

Mech 1571

Chapter 1571 Send Off

Now that the sandmen have begun to attack the Bright Republic, a solemn mood had swept over the entire state.

Even as Ves, Ketis and Gloriana collaborated on the Prideful Soldier project, many Brighters began to deploy to the front.

The star systems facing the defunct Coman Federation were very clearly next. While a small number of sandman fleets might skip the star systems at the border in favor of going deeper, most sandmen admirals preferred to take more immediate hops.

As a result, the fighting at the border between the Bright Republic and the former Coman Federation had already begun to flare up! Hundreds of mechs and mech pilots already started to fall as the sandman race began to bleed the state of vital assets.

Losing a mech wasn't so bad. The government freely spent its money to encourage every mech manufacturer to produce as many mechs as possible!

The real problem was that mech pilots weren't so easily replaced. The Bright Republic had already lost many precious mech pilots during the previous war, and now the brave warriors and soldiers had to put their lives on the line yet again!

If too many of them died, then eventually who would be left to pilot the mechs? There was no way a state could resist the sandmen once their stock of mech pilots ran out.

Already, the Mech Corps had begun to draft numerous potentates who quit their training or dropped out of the mech academies for whatever reason.

No matter how deplorable they performed, as long as they could interface with a mech and point the muzzle of a rifle in the direction of a sandman, that was enough!

During this tense and uncertain times, the first detachments of Avatars of Myth and Living Sentinels were ready to set out for the front.

Ves, Gloriana and Ketis personally arrived at the landing zone in order to send off to the volunteers.

Ketis, who was clutching Lucky in her arms, admired the Desolate Soldiers entering the mech bays of the landed light carriers with an emotional sigh.

"There's not a single melee mech among them. I feel as if I've been born in the wrong time."

Ves patted her back. "Don't look too down. This is simply part of what it means to dedicate yourself to a narrow category of mechs. You've made your choice. Instead of regretting it, you should be looking forward to the times when a swordsman mech is the best possible solution to a difficult problem!"

"I know, Ves. You don't have to console me. I'm not as dimwitted as I used to be!"

Lately, Ves had been spending a lot of time with Gloriana, which meant he hadn't been able to get up to speed with Ketis.

It was difficult for him to juggle his time because his girlfriend always demanded much of his time.

His relationship with his student wasn't as close as it used to be. Ketis had grown up now. She was used to acting on her own and no longer needed him to hold her hand all the time.

In some way, that was good. Ves was confident that Ketis could already make it as an independent mech designer.

However, another part of him regretted the loss of the dynamic he had formed with her before his journey to Centerpoint.

He belatedly tried to make it up by reminding himself to pay more attention to her. So far, he hadn't achieved much success.

Fortunately, he wasn't alone. Despite some indeterminate tension between the two, Gloriana was more than willing to provide some guidance to Ketis.

"Mech designers with Class VI, Class VII and Class VIII design philosophies often band up with other mech designers. That way, they won't be rendered helpless when they face a situation like yours. Staying with us is the best decision you have made. In the times where you won't be able to make your mech designs useful, you can lean on Ves and I to cover your moment of weakness."

That sounded surprisingly insightful. Ves nodded in agreement. "Gloriana is right. While mech designers are mostly fine when they work by themselves, it is so much better to work in a team."

They chatted for a bit until the Avatar Commander and the Sentinel Commander stepped forward.

Compared to the mature and grizzled Magdalena, Melkor appeared way too young.

Nonetheless, the authority he projected was sufficient for him to hold his ground. Ves predicted that as long as Melkor saw more action and gained more experience in

commanding his troops in battle, his commanding demeanor would soon match that of the former Mech Corps captain standing besides him at the moment!

Both commanders saluted Ves once they reached him. "Sir!"

Ves tiredly waved his hand. "I thought I told you to cut it with the salutes and stuff. We're not the Mech Corps and we shouldn't pretend we are. The Avatars of Myth are supposed to be champions and heroes. Strict discipline is even less appropriate for the Sentinels. A lot of mech pilots joined the Sentinels because they don't like the rigid structure of the military."

Magdalena Larkinson frowned. "These are trying times. Military customs and courtesy can do wonders in maintaining discipline and confidence."

In other words, she had no intention of cutting her act.

When Ves turned his gaze towards Melkor, the visored man said nothing, but his rigid stance signalled that he agreed with his aunt.

Among the Desolate Soldiers entering the carriers, a number of Aurora Titans stepped into the ships.

The Avatars and Sentinels only needed these two mech models. No more.

"Who will be rotating to the front first?" Ves asked.

"I am, sir." Melkor stated. "Between the two of us, I'm in dire need of experience."

"It'll be dangerous." Ves slightly frowned. "People are still figuring out how to deploy the Desolate Soldiers in the most optimal fashion. If you participate in the opening act, you'll have to figure things out on the fly."

"I believe I am up to the challenge, Ves."

Though Melkor was never an intense person, the quiet confidence he radiated possessed its own form of intensity.

Ves felt that Melkor was someone with something to prove. Having sat out most of the previous Bright-Vesia War, his cousin was probably unwilling to remain on the sidelines.

Now that the Avatars had matured into a smaller but more focused mech force, Melkor had all the tools he needed to excel in the coming battles!

As if thinking the same, Magdalena nodded at Melkor in respect. "Every Larkinson must answer the call of duty. This is the greatest conflict the Bright Republic has ever faced.

Our state has never been pushed so close to the edge. To resist the sandman and protect the lives of trillions of Brighters is a noble calling!"

Melkor nodded. "I know. I'm not just doing this for myself. I'm fighting on behalf of our home state."

As trivial and weak as the Bright Republic seems on the galactic level, it was still their home! Each and every Larkinson had been born and raised on a planet of the Republic. This gave them an indescribable connection to the state.

Once Ves was satisfied with Melkor's resolve, he shared one last hug with his cousin.

As soon as Melkor turned around and marched to his carrier, the Avatars standing in ranks began to shout!

"We shall sweep the stars of the sandmen! We will crush every grain of sand into dust! We must protect the Republic with our lives!"

"Why?"

"Because we are the Avatars of Myth!"

The Avatars shouted those cries with such intensity that Ves could feel the raw emotions in their voices. His eyes widened for a short moment as he recognized a familiar sensation.

The Flagrant Vandals projected a similar sense of unity, camaraderie and purpose.

Of course, the Avatars were nothing alike from the Vandals, but both of them had cultivated the essential qualities that bound mech pilots together.

Brotherhood!

As Ves studied the older Avatars and the younger Avatars, he noticed that all of them showed nothing but trust to each other and trust towards Melkor.

For Melkor to have bonded his highly-skilled Avatars together in such a unified fashion, his command skills weren't for show!

That made Ves feel a lot better about sending Melkor off to the front.

As for Commander Magdalena, it was best for her to remain at Cloudy Curtain in order to hold the fort. The Mech Nursery and all the other properties of the LMC on the planet still needed protection.

Leaving at least one senior commander behind ensured that the Avatars and Sentinels left behind wouldn't be running like headless chickens in the event of an emergency.

Ves stood at the side of his older aunt as they watched the light carriers close up and begin to boost off the ground.

"Those light carriers can't sustain many hits from sandman lasers." Magdalena remarked in a deceptively casual tone. "It's a bit of a pity that for all of the money the LMC is earning right now, we haven't been able to get our hands on a single combat carrier."

Her words carried an implicit rebuke towards Ves. Even as the LMC earned hundreds of billions of bright credits in the past month, the company was spending most of their newfound wealth in building up its infrastructure!

In particular, Ves heavily pushed for to construct more manufacturing facilities. He wanted his company to become less dependent on third-party manufacturers!

"We have already discussed this, commander." Ves pursed his lips. "Every shipyard is chock full of orders. The demand for starships is insane. The second-hand market has been swept clean of savvy vultures. The price of starships has already tripled, and still demand hasn't subsided yet! How can I possibly buy combat carriers under these circumstances?"

"Aren't you supposed to be a mech designer with allies and connections? From what I've heard, you're a man of importance in the Bright Republic!"

Ves grimaced. "That's true, but I'm hardly the top dog in the Republic. I still stand no chance against the members of the founding families, the established Senior Mech Designers and the powerful business families that have kept the economy in their grip for generations. All of these people have far better connections."

Magdalena let him off after hearing that. "I see. You're still a long way from joining their ranks. What about your girlfriend, then? Can't she help?"

"It's not politically wise to leverage her identity to obtain advantages in the Bright Republic. I'll just piss a lot of people off and make more enemies."

"What about ordering the combat carriers from the Hegemony?"

"It will take months to deliver my order. The war will at least be halfway done by the time they fall into our hands. Besides, I don't think the Hexadric Hegemony is in any position to fulfill these kinds of orders. From what I've read in the news, their shipyards are already occupied with the Komodo War."

Both of them adopted grave expressions when they thought about the destructive conflict between the Coalition and the Hegemony. The Komodo War already claimed many billions of lives! The amount of powerful second-class mechs that had fallen simply boggled the mind.

If all of those second-class mechs had been sent to fight the sandmen, then the aliens would have probably lost so hard that they wouldn't even be able to set foot in the Bright Republic!

"What an enormous waste!" Magdalena lamented.

Ves nodded in agreement. "Even when the aliens are harvesting so many human lives, the Coalition and the Hegemony are still preoccupied with their private vendettas."

Both of them felt inordinately disappointed at the conduct of the second-rate states of their star sector. Many third-raters looked up to the second-rate states for leadership.

