

## Mech 1551

### *Chapter 1551 Avatars in the Making*

The Bright Republic enacted all kinds of policies to mobilize the private sector into contributing to its defense.

The government did not coerce mech pilots to fight, but provided incentives to those that did. Forcing those unwilling to fight would never work, as instances such as running away as soon as the sandmen appeared would always take place.

Right now, many Brighters still possessed confidence that their state could weather the storm. They were used to dealing with pressure due to their frequent wars against the Vesians, but that was not enough to explain why so many outfits volunteered to the front.

Everyone was looking ahead.

As long as the Bright Republic defeated the sandmen, it stood to gain immensely. The star systems of the crumbling Coman Federation and beyond were up for grabs.

The only issue was that all of them had been swept to a ruin by the sandmen and required centuries to rebuild. Even so, the payoff would be immense.

With the promise of territory and other rewards to every outfit that participated, this was a golden opportunity for mercenary corps to become something more than a shabby band of mech pilots!

Gaining their own land, industries and more would elevate the mercenary commander into the upper ranks! The mech pilots would benefit as well, becoming vassals that owned and managed important properties.

With this rich promise, the Bright Republic successfully incentivized many profit-seeking outfits to help defend its star systems.

"I'm not aiming to gain more land or territory." Ves spoke to Melkor in the latter's office.

"Then why volunteer our troops?"

"Aside from being the right thing to do, I have three reasons."

Ves raised a finger.

"First, as you know, our Avatars and Sentinels are still very green. The little missions you've accepted isn't enough to forge them into a solid entity. Am I right?"

As the Avatar Commander, Melkor was keenly aware of this. "It's better than before, but we aren't truly united as of yet. It takes true battle to forge the kind of martial tradition we want."

"Right. So deploying them to the front against the sandmen is the best way to do so."

"We'll suffer casualties, though." Melkor cautioned. "When we volunteer our troops, they'll fall under the command of an officer of the Mech Corps. There won't be any slacking off. Depending on how the war will go, we might stand to lose half of the mech pilots we've dispatched."

That was a heavy figure, and the main reason why only half of the Living Sentinels volunteered. While the LMC promised generous pensions to their families if they died, that wasn't as good as returning from the front alive!

"We need a solid core. What is the use of recruiting hundreds of mech pilots if they will all shatter at the first serious blow? A martial tradition can only be forged in battle. Everyone knows that. As long as the Avatars and Sentinels make it through this pass, I will have no doubts about their competence anymore!"

Ves had seen many different outfits and mech regiments in battle. He recognized that there was a vast gulf between an experienced and inexperienced mech force.

No matter how much training an outfit enjoyed, all of it meant nothing if the mech pilots lost heart upon encountering their first setback in battle!

This was exactly the reason why Ves looked down on the Honored Ones from the Reinald Republic.

He raised another finger.

"My second reason for volunteering our forces is to earn more reputation. While it's difficult to see it now that we are in the middle of an existential crisis, the war against the sandmen will become a pivotal event in our star sector's history. Those who have answered the call of duty will become heroes to the state and the star sector. The mech pilots, the outfits and those who dispatched them will earn unsurpassed glory and honor for fighting the good fight!"

Melkor looked surprised, not expecting to hear such a reason. That was why Ves was in charge!

"Is reputation that important to you, sir?"

"It is!" Ves firmly replied. He had seen the effects of having an insufficient amount of reputation! "The galaxy is run by people and organizations. Being smart or wealthy is not a sufficient reason for them to do business with you. If you want to earn their regard,

reputation is essential! High society is especially vain and pretentious. Something as simple as dispatching half of my mech forces to fight off an alien invasion will definitely be celebrated in this circle!"

Otherwise, why would nobles and high officials elevate hunting into a prestigious occupation?

After Ves explained his reasoning, Melkor tentatively nodded.

"I think you're right. All of us stand to gain a lot of honor and reputation for battling the sandmen. This might even be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to add descriptions such as 'defender of humanity' and 'alien hunter' to our records!"

Regardless of how the authorities recorded the accomplishments of his mech pilots, they would doubtlessly be able to stand head and shoulders above others!

Those who never contributed to human civilization in this fashion would never have the guts to put on airs around veterans of this crisis!

"There's one more thing, Melkor. It's one thing to miss the fight if you were still a mech cadet or if you are stuck on the other side of the star sector. It's another thing to decline the opportunity to do your duty when you are in a position to do so. The cowards, the foot-draggers, the incapable and the incompetent will all carry the stigma of staying still while others fought to save the lives of trillions of people!"

This wasn't something that Melkor contemplated either! As a Larkinson, shirking his duty sounded alien to him. Yet now that Ves illuminated him, he understood how much dishonor those people suffered if they refused to fight!

Ves raised a third finger. "There is one more reason to dispatch the Avatars and Sentinels to the front. I want to test if my Avatars are loyal enough to do what I ask of them. I won't ask too much of the Sentinels, but I want you to push the Avatars. Either make or break them, but don't be too soft."

"You're asking for a lot, Ves. Every mech pilot who joins the Avatars are qualified enough to join a prestigious mech regiment of the Mech Corps."

"I know that, but what is the point of retaining them if they are unwilling to serve me as much as they pledged? The generous salaries and benefits they earn as Avatars should be enough to buy their loyalty."

Even if his Avatars weren't Kinners, they ought to be considering how much money Ves paid out of his pocket to support his premier mech force!

"Let's move on to choosing our assignments."

Ves and Melkor began to turn to the projection of the map of the Bright Republic. The Mech Corps posted many missions with different terms and requirements.

It took around half an hour to select the missions for the Avatars and Sentinels.

Preferably, Ves wanted to keep them together, but that wasn't always possible. He selected a more arduous mission for the Avatars that called for keeping the majority of them at the front for a long duration. Only a handful of Avatars would be rotated back to Cloudy Curtain to rest and recover.

As for the Sentinels, he still needed to finalize the details with the Sentinel Commander, but Ves picked out a more relaxed mission for them. The Sentinels would merely have to deploy a portion of their mechs and mech pilots to the front, and rotate them out every couple of months.

This was enough to give every volunteering mech pilot some actual battle experience without exposing them to too many risky battles.

"Do you want to meet with Magdalena?" Melkor asked.

"Not today. I already have a full agenda." Ves shook his head. He intended to visit the Living Sentinels and the Battle Criers sometime later when he wasn't so pressed for time. "Convey my intentions to her in my stead, will you?"

"Will do, sir. I have a good relationship with her. She'll understand what needs to be done."

Though Ves didn't know who came up with the decision, Magdalena Larkinson became the Sentinel Commander. From what he could gather, Magdalena used to work her way up the ranks of the Mech Corps before retiring as a Captain at the end of the recent war.

She was also a mother of three young children, which explained her inclinations towards the Sentinels.

Once they ended their discussion, both of them stood up and left the office. Gloriana, their cats and their bodyguards followed silently after the Larkinsons.

After leaving the administrative building, they crossed the grounds of the base before entering a training facility.

Around a dozen young Avatars in uniform awkwardly familiarized with each other at a lounge area. As soon as Ves and Melkor stepped in, they immediately rose from their seats and stood straight.

Though Melkor did not look as grizzled as some of the older veterans, he cultivated his own air of authority, which was enough to make the young Avatars honest.

"Ves, meet the Avatars in the making. They are some of the most promising young mech pilots in our ranks."

He recognized some of the Avatars looking at him with respect, fear or outright adoration.

"Chette Larkinson. Rhode Larkinson." Ves addressed his cousins first. "How confident are you in catching up to Jannzi?"

It seemed like a lifetime ago when the Larkinsons pushed three little chicks onto his hands. Now, one of them transformed into an eagle, far surpassing the remaining two chicks that barely stepped off the finish line.

However, as Larkinsons, they did not give in too easily. Their eyes burned with determination.

"We will catch up, sir!"

Ves nodded in satisfaction. He wanted his Avatars to be bold and confident. Even if they became a little too arrogant, that was fine because he was willing to give them the tools to back up their boasts.

With his spiritual vision, he recognized that neither of them possessed spiritual potential.

That was fine. As long as Ves mastered the art of elevating regular mech pilots into the ranks of gods, he didn't mind giving some of his relatives a life-changing transformation.

He couldn't do too much, though! If he uplifted every Larkinson or Avatar into the ranks of experts, then anyone with a pinch of logic could figure out that he possessed an unimaginable secret!

Ves could only elevate a couple of Larkinsons at most. The reputation his family had built up and its long pedigree of nurturing expert pilots would help allay suspicions.

As for elevating other Avatars, Ves had to show more restraint. He could only afford to uplift a handful of them as best. He could chalk his luck to the selective recruitment policies of the Avatars of Myth.

"Imon, Casella, how are the two of you doing?" He asked after he finished his brief chat with his cousins.

"We enjoy it here." Casella spoke up first. "We recognize that it is a privilege to join the Avatars. We will do our best to meet your expectations."

"Good. I have high expectations for the two of you, but you will both have to prove yourselves in battle."

Though Imon did not show much enthusiasm for their upcoming deployment, both Ingvars knew that this was a test they needed to pass.

Once Ves understood the situation of the Ingvar twins, he directed his attention to someone he didn't recognize.

The young Avatar exhibited much more enthusiasm and fervor than any other Avatar in the room.

Now that Ves paid attention to the fellow, his interest spiked when he sensed a vigorous trace of spirituality.

This was a mech pilot with spiritual potential!

Not only that, but his spiritual attributes felt a bit unusual! Though Ves did not recognize the attributes, he felt a little familiarity in them for some reason.

"Who is this kid?" Ves directly asked, pointing his finger at the Avatar.

Before Melkor could even answer, the mech pilot couldn't hold himself back any longer!

He fell on his knees and pleaded to Ves with his palms grasped together!

"Joshua King! I'm your biggest fan! I grew up piloting your mechs! It is my biggest dream for you to design a custom mech for me! I will defeat every challenger in your stead if you give me a machine that is solely mine!"

An awkward silence ensued.

*Chapter 1552 Cherish These Times*

Melkor coughed. "Joshua here is a recent graduate I picked up from Meirling."

"The famed advanced mech academy in Bentheim?" Ves briefly glanced away from the pathetic kneeling mech pilot.

What an odd display!

"He just joined us a few weeks ago, so he's still an unpolished gem. Don't let your first impressions fool you, though. Joshua is a top graduate from that mech academy who received many favorable offers from various mech regiments. He could have accepted a fast-track career at the Mech Corps, but he set his sights on the Avatars."

This young mech pilot became more and more interesting to Ves.

"Sit up, Joshua. You're an Avatar, not a groveler. Have some pride."

"Y-Yes, sir!"

"Why did you choose the Avatars?"

"I'm your biggest fan, sir! Perhaps you don't remember me, but I piloted one of your first virtual designs back when you were publishing mechs under the name of Chasing Clouds. I grew up piloting the Seraphim, the Young Blood, the Old Soul and both Marc Antony versions! I even piloted the virtual versions of your original mech models! I've piloted them all!"

Ves looked a bit astonished. "You piloted my earliest works?"

"I was born and raised on Cloudy Curtain, just like you, sir." Joshua smiled. "Maybe you don't remember me, but you even interviewed me a long time ago."

No wonder Joshua showed so much enthusiasm at meeting Ves. As a fellow Cloudy Curtainer, the young mech pilot probably grew up admiring Ves after he elevated the LMC from a small mech workshop into a large mech manufacturer!

This explained why Joshua was eager to become an Avatar!

The more Ves studied Joshua, the more he became satisfied. Joshua not only possessed an excellent academic record, but also carried spiritual potential with unusual attributes.

"What's his genetic aptitude?" Ves whispered to Melkor.

Genetic aptitude was a very sensitive topic to mech pilots. It wasn't polite of him to ask Joshua directly.

"C+, which is about the same as many Larkinson mech pilots."

A genetic aptitude of C+ was merely regarded as higher-than-average in the mech community. Nonetheless, genetic aptitude was not the sole factor in determining whether a mech pilot could advance to expert pilot or higher. It merely described the maximum load a mech pilot could sustain when interfacing with a mech.

A grade of C+ was more than sufficient to pilot most standard mechs. Once a mech pilot advanced to expert, their minds were capable of doing so much more. At that time, genetic aptitude mostly determined how easily they would be able to advance to the next step.

