing license to another sucker!

#### *Chapter 1550 Male God*

After they finished touring the manufacturing floor, they headed down to the lab and workshop floor of the Mech Nursery.

Gloriana quickly scowled when she inspected the lab equipment. "Trash! I can't believe you are working with these cheap machines!"

"They are all standard equipment in the Bright Republic!" Ves innocently raised his hands.

"They're unacceptable! Luckily for you, I've already anticipated this problem. When I shuttered my Flawless Mech Workshop, I packed up all of my equipment and loaded them onto Stellar Chaser. I'll order some men to install them here. As for your old machines, you can directly scrap them as far as I'm concerned. I don't want any of them to taint my workplace any longer!"

Ves loudly coughed. "My workplace, you mean."

"Our workplace." She emphasized with a grin. "I'm a lead designer of the LMC as well now."

While she was right, that didn't give her the power to rearrange his private sanctum within the Mech Nursery.

He quickly halted his protests, though. He knew that Gloriana probably owned some very powerful lab and workshop equipment. His old equipment simply couldn't compare.

Since Gloriana generously lent her high-quality equipment to the LMC, Ves gained massively from this development.

He'd be a fool to resist his girlfriend, especially when he knew that she would never give up this fight!

They quickly left the floor and headed down to the vault. They only spent a brief time there as Ves hadn't stored many valuables. He only showed off a couple notable items to inform Gloriana of their importance.

"These are my P-stones." He showed off the four P-stones. He left the fifth one at his Cloud Estate so that he could periodically deposit his excess spiritual energy. "They're one of the most important exotics I own."

"What do they do, Ves?"

"They're.. containers. They possess the capability to store some very good stuff."

That wasn't enough for her. She frowned at him. "You're being vague again. Stop that."

"Sorry, Gloriana. I'm used to keeping secrets. Let's just say that the P-stones are capable of storing.. the stuff I put in my mech designs."

Ves provided her with a very shallow introduction of his P-stones, F-stone and B-stone lockbox.

As usual, Gloriana instantly interpreted his explanation in relation to divinity. He was used to that. He only wanted to inform her of their value and their utility.

"The exotics you've collected is quite remarkable." She stated as she picked up a P-stone that was partially filled with excess spiritual energy. "This rock kind of feels like you, in a way."

As soon as she picked up the P-stone, Ves' spiritual fragment reacted a bit. This lent some credence to his claim that she sensed his spiritual energy.

Nonetheless, he insisted she put it back. The P-stones were far too precious to leave in Gloriana's possession. What would she even do with one that stored some of his spiritual energy?

Though his girlfriend looked unwilling, Ves offered her an option to get what she wanted.

"I'm very short on these three exotics." He walked to her side and hugged her side. "If you really want a P-stone that reminds you of me, then help me obtain more. As soon as you bring your new lab equipment, I'll allow you to perform some detailed examinations on my stuff. If you can discreetly reach out to your supply network and obtain something identical, it would help me a lot. With more P-stones in my possession, I'll be much more willing to leave one in your hands that carries some of my energy!"

Her eyes instantly brightened up. "Really?"

"Really."

"I'll do it!" She hugged him back and pecked him on the cheek. "While it's difficult for me to get in touch with my old suppliers now that war has broken out, I am not entirely cut off. I'll see what I can do."

Ves placed his hand on her shoulder. "Make sure to be discreet. Don't disclose what these exotics can do. In addition, don't make it obvious that we need them. If others learn that we specifically need these exotics, they'll collect them first and rip us off by charging ten times their usual price!"

In fact, that was just an excuse. The real reason why he wanted to keep this search quiet was to avoid tripping off those who were also searching for these materials.

Any person or organization who sought for them specifically were entities that Ves did not want to meet!

Seeing how much importance he attached to this condition, Gloriana nodded. "I understand."

"Don't delegate the search to Melody or anyone else on your staff."

"I get it, Ves."

After he showed off his exotics, he hesitated a bit about showing off something else stored in his vault.

Eventually, he decided he might as well introduce it to Gloriana so she became aware of its danger.

"The last item in my vault is a bit more special than the others. It's also a lot more dangerous. Maintain your distance and don't inspect the object too closely. That means no concentrating!"

Though Gloriana looked confused, her face quickly became turbulent the moment Ves retracted the Ancient Sarcophagus.

"Is that an alien relic?!" She gasped. "Wait, what's inside? And what is this pressure I'm feeling?"

"This is the Ancient Sarcophagus. It contains the dead body of some alien. Some treasure hunters retrieved it from the depths of the Nyxian Gap. The reason you are feeling this way is because a portion of the alien still remains alive. Do you want to know where I get my spiritual components from? Well, the Ancient Sarcophagus here is one of my most important sources!"

Gloriana quickly realized what he meant. "Ves! Don't tell me that there is a god locked inside this coffin!"

Though Ves did not feel that the entity inside deserved to be called a god, he didn't bother to correct her terminology.

"Nyxie."

"What?"

"I call it Nyxie, on account of its origins."

She frowned. "Is the alien male or female?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a male, but I'm not sure. Nyxie possesses the temperament of a male at the very least."