In a moment that was prime for them to showcase their power and magnanimity, they perplexingly decided to forsake their responsibility to the star sector!

At least Melkor answered the call of duty!

Chapter 1572 Resentful Soldier

Sending off Melkor and the first rotation of Avatars and Sentinels to war only served as a small diversion.

Ves, Ketis and Gloriana quickly turned back to work and began to shape the Proudful Soldier in rapid tempo.

After picking out the appropriate parts, they quickly substituted them into the design and began to mesh them together as best as possible. Because of the similarity of parts, this did not require too much effort.

The only problem was that a lot of tiny tweaks still had to be done because the reduced parameters of so many parts had fundamentally altered the balance of the design.

After roughly a week, the small design team finished making most of the major alterations.

"The design is 95 percent finished." Ves nodded in satisfaction. "It's the remaining 4 percent that's a bit difficult. The Proudful Soldier is already a decent mech, but we need to perform more simulations and testing in order to optimize its design."

Ketis furrowed her brows. "That only comes up to 99 percent in the end. What about the last percent?"

Ves smiled mysteriously at her. "The final percent is the final touch which I'll add at the end. I already have that covered, so you don't have to be concerned about that part."

After a bit of discussion, they decided to let Ketis manage the simulation and prototype testing phases. It would occupy her for a couple of weeks and allow her to be in charge for a while.

Of course, she still needed to check in with Ves to make any serious alterations to the design in response to the results she gained.

Though Ketis was still rather young and inexperienced, Ves believed she was competent enough to manage these phases by herself.

Off-loading the work to Ketis allowed Ves and Gloriana to move on to the Militant Soldier project and Peaceful Soldier project without any excessive delays.

"What do you think, Gloriana?" Ves asked.

His girlfriend eyed their four interns with a speculative expression. "We need more manpower. While I enjoy nurturing these four kids, they're not exactly useful at their current stage. We need real professionals with degrees in mech design to help us manage all of these projects. Having Ketis here is already a huge help to us. Think of how we can increase our productivity if we have ten of her around!"

Ves sighed. "You're right, but it's harder than it sounds to recruit mech designers. There are so many employment opportunities out there that working for me is hardly anyone's first choice."

If he wanted to, he could probably recruit some bottom-tier mech designers who were starving on the streets. Yet what good would that do? These failed mech designers were either too incompetent to be trusted with even the most unimportant tasks, or too untrustworthy that no employer dared to hire them. Adding them to his design team would do more harm than good.

Right now, the mech industry was undergoing a major upheaval. Plenty of mech designers already fled the Bright Republic. Many already found jobs elsewhere or accepted one of the many job offers from prestigious employers such as Seniors or the Mech Corps.

Working for a Journeyman was ordinarily a decent option to low-ranking mech designers, but Ves was still too young and erratic to be seen as an attractive employer.

Even if his Desolate Soldiers sold extremely well at the moment, it might have just been a fluke. His current success did not guarantee future success, which was something very important to many low-ranking mech designers looking for a tall tree to shelter under.

"You need to expand your recruiting efforts." Gloriana advised him. "You don't have to do everything yourself. Just tell your managers to set up a recruiting operation that is dedicated to scouting universities and job markets for mech designers that meet your requirements."

"You're right." Ves sighed. "I should have thought of that myself. I'll send a message to Calsie right away. Even if it's a little too late at this stage, it's better than nothing. We really need some extra hands to handle all of our future work."

As Ves composed a brief message to Calsie, he recalled the time he held a guest lecture at Rawlings University in the Sentinel Kingdom.

In normal circumstances, the students who signed preliminary employment contracts with him should have been on the way to the LMC after some time.

Unfortunately, the sandman invasion disrupted everything. The Sentinel Kingdom was still a fair distance away from the border to the frontier, so the powerful state had little to fear from the sandmen.

Which Sentinel mech designer would be crazy enough to leave their safe harbor and go travel to a state directly under threat by the sandmen?

Ves had already received notifications that the mech design students he recruited at Rawlings had broken their contracts. They would rather pay the penalty and stay home at Sentinel than brave the dangers of working in a sandman-infested state!

He did not blame them for their choices. Not every mech designer was like him who didn't mind a little excitement every now and then.

The only surprising part was that Mayer Torto hadn't torn up his contract yet. Apparently, he was still committed to work for the LMC when he graduated.

"Will he truly stay?" Ves frowned.

Maybe Mayer believed he could still gain the most under his tutelage than working for someone else.

"Well, I won't let him regret his choice."

Talents like Mayer Torto were not that easy to get a hold of. Every institution that taught mech design was filled with scouts and recruiters who kept their eyes on promising future mech designers.

In addition, ambitious mech designers rarely sat still and waited for offers to come to them. Oftentimes, they proactively applied for internships in prestigious mech companies, hoping to transition their temporary jobs into permanent jobs.

The LMC was still too new and volatile to attract any serious consideration from mech design students.

"No matter." He muttered. "The LMC can slowly build up their recruitment capabilities."

If Ves wanted to get his design teams up to speed, then he needed at least two teams with ten mech designers each. They didn't have to be particularly smart or talented. As long as they possessed a strong grasp on the fundamentals, Ves could teach them the necessary knowledge to allow them to perform their tasks.

Before the pair of Journeymen tackled their next projects, Ves finally received the message he had been waiting for. He tapped Gloriana's shoulder.

"Let's head to the infirmary. William has finally recovered from his treatment."

"He's awake? That's great! We can finally complete his custom mech!"

The two walked to the infirmary and entered William's room.

The Urbesh clansman looked awake and alert. His back was straight as he sat rigidly on his bed.

His intense eyes glared at Ves with silent resentment.

Ves smiled. "You dare?"

William didn't respond immediately. Instead, he glowered at Ves as if he wanted to do nothing than skewer this mech designer that had put him through so much torture!

"Good." Ves nodded in satisfaction. He paid no attention to William's grievances towards him! "I like the way you look. It doesn't matter what you think of me. As long as you can think aggressively, you're light-years ahead of your old self!"

William didn't respond. In fact, Ves found it rather unnerving that William kept staring at him like a bug to be squashed.

How much of Nyxie's influence had warped William's mentality? Ves had a sneaking suspicion that the ancient alien spiritual entity had contaminated William's mind a bit more severely than he planned!

"Can you even talk?"

"Yes." William finally said with a hoarse voice.

Even though he finally opened his mouth, William somehow appeared even more unsettling!

There was something very wrong with the mech pilot!

Nonetheless, Ves did his best to repress his latent fear and suspicion. Right now, William showed a remarkable amount of courage. This was not something which Ves wanted to lose.

As long as William was not a coward, nothing else mattered!

Ves waved his hand. "Gloriana, I think it's best if your bodyguards take him back to the lab. Go perform your examinations and such. We'll finalize William's custom mech after we understand his new condition. Is that alright?"

"Mmhmm." Gloriana wordlessly nodded while studying William with an analytical expression.

As someone who specialized in matching mech pilots to mechs, she was very observant when it came to people. She immediately recognized that William possessed a radically different demeanor after recovering from his strange treatment.

Whatever Ves did to William, her boyfriend succeeded in altering the Urbesh clansman's personality!

The only worry they both held was the repercussions of the treatment. How many side effects had occurred? How much damage did William sustain? Gloriana was determined to answer these questions.

As Gloriana and her bodyguard guided the taciturn William out of the infirmary, Ves lingered behind as he processed what he sensed with his spiritual senses.

From what he perceived, William's spiritual potential had achieved a new state of balance. His spirituality managed to tentatively integrate the foreign spiritual attributes left over from Nyxie's failed attempt to take over his mind.

A profound mental and spiritual transformation had taken place. In fact, William's mentality was still in flux. It might take weeks or months for William's personality to settle down!

Ves welcomed the change. Anything was better than the old William. As for the many deficiencies and side effects that ensued as a result of his spiritual treatment, that wasn't his problem!

"William should be glad to gain the opportunity to advance! Don't you think so, Lucky?"

His cat lazily clung to his shoulder.

"Meow."

Ves affectionately patted Lucky on the head. "

Both Ves and Gloriana diverted a few days to work on completing William's custom mech. The Desolate Soldier had gone through major alterations. Though it still used the same parts, Ves found it astounding to how much it diverged from the base model.

A true custom mech designed for a single mech pilot always ended up as an intrinsically-unique iteration. A mech model that served the masses featured so many compromises that not a single mech pilot would ever be able to achieve a perfect fit with such a machine.

While Gloriana preoccupied with studying William's new condition and tweaking the design of their custom mech in response, Ves largely devoted his attention to the spiritual component.

For the new William, the standard X-Factor of the Desolate Soldier was too unsuitable. His mass market product centered heavily around the concept of duty.

Right now, William didn't appear to be the type of person who would sacrifice his life to do his duty.

Instead, according to the personality tests that Gloriana had conducted, William had become a bit more aggressive and assertive. Combined with his old traits such as self-centeredness and egotism, the new William was anything but altruistic!

"I'll have to do something similar to the Prideful Soldier, then." Ves concluded.

He came up with an altered concept and also settled for a fitting name for William's custom mech.

"What do you think about calling our custom mech the Resentful Soldier?" Ves suggested to Gloriana.

"That doesn't sound very pleasant, Ves."

"It fits, though. I've tweaked the spiritual component of the Resentful Soldier by mixing the spiritual component it inherited from the Desolate Soldier with an extra flavor. It feels a lot more.. resentful."