A monster like Venerable Foster faced much fewer hurdles in advancing to ace pilot than someone with a lower aptitude!

While it sounded unfair, this was simply the way the galaxy worked!

"Satisfactory." Ves softly nodded. "I'm very satisfied with him. Take good care of him, Melkor."

Melkor nodded in acknowledgement.

What pleased Ves the most about Joshua wasn't necessarily his academic pedigree. His spiritual potential, spiritual attributes and genetic aptitude did not warrant too much attention either.

No, the true reason Ves regarded this young mech pilot with favor was the latter's unquestioning devotion!

Biggest fan or not, Ves confidently judged that Joshua was sincere in his admiration!

As far as Ves was concerned, Joshua didn't even have to risk his life against the sandmen to prove his loyalty.

This fanboy and fellow Cloudy Curtainer had already completed his indoctrination ahead of time!

"Maybe we should put more effort into recruiting other locals." Ves remarked to Melkor.

"Joshua is an exception. Most mech pilots from this planet aren't even good enough to join the Sentinels. It isn't until recently our family took over the basic mech academy of Freslin and improved its training standards."

"I see."

Ves spent a few more minutes of his time directing his attention to the remaining young Avatars. It was enough for them to meet their employer in person. The impression he made would be seared in their minds as they matured to become the backbone of the Avatars for many decades.

He ended his visit shortly afterwards. As Ves left the Avatar's base of operation, Gloriana linked her arm with his and walked alongside him with a gentle smile.

"I didn't think much of your 'Avatars of Myth' when I first heard of them, but you've surprised me, Ves."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "What has caught your attention?"



"The quality and potential of some of those young mech pilots are very high. Since I specialize in fitting mechs to mech pilots, I'm very good at judging their quality. Most of them have what it takes to become elites. If their upbringing and augmentations were a little bit better, then they could have enjoyed storied careers in the Hex Army."

That was high praise from someone like Gloriana. "Are my Avatars really that good in your eyes?"

She nodded. "Most of the Larkinson mech pilots I've seen so far are also pretty decent. Whether it's their mindsets or their physical conditioning, they're good material."

While his girlfriend spoke highly of the Larkinsons, Ves believed that part of it was because they were his relatives. She wouldn't speak so highly of them if he wasn't a Larkinson!

Even so, Gloriana never lied when it came to expressing her likes and dislikes. Since this topic was related to her design philosophy, she would never lie to Ves just to make him feel better.

What do you think about the odds of elevating my Avatars to second-class mech pilots?"

"It shouldn't be a problem as long as you invest in the right augmentations for them. Your relatives have a particularly solid foundation, so they should be able to succeed in a couple of years of focused training."

"I understand. Is the Glory Battalion willing to train my men?"

She grinned. "I'll make them accept this assignment. Don't worry, Ves. You'll get your own second-class mech pilots to play with. Just be ready to provide the required support."

The cost of converting a third-class mech pilot to a second-class mech pilot varied. While Ves could make do with investing a couple of million of credits, better and faster results could be achieved if he invested ten or even a hundred times more!

Ves was not in the habit of wasting so much money, though. Investing a few million credits per Avatar was the most he was willing to spend. What if a mech pilot that cost him a billion credits to nurture suddenly got shot down by an enemy mech one day?

Fortunately, as long as his Avatars possessed the right foundation, it shouldn't be too difficult to make the transition.

What Ves should really be concerned about was having the right second-class mechs in place. He had to make sure he became proficient in designing second-class mechs by

then because he did not wish to resort to buying someone else's products to outfit his premier mech force.

"I have a lot of studying to do to design the mechs my Avatars deserve." He sighed.

Gloriana pressed closer against him. "I'm sure you'll get it within a year. I'll do whatever I can to help you become a qualified second-class mech designer. Otherwise, how will you be able to prove yourself to my dynasty within three years?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I made an agreement with my mother. We need to accelerate our timeline and produce a second-class masterwork mech within three years!"

"That's way too fast!" Ves clutched his heart in shock. "I'm not even confident I can produce another masterwork mech within a decade!"

It was simply too hard to make a masterwork mech on demand! Even if Ves had made one before and even if Gloriana's design philosophy increased the odds of making one, that still left them with a miniscule chance!

"I know we can do it, Ves." She spoke and grasped his hands. "As long as we develop our synergies, it will only be a matter of time before we manage to make a fantastic masterwork mech."

Though Ves still remained skeptical, he did not reject the challenge. Producing a masterwork within three years would confound any Journeyman or Senior, but Ves was different.

Having finished touring the Mech Nursery, the couple left the complex and returned to the Cloud Estate.

There, they enjoyed a quiet dinner together before relaxing outside during the evening.

Though Ves felt very ambivalent about the presence of so many Larkinsons at his estate, he quickly felt at ease once he sat among his uncles and aunts.

Despite his high standing within his family, the Larkinsons were never very hierarchical to begin with. The elders only enjoyed slightly higher regard. Only the expert pilots in the family enjoyed respect.

"We know you're very busy." An old Larkinson calmly spoke to him. "You're in the prime of your life. When I was as young as you, I dreamed of having a rich girlfriend like you. Who are we to spoil the best years of your life? Cherish these times, Ves."

"I will." Ves nodded with some respect.

He continued to chat with the oldest Larkinsons. Because they had already experienced a fulfilling life, Ves did not sense any ulterior motives from them aside. They didn't even beg Ves to allocate more money and resources to their children and grandchildren.

Ves didn't make those kinds of decisions anyway.

While Ves started to enjoy his time with the old and placid Larkinsons, Gloriana played with the very youngest Larkinsons.

The young kids quickly became bedazzled by her beauty and charm. She giggled frequently as she played along with some of their games.

What surprised Ves the most was that Gloriana did not bring up anything related to hexism at all! She also treated boys and girls with an equal amount of consideration.

As Ves continued to keep an eye on his girlfriend, he began to suspect that she was deliberately trying to charm the Larkinsons!

Why shouldn't she? If she managed to get on the bad side of the Larkinsons, then her relationship with Ves would certainly be in jeopardy! At the very least, the tension would introduce a lot of strain!

It pleased him a lot to see her getting along with the Larkinsons and vica versa. Though it remained to be seen whether she could earn the approval of every Larkinson, she was well on her way to winning the hearts of the younger ones.

They decided to retire after a few hours. It was already bedtime for the youngest Larkinsons.

"Your family is very wholesome, Ves." Gloriana remarked as she accompanied him to the main mansion. "It's different from the Wodins. Every relative of mine has something to prove. Even if we're not as bad as some of the more competitive dynasties, it's very rare to encounter a Wodin who is able to put down their worries and enjoy a simple life."

The two enjoyed different upbringings, but they managed to be compatible so far. As long as Ves continued to get along with Gloriana, he was happy with what he got. He couldn't ask for more in their relationship.

"Will I be able to fit in with the Wodins?" He asked.

"It's... very difficult. Even if we pass our three-year challenge, you'll always be regarded as an outsider by the Wodin Dynasty."

"Don't misunderstand me, Gloriana. I don't want to become a Wodin. I'm a Larkinson. I like to keep it that way."

Both of them smiled at each other. They were both proud of their families and didn't want to lose those parts of their identities.

The time they spent with the Larkinsons somehow brought them closer together. A harmony formed between them that was just as amazing as the synergies they discovered when they collaborated on a design project.

"I love you, Ves."

"I love you too."

"Good night. Let's get back to work tomorrow, okay?"

The two kissed each other at the porch of their mansion.

### *Chapter 1553 Sharpening Teeth*

The next morning, Ves and Gloriana met during breakfast but separated shortly afterwards.

Ves still needed to tour more sites before he was ready to tackle work.

Though Gloriana enjoyed accompanying her boyfriend, she didn't intend to spend all of her time with him. She still needed to study, perform research and manage her own affairs.

"I'll be supervising the installation of my lab and workshop equipment." She told him once they were ready to depart. "After that, we'll meet again when you convene your design team, right?"

Ves calmly nodded. "It's not much of a design team. So far, I only have Ketis. I've also been informed that a couple of teenage Larkinsons will be joining us as well. They're the seeds the Larkinsons have selected to learn from my hip. Please treat them well."

"I understand, but Ves, a good mech designer isn't so easy to raise. I don't mean to insult your relatives, but..."

"You don't have to couch your words to me." He spoke. "I know very well that the odds that they'll advance to Journeyman is exceedingly small. I'm not looking to turn them into my successors, though. It's already sufficient for them to become capable Apprentices that can assist me in my work or provide the Larkinsons with at least some measure of financial continuity."

The Larkinsons did not have a tradition of raising mech designers, so Ves did not expect too much from the seeds his family selected. Regardless if they possessed

spiritual potential or not, as long as they possessed the right attitudes, he was willing to tutor them from time to time.

Of course, Ves couldn't teach them too much at their young age. The best he could do was to prepare them well enough that they would be able to apply for the best mech design universities in the region.

Not the Ansel University of Mech Design, though. Anything but Ansel.

If the Bright Republic successfully survived the current crisis, then Ves would recommend them to the Dorum Center of Technology and Innovation. With his connections, he could get a stupid pig accepted as a mech design student.

Well, that was for later.

Ves and Gloriana kissed before they went their separate ways. Clixie, Melody and her bodyguards followed after their lady while Nitaa and Lucky accompanied their lord.

As they boarded a shuttle, the vehicle lifted off and flew towards the Mech Nursery. Some aerial mechs of the Sentinels surrounded the shuttle while a couple of landbound mechs of the Avatars followed on the ground.

"What do you think so far of the people you've met at the Cloud Estate and the Mech Nursery?" He asked Nitaa.

"So far, I haven't detected anyone who holds malice against you, sir."

"What does your nose tell you?"

"All of the people we've met on this planet are not involved with the cult as far as I know."

Ves nodded, though he didn't blindly accept her judgement. What if an agent of a splinter organization of the Five Scrolls Compact embedded some spies and informers within his company?

Unless they possessed extraordinary powers like Nitaa, detecting them was incredibly hard!

He left the vital role of identifying spies and informers to Crindon. In his capacity as Captain of the Virtual Security Department, Crindon wouldn't have to conduct his search alone.

Considering how Flashlight operated, Ves knew for sure they inserted at least dozens of spies in his company.

While Ves did not intend to expose them or root them out, he still wanted to identify them. It was better to know and not do anything about it than remaining ignorant he could ill afford it. Doubtlessly, many other organizations may have planted their spies in his workforce as well.

It was one thing to tolerate an informer like Gavin or in the LMC, but it would be devastating if a spy managed to slip into the ranks of his Avatars of Myth!

"Do you have any other concerns, Nitaa?"

"I do, sir. I have been speaking with some of the bodyguards of the Glory Battalion as well as some of your other guards. You are making a lot of waves lately. This also means you are making many people upset. Now that you are making very large moves, I'm afraid the people who lose out will resort to drastic measures to stop you from doing more damage."

Ves scratched his chin. "You're right. I can't avoid disturbing others, but I enjoy a sufficient amount of protection from my backers. The Bright Republic is on my side. Gloriana and by extension her Glory Battalion is on my side. Calabast is on my side. If that isn't enough, I can count on the Avatars of Myth and Living Sentinels to foil any assassination attempts."

"You are sending out the majority of your Avatars and many of your Sentinels to fight the sandmen." Nitaa pointed out. "This reduces your security, especially when you are separated from Gloriana. To be frank, I highly prefer it if you remain with her as much as possible. While the Glory Battalion is tasked to protect her first, they will eliminate any threat that targets you because Gloriana would also be at risk."

Depending on his girlfriend's bodyguards to protect him put a sour taste in his mouth. Wasn't it his intention to cultivate the Avatars of Myth into an elite second-class mech force?

Even if the Avatars became capable enough to fend off all local threats, what if some donkey from the Hegemony or the Coalition decided that Ves had to be wiped out?

The backing and protection he currently enjoyed only shielded him against third-class threats. For the rest, he needed to depend on his girlfriend, which deeply unsatisfied him. The Glory Battalion obviously wouldn't risk their lives for Ves alone.

"I can only depend on something I can build myself!"

He needed to elevate the Avatars into a second-class mech force as soon as possible!

His shuttle arrived at the Mech Nursery a brief moment later. As he entered into the range of the aura of a Desolate Soldier installed as a display model, he took the time to admire the mech for a moment.

"Very adequate." Ves nodded in satisfaction. "It's not entirely flawless, though."