"I see." She replied flatly. Her interest in the Ancient Sarcophagus and what it held inside instantly faded! "That explains the cruelty, aggressiveness and dominance I am inexplicably sensing. Nyxie is a very angry god, it seems. A very male god."

Ves shrugged. "I don't blame him. I did cut off one-fiftieth of its essence and heavily processed it in order to create the spiritual component for my Desolate Soldier design."

"Well, please get this filth out of my sight. Your imprisoned male god is ruining my mood."

As long as Gloriana knew not to mess with the Ancient Sarcophagus, Ves didn't care what she thought about Nyxie. He did wonder what would happen if Nyxie turned out to be female.

Would Gloriana demand he free the trapped spiritual entity or something?

He shook his head. Not for aliens. God or not, the Hexers at least didn't worship aliens.

They left the vault shortly afterwards. They returned aboveground and calmly walked across the grounds. They quickly reached a small fortified base that housed the Avatars of Myth.

Different from last time, it was a lot more emptier since his last visit a year ago. Most of the Avatars of Myth had transferred to the Living Sentinels, thereby leaving his original mech force with the best and most loyal mech pilots.

"Melkor! Good to see you again!"

"Sir." Melkor nodded stiffly to Ves before directing his visor to his girlfriend. "I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Gloriana. I'm Melkor Larkinson, Commander of the Avatars of Myth and Ves' cousin."

"Ah, I'm already familiar with you." She smiled and eyed his physique like a tailor eyed a client. "We planned to design a custom mech for you, infact."

That was new to Melkor. "Did you?"

Ves sighed. "I wanted to design a laser rifleman mech to reward you for your services, but..."

"The sandmen eat lasers like breakfast. I understand, sir. Other projects take priority."

"I'm glad you don't have any hard feelings."

"How can I be upset at something I've never enjoyed? I can wait. Besides, I'm not sure I should be the first Avatar to receive a custom mech designed by the two of you. While I don't have a lot of Avatars left, the ones that remained are very skilled and dedicated. I've even recruited some amazing talents recently that will certainly grow to become our elites!"

The group walked to the administrative building while they talked.

"How many Avatars do you have right now?" He asked.

"Enough to field eighteen landbound mechs and sixteen spaceborn mechs. I'm trying to get those numbers back up to a full mech company each."

"How is recruiting?"

"It won't be as slow as before. Different from last time, our foundation is solid now. Our structure is mature and the mech pilots I have right now form a very solid cadre that can keep the Avatars cohesive even if I double our numbers in a matter of months. I hope to fill out our mech roster within a month."

"A month?!" Ves reacted with surprise. "That's pretty fast! Are you sure you are maintaining our standards?"

Melkor chuckled. "It's not as hard as it sounds. The Avatars of Myth is not as obscure as before. What's more, I expect some of our new recruits to consist of Larkinsons. Young Larkinsons."

Once they reached Melkor's office, Ves met with Crindon again.

"Sir."

"Hello Captain Crindon. How are you doing in the Avatars of Myth?"

"Commander Melkor has been showing me the ropes." His Kinner bondsman responded. "Overall, it's clear that I have a lot of work in store."

Upon his return to Cloudy Curtain, Ves decided to transfer Crindon to the Avatars of Myth.

While he could have opted to keep Crindon on his direct staff, Ves needed someone trustworthy to take charge of the Virtual Security Department of the Avatars.

Only someone as impeccably loyal to Ves as Crindon was suitable for this position!

The newly-instated captain of the Virtual Security Department explained what needed to be done.

"Many experts that formerly worked at this department have transferred to the Living Sentinels, thereby leaving us deprived of skilled hackers and security experts. I've only recently started recruiting, but it will take some time to bring this department up to par. As per your instructions, I'm being exceedingly careful about the loyalty and trustworthiness of new recruits."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "I hope you can do a good job. There is no hurry. I would rather you take it slow than to make too much haste and risk introducing a traitor in our ranks."

Once he finished discussing matters with Crindon, the Kinner left the office.

"How is our guard infantry department? Is that old dog Coyin Larkinson still around?"

"Captain Coyin Larkinson still leads our sole guard infantry company." Melkor replied with a thin smile. "Our uncle is a little hard to work with, but he's taking a liking in leading his own unit with much more autonomy than he ever enjoyed in the military. Do you want to talk to him, perhaps?"

Ves quickly waved his hands. "No, thanks! I don't need to talk to all of your men. I think you're doing a good job so far. Even with the reduction in numbers, the Avatars still remain promising. Anyway, let's get down to business. Checking up on the Avatars is only one of the reasons why I'm visiting."

"I know." Melkor said. He activated his desk terminal and projected a map of the Bright Republic. "It's time we discuss the deployment of our Avatars of Myth and our Living Sentinels."

"How many Avatars and Sentinels are willing to be dispatched to the front?"

"Well, it's mandatory for the Avatars, so all of us will go. As for the Sentinels, you should speak with their new commander to hear the details. From what I've heard, about half of them are willing to do their duty."

"Just fifty percent?" Ves frowned.

With all of the Desolate Soldiers in their mech roster, he would have thought the Sentinels would be glad to do their duty!

Melkor shrugged. "You know what these mech pilots are like. Even if they are willing to do their duty, they cherish their families."

Even the Desolate Soldiers could only do so much to compel people to do their duty!