The addition of Nyxie's semi-purified mote of spirituality gave the Resentful Soldier a very different character. Its duty-oriented aura and X-Factor had been heavily warped by this deceptively small influence.

Duty had warped into purpose! Anything that hinted at responsibility had disappeared, and in its place was a kind of anger and selfishness that made it abundantly clear that the Resentful Soldier did not fight on behalf of others.

The Resentful Soldier purely fought on behalf of itself!

"What a huge change." Gloriana remarked when they finalized their design. "I can feel how different it is from the base model."

Ves smiled in satisfaction. "You can do a lot with a couple of minor changes. I think this is sufficient. Shall we go and fabricate this mech?"

Gloriana instantly perked up. "I've waited too long for this moment! Let's see how close we can get to fabricating a Masterwork mech! With all the work we've put into the Resentful Soldier design, I refuse to accept a sub-standard outcome!"

Chapter 1573 Masterwork Attempt

"The fabrication process of a perfect vessel is a ritual." Gloriana told Ves in a solemn voice. "The mech has to be produced successfully at the very first attempt."

"I don't think the worst case scenario will happen." Ves smiled at her. "Regardless of how much we customized it, the Resentful Soldier is still a simple mech design. With our level of skill, it's impossible for us to fail our first attempt."

The two had moved over to the workshop hall where they awaited the delivery of the raw materials required to fabricate their mech. Ves had already spent some time familiarizing himself with Gloriana's high-quality production equipment.

The 3D Printer, assembly system and so on surpassed anything the LMC possessed. With such high-quality equipment, the chance of fabricating a masterwork mech was a little bit better than normal, which was exactly what Gloriana wanted.

"With how much effort we put into this mech, we have to aim for masterwork!" Gloriana declared with a determined expression. She raised her dainty fist at Ves. "You better make sure to put in your full effort. Show me the strength that enabled you to fabricate your first masterwork!"

Her intense demand forced Ves to take this job a lot more seriously than he initially planned.

In truth, Ves did not regard his chances highly. Their collaborating in this project had not been very smooth. They barely achieved some synergy and there was still a lot more room for improvement.

On a creative level, he also wasn't very emotionally invested in the Resentful Soldier. He cared little for William Urbesh and mainly saw the project as an introductory work to see how well he collaborated with Gloriana.

As long as the mech came out decently well, Ves was already satisfied.

Obviously, Gloriana saw the project in a different light. She wanted their first collaboration to be as perfect as possible. Perhaps sensing that Ves wasn't as motivated as her, she prodded him plenty of times in order to get him to adopt a serious attitude.

"Okay, okay!" He raised his hands. "I'll put in my best effort, okay!? Just give me some time. I work best when I enter into a focused and inspired mood."

Gloriana clearly didn't need any preparation. She had been looking forward to this moment since the very start she designed a custom mech with Ves. The outcome of this fabrication attempt served as concrete proof of how well they collaborated with each other!

If their mech ended up as a disappointment, then that would seriously affect her confidence in continued collaboration attempts.

Ves didn't share her concerns. The Resentful Soldier not only inherited much of its simplicity from the Desolate Soldier, it also contained some wondrous interactions between their respective design philosophies.

As Ves studied the finalized design carefully, he sensed that the mutual strengthening effect was very much present. Gloriana's specialty naturally leaned towards empowering the specialties of other mech designers. Ves himself had tweaked the spiritual foundation of the Resentful Soldier to be more receptive towards her ideals.

All of their efforts resulted in a slightly more powerful expression of X-Factor than the Desolate Soldier.

Resentment, aggression and desperation poured out of the mech design as if the beast inside desperately wanted to escape its prison!

That suddenly reminded Ves of something.

Nyxie's influence was very pervasive in this project. Not only did he form the main ingredient of the design spirit of the mech, he also gained more direct influence due to the direct addition of his mote of spirituality!

If that wasn't enough, William's treatment also left the mech pilot with a contaminated mind and spiritual potential! The alien entity trapped inside the Ancient Sarcophagus had wormed his way so deeply into William's psyche that the man was nothing like his old self now.

Having surmised all of this, Ves began to ask a very disconcerting question.

"What will happen if William and the Resentful Soldier are put together?"

Nyxie left a very heavy footprint in both of them. They could even be seen as an extension of the ancient alien's influence.

Perhaps something very significant might happen once William interfaced with the Resentful Soldier.

Even so, Ves wasn't deterred. He only cared about completing his assignment. Right now, that meant designing a mech that allowed William to participate in the battles at the front!

The conflict between the sandmen and the humans living in the Komodo Star Sector became known as the Sand War.

Though the name was fairly unimaginative, no one laughed or made light of it. The two words put together invoked a lot of fear and anger from people.

The sandmen were too difficult an opponent to deal with! Their vast numbers and endless fleets had already battered more than a dozen states in the star sector!

Any single battle against the sandmen resulted in at least some deaths. No mech pilot looked forward to facing the sandmen for that reason.

However, Ves did not entirely see that as a negative. A typical sandman fleet wasn't very difficult to defeat. The occasional casualties suffered by the defenders was not excessive, at least at first.

With a relatively high survival rate for mech pilots, the circumstances seemed ideal for stimulating mech pilots into breaking through!

"This is the perfect stage to push William past his limits!"

Though risky, Ves wanted William to gain some actual battle experience for a few months.

If William did not come close to advancing to expert candidate after participating in numerous battles, that was fine.

Ves would just have to visit in person and subject William to another experiment. After his last experiment, he gained an increased understanding in the nature of spirituality and how it tied to the mind of a living human.

Was he confident enough to develop a treatment that uplifted a mech pilot with spiritual potential into an expert candidate? Not really. He still had ideas, though.

As long as Ves understood the nature of force of will a little better, he was confident he could crack the code.

"Are you ready, Ves?" Gloriana asked. "I don't want to delay too long."

Ves shook his head and peppered himself up. "I'm prepared. Let's begin."

The two Journeymen formally started their fabrication run.

The workshop hall began to hum as several machines went active. Because Gloriana wanted Ves to express his ability to the fullest, she insisted on letting him do the bulk of the work.

"I'll assist you on the side and make sure that all of the materials and parts will go to the right places." Gloriana explained her own role. "I'll also inspect all of the parts thoroughly to make sure they don't have any faults."

Their start had been fairly shaky. Despite familiarizing himself extensively with Gloriana's production equipment, Ves still needed some hands-on experience in order to increase his fluency in operating all of the advanced machines.

Just the 3D printer alone was a marvel of advanced Hegemony technologies! One out of five parts that Ves had fabricated came out as defective in Gloriana's standards.

"Not good enough!" She yelled at Ves while throwing down a delicate sensor part against the deck! "Are you being lazy, Ves?!"

Ves frowned deeply at her. "I already told you. I'm still getting used to your tools! If you had just left my old equipment in place, I would have been able to hit the ground running!"

Gloriana smacked him in the side. "Aren't you supposed to be good at fabricating mechs?! Even Clixie can spit out better parts than you!"

"Miaow?" Clixie raised her head for a moment.

"Meow." Lucky pressed her head back down with his paw.

The two Journeymen ignored their cats and went back to work as best as possible.

After a few learning pains, Ves finally achieved the necessary fluency he needed to operate the machines smoothly.

Afraid of earning Gloriana's ire, Ves made sure to concentrate as much as possible as he fabricated part after part.

For her part, Gloriana actually began to smile again as the quality of the parts all surpassed her acceptable threshold.

To someone with standards as high as Gloriana, that was very difficult!

Once they completed all of the parts, they inspected them again and replaced those that seemed to be a little wrong with substitutes.

Only when they became satisfied with the quality of all of the parts did they begin to move to the assembly stage.

The pair worked slower than usual in assembling their mech together. Gloriana was especially sensitive towards mistakes.

With Ves continuing to take the lead, the Resentful Soldier started to become more and more whole.

The more the mech became complete, the more its aura became evident. Its spiritual nature already started to affect the moods of everyone in the vicinity.

Gloriana slowed down.

Their bodyguards held their weapons tighter.

Lucky and Clixie left back until they reached the other end of the hall.

Only Ves remained unaffected. Since he created it, why should he fall under its influence?

Now that Gloriana no longer watched over his back, Ves finally loosened up and entered his groove. He focused on his vision as best he could to ensure its X-Factor remained as pure and untainted as possible.

"This is kind of difficult." Ves muttered with a slight frown. "Holding on to a positive emotion is much more helpful in fabricating a mech than concentrating on a negative emotion."

The Resentful Soldier, as its name suggested, mostly carried an ill will. Its bad temperament and negative attitude were not very pleasant to maintain.

He still persevered. If he couldn't even handle a difficulty like this, then he might as well give up on fabricating mechs.

"I won't back down from this challenge."

The Resentful Soldier became more and more complete. As Ves slowly put the final pieces together, the mech pulsed on a level that only Ves could sense.

"Complete." He whispered.

He calmly stepped back and admired the finished product alongside Gloriana. They both studied the finished mech carefully.

Only after several minutes went by did Gloriana finally react.

She sighed. "Not a masterwork. A pity."

Ves gently caressed her back. "It is too unrealistic to expect to fabricate a masterwork upon our first collaboration. Our teamwork still needs some work."

Shortly after he started the fabrication run, he could already tell that there was little chance that the Resentful Soldier would end up as a masterwork.

Ves encountered too many problems, and Gloriana's frequent demands and interruptions constantly interrupted his flow.