The mech technicians of the LMC had done their best to fabricate the mech without his personal guidance. The Desolate Soldier was a very simple mech design to begin with, and Ves already transmitted detailed fabrication plans to the company.

If his mech technicians were too stupid to follow all of his instructions, then they didn't deserve to work for the LMC!

As much as Ves itched to fabricate a couple of gold label Desolate Soldiers, he did not consider them meaningful.

Who would spend so much effort on crafting high-quality versions of a cheap product?

Ves shook his head and proceeded to his appointments.

For most of the morning, Ves visited the other two mech forces under his purview.

He began with meeting Commander Cinnabar and the Battle Criers. While Ves hadn't paid much attention to them since he returned to Cloudy Curtain, as Kinners they didn't need much babysitting.

The most pertinent issue he wanted to discuss with the Battle Criers was whether they were willing to fight on behalf of the Bright Republic.

"This is what we are made for." Commander Cinnabar replied to Ves. "Do you think that because we're Kinners, we only care about the safety of the Kinner Tribe? We are an extension of your will, now. Your concerns are our concerns. Let alone that this is a fight which mech pilots shouldn't avoid. I can think of no better cause to fight for than protecting humanity against alien aggression."

At this point, Ves already signed a contract with the Battle Criers and bought them out in the Kinner tradition. Even though he knew he held the power to do almost anything he wanted with the Battle Criers, he didn't want to overstep the line.

Hearing Cinnabar's declaration reassured him a lot.

"I'm glad to hear that, commander. If that is so, I won't hesitate. Please deploy some of your Battle Criers to the front. Aside from doing what is necessary, I also want you to focus on hardening your mech pilots. I have no doubts about your loyalty, but your troops can use some more polishing. Since the sandmen are about to flood the Bright Republic, you'll enjoy all the battles you need to hammer your men into shape."

As a mercenary commander, Cinnabar understood Ves' argument. "We've never been cowards. We've already survived our fair share of battles."



"I hope your Battle Criers can prove yourselves once more. To those that survive, I'm willing to invest your development. Becoming second-class mech pilots is not out of the question!"

He had already dangled out this bait, but it didn't hurt to remind the Battle Criers of what they stood to gain.

Once Ves made sure that the Battle Criers were settling in, he departed to the largest base.

Dozens of mechs of the mechs of the Living Sentinels stood on standby right inside the grounds of the base. Every mech pilot wearing the silver uniform of the Sentinels greeted Ves with respect.

He met with Magdalena Larkinson shortly afterwards in her office. A stern lady with an aging face, the Magdalena still radiated strong military vibes.

Not a lot of time had passed since she retired from service. The onset of the sandman invasion coupled with the outbreak of the Komodo War had probably caused her to dust off her and don military bearing.

"Sir." She saluted towards him. "Welcome to the Living Sentinels."

Ves casually waved his hand at her. "Knock it off. We're not in the military."

"Sorry, sir. Old habits die hard."

"Well, I can see how you managed to become the commander of the Living Sentinels."

"Even if we aren't as excellent as your Avatars of Myth, we have a lot of responsibilities on our shoulders. The LMC is our family's main source of prosperity now, far outstripping the meager profits earned by the Larkinson Estate."

Ves was impressed by her dedication. "That's true. I'm glad you are taking your job seriously. It's not meant to be a retirement home for Larkinsons who are tired of serving in the Mech Corps."

"The Larkinson mech pilots who have truly hung up their piloting coats have all gone to become mech instructors for our mech academy." Magdalena smirked. "You should pay a visit to them sometime."

"I plan to do so immediately after this meeting." Ves nodded.

He had some business to do in Freslin. Not only did he want to check out the latest preoccupation of the Larkinsons, he also wanted to talk with Dietrich from Walter's Whalers.



Though Ves hadn't kept in touch with the Whalers lately, he heard that they suffered a very severe setback when they attempted to return to Bentheim and conquer some turf.

Ves got down to business with the Sentinel Commander.

As Ves hadn't been involved in the establishment of the Living Sentinels, he wanted to make sure they hadn't made any decisions he disagreed with. It would be much harder to impose changes once the Sentinels became set in their ways.

He paid especially close attention to their budget. Even though the LMC took care of their bills, he didn't want the Living Sentinels to develop into a bloodsucking parasite.

Fortunately, Magdalena ran a tight ship. The Living Sentinels employed a lot of Larkinsons, and while Ves suspected that plenty of nepotism took place, at the very least his relatives weren't lazy and corrupt.

"I'm very content with your arrangements." He told her. "I approve of your handling. Keep up the good work."

As Ves left the base of the Living Sentinels, he took another look at their mechs before he left.

Though the Avatars of Myth, Battle Criers and the Living Sentinels still hadn't reached their optimal forms, they already held a lot of battle power. With hundreds of mechs at his disposal, Ves no longer felt that he was powerless anymore.

Even if he was still a mech designer, he actually possessed some teeth now!

"I just have to polish them by deploying them against the sandmen." He muttered. "Only then are they sharp enough to bite my enemies to death."

#### *Chapter 1554 Old Guard*

Freslin changed a lot since he last visited. The second-largest city on Cloudy Curtain featured a lot of new construction. The sudden relocation of billions of refugees required an enormous amount of services to accommodate their integration into Brighter society.

Hospitals, planning offices, distribution warehouses, high-rise business centers and more dotted the outskirts of Freslin.

When Ves saw the enormous sprawl of construction, he guessed that Freslin might double in size within a year!

As much as Ves was amazed by the scale of construction, he knew that this was only a taste of what was to come.

Only the more daring, risk-taking entrepreneurs invested early in Cloudy Curtain. They saw the ballooning population of Cloudy Curtain and noted that the planet would soon be grossly short on various essential services.

The lack of existing institutions presented savvy investors with an enormous gap in the market!

"Still, aren't they a bit too daring?" Ves frowned as he looked down on the expanding city from the window of his shuttle. "If the Bright Republic fails to repel the sandmen, then all of the money sunk into construction will wash away in a tide of sand."

Certainly, many investors liquidated their assets and pulled as much money out of the system as possible. It was the most prudent course of action to do. What was the worth of prime real estate when it would soon be crushed by the relentless sandmen?

However, those who believed the Bright Republic had what it took to defend its space took the biggest gambles in their lifetimes. They snapped up all of the liquidated assets at fire-sale prices and constructed new institutions on planets designated as dumping grounds for refugees without any hesitation!

The risks may be large, but the rewards were absolutely astronomical!

Even Ves, who liked to gamble every now and then, balked at the thought of going all-in on this daring bet!

From what he read in the news, the government did everything possible to facilitate this risk-taking behavior. Anyone who decided to commit to the Bright Republic and take over the assets sold by cowardly, risk-averse investors received numerous perks and tax breaks.

One of the lessons the Republic learned from the border states was that society could quickly break down if everyone tried to liquidate their assets!

Even though many large investors acquired a bad reputation as leeches and corporate raiders, if they all decided to pull out of the economy, the state would quickly be thrown into chaos!

"Well, I don't have to play this game." Ves shook his head.

His primary concern was to improve his skills and grow his mech company. The money he earned from licensing his latest mech designs already surpassed 200 billion bright credits!

Of course, most of the companies and mech designers who licensed his mech designs probably suffered from buyer's remorse right now. Any variants they designed inevitably featured drastically weaker X-Factors.

Once it became known that it was far more problematic to design variants of his mechs than anticipated, Ves predicted that he wouldn't be able to exploit the mech industry's ignorance again!

"Still, 200 billion credits is a huge windfall for the LMC!" He grinned.

The recent board meetings all concerned how to spend all of this money. Ves had pushed for investing much of the money into expanding the Mech Nursery and building more manufacturing complexes.

The LMC's existing production capacity no longer matched its success level. Ves detested depending on third-party manufacturers to make up for the company's severe shortfall in production.

Naturally, Ves did not bet completely on this plan. If the sandmen defeated the Mech Corps, then all was moot.

"Once the Bright Republic falls, the bright credit is worth nothing!"

Due to all of the economic activity and the government's profligate spending spree, inflation already started to rouse. Even though the LMC was earning more bright credits than ever before, the rising inflation continually tempered their real earnings.

Perhaps there might come a day where a nutrient pack sold for 1 million bright credits!

Ves shook his head at the ridiculous notion. "That will only happen if the Bright Republic loses Benthaim and half of its territory or something."

In any case, Ves and the LMC needed to make the most use out of their windfall by converting bright credits to tangible assets as fast as possible.

"It still feels good to be rich, though." He smiled.

While the money he earned was nowhere close to funding his expeditionary fleet, it represented a good start.

As Ves mused about his expanding fortunes, his shuttle finally arrived at his first stop.

Surrounded by Nitaa and his bodyguards, he exited the shuttle and stepped onto a familiar street.

The low, intimidating aura of his Pride of Dusk immediately affected the nearby locals.

"Look! It's Ves Larkinson! He's back!"

"Wow! He looks more handsome than ever! No wonder he managed to seduce a Hexer!"

Most citizens of Freslin regarded Ves and the LMC very highly.

Ves idly waved at the gawkers before entering a rundown bar.

Unlike last time, not a single patron was present. Even if Ves decided to visit in the morning, he knew the Whalers didn't care for these matters.

Ves immediately spotted the person he sought sitting bored and morose behind the bar. He stepped forward and calmly sat on the barstool right in front of the barkeeper.

"Hey Dietrich."

"Hey."

A short silence ensued as both of them looked at each other. Both of them had changed a lot since they last met.

Whereas Ves looked more imposing due to his confidence and his Pride of Dusk, Dietrich resembled a deflated balloon.

His previous confidence and playboy-like demeanor was nowhere to be seen. His messy hair hung limply on his head and his clothes appeared as if he'd slept in them for several days.

"What happened to you, Dietrich?"

"Bentheim happened."

"I heard. Is Walter.."

"My father is dead. Along with more than a hundred mechs and mech pilots who followed him to fulfill his foolhardy dream."

"Dietrich.. my condolences.."

The son of Walter let out an exasperated sigh. "You don't have to feel sorry for me. My father got what was coming! What did he think he could do with a bunch of green recruits and unreliable mech pilots? Even if we outnumbered the gang we targeted, they bogged us down and confounded us with their superior piloting skills and tactics. We should have pulled out back then, but my father and the old guard insisted on pressing through!"

"What happened?"

"Our opponents called in their friends. Enemy reinforcements quietly surrounded us from all sides. Once they formed a complete envelopment, they attacked us on all sides!"

The outcome was devastating. The Whalers lost eighty percent of the mechs they deployed in battle. The remnants that came back to Cloudy Curtain were diminished, dispirited and utterly broken!

"Are the Whalers still around?" Ves softly asked.

"My father died. The old guard died. I managed to survive, and so did a couple of others. Upon our return, I tried to take charge as best as I could and recalled all of our remaining mech forces to Cloudy Curtain. There was no way we could hang on to our other turf at our current level of strength."

"And then?"

"And then, I got kicked out of my father's own organization!" Dietrich slammed his fist against the bar counter. "What a good leader I turned out to be! While my father and the old guard who supported me the most were still around, all of the Whalers remained honest. As soon as this changed, the disloyal bastards who joined the Whalers in the past few years since the Glowing Planet Campaign usurped control from me! Too few Whalers backed me up when the usurpers launched their coup!"

Dietrich freely explained how it all went downhill.

Ves did not look entirely surprised. Walter's Whalers used to be a small-time gang that lorded over Cloudy Curtain because they didn't have any competition. After participating in the Glowing Planet Campaign, they lost a lot of old hands but gained billions of bright credits.

The Whalers could never protect all of their wealth with the meager forces at their disposal, so they underwent an enormous hiring and procurement spree. Their strength and numbers ballooned in a matter of years, so much so that they became local hegemony that claimed other rural planets in the Bentheim region as their turf!

Yet Ves recognized the vulnerability of pursuing such rapid expansion. The Whalers were never very diligent with how they managed their organization. They recruited too many new Whalers, diluting their old culture, loyalty and identity.

While this situation wouldn't have led to any serious problems, a cancer had taken root in the gang. As long as the only deterrent in the form of Walter and his old buddies was gone, Dietrich alone did not possess enough power to retain control over the Whalers!

"...So that's how I end up here by myself in this deserted bar." Dietrich finished. "It's the only piece of real estate that I have left in my name."