With all of these complications, it wasn't surprising that Ves failed to enter an inspired state.

"It's okay. I'm fine." She said. "The Resentful Soldier is still a success. Just not a great one. Its quality is more than satisfactory."

Even if Ves hadn't done a perfect job, that didn't mean he had done a sloppy job. With a single masterwork under his belt, his mech affinity had risen to a height that was difficult for others to reach.

With the help of his increased mech affinity, Ves could still rely on his strong intuition and grasp on his skills to fabricate a very fine mech.

"The quality is more than enough to outshine the works of most Journeymen and Seniors." Ves confidently stated.

To be honest, Ves had hoped to achieve more. If the quality of the mech was higher, then Ves could apply one of Lucky's gems to cheat his way into completing his second Masterwork.

Even if this method was a little dishonest, the increase to his mech affinity was very real! With such a rich reward on the line, Ves would readily give up one of Lucky's rarest gems to obtain a permanent improvement in his ability to work with mechs!

Sadly, that wouldn't happen today.

As Ves was about to order the Resentful Soldier to be shipped to a testing ground, Gloriana raised her hand and halted him for a moment.

"The Resentful Soldier isn't very expensive, Ves. It doesn't cost us anything to fabricate another copy. Why don't we try again?"

That was a very valid question. Should they try again or settle with the current copy of the Resentful Soldier?

Chapter 1574 The Weight of Meaning

Ves shook his head. "No."

"Why not?" Gloriana glared at him. "Our first attempt was hardly a stellar example in perfect teamwork. You messed up so much at the start that you weren't working at your best throughout the first run!"

"You know that the first copy of a new design is always the most significant, right? A second attempt will have less meaning. It will be difficult for me to produce something that surpasses our first copy."

Both Gloriana and Ves looked a bit regretful.

What he said was true. Masterwork products were exceptionally hard to make and almost always arose through special circumstances.

The very first attempt was a process of discovery, fulfillment and completion. The meaning and emotions it provoked simply couldn't be replicated a second time.

Ves was aware enough to realize that he probably wouldn't be able to enter into an inspiring mood.

Only in rare cases did someone manage to fabricate a masterwork mech after making many attempts.

These special situations mostly occurred with professional fabricators who knew a mech design from inside out. As long as they entered into a transcendent state, they gained a chance to merge all of their insights of a particular mech design into a brilliant reproduction!

Such an exceptional event required a large dose of luck as well as years of accumulation. Ves had no patience to spend such an excessive amount of time for a single custom mech.

"There is a second reason why I think it's better to settle with this attempt. Time itself is a valuable resource. Fabricating additional copies of our custom mech is not a good use of our time. The sandman tide has already reached the Bright Republic. The fighting has only just begun. In these circumstances, we should prioritize mechs that can equip the most people as opposed to mechs that only helps a single mech pilot."

Though Gloriana was unwilling to give up, she could not ignore his logic. His arguments were sound and she knew that he was right.

"..Fine." She clenched her fist. "I don't like this at all. There are still too many imperfections in our mech."

"Then how did you manage to fabricate your own custom mechs?"

"I all considered them disappointments. Not a single mech I've designed and fabricated in my career has ever come close enough to reaching my standards!"

That was certainly an extreme position. Ves tried to console her as best as possible.

"Now that we have worked out some of the kinks, we can do better next time. I'm sure of it. We just have to complete our next two projects to give us two more attempts."

"You're right. I'm tired, today. Let's wrap this up and go home."

The two of them cleaned up the workshop and made sure to deliver the Resentful Soldier to the testing ground.

Though they didn't intend to submit the design to the MTA, it still needed to be checked.

"Since the machine is designed for William, he will need to come to the testing ground and pilot our mech under our auspices." Ves spoke.

"I agree." His girlfriend nodded. "We should witness the initial tests in person to see how well our specialties played out. I think the Resentful Soldier will make quite an impression tomorrow."

Now that they finished all of the hard work, they took some time out and retired to the Cloud Estate to relax.

As Gloriana began to chat with some aunties, some of the younger Larkinsons approached him with curious expressions.

"I have a question, Ves." A teenage female Larkinson asked.

"Go ahead and ask."

"Are we turning into Hexers?"

Ves almost puked out blood. "No! Absolutely not! Don't let Gloriana stuff any strange ideas in your head! You're a Brighter, not a Hexer! Remember your roots!"

"Ah, yes sir! Sorry, sir!"

The teenager actually appeared disappointed by his answer.

Fortunately, the boys looked just as scandalized as Ves.

"What are you saying?! Do you want us to turn into babies under your care?! We'll never embrace the Hegemony!"

Once Ves entertained the squabbling teenagers for a while, he waved them off. Since they had been taught to always respect Ves, they didn't object to his dismissal.

As Ves watched them go, he continued to frown and scratch his head.

The Larkinsons had no reason to pick a side in the Komodo War. While the Friday Coalition shared many ties with the Bright Republic, the Larkinson Family wasn't among the groups with ties.

However, the Larkinsons would not get along with the Hexadric Hegemony. Ves always had the impression that the family always leaned towards masculinity due to its military orientation. Both men and women earned the same regard as long as they proved themselves.

To fall under the sway of the Hegemony and adopt their contempt for male gender would not sit well with half of the family. In fact, Ves believed that even the women among the Larkinsons would object!

What was good for them wasn't necessarily good for the family, and vice versa.

"It is best if they can just come with me on my grand expedition." He whispered.

That way, regardless of who won or lost the Komodo War, the Larkinsons maintained most of their identities and traditions.

Ves yawned and stretched his arms. "I should sound out more Larkinsons to see if they're interested in coming along. My expedition can use a lot of reliable manpower."

"Meow." Lucky crawled over his lap and began to purr.

"Oh, you want some company as well, do you?"

"Meow!"

As Ves spent the rest of the day playing with Lucky, chatting with the Larkinsons and hanging out with Gloriana, he received a surprise visitor.

"Calabast! You scared me!" Ves dramatically clutched his heart as the spy popped out from behind.

His strategic partner smirked at Ves. "We should talk. Let's go inside your home office in your mansion. It's secure there."

Ves followed after Calabast, bringing Lucky with him but no one else.

Though Gloriana saw where the two were going, Calabast merely waved her hand at his girlfriend to halt her attempts to follow.

This silent interaction revealed that Calabast and Gloriana had already come to an understanding with each other. Otherwise, his girlfriend would never allow him to sneak off somewhere else in the company of a gorgeous woman!

"Are you surprised?" Calabast teasingly asked as if she knew what he was thinking.

Ves merely shrugged. "You have a girlfriend, right? Evidently, you're one of those Hexers who look down on boys."

"I'm not your typical Hexer, kid. I've long shed my biases and preconceptions when I underwent training. After all, we wouldn't make for good spies if we constantly despise the men around us, would we?"

"That makes sense." Ves nodded in agreement. "How do you actually see the Hegemony, then?"

"Even though I'm not a typical Hexer, I haven't abandoned my roots. The Hegemony is still my home, just as the Bright Republic is your home. These ties will always have meaning for us. To uproot yourself and let go of your home is not a pleasant way to live."

"The spaceborn clans do just fine."

"That's because they made their ships their home. Isn't that what you're planning?"

"Maybe." Ves shrugged. "I haven't really formed any concrete plans for my grand expedition other than getting out of here."

"I suggest you think deeper on what you want. While it's possible to roam the galaxy forever, I don't recommend you do. Everyone needs a place to settle down for a while."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"Let's enter your office first."

They walked to the top floor of the mansion and entered his opulent office. As soon as Calabast activated the necessary security precautions, they sat down and began to talk.

"Where have you been, Calabast?"

"Around." She said cryptically. "I've mostly been taking care of the Swordmaidens while building up my infrastructure in the state. Since the sandman invasion has turned everything into disarray, this is a golden opportunity for me to put my men into place."

"How many people are working for you? What do they do?"

She smiled at him but didn't answer his question. He knew better than to insist.

"Fine. Keep your secrets then. Can you at least tell me if you've accomplished anything that I should know of? It's hard to appreciate your presence when you keep withholding information."

Calabast reached out and tapped her finger against his forehead. "There's a very good reason for that, kid. Most of the information I've collected is unreliable and unverified. It would do you no good for me to pass on rumors and scattered clues to you. One of the reasons it took so long for me to get back to you is because I needed to verify my intel."

"So what did you want to tell me?" Ves curiously asked.

The woman adopted a serious expression. "I have several pieces of intelligence to pass on. Let me start with the biggest one first. While not reliable, I think this news is important enough for you to hear. There are signs that the MTA will soon be announcing the next mech generation."

The next mech generation!

This was an event that every mech designer in the galaxy had been anticipating!

"How soon?"

"I'm not sure. I don't have an inside source in the MTA. My best estimate is that it shall commence within a year."

Ves frowned. "That's helpful, but not as much as I've hoped. The range is a little large. It already lines up with my own guess."

"There's more, Ves. From what I've gathered, the MTA stalled the commencement because they plan to make another major announcement. One that will affect all of human space."

Now that sounded interesting! Ves immediately sat more upright and paid more attention.

"Do you have any idea what the MTA has in store for us all?"

"It's a major, galaxy-wide announcement. From what I can gather, their second announcement likely has a relation to the MTA's period of dormancy. I think it hasn't escaped you that the Big Two have been staying quiet over the past couple of decades. You don't have to be an intelligence analyst to guess that the biggest human powers are preparing for something. It seems that we will soon have our answers."

Ves quietly processed her words. What she told him certainly matched his own impression of the Big Two. The MTA had especially been quiet lately, to the point of abandoning some of their duties.

If the MTA wasn't so preoccupied with something else, they would have dispatched a powerful force to crush the sandmen!

Their continued inaction made every citizen from the beleaguered state bitter, including Ves.

"The MTA better have a good reason for ignoring the sandmen!"

Calabast smiled at him but shook her head. "The MTA has better things to do than worry about the opinions of some trivial citizens from the galactic rim. I wanted to tell you this to prepare you beforehand. I believe whatever the MTA intends to announce will involve all of humanity. This means that there might be an opportunity for you to mix with them or assist them in whatever they are doing."

That sounded intriguing to Ves. However, he knew that it would be far more complicated than Calabast suggested. The people who were worthy to work alongside the MTA were almost always exceptional. Someone like Ves still needed to distinguish himself in some way to become eligible to any opportunities that arose.

This made his mission from the Rim Guardians all the more important. Ves needed to prioritize turning William into an expert candidate!

"Okay. I think I get it. I'll make sure not to piss the MTA off during this time. Is there anything else?"

"Yes." Calabast nodded. "My second piece of intelligence is related to the Wodins. I believe that it is very possible that some of her relatives will come to visit you soon."

"What?! Aren't the Wodins busy fighting the Komodo War?! Why would they come out all the way here?!"

Ves already had his fill of Hexers with Calabast and Gloriana. He could not handle any more, especially Gloriana's relatives!

Chapter 1575 Actions in the Dark

By passing on valuable and relevant intelligence, Calabast showcased her value to him. Even if she blackmailed him into becoming his partner back at the Starlight Megalodon, a one-sided relationship never ended well.

If she exploited him without giving anything in return, Ves would only grow more resentful at her. This meant that she would have to continue to find more ways to coerce Ves while watching her back for any betrayals.

Instead of pursuing this short-sighted course of action, Calabast made a decision that reflected the best of her Hexer heritage.

She decided to take advantage of the situation to become an equal partner to Ves.

Though Ves didn't want to admit it, her approach was working.

To ride the transit shuttle, you needed to pay the fare.

Providing intelligence and working to protect Ves in the dark was Calabast's way of paying the fare. By keeping Ves content, she could continue to ride him all the way up to top.

This way, both of them benefited from each other. As long as nothing altered this balance, neither of them had any reason to break their mutually-beneficial relationship.

After warning Ves about the MTA's coming announcements and the possible arrival of some of Gloriana's relatives, Calabast turned to more local matters.

"Your Desolate Soldier mechs have continued to make a lot of waves. In fact, they're even starting to be fielded in states such as the Reinald Republic and the Hertog Dominion." She spoke.

"I know that. Many states are just as in danger as the Bright Republic. Since my product is useful in my home state, it should also be useful in foreign states."

"A lot of people have taken note of the explosive popularity of your Desolate Soldier model." Calabast said gravely. "Disrupting the market to this degree and attracting this much attention is not always desirable, kid. You're just a newly-risen Journeyman and already you're starting to sell as many mechs as an experienced Journeyman or a relatively fresh Senior."

"What do you think I'm supposed to do, then? My Desolate Soldier is just that good. Now that it has gained some market traction, it's impossible to ignore the value proposition of my design."

Its attractive price point, its ease of maintenance, its adequate performance against the sandmen, its lack of wasteful gimmicks, and most of all its ability to inspire duty all combined into an immensely attractive package!

Against ordinary sandman fleets, it really didn't matter too much if a rifleman mech performed ten or twenty percent better than the Desolate Soldier.

More expensive mechs fell just as easily as cheaper mechs when struck by a devastating sandman laser beam!

Only when a mech became as tough as an Aurora Titan or a heavy mech would a machine stand a chance of blocking such a powerful attack

Any mech that failed to reach this degree of defense might as well strip its armor down to the bare minimum and rely on dodging and evasion to confound sandman targeting systems!

Therefore, even without its aura, the Desolate Soldier already won some praises from the market!

"Do you think the competition is sitting still?" Calabast pointed her finger at him. "I've already managed to ascertain that a group of Ansel Senior Mech Designers have come together to design a direct competitor to your Desolate Soldier design! They are aware of the threat your mech poses to their dominance in the mech market!"

Ves grinned and crossed his arms. "As long as it's fair competition, I'm not afraid of challengers. The market is always fair. They can decide for themselves which product is more attractive."

"Your competitors aren't limiting themselves to fair competition. They've also been pulling strings in the dark, you know. I still don't have a complete picture of what they are doing."

"Can you tell the schemes you did manage to discover?"

She nodded. "Let's see. So far, I've detected a number of attempts to hinder you. They range from demanding the Ministry of Economic Development to limit you from contracting third-party manufacturers, getting various authorities to forbid you from exporting your mechs abroad and attempting to drag you over to trial in front of the Bentheim Mech Court!"

That last one should have made Ves jump in fright. Instead, he just raised a single eyebrow.

"On what charge?"

"Brainwashing and influencing people's minds without their consent."

That sounded very grave, though Ves retained his calm. "Why haven't I heard anything from the Mech Court then?"

"The Ministry of Defense and the Mech Corps immediately put a halt towards any attempts to accuse you of any crimes." Calabast nodded to Ves with a measure of respect. "You have powerful allies in the government. Even without any backers, the central government would have intervened on your behalf. They value your Desolate Soldier design too much to allow a bunch of jealous Seniors to ruin its proliferation."

"Sounds like the government knows what is best for the Republic." Ves smiled in satisfaction.

"I wouldn't be so smug if I were you. Seeing that any solicitations to the government have fallen on deaf ears, your enemies, which doesn't just include Ansel, have taken to employing detestable means. Haven't you heard about certain irregularities in supply?"

"You mean the raided shipments and the bombing of production facilities?" Ves frowned.

Lately, bewildering incidents like this took place everywhere. With how every state had fallen into crisis, a lot of people became discontent and started to lash out.

Strangely enough, the Bentheim Liberation Movement wasn't among the troublemakers this time. The rebel group kept oddly quiet during this time, though Ves did not find that too surprising.

As a group that advocated for Bentheim's independence, any attacks on the Bright Republic were self-defeating. Once the Bright Republic fell, Bentheim would fall as well, because the sandman completely disregarded political affiliations!

"Certain people have hired pirates and dark mercenaries to harass the infrastructure involved with producing your Desolate Soldiers as much as possible." She spoke.

"Since the Mech Corps is fully preoccupied with fighting the sandmen along with many other mercenary corps, it's difficult to secure the shipment of goods and mechs, even in the rear."

Ves shrugged. "The scale of these attacks are fairly small. It's impossible for my enemies to sabotage every shipment or production facility. If they become more brazen, then the government will definitely take notice, and that will be very bad for the masterminds behind this scheme. Besides, the attacks have only struck our external partners so far. The LMC itself has remained unaffected thanks to the protection of the Living Sentinels."

Though Ves and the LMC already dispatched a portion of Living Sentinels to the front, plenty more remained behind to protect the LMC's existing assets and shipping routes.

There was no way to attack any property owned by the LMC without employing a huge amount of mechs!

As for the damage suffered by third-party manufacturers? That was none of the LMC's business! It was their fault that they skimped on security!

Even if an external partner lost the ability to produce Desolate Soldiers, the LMC could simply dump them and hand over the contract to another company!

"The actions in the dark aren't limited to harassing the operations of your third-party manufacturers. They're also targeting you in person."

"Hahaha!" Ves laughed. "I'm already used to that! Let alone my Avatars of Myth, any assassins will have to go through the Glory Battalion before they get to me! I've survived so many crises that you can call me a space cockroach!"

Calabast pursed her lips at him. "The people who are plotting against you are well aware of that. Instead of attempting a series of feeble assassination attempts, they're preparing for something grander. They know that they can only make a single attempt at your life before the government becomes alarmed."

"Who are these people, exactly?"

"I'm not sure. They're being very careful, as can be expected when so many interests are at stake. I'm certain that at least a couple of Seniors from the Ansel alumni network are involved, but it's difficult to pin down their names."

"Doesn't the entire network pretty much hate me due to my association with Professor Ventag?"

"Ansel is not a monolithic entity, kid. From what I've heard, Professor Pendleton, who you've already met, is fairly persistent in trying to beat you fair and square. He believes that mech designers should beat other mech designers in the arena of the mech market. He's one of the lead designers of the collaborative design project meant to form a solution against your Desolate Soldiers."

That sounded surprisingly fair of his old foe. While Ves always disliked Professor Pendleton, he admired the Senior's principles.

Ves mentally tipped his hat to Professor Pendleton.

"I'm eager to see how these Ansel folks plan to upstage my Desolate Soldier's value proposition." He grinned in anticipation.

Calabast shook her head at the sight. Ves wasn't taking her warnings seriously!

Fortunately, she wasn't entirely on her own. In addition to the organization she built up, she also snapped up the Swordmaidens as well as other desperate outfits.

In truth, Ves did appreciate her forewarnings. Having someone like Calabast passing on crucial information would allow him to prepare for threats in advance!

That was much better than before, where he had to deal with many dangers out of the blue.

The two began to talk about less acute developments. For example, Calabast shared some of her thoughts on what the government was doing at this time.

"It's all hands on deck at the central government." She said. "They can barely afford to divert some of their time towards you and your Desolate Soldier model. In particular, they've reached out to numerous states and organizations for entreaties."