"Walter's Whalers left nothing behind for you?"

"They no longer go by that name. They call themselves the Cloud Whalers by now. As for my severance fee, I'm lucky enough to retain this worthless bar and my stupid life! I wouldn't have been able to walk out from the Whalers if it hadn't been for some of the old members speaking up for me. They still turned their back to me, though."

"How come they didn't support you?"

"My father is tainted. We enjoyed a lot of success, but my father and the old guard's obsession with Bentheim threw most of it away! The old members who remained behind weren't mech pilots. They're the administrators, the business owners, the mech technicians and the like who wouldn't have been useful in our attempt to gain a footing on Bentheim. Even if they had been with Walter from the start, they don't have the power to contend against mech pilots."

"I see. The usurpers probably obtained their support before they launched their coup. Their main demand was to preserve your life, on account for the sentiment they held towards your father."

Dietrich sighed. "In hindsight, that was obvious. The usurpers couldn't have taken over the Whalers so smoothly without making a lot of deals."

The new Cloud Whalers no longer had anything to do with Dietrich and his father. If Ves wanted to be poetic about it, then he would remark that Dietrich and the Whalers had broken the bonds of karma between them. With how lifeless Dietrich looked, not even revenge was on his mind.

"Did Walter leave you a nest egg or something? Surely your father wasn't stupid enough to put all of his eggs in a single basket."

"Hahaha!" Dietrich laughed. "You're right. My father did squirrel away a couple of billion credits to a number of secret stashes and bank accounts. The problem is that my dad is really bad at all of this complicated finance stuff, so he entrusted the matter to one of his old buddies who acted as our chief accountant."

"I see."

He didn't have to ask whether this chief accountant stabbed Dietrich in the back. All of the money that Walter saved for his son had fallen into the hands of the usurpers.

The dispossessed heir to the Whalers snorted at his visitor. "You don't have to feel sorry for me, Ves. We all got what we deserved. This is how gangs are like. I'm tired of the Whalers anyway. They're all a bunch of idiots with too many mechs and not enough foresight. My dad and the old guard could have used the windfall they earned from the

Glowing Planet campaign to transition the Whalers into a large mercenary corps or security company."

"It takes a lot of training and expertise to set something like that up, Dietrich!"

"We had a lot of money! We could have set up an investment fund and bought a bunch of lucrative companies to live off the profits, but no, my dad insisted on paying back his old grudges!"

Obviously, losing access to all of the wealth the Walters earned stung Dietrich deeply. Ves understood how bad it must be for Dietrich to be a billionaire for a few years before being robbed of all of the wealth that he supposedly owned!

"How about a new start?" Ves extended his hand to the other man. "You're a decent mech pilot. We shared a life-and-death experience together. I just happen to need a lot of mech pilots."

Dietrich snorted. "I know about your Avatars of Myth and Living Sentinels. Every mech pilot on Cloudy Curtain wants to work for them. It's just.. I won't fit in an elite outfit like the Avatars and I don't want to become a glorified security guard."

Ves already anticipated this answer.

"You don't have to join them. I have a third outfit under my command. Hear me out..."

*Chapter 1555 Larkinson Basic Mech Academy*

In the end, Dietrich accepted his offer to join the Battle Criers. It wasn't as if he had anything better to do.

While Ves hadn't mentioned that the Battle Criers consisted entirely of Kinners, he didn't anticipate many problems. The Battle Criers were ruffians at heart, which meant that Dietrich should easily be able to fit in once he managed to get over the fact that he would be serving alongside a bunch of foreigners.

"You won't regret your choice, Dietrich." Ves smiled and shook the other man's head. "Now go close this bar, clean yourself up and report to the Battle Criers based at the Mech Nursery. I'll call ahead and tell them to give you a warm welcome."

Dietrich eyed him with some suspicion. "Why do I get the feeling you're bamboozling me or something? You're being awfully keen on recruiting me. Even if my skills are decent, you can afford better."

"Some things can't be bought." Ves replied. "I trust you and I have a good feeling about you. It's up to you to decide how you want to reciprocate."



"Let's drink to that."

After retrieving a bottle from the top shelf, Dietrich poured two glasses and offered one of them to Ves.

Both of them clinked their glasses together and gulped down their drinks.

While Dietrich soon began to grow tipsy, Ves remained as sober as ever. At this quantity, alcohol had little effect on his altered metabolism.

"Well, I have to go now, Dietrich. I hope you can pick up your life and find a new meaning to live on. You deserve better than the Whalers."

Ves left the bar and returned to his shuttle. As his vehicle brought him to the outskirts of Freslin, he briefly reflected on Dietrich's experiences while scratching Lucky's ears.

"So much has changed over a year."

As Ves and the LMC rose to prominence, Dietrich suffered an enormous fall from grace.

What struck Ves the most was how quickly Dietrich lost everyone and everything around him. Without the tall trees of his father and the old guard, Dietrich was left naked and vulnerable to the predations of his former subordinates and allies.

Even though Ves considered Dietrich to be a decent fellow, he didn't possess any remarkable strength to suppress any unrest within his former organization.

"Something like that will never happen to me." Ves vowed.

As much as Ves respected Walter, the old gang leader had been way too sloppy and careless. Aside from underestimating the brutal competition at Bentheim, he ran the Whalers as poorly as he did when it was still a small-time gang.

Ves especially disapproved of the decision to expand rapidly. While it felt good to gain so much new strength, the newcomers vastly outnumbered the old Whalers. The latter hadn't made any good attempts to integrate the former into the organization, thereby letting an enormous hidden danger fester underneath their noses.

"In the end, the newcomers were more loyal to themselves than the organization."

The Cloud Whalers were nothing like Walter's Whalers now. Ves predicted that their old heritage would soon be forgotten as the new leaders attempted to wipe away as much of Walter's influence as possible.

"They're not worth my time anymore." He grumbled.



He decided not to meddle in the relationship between the LMC and the Cloud Whalers. Now that the Living Sentinels had been formed, his mech company wouldn't be easy to bully.

What happened to Dietrich served as a valuable lesson to Ves and affirmed his own decisions.

Unlike old Walter, Ves insisted on setting the foundation for his old Avatars of Myth. Even though he could have ordered them to recruit hundreds of mech pilots at once, how could the Avatars possibly turn them into loyal subordinates?

His recent visits to the Avatars and Sentinels vindicated his decisions. Even though both mech forces were still rather young, Ves was very satisfied by their loyalty and dedication to their respective causes.

What was truly critical to the success of the Avatars and Sentinels was the Larkinsons involved in forming them! Any random Larkinson mech officer was ten times better in managing an outfit than Walter!

"Leadership matters!"

Of course, Ves recognized that he became dangerously dependent on the Larkinsons to run two out of three of his mech forces. He needed to make sure they stayed under his thumb. It would be pretty devastating for him if the Larkinsons turned their back to him one day!

"Sir, we've reached our next stop." Nitaa informed Ves.

As Ves stepped out of his shuttle, he swept the tall and expansive campus.

"Welcome to the Larkinson Basic Mech Academy, Ves." An old man walked up to him with a gentle smile.

"Elder Ronsel. I didn't expect to greet you here at the landing zone."

"Haha! You're a pillar of the family now. You deserve the same courtesy as our expert pilots."

Ves hadn't actually taken notice of Elder Ronsel before, but he knew the older man's story.

When he employed his spiritual vision towards Ronsel, he immediately noted the diminished and lethargic spirituality inside his head.

Ronsel used to be a promising mech pilot from grandpa Benjamin's generation. The elder managed to advance to expert candidate, elevating his prospects immensely.

As long as he took another step, he would have become another respected expert pilot of the Larkinson Family!

Sadly, war was not kind to Ronsel. Before he could obtain the chance to undergo apotheosis, Ronsel lost his mech during an arduous battle against the Vesians. Even if he managed to eject, his cockpit sustained moderate damage.

The result? Just like Benjamin, Ronsel lost his ability to pilot mechs! He sustained too much brain damage to interface with a machine!

What was the worth of an expert candidate who was no longer able to pilot mechs? Ronsel's entire career had been ruined!

Fortunately, he managed to pick himself up after his departure from the Mech Corps. He may have lost his ability to pilot mechs, but he was still an expert candidate!

Disabled or not, his elevated skills and unique experiences turned him into an excellent teacher.

He soon became known as one of the best mech instructors. Every young Larkinson mech cadet wanted to enjoy his tutelage. Ronsel became so passionate about teaching that he became even better at guiding mech cadets than actual expert pilots!

For this reason, once the Larkinson Family took over the local mech academy, Elder Ronsel had instantly been tapped to become its principal.

"Everything here looks new." Ves commented after he greeted the elder. The two walked alongside each other. "Even the training mechs are all new."

Elder Ronsel gestured towards the brand-new training halls and expansive outdoor training grounds, all scaled up for mechs.

"The old academy ran on a shoestring budget. It was completely inefficient. As soon as we took it over, we razed the old facilities and sold off the battered training mechs. After a lot of investment, our new academy has finally met our standards. We're even in the process of expanding our capacity to handle the influx of mech cadets among the refugees."

Ves turned around and witnessed a lot of new facilities under construction. The Larkinsons already spent billions of credits to reform the mech academy, but now they spent billions more to double or triple its capacity within a few months!

"Isn't this a poor time to invest the bulk of the Larkinson Estate's earnings into a mech academy?" Ves skeptically asked.

"Teaching is a noble profession, Ves. We Larkinsons have always excelled in training mech cadets. It's just that we never had the capital to run our own mech academy before you came into the picture. We're very grateful that you allowed us to fulfill our dreams."

Ves directed a suspicious glance at the seemingly-amiable principal.

"Is that the only reason to throw a lot of money at this pit? Tell me the truth, Ronsel."

"We're building an institution, Ves." Ronsel sighed. "Don't look at how much we spent. Instead, you should look at what we stand to gain."

"Mech academies have never been profitable."

"Money is just one part of the equation, Ves. Think of how many local mech cadets will graduate in the coming years. With our proven Larkinson teaching methods, many of them will become capable mech pilots."

"What's the point of that?"

"Many of them are already highly predisposed towards you and the LMC. They won't forget their alma maters when they graduate, Ves. The mech pilots we educate will become our backbone in the future. Whether they go on to serve in the Mech Corps, the Avatars or the Sentinels, we can always count on them for support."

If Ves intended to stick around in the Bright Republic, he might have appreciated the value of this long-term plan.

However, it took too long for the mech academy to bear fruit. Ves immediately grew less interested.

"Whatever. Do what you want. Show me around please."

In the following hour, Ves toured various facilities to familiarize himself with the mech academy. He observed hundreds of mech cadets undergoing physical conditioning. He witnessed another class learning how to shoot a practice rifle under the stern instruction of a Larkinson.

What interested him the most was live mech practice sessions. Various cheap but extremely robust mechs were attempting to navigate a complicated path through an expansive training ground.

While Ves regretted that he hadn't designed any training mechs, he had to admit that the Larkinsons chose well.

"These mechs are very durable and easy to maintain."

"All training mechs possess these qualities."

"Still, I commend your selection. These are some of the most cost-effective training mechs I've seen."

As Ronsel kept showing him around, Ves had already noticed the presence of his now-familiar Desolate Soldier mechs.

If the Bright Republic started to become familiar with its effects, how could the Larkinsons not be aware?

Ves already counted more than a dozen Desolate Soldiers placed throughout the mech academy!

"Ronsel... do you think it is a good idea to expose tens of thousands of mech cadets to my Desolate Soldiers?"

The old man chuckled. "Our mech cadets became significantly more attentive and dedicated to their studies after we procured your Desolate Soldiers. Even though some of our pupils have begun to slack, they're still a lot more diligent than before."

"Ronsel.." Ves frowned. "I have never tested the effects of long-term exposure to growing young mech cadets."

"We believe the merits outweigh the risks. You wouldn't have published your mech if it wasn't safe for human use, correct?"

"That's true, but.. even if it's permissible, is it the right thing to do?"

The principal adopted a severe expression. "There is a difference between Larkinson mech cadets and normal mech cadets. Our family members have all instilled the proper values in our younger generation. The same can't be said for the majority of our students. Even if we are doing our best to impart the right values into their heads, there is only so much we can do, Ves."

At this time, they reached a parade ground where around five-hundred mech cadets stood in formation.

"Watch this." Ronsel told him before stepping up to the serious-looking kids in uniform.

All of them looked incredibly intense!

"Cadets! Identify yourselves!"

"WE ARE LARKINSON MECH CADETS!"

"What is your cause?"

"WE FIGHT TO PROTECT THE BRIGHT REPUBLIC!"

"Who are your benefactors?"

"WE GIVE THANKS TO THE LARKINSON FAMILY!"

The fervor demonstrated by the mech cadets matched that of the Ylvainans! How long had the Larkinsons been working on these kids?

Ves wanted to scratch his head. Was it necessary for the Larkinsons to adopt a rigorous, military-style training approach at this stage?

This was too excessive!

Once Ronsel dismissed the mech cadets, he guided Ves to a separate training facility.

Aside from touring the Larkinson's pet project, Ves had another reason to visit the mech academy.

It was time for him to pick up William Urbesh from the tender care of the Larkinsons.

#### *Chapter 1556 Looked Down Upon*

A young and athletic man collapsed in exhaustion after running his umpteenth lap. No one else was present in the large and well-equipped training facility aside from William and his designated trainer for the day.

Once Ves and Ronsel entered the main training hall, they quickly strode over to the occupants.

Ves peered down at William's sweaty, fit body. This was the body of a warrior and a mech pilot. If anyone told him that the person occupying this body was an abject coward, he wouldn't believe it at first.

"How has this fellow fared under your care?"

"Poorly." Ronsel sighed. "Young William here is by far our most confounding student. We have never encountered a mech pilot who is so completely helpless when it comes to actual mech combat. In fact, forget about mechs, he's not even able to bring himself to spar with our trainers."

The Rim Guardians wouldn't have given up on William Urbesh if his condition was easy to treat. Not even Ronsel managed to overcome William's crippling psychological condition!

"At least he made some progress under your training regime, right?"

"We did. We systematically trained and retrained him. Aside from his affliction, we managed to correct all of his bad habits and expand his versatility. Upon your instructions, we've spent a lot of effort in making him proficient in piloting spaceborn rifleman mechs. It's not much use, though. Even if he's relegated to the rear of a battle line, he still locks up in fear."

What a sad mech pilot. The more Ves stared at the exiled scion of the Urbesh Clan, the more he became disgusted at the sight.

Even though he knew that William was not to blame for his uncontrollable affliction, cowardice was something every Larkinson had learned to detest. No matter if it was Ves, Ronsel or William's current instructor, all of them looked down on William with mild contempt.

"Please carry him back to the locker room to refresh himself. We're taking him with us back to the Mech Nursery."

The instructor approached and easily lifted William up as if he was a sack.

"Unhand me!" The young mech pilot protested! "I can take care of myself!"

No one listened to his words.

Ves and Ronsel talked for a while before William Urbesh reappeared, clean and ready to depart.

"Come with me. It's time to step up the next phase of your training."

Some time later, Ves said goodbye to Ronsel and took William inside his shuttle. As his vehicle rose to the air and departed to the Mech Nursery, William immediately launched a tirade against Ves!

"You! It's all your fault! Why did you dump me onto the laps of your hellishly strict relatives!? I hate you! I hate your Larkinsons! If I was back in Vicious Mountain, I could easily crush you measly third-raters!"

Ves calmly raised his hand. "Nitaa. Please slap some sense in him. His words displease my sensibilities."

Even if Urbesh came from a once-storied clan from a tribe within the vast and powerful Garlen Empire, Ves did not care for William's feelings. The mech pilot was merely a means to an end.

As Nitaa approached, William feebly raised his arms, only for them to get whacked aside. A couple of precisely-controlled punches followed that quickly wiped away the mech pilot's bluster.

"Ahh! That hurts! The Rim Guardians won't forgive you!"

"Again, Nitaa."

"Ahh! Stop it! I'm sorry, Mr. Larkinson!"

"Pathetic." Ves sneered at William. "The mech pilots of Vicious Mountain are known as warriors and tyrants. Has all of the training we put into you gone to waste? A real man ought to stand up for himself!"

"I-I-I-I can't! Your woman is too big and strong! There's no way I can beat her in a fight!"

Ves wordlessly shook his head in disappointment. This fellow was more pathetic than a male Hexer! What would Gloriana think when she finally met William in person?

Once Nitaa taught William a lesson, the mech pilot sat meekly on the opposite side of the shuttle. The man fidgeted uncomfortably under Ves' piercing glance.

It didn't help that Ves slowly raised the pressure emanating from his overcoat. Zeigra's spiritual fragment perpetually radiated a mix of pride, aggression and hatred towards Ves, though everyone else in the vicinity suffered from its aura as well.

"Ahh! Please stop it, Mr Larkinson! I can't take it! I want to die!"

Ves dampened the aura from his overcoat to give the Urbesh clansman some relief.

In truth, Ves performed a brief experiment to see how Urbesh reacted to Zeigra's aura on a spiritual level.

Unlike many other mech pilots, William was lucky enough to possess spiritual potential. Ves observed the mech pilot's trace of spirituality very carefully when he raised his overcoat's aura to the maximum.

As expected, a very intense spiritual reaction took place in William's spirituality. It amplified and resonated with the man's existing fears and other related emotions.

This little test confirmed Ves' suspicions. William's fears were rooted deeply in his personality. So much so that once he developed spiritual potential, the weak trace of spirituality in his head acquired a character that matched his cowardly personality!

The implications of these observations were grave.

If Ves used an unknown means to forcibly elevate William into an expert candidate, then his cowardice wouldn't go away. Instead, as his spirituality developed further, his cowardice would become more magnified!

Even if William advanced all the way to god pilot, his cowardice would be so strong that he wouldn't even be able to hurt a fly despite his immense might!

"What a tricky problem." Ves muttered under his breath.

Fixing this fellow's problem wasn't as simple as performing spiritual lobotomization on his spirituality.

William possessed very little spirituality. The reason why Ves described it as spiritual potential was because it only amounted to potential in this stage.

There was no way that William possessed enough spirituality to augment his piloting and fighting skills.

What was worse was that the spiritual attribute that was most predominant in William's spirituality probably corresponded to his cowardice. The man had lived in so much fear that his spirituality precisely reflected how badly he got spooked!

How much spirituality would be left after Ves cut off the part he considered a tumor? Almost nothing!

Ves had no idea what would happen. Would William lose so much spiritual potential that he would regress to a norm without potential? He couldn't risk this possibility!

As the shuttle approached the Mech Nursery, Ves silently formed a number of approaches. All of them came with various amounts of risks.

Whatever approach he selected, he needed to make a choice very soon. The custom mech destined for William needed to accommodate a mech pilot who was willing to fight.

It was pointless to finalize a custom mech for a mech pilot who would definitely turn around and flee at the first sight of an enemy!

Once the shuttle arrived at the Mech Nursery, the group moved down to the newly-refurbished lab and workshop floor.

As soon as Ves entered the main hall, he instantly became struck by the advanced equipment.

Though Ves didn't know what they were capable of, they looked as sleek, classy and capable as the lab machines owned by Master Olson!



"How luxurious!" He gasped.

"Ves! Over here!"

Ves walked to Gloriana who was wearing a lab coat and exchanged a kiss.

"How have you been?"

"I'm great. This workshop looks a lot better now that I replaced your trash machines with my own equipment. Do you want to see what they can do?"

"Later." Ves waved his hand. "Let's meet with the others first."

A number of people stood aside as Ves and Gloriana kissed and greeted each other. Ketis in particular looked a bit unsettled before she schooled her face.

"Ketis, you've grown up." He spoke.

As he inspected her with his spiritual senses, he sensed that her nascent design philosophy had made a lot of progress.

"With the sandmen sweeping through the frontier, I realized that I can't play around anymore." She spoke with graveness. Her upbeat personality was nowhere to be found right now! "If not for Calabast, my fellow Swordmaidens wouldn't have been able to make it out. I owe a huge debt to you and her. I hope I can pay it back one day."

"You don't have to feel you owe us something." Ves gently smiled at her. "Commander Dise and the Swordmaidens can take care of their own debt to Calabast. As for you, you're my student. Progressing as a mech designer is enough to make me satisfied."

"Thank you, sir, but I'm not a good friend if I don't settle this debt."

"She's a good kid." Gloriana smiled and pressed against Ves. "Smart, too. I don't mind tutoring her a bit when I have some time available."

"Please do. Ketis hasn't received an orthodox mech design education, so she's a little rough around the edges."

"I've noticed. I don't mind. She's dedicated to our craft and cares a lot about her design philosophy. She's a good seed."

Ves wasn't sure if Gloriana was actually sincere or if she merely acted polite in order to avoid badmouthing his first student.

Whatever the case, Ves hoped that both women would be able to get along. They were both his two most important fellow mech designers.

He asked a few more questions to Ketis. She hadn't spent the last year in vain. Aside from designing some variants by herself, she also expanded her knowledge base to the point where she possessed a solid Apprentice-level foundation. She even made some strides towards acquiring Journeyman-level Mechanics, but the sheer amount of knowledge couldn't be picked up so easily at her busy schedule.

Once he became satisfied at her progress, he turned his attention to the four teenagers standing attentively next to Ketis.

"So, are you the hopeful future mech designers the Larkinsons have sent to me? Introduce yourselves, please."

"Maikel Larkinson."

"Rennie Larkinson."

"Maisie Ann Larkinson."

"Zanthar Larkinson."

Two boys, two girls. Each of them ranged from ages fourteen to sixteen. All of them had moved to Cloudy Curtain a while ago and attended a local school. Not only that, the Larkinsons also supplemented their learning by hiring a bunch of excellent tutors for all of their kids.

The four seeds before Ves received the most attention from the tutors. The Larkinsons were very hopeful that they would become the supporting pillars of the family a decade or two from now.

Unfortunately, it was unlikely they would amount to more. At this moment, none of the four seeds possessed spiritual potential. Unless they developed it later on, becoming Apprentices was the most they could achieve in their lives.

That made him wonder how soon a human could develop spiritual potential. Ves mostly spent his time with adults, and they either possessed it or not. He never saw an instance where adults naturally managed to develop spiritual potential.

Did humans acquire it during their teens? Then these seeds still possessed hope.

Ves looked at the four seeds sternly and subtly raised the aura of his overcoat.

To their credit, even though the teenagers looked up to Ves, they possessed enough courage to withstand a moderate portion of Zeigra's fury.

He nodded in approval and gradually dialed down the aura. "All of you are true Larkinsons. I don't know how smart you are and how well you can learn my craft, but

don't forget that you are Larkinsons. Courage and discipline defines us. You will each need to work hard and push yourselves to your limits in order to keep up with your studies. Even if we share the same blood, I won't go easy on you, because mech designers never have it easy."

Maisie Ann timidly raised her hand.

"Will we be able to design mechs?"

Both Ves and Gloriana laughed.

"Don't be in such a hurry!" Ves gently waved her down. "Designing a mech can only take place as long as you have become proficient in math, physics, mechanics and so on. The knowledge you require to start designing mechs is something that you won't be able to acquire in your teens."

The four seeds looked disappointed, but Ves didn't want to spoil them too much.

#### *Chapter 1557 Lesson in Risk-Taking*

While Ves talked with the seeds selected by the Larkinsons, his girlfriend approached William Urbesh.

Her analytical gaze made William uncomfortable.

"So you are William of the Urbesh Clan." She harrumphed. "Well, Ves hadn't been lying when he said you were lacking. How can such good stock be ruined by an inability to face opponents?"

Before William could even open his mouth to defend himself, Gloriana signaled a bodyguard who took the hapless mech pilot and dragged him over to one of the lab machines.

She wanted to get to work on examining William's condition thoroughly! The custom mech she prepared for the Urbesh clansman still needed more adjustments to achieve a better fit!

"Help me! I don't want to go into this machine!"

"Don't complain and sit still!"

"Um, sir..." Maikel raised.

"Don't mind what they are doing. You've heard about William Urbesh, right?"

They all nodded. Who hadn't heard of the cowardly mech pilot the Larkinson instructors had been trying to beat into shape?

Ves quickly moved on and began to lecture the seeds. He wasn't really interested in getting to know them better until they proved themselves. For now, they were just high school students who had a lot to go before they became qualified mech designers.

"Mech design is a great profession to those who have a passion for mechs." He began. "Designing mechs is more than a science. It's also an art. Studying the sciences merely serves as a foundation that makes you eligible to design mechs. It does not guarantee you will be able to succeed. While you should mostly focus on learning at your stage, don't neglect your creativity."