"What does that mean?"

"The Bright Republic is looking for allies to shoulder the burden."

"That sounds hard."

"It is, but the government believes it's worthwhile to forge greater cooperation. You'll probably hear the results within a couple of months."

Aside from this, Calabast didn't really offer anything that aroused his interest. After she finished informing Ves of what he needed to know, she revealed some of her own plans.

"Right now is an especially volatile time. A lot of elements are moving and a lot of opportunities have arisen. I'd be remiss if I don't take advantage of this situation as much as possible."

"Will you be gone, then?"

She nodded. "You can already take care of yourself to an extent. With my existing arrangements, I'm confident I can stop or hinder any small actions targeted against you or your company. I'll have an assistant visit you periodically in order to inform you what my organization has achieved."

"Does your organization have a name?"

"You can call us the C-Men."

Ves immediately chortled in reaction. "What kind of name is that?!"

"I'm just joking, kid." Calabast shook her head at his infantile reaction. "I haven't settled on a name yet. It's very difficult to come up with a name that makes my people proud while giving away as little as possible to our enemies."

"You previously worked for a Hexer intelligence agency called DIVA, right?"

"I see you've fallen into its trap. DIVA is an acronym meant to make people underestimate the organization. Its propensity to hire agents from the prominent dynasties of the Hegemony means that men are especially prone to underestimating what it's capable of. If you think that DIVA is filled with vain and air-headed divas, then think again."

Ves stopped smiling. "I see."

After they were done laughing, Calabast stood up and turned to the exit. "This will be my last visit for a while. We'll keep in touch through other means. Until then, stay out of trouble!"

"I know! You're not my mom, Calabast!"

"I might as well be!"

Once she left, Ves sat back down and processed what he learned. He obtained a decent amount of critical information, though he heard nothing too pertinent that demanded him to take immediate action.

What concerned him the most was the MTA's imminent announcement and the development of a direct competitor to his Desolate Soldier.

While Ves believed that his monopoly on spiritual components gave him a huge advantage, he was not the only mech designer who could offer something unique. A lot of Seniors developed their own advantages which they relied on to gain a solid footing in the market.

"If a single Senior designs a mech, then I shouldn't be worried." He considered while rubbing his chin. "If five of them have banded together, then that is something different!"

Chapter 1576 Threat of Competition

There were limits to collaboration. How could a mech design accommodate an endless number of specialties and abstruse effects?

It was impossible for hundreds of mech designers to contribute their distinctive strengths to a single mech design.

Even if their specialties miraculously didn't overlap, a mech or mech design simply couldn't contain so many exceptional elements!

In part, this was because a mech design could only accommodate a finite amount of design philosophies. Adding more than a mech design could handle would only dilute the strength of existing abstruse effects.

The general rule when it came to collaborations was that the total capacity of a mech design largely depended on the size of the mech and the capabilities of the lead designer.

The bigger the mech, the more specialties it could accommodate.

The better the lead designer, the more room he or she could open up in the design.

This was why the identity of the lead designer mattered so much.

The exact capacity a design philosophy occupied depended on many factors, such as the degree of contribution of its mech designer, the strength of the mech designer, the exact nature of the design philosophy and how extensively it affects a mech design.

It was difficult to come up with exact figures for that reason.

In the case of Journeymen and Seniors, the MTA issued a general guideline that no more than five peers should collaborate on a single mech design.

Adding any more to the mix would only reduce the strength of every specialty and increase the amount of interference. Stuffing too many design philosophies inevitably led to friction and other negative side effects.

Ves heard that it was a different case for Masters, but that wasn't something he should consider at his current stage.

"If I assume that the Ansel mech designers will adhere to this guideline, they'll only pool the specialties of five Seniors at most."

It was relatively rare for five Seniors to collaborate on a single mech design. Every Senior was an esteemed mech designer, especially in a third-rate state like the Bright Republic.

Even if they were part of the same network, they still competed against each other without too much reserve!

For five of them to come together to work on a single killer mech design signalled how serious the Ansel alumni network intended to dethrone his wildly successful Desolate Soldier model.

"Isn't this bullying?" Ves frowned.

Sadly, the mech market was never fair. Seniors and foreign megacompanies dominated the Bright Republic's mech market for very good reasons.

An upstart like Ves who managed to capture so much market share was a clear anomaly.

Anomalies never lasted long.

Did this mean that Ves hated his competitors?

Not really. Even if a bunch of Seniors with nothing better to do wanted to knock down his Desolate Soldier by developing a better alternative, Ves already earned enough profit.

Even if his Desolate Soldiers faded in popularity a few months later, it didn't change the fact that hundreds of thousands of mechs were already being put to use against the sandmen!

Ves considered it a supreme honor for one of his products to achieve this unprecedented level of market penetration!

"No mech can reign supreme forever."

Even if his Desolate Soldier got upstaged by a better model, it still offered something indispensable to many forces. Ves highly doubted that any of the Ansel Seniors could come up with a substitute for the auras of his mechs.

This was the true reason why he remained confident.

Naturally, Ves also acknowledged that his current connections played a huge role in covering his back. If not for the government's favor towards him, he would have encountered numerous hindrances.

For now, he needed to make sure he remained on the good side of the Bright Republic. At the very least, he should keep his allies happy.

"Hmm. Maybe I should talk to someone."

He decided to call a former collaborator. After placing a call, his comm soon projected Professor Ventag's face.

"Ves. It's been some time. You're doing quite well, it seems."

"Extremely well." Ves answered. "I hope I haven't given you a lot of trouble."

The professor casually waved his hand. "It's fine. When it comes to competition, every mech designer ought to do their best. You should never hold back even when trampling over your own friends. This is the only way the mech industry can remain strong."

Ves knew that Professor Ventag had already published a mech that occupied a similar role to the Desolate Soldier.

Unfortunately, much like any other budget-priced spaceborn ballistic rifleman mech, their unique strengths paled in comparison to what Ves had to offer.

"Are you truly doing okay?"

"I've already pivoted to other projects. I'm personally designing a defensive mech that can give full play to my design philosophy and I'm also involved in several military projects."

Ves recalled that Professor Ventag specialized in damage control. Such a specialty was normally useful in every case, but the sandmen ruined this dynamic. Mechs either returned from battle whole or with a giant melted hole running through their frame.

A specialty like damage control was of little use in these circumstances!

He still tried to console the Senior. "I think your product might merit a second look in the future, professor. Now that several experienced sandman admirals have shown up, mechs like yours will definitely become more useful."

"You underestimate the power of inertia." The professor shook his head. "Even if another mech becomes more useful due to changing circumstances, it costs a lot of time, money and effort for mech forces to replace an older mech model with a newer mech model. This is why the first-mover advantage is so powerful."

The two chatted for a bit about their respective works. Aside from talking about their published mech designs, they also started to talk about their ongoing projects, though they made sure not to mention anything confidential.

Ves did not consider his current projects to be anything secret, as the Ministry of Defense hadn't classified anything.

This meant he was free to talk about them with a fellow mech designer on a relatively unsecure comm channel.

What did it matter if others were eavesdropping on their conversation?

Ves did not fear any competition. MinDef didn't care either. In fact, they welcomed competition if that meant they gained more choice!

As Ves described the criteria and requirements for the Militant Soldier and the Peaceful Soldier designs, Ventag started to frown.

"These projects aren't light."

"I know. I've already taken that into account."

"Good." The professor smiled. "I can give you some tips on how to approach the two projects. First, let me ask you, did MinDef pose any requirements to you with regards to collaborations?"

Ves recalled the lengthy documents that MinDef sent. "I don't think so."

"That's fairly unusual, Ves. The Mech Corps and the Planetary Guard are normally very meticulous about this. Mechs designed by multiple mech designers tend to be more rounded and less prone to extremes. The requirements they posed to you also sounds remarkably less rigorous than those issued to others."

"Why is that?"

"It could be that an ally within MinDef has lobbied on your behalf. It could also be that MinDef prioritizes speed and doesn't want to add to your burden."

"I think both might be true. My relationship with the government is pretty good, and my grandfather is a senior advisor in the ministry."

"Whatever the case, you've been granted with a lot of leeway. Be sure to make use of that to spread your ideals in the Mech Corps and the Planetary Guard. Ordinarily, a young Journeyman such as you isn't qualified to supply mechs to those organizations. After all, they already employ their own Seniors. This is your chance to get a head-start from your peers and catch up to the older generation."

Ves nodded in understanding. "That's what I intend as well."

"Let's address the variants individually. First, don't expect your Militant Soldier to become a mainstay in the Mech Corps. As I've mentioned earlier, the Mech Corps does not lack for mech designers, many of which have earned the trust of their respective mech regiments."

"Then why encourage me to develop a variant for the military in the first place?"

"Because the military wants to offer every mech regiment a backup option. If the resident mech designers aren't able to design a mech that fares well against the sandmen, then they can always decide to adopt your Militant Soldier design instead."

"That.. sounds unlikely. There are definitely Seniors in charge, right? Would they be willing to admit defeat to a Journeyman-level design?"

The professor sneered. "If the Seniors aren't willing to recognize reality, then the brass will force them to. A military variant of your Desolate Soldier design is exceptionally threatening because of your unique strengths. The Mech Corps doesn't actually need any mech regiment to adopt your Militant Soldier. Just the threat of its existence in its internal database is enough to light a fire underneath the mech designers employed by the military!"

"I see! No wonder that MinDef hasn't made any excessive demands!"

Just as the Desolate Soldier forced the Ansel mech designers to work harder, now the military wanted to obtain their own version to threaten its own mech designers!

Though Ves felt dirty for being used like this, he didn't object too much. He was certain that several mech regiments might embrace his Militant Soldier design for the same reasons the private sector appreciated his mech so highly.

After giving his thoughts on the Militant Soldier, the professor turned to the Peaceful Soldier.

"The Planetary Guard is normally involved in peacekeeping operations, so it's no surprise that they have asked for a landbound variant for your Desolate Soldier design. What you need to keep in mind is to design it as a flexible platform."

"Why so, professor?"

"To give the Planetary Guard organizations some choice on how to employ them. I believe that many units will come to favor this product due to its strange effect on people. For the duration of the Sand War, it's most appropriate for the Peaceful Soldiers to wield ballistic rifles. When it's over, the Planetary Guard will have to withdraw at least some of their lethal armament and switch to non-lethal armament. If your Peaceful Soldier can be made compatible with the fluid projectors the Planetary Guard favors, then that will save them a lot of inconvenience."

This was a very valuable piece of advice. Ves bowed his head in thanks. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind, professor."

"No problem, Ves. We are both friends. I'm very satisfied with how our Aurora Titan model turned out. Even now, sales hasn't stopped since it's apparently capable of blocking a single heavy laser strike. Perhaps I might approach you for another collaboration once the Sand War is over."

"I welcome any opportunity for cooperation as long as I can make a significant contribution." Ves smiled back.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll become a very popular collaboration partner after this war is over!" The professor laughed.

Once the comm call ended, Ves closed his eyes and sunk into his chair.

He couldn't help but notice that Professor Ventag was exceptionally friendly towards him. This affirmed his belief that his value was beginning to get recognized.

In fact, the professor plainly admitted his hope for future collaboration.

Ves did not object to working together on another project with Ventag. He benefited a lot from the professor's guidance.

In addition, he wanted to make sure he could continue to enjoy the backing of an established Senior.

"Why do I feel like I've become a politician?" He sighed.

Though Ves disliked depending on connections, his current level of prominence was too dazzling to exist by itself. Ves alone wasn't strong enough to keep up with his incredible success.

Only by borrowing the strengths of Professor Ventag, Flashlight, Senator Tovar, Gloriana and etc. would he be able to exploit his design philosophy openly while remaining secure!

"Speaking of borrowing the strengths of others, I should check in on how William is doing..."

Chapter 1577 Silent William

Ves and Gloriana paid a visit to the LMC's spaceborn testing ground. Set in an asteroid belt to guarantee some privacy, they witnessed the performance of the Resentful Soldier piloted by William Urbesh in person.

In response to a request, the testers pitted the Resentful Soldier against a Desolate Soldier in a practice duel. Both of the mechs had been issued with purpose-built practice rifles instead of their normal armament.

Right now, both mechs fought furiously against each other. The mechs trailed in space in dazzling circles and corkscrews as they maneuvered wildly in an attempt to spoil the aim of their opponents.

The range between the two mechs was rather close due to the limitations of their weapon type.

Right now, William was making a very good account for himself. His Resentful Soldier only sustained seven hits while his opponents suffered twice as much!

"Wow!" Gloriana watched the projection tracking the practice duel with admiration. "William is finally showcasing his real skill!"

"He's no longer a coward." Ves smiled in satisfaction.

This was exactly what he set out to achieve! Even if William never emerged out of his treatment quite the same, at the very least the mech pilot no longer jumped at shadows whenever he faced an actual opponent.

Even if William only engaged in a practice duel, he clearly demonstrated his ability to fight!

He was cured!

As Ves studied some of the telemetry, he noted that William's life signs did not fluctuate too much. This meant that William wasn't forcing himself.

Instead, he embraced the fight!

"William is quite a good mech pilot now that he isn't gripped by fear." Gloriana commented.

"That's a given considering his background."

William wasn't quite as good as a typical second-class mech pilot due to his lack of combat experience. However, his time with the Rim Guardians had given him a very solid foundation.

It was just that William's combat effectiveness always sunk to the bottom whenever he was actually put inside a mech.

Now that Ves washed away the dirt and polished William to a shine, he was finally able to unleash his formerly-hidden strength!

"He's actually better than most Larkinsons at his age!" Ves judged.

As a Larkinson, Ves knew exactly how skilled his family was in piloting mechs. While there was a huge variance in skill level, on average a Larkinson mech pilot easily outperformed an average mech pilot.

For William to display a level of skill that was significantly beyond the level of a typical Larkinson mech pilot showed that he had a bright future ahead of him. The only caveat was that he needed to show off the same level of performance against real opponents.

A simple practice duel still fell short of actual battle. It remained to be seen if William kept his nerves during his first sortie against the sandmen.

Once the Resentful Soldier finished its tests, it flew back to the small space station that served as the testing ground's main facility.

Ves and Gloriana headed down to the mech bay to greet William in person. The mech pilot calmly exited the Resentful Soldier and faced the two Journeymen with a stoic expression.

"William. Good job today. You performed well with the Resentful Soldier."

The mech pilot stared back at Ves without saying anything.

Ves began to get somewhat unnerved. Even if Ves had mentally and spiritually tortured the poor fellow with an ill-conceived experiment, couldn't William show some appreciation to his benefactor?

A mech technician awkwardly walked up to them. "Sorry, sir. Mr. Urbesh here hasn't spoken any word since we first received him. As far as we know, he's a mute."

"Mute?" Ves grumbled.

Was this one of the side effects of his treatment? That was pretty bad. If Ves managed to cure one affliction only to cause William to suffer another, then that meant his treatment method still needed a lot more refinement.

Oh well. Ves still achieved his primary goal. Test subjects like William existed to tease out unanticipated consequences such as turning mute.

"Can he still communicate?" Gloriana curiously asked.

"Sure, ma'am. Mr. Urbesh, please lift your left arm."

William lifted his left arm without any hesitation. His face remained impassive while he moved his limb.

"Please lower your left arm and raise your right foot."

William did as the mech technician instruction.

"Okay, that's enough." The mech technician said to William before turning to Ves. "As you see, sir, there is nothing wrong with William's hearing or judgement. If he wants to communicate, he mostly gestures with his arms. If he wants to say something more complex, he'll take the time to write his words."

"Oh. That's okay then."

If William was capable enough to write, then that meant that Ves hadn't completely scrambled the mech pilot's mind.

However, no matter how many questions he asked, William refused to communicate to Ves. Considering what he'd been through, Ves did not blame him too much.

It was enough that William could still be brought to fight.

"Good luck on the remaining tests." Ves awkwardly said and patted William on the shoulder. "You'll be deploying to the front very soon as part of the next rotation. The Avatars of Myth will make sure your Resentful Soldier will be able to showcase its strength."

William didn't respond. Ves had no idea what the Urbesh clansman thought about being sent into a thankless battle to defend a state he didn't care about.

Oh well, it was pointless of him to refuse. Ves made sure to surround William with enough people to keep him in line. If he ever rebelled, there was no way he could get away!

As soon as they were done with their visit, Ves and Gloriana returned to Cloudy Curtain aboard the Stellar Chaser.

Having been warned by Calabast, Ves made sure the Glory Battalion escorted them all the way back. The sheer amount of protection gave no opening for sneak attackers to take out Gloriana's personal ship.

No incidents took place during the way back. Once they reached the surface, Ves and Gloriana proceeded to work on their next projects in earnest.

Now that they already collaborated on the Desolate Soldier and Resentful Soldier project, their cooperation already reached an acceptable state.

Ves first decided to focus on the Militant Soldier project.

"To satisfy the Mech Corps, we'll have to incorporate military standards and military components in our design." He began. "Fortunately, I have a decent amount of experience in working with them both. Not much time has passed since I came back from the war so many of the components I'm familiar with should still be current."

He took the initiative to select the component designs needed to make the Militant Soldier. The important part about the mech design was that it had to be good enough to satisfy the mech pilots serving in the Mech Corps while also making it compatible with all of the prevailing standards and hardware.

Though the Mech Corps employed thousands of different mech designs, the mech regiments easily supported this diversity by adopting one single set of standards and protocols. From slots to energy cells, as long as the mechs shared enough in common, the logistical burden would still remain in an acceptable range.

For various reasons, the standards of the Mech Corps differed from the standards prevalent in the open mech market. In fact, many different mech designers propagated their own individual standards in order to encourage customers to make use of their entire mech catalogs at once.

Picking components was easier than Ves expected. It turned out that the Mech Corps had already filtered out a narrow list for him. This was mainly to prevent him from leaking the complete list of component designs adopted by the Mech Corps.

With only a limited selection available, it didn't take too long for Ves to make his choice. Whoever composed the list must have been a knowledgeable Senior who already had a good idea what the Militant Soldier ought to look like.

"I like working with professionals." Ves smiled.

Once he selected the parts, he began to sketch out a draft design together with Gloriana.

Both of them thought hard to develop a suitable vision for the Militant Soldier.

"Maybe we don't need to alter that much besides its components and internal architecture." Gloriana suggested. "The Desolate Soldier's divine nature is already very suitable to the military. I don't think your Mech Corps will object if they get the same thing. They must have already studied our Desolate Soldier design extensively and found it acceptable."

"You're right." Ves nodded in agreement. "Let's just envision our Militant Soldier as a straight military conversion of the Desolate Soldier."