He activated a table projection and quickly summoned up the design schematics of his current commercial mech models.

"A good mech designer is an inventive mech designer. All of my commercial mech models have sold by the thousands because they are unique in some way. Do you think it's easy to compete against the oversaturated mech market? The competition is incredibly intense. Unless you develop a specialty that is both rare and valuable, you won't be able to cut it as an independent mech designer. If you can't be an independent, you'll have to work for someone else, which means you won't be able to earn a fraction of what my mech company rakes in per day!"

He carefully studied the gazes of the four young Larkinsons. Each of them admired the complicated design schematics projected over the table while at the same time dreaming about earning as much money as Ves. This was what every prospective mech designer dreamed!

Ves smirked at their eager faces. It was fine for them to dream. The problem was that it took more than wishful thinking to get to this point.

"To those who enjoy success, designing and selling mechs is incredibly lucrative. Let's take my latest mech model and its variant for example."

He waved his hand, causing every projection except the Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier.

Now that the two schematics had been isolated, the four seeds faintly sensed the X-Factor contained within.

"Do you know how many Desolate Soldiers the LMC expects to sell within the first two months of release?"

"Ten thousand?" Rennie guessed.

"No, you dolt! Haven't you kept up with the latest news? The Desolate Soldiers are selling like hotcakes right now! The model will probably sell over fifty-thousand times!"

The other two Larkinson seeds gasped.

Ves rapped his knuckle against the work table and smiled. "It's more than that. Our current estimates have reached 100,000 copies! We had to revise our projections upwards because my mech model is more popular than we've anticipated!"

A huge shock ran through the seeds. All of them knew how much they sold for, though they weren't sure how much profit the LMC made per sale. However, with such a huge sales volume, the total profit shouldn't be small!

He smirked. "There's more. Even if my mech company isn't selling any mechs, my design work is already valuable in itself. Do you know how much money the LMC earned from licensing the two designs? More than 200 billion bright credits."

This unimaginably vast sum exceeded the thinking capacity of the young seeds. When money reached this kind of height, no one could keep a clear head anymore!

As Ves studied the expressions and emotions of the interns carefully, he mentally shook his head. He bet that all four of them were imagining themselves in his place!

Ves slapped his palm against the table, forcing the Larkinson students from their delusions!

"Do you think it's easy to get to this point? Do you think I'm earning all of those hundreds of billions of credits with ease now that I'm a Journeyman?"

"It's not?"

"No! Even a Journeyman can fail! No matter how well they design a mech, if it doesn't bring any added value compared to competing designs, it simply won't sell! Don't think of this as a single-player game. Every mech designer is participating in the biggest multiplayer game in the galaxy, and that game is called the mech market."

Every kid played games. The Larkinson seeds instantly understood his simple analogy.

"Think about how many mech designers are operating in the galaxy." Ves said. "Almost all of them are deadweight. Do you know why? Because they don't have the guts to design something different from the norm. Everyone needs to take some risks to distinguish themselves from the crowd."

Ves patted his chest with pride. "I hope you don't forget what it means to be a Larkinson. One of the biggest reasons I made it this far is because I am a Larkinson. Don't think that courage is only relevant to mech pilots. There are plenty of times in your

mech design career where you will need to go above and beyond and take some risks in order to achieve success!"

His appeal resonated with the seeds. They were all Larkinsons who grew up in a family that highly prized courage.

When Ves mentioned how their Larkinson heritage could help them become better mech designers, their fires started to get lit!

"Good!" He exulted. "Don't forget this sensation! What you are feeling right now is passion! As long as you are able to summon this sensation again, I'm confident that you'll be able to reach my level in time!"

Perhaps there was some hope for these seeds after all. Of course, his brilliant teaching played a huge role in stoking up their passion.

"Let me give you your very first lesson of the day." Ves gazed at their eyes in a challenging fashion. "Dare to design."

The words contained a profoundness that the Larkinson seeds barely comprehended after listening to what Ves previously said. The succinct phrase neatly encapsulated his beliefs on how a mech designer should develop themselves.

"A mech designer has to be bold!"

"A mech designer has to be daring!"

"A mech designer has to be innovative!"

"Certainly, taking risks is not always healthy. Sometimes, you lose, but so what? At least you tried your best! Caution and incrementalism won't get you anywhere in the cutthroat mech market! If you want to stand taller, then you'll need to push yourself and surpass your potential!"

Ves continued to lecture the seeds along this refrain for the next couple of hours. The seeds attentively hung on his words as if they were starving chicks gobbling up the food their mother bird regurgitated.

He made a very deliberate decision to shape their perspectives on mech design. They already learned the basic sciences at school and from their tutors. There was no need for Ves to waste his time on such a trifling matter.

What mattered more was their mindset and principles. If they didn't develop a perspective that allowed them to survive the brutal mech industry, then they wouldn't be able to accomplish anything even if they absorbed a lot of learning.

Ves had constantly grappled with this dynamic ever since he obtained the System.

As blank slates, Ves wielded a lot of power. The Larkinson seeds all worshipped him because he was a rare and esteemed Journeyman. He made use of the authority he gained from his status and accomplishments to indoctrinate the seeds with a particular set of values.

In the back of his mind, he knew that he would invite a lot of controversy if other mech designers heard what he said. Ves had deviated from the orthodox path by emphasizing risk-taking a lot more than was prudent.

A lot of mech designers were actually very risk-averse! The best that could be asked of them was to take careful, calculated risks every now and then. What Ves currently taught significantly differed from what he learned at school!

It was very difficult to push a cautious mech designer into taking risks. That was why Ves addressed this matter in their very first teaching session.

If the seeds internalized his lessons, then they might end up like little Vesses in the future.

Was that a good thing? Not entirely.

Unlike the actual Ves, the little Vesses did not enjoy his advantages. Lacking the System meant that they would likely fall to ruin if they lost a big bet!

Yet what did it matter to Ves? Let them fail! As long as one of the little Vesses succeeded, then the gains would definitely be bountiful. A single overwhelming success was far more preferable than four mediocre results.

In short, Ves was basically turning his teaching responsibility to the Larkinsons into a high-stakes bet. He wanted the little Vesses to push themselves to the limit and adopt an innovative mindset from the very start!

Even if Ves ended up leading the seeds to ruin, so what? The Larkinsons would probably keep sending him hopeful mech design students who could shoulder the burden of supporting the increasingly voracious Larkinson Family.

If his first four bets failed, then Ves would simply repeat his gamble! Eventually, one Larkinson seed would bloom into a flower. He just hoped that he wouldn't ruin too many seeds to get to this point.

In any case, the Larkinson seeds had it much easier than Ves. When he initially started his business, he didn't enjoy any backing from the Larkinsons.

It was different now. The Larkinsons finally came around to mech design and supported anyone smart enough to pursue it. Those who succeeded would become pillars of the family, while those who failed or fell short could still lean on Ves and the Larkinson Family to mitigate their losses.

Ves didn't mind wiping their butts if it was convenient for him to do so. This allowed his little Vesses to take more risks, thereby increasing the odds of achieving massive success!

"Don't ever think that mech design is easy." He wrapped up his lecture. "In order to stand out from the crowd, you need to swim against the current. At this stage, most of my words don't apply to your current situation, but you should never forget them. You are Larkinsons. Don't forget that. Becoming a mech designer does not mean you have to go against your nature."

The little Vesses all looked dazed as Ves had given them an abundance of instruction, many of which they had never heard.

Ves let them stew over his words and walked up to Gloriana.

Ketis had joined her as well to act as an assistant while they examined William's properties.

The mech pilot wearily underwent numerous tests, some of which pushed him to exhaustion, while others inflicted a lot of pain.

Gloriana needed as much data as possible. A lot of lab equipment she brought in weren't dedicated to the study of exotics or anything directly related to mechs.

Instead, they were dedicated to examining mech pilots.

"How is it going, Gloriana?"

"I still need another day."

"You may have to wait."

"Why so?" She turned to him with a questioning eye.

"Because I intend to start his treatment immediately." Ves grinned.

"Oh? How can you possibly treat his condition? Even the Rim Guardians failed!"

"I have my ways. You may not be aware, but I happen to possess a fair amount of experience in experimenting with people's heads."



His eyes carried the familiar glint reserved for test subjects.

#### *Chapter 1558 Spiritual Treatment Plan*

The Rim Guardians gave him a deadline of three years to get William Urbesh into shape.

Almost one year had passed, which meant that Ves had two years left to turn him into an expert candidate.

Ves put extensive thought on how to approach William's treatment.

Even the most intensive training from the Larkinsons hadn't put a dent in his psychological affliction. This meant that taking the slow and steady approach likely wouldn't yield any results in the remaining two years.

Ves intended to complete this mission quickly. He didn't want to waste too much time on William.

To do that, Ves needed to follow his own advice and take some risks.

As Ves observed his girlfriend subjecting William to a variety of scans and invasive tests, he mentally went over his possible treatment plans.

Before he could turn William into an expert candidate, he first had to treat his psychological condition.

Only after he completed this step would Ves be ready to consider the next step. No one had ever come up with a method of turning a regular mech pilot into an expert candidate.

If Ves wanted to succeed in pioneering a viable method, he needed to lay the groundwork. He needed to get rid of as many complications as possible.

A crippling fear towards fighting was such a debilitating condition that it could single-handedly ruin everything. Therefore, it needed to go.

The problem was that Ves hadn't been able to come up with a good solution. All he came up with so far were a bunch of flawed solutions. Each of them promised to solve the problem, but demanded a very high price in exchange.

The first solution was his original plan of performing spiritual lobotomization on William. He already dismissed this solution because the dangers were way too big.

Even if he succeeded in cutting off the spiritual tumors without collapsing William's spirituality, what prevented him from growing back another spiritual tumor?

Ves shook his head. "This is by far the worst solution imaginable."

The second solution he came up with was to do the opposite of subtracting from William's spirituality. Instead of cutting away his fear, it might be better to insert some courage.

Ves could draw upon several sources of courage. He could donate his own spiritual energy, for example. He could cut a mote of spirituality from Zeigra, the Solemn Guardian and even the tyrannical Nyxie to obtain the appropriate ingredient!

The only problem was integrating this mote of spiritual courage into William's spiritual potential.

Spirituality consisted of spiritual energy. Spiritual energy was not uniform, but differed by attribute and imprint.

Both needed to match the individual to be able to merge.

For example, the excess spiritual energy that Ves deposited into his P-stones perfectly matched his own attributes and imprint.

Even if his attribute mix changed over time, he could still reabsorb his stored spiritual energy with ease.

Yet what if he tried to insert his excess spiritual energy in someone else???s mind?

From what he knew, there was no reason his spiritual energy would integrate in William's spiritual potential. It was as stupid as injecting William's body with his blood and expect them to get along.

While Ves had developed a spiritual technique that allowed him to manipulate imprints, he had never attempted to expand a living human's spirituality to imprint itself on ownerless spiritual energy.

His successful attempt that led to the creation of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment did not entail many risks. Even if he failed, he wouldn't be able to harm someone who was already dead. He could have simply stolen another relic and tried again.

That would not be the case when it came to a living human like William. Once he made a catastrophic failure, then William's mind and spirituality would sustain severe damage!

The outcome could very well lead to death or permanent brain damage!

Even if he succeeded in expanding a living human's imprint on ownerless spiritual energy, he still had to solve another problem.

William needed to integrate an entire different spiritual attribute.

It would be best if the spiritual attribute was compatible with his existing personality and inclination.

However, that wasn't the case here. Ves wanted to insert a lot of courage in William's spirituality.

Courage happened to be diametrically opposed to William's intrinsic fear. What would happen if opposites met?

"Nothing good."

A violent clash would definitely ensue. Even if Ves inserted enough spiritual energy related to courage to overpower the spiritual energy related to fear, the damage to William's mind might be too much to bear.

To Ves, the second solution was a bit more sound than the first solution, but both inflicted way too much damage while offering few guarantees of success.

Fortunately, he came up with a third solution that promised much less risk.

Normally, Ves considered spiritual contamination to be a detrimental effect. Ves had often been exposed to contamination in various forms. As a mech designer, he used to be sensitive to contamination by another mech designer's design philosophy.

That had changed once he advanced to Journeyman. With his design seed, he no longer needed to worry as much about abandoning his principles and taking over someone else's views towards mech design.

Of course, even if the risks were minimized, they hadn't gone away. His design seed could only sustain so much pressure until it cracked.

Ves scratched his chin. "Fortunately, William isn't nearly as strong."

William did not possess the extraordinary willpower of an expert pilot. Just like Novice and Apprentice Mech Designers, his spirituality was still very malleable.

He just needed to treat it the right way.

Whereas the first two solutions called for adding or subtracting spiritual energy in a very crude fashion, his third solution was a lot more gentle.

Ves wanted to contaminate William's spirituality.

Deliberate contamination was the best alternative he came up with. Spiritual energy was not fixed. If their imprints could change, what about their attributes?

Of course, Ves didn't think it would be so easy.

He first needed to obtain a spiritual fragment with the right attributes and package it in a way that prevented it from doing damage to William's mind.

The spiritual fragment needed to be strong enough to contaminate William's existing spiritual attributes, but not too strong to the point of inflicting unwanted damage.

"This solution is not entirely without risks." He softly muttered.

When Ves went over his three solutions again and again but believed his last one was the most viable one.

There were still a lot of uncertainties. Would contaminating someone's spirituality also contaminate someone's mind?

Ves hoped so. If possible, he wanted to kill two birds with one stone.

However, he would settle for killing just one bird if that was all he got. He would just have to pick up a different stone to kill the bird that managed to stay alive.

To contaminate a coward's mind with courage sounded crazy, but his intuition did not ring any alarms. With a lack of a better alternative, Ves decided to implement it before he second-guessed his own decision.

First, he had to obtain a spiritual fragment. One that carried spiritual attributes that could overpower William's deepest fears.

The mech pilot was not just a coward, but he was a king of cowards! Just regular courage didn't suffice!

"I need quality instead of quantity!"

Ves reminded himself that William only possessed a tiny bit of spirituality. The spiritual fragment needed to be as small as a mote of spirituality if he wanted to minimize the risk of crushing William's spirituality.

"I have three choices here."

From which source should he draw out this mote of spirituality?

Ves, the mech designer?

Zeigra, the Crown Cat?

Or Nyxie, the ancient alien tyrant?

Though Ves thought highly of his courage, he wasn't so sure if its quality was sound. Perhaps a part of his courage was actually a result of ignorance or opportunism.

"That's more like false courage."

The only advantage of choosing this option was that his control over his spiritual energy was the highest. He could expertly manipulate it because it wouldn't resist his ministrations.

Ves wanted to achieve a solid result. After a bit more thought, he ruled out using his own spiritual energy.

He contemplated his next alternative. It would be fairly easy for him to cut out a mote of spiritual energy from the fragment stored in his overcoat.

While Zeigra's spiritual attributes largely consisted of pride and aggression and so on, they would certainly clash against anything related to fear and cowardice.

Ves considered this option to be better and more effective, if a bit more risky due to his inability to control the fragment as well.

The third option would be to go one step further and draw out a spiritual mote from the most fearless entity he could think of. Nyxie was immensely strong and the quality of his spiritual energy simply couldn't be compared.

With how powerful and effective Nyxie affected people's minds, Ves had no doubt that a spiritual mote taken from the spiritual entity trapped in the Ancient Sarcophagus was incredibly infectious!

The only issue was that Nyxie was incredibly hostile, arrogant and domineering, so much so that Zeigra was like a kitten in comparison!

Yet was that a bad thing in this case?

"Not necessarily."

Why settle for a half-measure like Zeigra when Ves could turn to Nyxie instead?

Ves would never want to contaminate himself with Nyxie's diverse mix of dominance, tyranny and alienness.

He didn't need to. That was what his test subject was for. To Ves, test subjects existed to pay the prices on his behalf!

At worst, William might die or degenerate into a feral human contaminated by an alien spirit.

If this outcome happened, then the only price he paid was failing the mission issued by the Rim Guardians. His life would be completely intact.

He smirked. "I can accept that price."

Though he felt a bit uncertain about settling on this extreme decision, a part of him was incredibly excited.

He really wanted to see what would happen!

Ves started to rub his hands in anticipation. A devious grin was plastered on his face as he outlined and detailed his treatment plan.

He believed it was viable!

Even if he ended up botching the process in some way that resulted in William becoming a psychopath or monster, who cared?

Ves had only been instructed to elevate William into an expert candidate. What did it matter if his mind and spirituality had been twisted by an eldritch alien horror along the way?

As long as the outcome fulfilled the requirements, all the other problems could be left to others!

"Hahaha! I'll just let others clean my mess!"

The moment he formed his plan of action, he withdrew from the lab and workshop floor and visited the vault.

There, he first retrieved some P-stones, his only F-stone and his B-stone lockbox. He then retracted the Ancient Sarcophagus from its storage place.

"Hello, Nyxie. It's time for your regularly-scheduled haircut." He grinned.

Some time later, Ves put everything back aside from his B-stone lockbox that contained a P-stone holding in an angry spiritual fragment.

"I can save this up for my next original mech design project." He nodded.

He only winced a bit at the price he paid to obtain this fragment. The offensive charge in his F-stone had been reduced by another nine percent.

He used a bit less charge than last time because he didn't need more strength. He had a better handle on Nyxie's strength now and hadn't been going in blind this time.

"Maybe nine percent is still too much." He muttered.

In any case, Ves not only obtained a powerful spiritual fragment that he could save for later, but he could also cut tiny motes from it to use for other purposes.

The only issue now was how much he should treat the mote before using it as a contaminant?

### *Chapter 1559 Roaring Inflation*

He decided to spend some time by himself to draw out a larger-than-average mote of spiritual energy and apply some spiritual refining.

Using methods he developed before, he drew spiritual attributes that he didn't want and cut them away.

Ves tried to be as diligent as possible and focused mostly on cutting out the weird, unidentifiable alien attributes. Even if Ves didn't care about how William would turn out after being subject to contamination, it would be bad if the mech pilot started speaking an alien language or began to worship an alien god.

"There are still some limits to how far I can go. William still needs to be a functioning human being."

Therefore, Ves was fairly meticulous in his crude refining process. He kept cutting more and more undesirable parts out of the mote until it only retained a fraction of its essence.

Still, even this tiny fragment was enough to overpower William's spiritual potential.

Ves needed to weaken or dampen it in some fashion. After some thought, he decided to surround it with a spiritual barrier.

Just like how he formed a flexible barrier around Zeigra's spiritual fragment to modulate its aura, Ves was doing the same to Nyxie's spiritual mote.

This way, he could adjust how much the mote's contaminating influence affected its surroundings.

While Ves wasn't sure if his spiritual barrier blocked everything, he didn't sense much threat once his barrier closed around the mote.

"It's probably sufficient. Probably."

The spiritual barrier also acted as a cell that isolated the spiritual mote from attacking or directly affecting William's spirituality.

What Ves wanted to achieve gradual, controllable contamination. An abrupt merger or collision risked way too much.

"This is it." He nodded.

He stowed away the other exotics into the vault and kept the shielded spiritual mote in his mind.

As much as he feared anything related to Nyxie, a tiny spiritual mote could do nothing to a Journeyman of his strength. He was more than confident enough that he would be able to resist contamination from a partially-purified spiritual mote.

Ves headed back to the lab and workshop floor. The four seeds had already left in order to resume their regular studies. Gloriana and Ketis were still in the process of examining William.

Once William came out of a machine, Ves ordered Nitaa forward to claim the mech pilot.

"Hey!" Gloriana glared at Ves. "I'm not finished with him yet! Why are you taking him away?!"

"Huh?" William shuddered in fear. "What treatment plan are you referring to, Mr. Larkinson."

"I've come up with a way to treat your affliction, William." Ves smiled reassuringly at the mech pilot before turning to Gloriana. "I've completed my preparations. I'm not sure how long it will take, but once I'm done he'll probably come back as a different man. By then, it's best if you repeat your prior examinations from scratch."

"That doesn't invalidate the need to perform scans, Ves. If nothing else, we can compare the differences and learn how effective your treatment plan has worked. We can also keep an eye out for any unintended side effects."

While Ves did not think that contaminating William would lead him to grow an alien third leg or something, he recognized Gloriana's point.



Though Ves prized expedience, he shouldn't be too careless when he was about to apply an innovative and risky spiritual operation.

"Fine." He nodded. "I'll let you have William for another day, but no more! The sandmen that have reached the Bright Republic are growing more numerous by the day. I want William to be ready to deploy into battle within a few weeks."

William gasped. "What?! You're sending me to the frontlines! Please no! Please don't do this! I don't want to die!"

Nobody listened to the coward's complaints.

Since Gloriana insisted on delaying the treatment, Ves called it a day and left the lab.

He decided to spend the rest of his time on catching up to other work. He returned to his penthouse office at the headquarters and called up Gavin to hear the latest updates on the sales of his latest mech models.

"Our Desolate Soldiers keep selling as fast as we can produce them." Gavin emphasized with a smile. "What's more, a lot of third-party manufacturers have seen how successful they are and approached us with offers."

"I hope the LMC hasn't been too hasty in extending contracts."

"We know how important it is to maintain adequate quality. We've been busy with auditing the applicants to make sure they are capable of meeting our standards. So far, only a couple of bad apples have slipped through."

Ves studied the money the LMC earned so far and held his breath. The license fees combined with the earnings made from sales combined to a horrific amount of money!

His Desolate Soldiers already netted him more profit than any of his previous mech models! While their margins weren't as impressive as his older premium mech models, the sales volume was absolutely immense!

Perhaps the true road to dominance in the mech market did not lay in the premium price category, but the budget price category!

As Ves grinned from ear-to-ear as he imagined all of the profits he would earn, Gavin gently interrupted his daydreaming.

"It's not all good news, Ves." Gavin spoke after adopting a serious expression. "Inflation is rising in the Bright Republic as well as every other state affected by the sandman invasion. The government and everyone else is spending money like it's their last opportunity to do so! The bright credit has already lost ten percent of its value over the last month and it's projected that its value will reduce by twenty percent the next month!"

Ves almost had a heart attack when he heard this figure! "What does that mean for the LMC?"

"Our current policy is to constantly adjust the prices for our products. We're only able to set the prices for the mechs we produce ourselves or those produced by third-party manufacturers under contract, so our prices are largely consistent. Luckily, everyone is already used to frequent price increases."

Gavin and Ves talked a little more about the consequences of inflation on the company. As Ves had already foreseen, holding an increasing pile of cash at this time was incredibly stupid.

For the duration of the sandman prices, every month its value would reduce by ten to twenty percent. In some months, it might be even worse!

Though the Bright Republic deserved a lot of credit for keeping inflation largely under control even through the worst periods of the Bright-Vesia Wars, the sandman threat was so much greater.

It was better to spend money now than when it was too late to make a difference!

"In a month or two, our Desolate Soldiers will likely be sold for 25 million bright credits. A month after that, 30 million bright credits. By the time the sandman invasion has run its course, it's not impossible for a Desolate Soldier to be sold for 100 million bright credits!"

Even though the numbers kept getting bigger, the actual value kept growing smaller!

The same was happening in every other state threatened by the sandmen. Every local currency was rapidly losing value because every person or organization with savings wanted to convert useless money into tangible assets!

At this moment, mechs but especially ships were in incredibly high demand!

An enormous amount of civilians pooled their money together to order evacuation ships. Private shipyards were working on overtime to pump out vessel after vessel, but they hadn't even been able to make a dent on demand!

The LMC had big plans to spend its enormous windfall, and the onset of inflation increased everyone's urgency. Even if their profligate spending plans contributed to the rise of inflation, no one cared.

If the Bright Republic fell, the bright credit would be worth nothing! Faced with such a ruinous outcome, even the government ran its printing presses like no tomorrow!

"I see." Ves sighed. "I suppose there is so much we can spend on at the moment, right?"

Gavin nodded. "A lot of goods and services are in high demand. The prices of several essential raw materials used in the production of our mechs have risen far above the rate of inflation. These metals and exotics have many different applications, hence their huge demand."

"Does that mean we'll have to raise the real prices of our two mech models?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

A grim silence ensued. One of the biggest appeals of his Soldier product line was that it was a great bargain. Raising its real prices by ten percent or twenty percent would put a severe dent to its value proposition.

Ves silently consoled himself with the fact that other mech manufacturers wouldn't be left out. Depending on how much scarce materials they incorporated in their mech designs, their prices might rise even more drastically.

"Let's leave the planning and the details to the Marketing, Finance and Accounting Department." Ves eventually waved his hand. "As long as our company survives, everything is fine."

After discussing some miscellaneous matters, Gavin raised an important topic.

"The Ministry of Defense has sent us an official letter. You should read it first."

Ves took Gavin's data pad and read through the official-sounding document. What Leland told him earlier had come true. MinDef appreciate his Desolate Soldier model, but found its limitations to be a hindrance to their plans.

"MinDef wants me to design additional variants of my Desolate Soldier." Ves announced and put down the data pad. "Have you read the letter?"

Gavin nodded. "I'm aware of what it says. One point I'd like to say is that MinDef has merely issued a request. While it's a bad idea to deny their requests, you aren't obligated to fulfill their entire wishlist. I think they'll understand if you have problems with some of the suggested variants."

Leland had already mentioned the four proposed variants beforehand. That gave Ves plenty of time to mull over the merits of the variants.

"I think all four merits can play a useful role." Ves gently spoke. "None of them are useless. It's just that some require more design work than others to complete. The time

that Gloriana and I must spend on designing the variants will detract from the time I could have spent on another original mech."

"Even so, the success of your Desolate Soldier design practically demands the development of variants." Gavin reminded Ves of the industry standard. "When you've created a hit, the usual answer is to milk it for all it's worth. There is so much more market share we can capture if we just change a couple of elements from the base model."

Both of them understood this logic, but Gavin was not a mech design. He viewed the decision from a marketing perspective, while Ves also had to think about the consequences to his progression.

Designing a completely new mech was much more fulfilling to him than coming up with another spin to an existing product. There was much less challenge and creativity involved in the latter that Ves would barely gain anything despite spending just as much time.

Time was valuable to Ves. He was only willing to spend it if he yielded something more.

This happened to be one of those times.

"Four variants." Ves repeated. He picked up the data pad and scrolled down to the list of specifications.

PRIDEFUL SOLDIER: VARIANT OF THE DESOLATE SOLDIER. AIMED AT IRREGULAR OUTFITS AND ORGANIZATIONS.

MILITANT SOLDIER: VARIANT OF THE DESOLATE SOLDIER. RESERVED FOR MILITARY USE.

WORTHY SOLDIER: VARIANT OF THE DESOLATE SOLDIER. ELITE VARIANT RESERVED FOR HIGHER-END MILITARY USE.

PEACEFUL SOLDIER: VARIANT OF THE DESOLATE SOLDIER. LANDBOUND MECH INTENDED FOR POLICING.

Ves wasn't surprised that MinDef wanted two different military variants. MinDef ran the Mech Corps, after all.

He wasn't surprised that they added in a landbound variant exclusive for policing and peacekeeping operations. His Desolate Soldiers were already quite a hit among Planetary Guard organizations, but their spaceborn nature made them very poor combatants on land.

The only variant that confounded him a little was the suggestion for the Proudful Soldier.

## *Chapter 1560 A Legend*

The perpetually-cloudy skies yellowed and redded as the local sun began to fade over the horizon.

In the idyllic Cloud Estate, a group of children giggled as they huddled around and played with a pair of cats.

"Meow~"

Lucky purred as a bunch of girls caressed his bone-white smooth exterior.

"Miaow~"

Clixie attracted a bit more attention due to the fact that she possessed actual fur.

Meanwhile, a pair of lovers comfortably leaned against each other as they sat at the porch in front of their mansion.

"I love it here." Gloriana sighed. "There's no pressure at all, unlike back at home. Your Larkinson relatives are so relaxed around each other."

"That's because most of the Larkinsons who reside here are either children or old dogs who have seen their fair share of battle." Ves replied while caressing her dainty hands. "We Larkinsons have learned early on that peace, tranquility and family are the best ways to mend the wounds of war."

"If only more families adopted the ways of the Larkinsons."

"To be honest, I'm not sure if we can sustain this tradition. Our Larkinson Family used to be well-off, but not extravagantly wealthy. There is little point in competing for money and resources when the prize pot is small."

Gloriana curiously turned towards her lover. "You're afraid your family will abandon this tradition?"

"I am. Peace and tranquility will be a thing of the past, and part of the blame lies on me. Already, many Larkinsons who used to spend their idle days in peace have returned to work. I've presented them with a new future, one that offers more than serving the Mech Corps or running the modest holdings of the Larkinson Estate."

"So what you're truly worried about is that your relatives will give up their happiness in order to pursue greater prosperity."

"Prosperity can make people happy as well." Ves spoke. "It's just that I don't want the Larkinson Family to transform into a noble house where competition is rife and

backstabbing is not unheard of. That's not who we are, yet every day I see my family taking another step towards this future."

He cherished the Larkinson Family he grew up with. Their core identity used to center around serving the Bright Republic.

Now, those simple days were beginning to fade. Almost every Larkinson found something to do and something to chase after. Parents already started to encourage their children to join the LMC or one of the mech forces under his control.

Less and less Larkinson mech pilots enlisted into the Mech Corps. While joining the military was a noble decision, it didn't earn them that much money. Only the expert pilots among them enjoyed special treatment.

As for the regular mech pilots among the Larkinsons, they fought and died over abstract ideals.

Now that a more attractive and more rewarding alternative became available, who wouldn't want to pass up the opportunity to join an outfit run by a Larkinson?

Gloriana smiled and kissed his cheek. "I think it will be fine as long as you take control and insist on preserving the family's traditions. The Larkinsons are pretty much eating from the palm of your hand at this point. They have no choice but to take your wishes into account."

"That's true." Ves tiredly sighed. "Let's discuss something else. Have you thought about the four variants that the government wants us to design?"

"Three out of four variants will take a lot of time to design. It won't be like the Holy Soldier where you just made some cosmetic changes. The deviances are so great that we need to overhaul the internals and replace existing component models with other component models."

Both of them shared their thoughts on the four variants.

The Proudful Soldier was the simplest to design. Ves merely had to make the mech a little more affordable and tweak its aura. The goal was to offer a more fitting choice for gangs and other underground organizations that disliked the base model's aura.

The Militant Soldier had to be designed according to military standards. This meant that Ves needed to replace commercial components with military components. He also needed to alter the configurations of all of the systems so that the mechs worked well alongside other mechs of the Mech Corps.

The Worthy Soldier was similar to the previous variant, only this time it had to be tailored to elites. MinDef wanted a mech that cost ten times more than the Desolate

Soldier that provided much more elevated battle performance while retaining the same strong aura.

As for the Peaceful Soldier, Ves had to make it suitable for landbound combat in order to meet the hot demand for a Desolate Soldier variant that could fight adequately on the ground.

"Each of them aside from the Proudful Soldier will require at least a month for us to design." Gloriana remarked. "In fact, the Worthy Soldier and the Peaceful Soldier are so different from the Desolate Soldier that they might as well be part of an entirely new product line."

"That's what I think as well. While MinDef really wants us to design all four variants, I think they won't kick up a fuss if we give up on one of their demands. It's not like we're the only mech designers who are supplying emergency designs to the government."

In fact, the Ministry of Defense probably wouldn't have approached him in the first place if his product wasn't so useful. The Desolate Soldier's aura kept winning over more and more people.

After a brief discussion, they made their choice on which variant to remove from their consideration.

Ves blissfully enjoyed Gloriana's scent while he explained his choice. "I originally envisioned the Desolate Soldier to be a disposable mech. It's a mech borne out of duty and necessity. The word 'desolate' in its name is my attempt to emphasize that performing a duty is difficult. Much is asked of the mech pilots of this mech model. They might find themselves alone, either because they lost all of their comrades to the sandmen or because they have passed on to the afterlife."

A variant did not necessarily have to share a close resemblance to the base model. However, if the divergence turned out to be incredibly wide, then a variant stopped being a variant. It became an entirely new product line.

From a conceptual viewpoint, the Worthy Soldier was everything the Desolate Soldier was not. One was disposable while the other one was valued. One was cheap while the other one was expensive. One crumpled after suffering a single heavy blow while the other one possessed advanced survival mechanisms.

All of these contrasts made it clear that they simply didn't belong to the same family!

Gloriana agreed with Ves and had her own objections. "There is little for us to gain in wasting too much time on developing variants. You need to design a lot of new mechs and prepare to complete my mother's challenge. We need to make the most out of the three years we have to get you ready to design and fabricate a second-class masterwork mech!"



Ves briefly grimaced at the thought. Gloriana was so confident in his ability to repeat his earlier feat that he was afraid what would happen if he failed to meet her expectations.

He didn't welcome the pressure she heaped upon his shoulders.

While he ordinarily thrived under pressure, he always set achievable goals for himself. Now that Gloriana set the goal this time, Ves struggled to cope with the urgency of creating another masterwork mech.

Such a demand was as difficult as winning the lottery two times in a row! While Ves could increase the odds of making a masterwork mech through putting his heart and soul into designing a mech, he couldn't control all of the factors.

Chance and serendipity remained out of his control. The importance of these factors in the creation of a masterwork mech enormously complicated Gloriana's fanciful goal.

No mech designer adopted a business model that centered around making masterwork mechs on demand!

While Ves heard rumors that only very good Masters and Star Designers were capable of making masterwork mechs on demand, he wasn't sure whether they had any merit.

As Ves worried over his chances of success, Gloriana smiled and leaned her head against his shoulder. Her long, black hair brushed softly against his cheek.

"It'll be okay, Ves. You're not alone in this. Together, I'm confident that we can meet my mother's expectations."

The two snuggled closer together.

Ves sighed as he enjoyed her warmth. "They say that when someone reaches the point where they can design and make the best mechs, they have reached a legendary state."

"At that point, a mech designer has fully transcended their human roots and become a god."

His lips twitched. "I'm not so sure about that, Gloriana. I much prefer to believe in the legend that a mech designer who has reached this height has acquired the mech touch!"

What did it mean to possess the mech touch?

In legend, a mech designer only had to touch the air in order to design the mech in the galaxy!



With another touch, a mech designer could realize this design into reality in its most perfect form!

Both of them recalled these claims and fantasized about reaching this height.

"A single touch to design a mech! A single touch to make a masterwork mech!" Ves recited while poking his finger into the air.

Ves used to believe that it was impossible for mech designers to accomplish this feat, but now he wasn't so sure. Humanity mastered a lot of high technology, many of which Ves couldn't even imagine they existed!

To achieve a state of drawing a complete mech design with a single touch was not as ludicrous as it sounded at first.

The mech designer simply had to be good enough to design the mech from scratch within their heads in a matter of seconds! The use of implants was probably essential to project a design that was locked within the mind into the air!

As for making an entirely new mech through a single touch, that was a bit more fantastical to Ves. He believed it might be possible to create a mech from nothing with the help of materialization technology.

Certainly, the System was already capable of doing so.

The only problem was that the mech had to be better than a cold, unfeeling reproduction of a mech design. It needed to be a masterwork, which materialization technology had never produced.

Ostensibly.

Of course, the mech touch held multiple meanings. Some mech designers believed that the mech touch was something more metaphorical than literal. To them, possessing 'the touch' was merely an allusion for mech designers who were so good at designing and making mechs that they might as well be gods!

Right now, Ves and Gloriana were too far removed from the pinnacle of mech design to know for sure. Perhaps even Star Designers lost a lot of sleep over achieving this state!

"Let's just focus on the present for the moment and think about our immediate problems." Ves noted to his daydreaming girlfriend. "We have plenty of design work to do and only a limited amount of time to fulfill them all."

From finishing William's custom mech, designing three out of four variants requested by MinDef, designing other mechs to assist in the fight against the sandmen and learning

how to design a high-quality second-class mech, Ves and Gloriana had a lot on their plates!

Ves fully realized the lessons he received from old mech designers who regretted wasting their time when they were his age.

Not a single mech designer enjoyed enough time to fulfill all of their goals!

Still, no matter how much time he wanted to spend on designing mechs, Ves also wanted to reserve some time with his friends and family.

He never realized what he was missing when he was largely working alone. Now that he had Gloriana in his life, he realized what a difference love could make. The fulfillment he gained from their relationship made his design work a bit more meaningful than before.

What was the point of life if he didn't live it to the fullest?

To Ves, it was not a waste of time to spend hours with his loved ones every day!