Neither of them felt eager to expand the scope of this project. Changing out so many parts already posed a significant burden to them. Ves himself couldn't think of any way to make his Militant Soldier's aura become more suitable to the Mech Corps without borrowing a new spiritual fragment somewhere.

Should he borrow a spiritual fragment from a Larkinson expert pilot or something?

Though it sounded abominable, Ves seriously considered the idea before shaking his head.

"It's not necessary, and I'm not sure this is the good time to injure one of our own expert pilots."

Though a part of Ves felt as if he made a lazy decision, he forced himself to accept this decision.

To be honest, both Ves and Gloriana would rather work on something else. Designing variants of an existing mech design was not as great as designing an entirely new mech.

Still, Ves couldn't ignore the request from the government. It didn't cost him much except time to design the variants, so he might as well spend some months to complete them before moving on to his next project.

During this time, Ketis also finished testing the Prideful Soldier. Once Ves inspected the design for the final time, he decided to leave the matter of publishing and marketing it to his subordinates.

"Take care of it, Benny."

Gavin studied the schematics. Of course, as a layman, he could only judge the Prideful Soldier on its surface.

"I will, boss. The LMC has already formed a marketing plan to promote the Prideful Soldier."

"How well do you think it will sell?"

"Quite well, especially considering the feeling it gives off. There's nothing like it, Ves. I like how you managed to stain the Desolate Soldier's effects. It's much more aggressive and feral. Just watching the design is pumping me up!"

Ves smirked at Gavin's reaction. The addition of Zeigra's mote of spirituality had given the normally-pure X-Factor of the base model an entirely new character!

"Can you be more exact?"

"Not as much as the Desolate Soldier, if that's what you're hoping." Gavin tempered his expectations. "It will still be a success, though. Plenty of gangs and underground organizations already appreciate the Desolate Soldier. Now that the Prideful Soldier can go on sale, they'll highly favor this variant."

"Will the production capacity at our disposal be able to produce enough Prideful Soldiers?"

"That.. is going to be difficult." Gavin reluctantly admitted. "While keeping up with the production side of things isn't my ballpark, I've heard plenty of warnings that it's getting harder and harder to contract third-party manufacturers."

"There are no more mech companies available who are willing to lend their production capacity to us?"

Gavin nodded. "Right. We've exhausted the available supply. We're not the only ones who are looking to depend on external manufacturers to produce mechs. Not only are we facing competition from other mech companies, we also have to jostle for production capacity against the government. All of those turrets and defensive platforms don't come from nothing!"

"Even if that's so, I'm surprised that production capacity has already run out. I thought we still had plenty to spare."

"That's because the military has recently started a new initiative."

"And what is that?"

"Producing spacefighters."

Chapter 1578 The Return of Starfighters

The concept of small spacecraft or starfighters enjoyed mixed success during humanity's ascendance and dominance over the galaxy.

Swift, agile and cheap, starfighters performed fairly well as cheap weapon platforms that could harass large, sluggish targets from a distance.

In fact, humanity initially deployed drones to serve this role, but they became too prone to hacking. Any rival with a bone to pick could sneak in and sabotage the AIs controlling the drones, causing them to fire on their allies instead!

This meant that piloted starfighters actually played a respectable role during the Age of Stars and Age of Conquest.

Yet when humanity finally started to fight against the big boys of the galaxy, the downsides of fielding starfighters became very prominent.

Their small size meant that they became exceptionally vulnerable to massive, ship-scaled armaments with huge areas of effects. In fact, detonating a few nuclear missiles or anti-matter bombs in the middle of a formation was enough to wipe out hundreds of them at a time!

Casualties mounted to such an extent that the romanticism surrounding starfighters quickly faded. Deploying starfighters in the middle of a battle between huge warships was as idiotic as deploying infantry in a battle between mechs!

Just a few powerful weapon discharges was enough to kill huge swathes of annoying ants!

Even after the end of the Age of Mechs, the rise of mechs eclipsed every other weapon platform during the Age of Mechs.

Certainly, starfighters were more viable than before. The absence of warships in most of human space meant that smaller weapon platforms could actually play a role.

Sadly, when starfighters were pitted against mechs, the latter always gained the upper hand.

The advantages of mechs over starfighters were very clear.

Mech pilots were practically born for the job. When paired with a suitable mech, they made their machines come to life. Skilled mech pilots distinguished themselves by directly controlling many functions of a mech to make the most of their machines.

In contrast, starfighters piloted by norms lacked the advantages of a man-machine connection. Though cheap, the dependence on automation and the lack of fluidity in employing starfighters meant that they always fared worse against an equal force of mechs.

States stopped pumping money into making starfighters because the costs outweighed the benefits. War during the Age of Mechs had subsided into smaller, more focused conflicts centered around conquering territory and pushing ideologies.

Once the Age of Mechs took off and everyone began to fall in love with mechs, the Mech Trade Association began their fatal assault on alternate weapon platforms!

A whole swathe of weapon platforms such as starfighters, defensive platforms and the like were subject to numerous restrictions!

Their use in human conflicts had to be constrained at all costs!

Certainly, the MTA made a very persuasive argument for their case. When the outcome of a conflict solely depended on mechs, the damage inflicted to the parties involved was a lot less severe than if other weapon platforms entered the mix!

The benefit of mechs on the other hand was that its numbers were always finite. The amount of mechs a state could field would always be limited by their limited pool of manpower.

Only around 3.5 percent of humans possessed the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs. Of that 3.5 percent, only a portion of them actually became mech pilots.

By narrowing the scope of human infighting to battles between a small number of highly-trained professionals, much of human vigor would still be preserved after the end of a war.

In other words, less people died.

Scarred by the mass deaths and genocides that characterized the latter days of the Age of Conquest, many humans embraced this logic.

The approval of the masses, the power wielded by the MTA and the tacit consent of the CFA all supported the new policies.

Since then, the restrictions on starfighters and other competing weapon platforms came into force!

Both Ves and Gavin recalled the history surrounding the ruling that was meant to put the nail in the coffin for starfighters.

Therefore, Ves was a bit surprised to hear that they would be making a return.

"Has the MTA approved?"

"They did." Gavin nodded. "Every state intending to mass produce starfighters has received the greenlight to pull out all the stops. Since aliens aren't entitled to the protections enjoyed by humans, we don't have to abide by as many restrictions."

It would be stupid to fight with one hand tied behind your back against the aliens. In fact, people even began to wonder whether they would be allowed to construct warships again.

Unfortunately, that was a bridge too far for the Big Two. For now, deploying lots of starfighters was the most a state could get away with at this time.

"Now that I think about it, resorting to starfighters make a lot of sense." Ves mused while rubbing Lucky's back. "Starfighters are simply smaller and mobile versions of defensive platforms that are placed in the orbit of planets. The biggest downside to orbiting defensive platforms is that they have to wait for the sandmen fleet to come within firing range before they can do their jobs."

At that stage, a sandman fleet almost reached the end of its destination! Even if hundreds of defensive platforms orbited a planet, just one sandman vessel had to go through and make landfall in order to wipe out a city of millions!

On the other hand, if starfighters could be deployed in the outer reaches of a star system, they could whittle down a sandman fleet over days. This put the populated planets out of danger.

"A lot of states threatened by the sandmen have started to get in on the action." Gavin summoned a small projection which showed snippets of recent news broadcasts. "The Bright Republic has already recruited their first batches of starfighter pilots from the auxiliary regiments and they're recruiting more. A lot of desperate norms who feel powerless in the face of alien annihilation have applied in spades."

"Well, at least the Bright Republic isn't lacking for volunteers. Do you know how the military intends to deploy the starfighters?"

"The bright senate has authorized the creation of the Starfighter Corps to field the new machines. It's a new branch and they're still working out the details. I think we'll be witnessing the first new starfighter wings in battle within a month."

"That fast?"

"The government has been cooking up this plan for months, boss. Did you know that one of the reasons why most of the shipyards in the regions no longer accepted any orders? It's because the governments all placed orders for lots of light carriers!"

"Light carriers? Isn't that kind of.. flimsy?"

"Many states are running into money problems. Everything has to be done as cheaply as possible. The training of starfighter pilots is rushed as fast as possible. The starfighters themselves are cheaper than frontline mechs. The carriers that bring them to battle are so shoddily constructed that they won't even last an entire decade!"

All of these measures make it clear that the deployment of starfighters was nothing more than a desperation plan. Unlike the Mech Corps which enjoyed a generous budget, the Starfighter Corps had to field as many fighter craft as possible at a fraction of the budget!

That made Ves a little mollified. As a mech designer, he selfishly favored the primacy of mechs. The rise of alternative weapon platforms such as starfighter posed a threat to the dominance of mechs.

"It's good that the states under threat can alleviate the pressure from the sandmen in this manner." Ves charitably said. "Do you have any more details?"

"The starfighters won't be anything fancy. They'll be mounted with side thrusters that can rotate in a full circle, thereby allowing them to fly forwards and backwards without changing their orientation. They'll be mounted with a cheap but efficient ballistic gun that can only fire forward. To cut down on cost, they don't have any armor to speak of. The goal behind their designs is to waste as few exotics as possible."

"That sounds like cannon fodder." Ves remarked. "An awful starfighter like that doesn't have the flexibility, armor or mobility to defeat a mech."

"They're not meant to be deployed against mechs. According to the analysts, the starfighters will mostly be deployed alongside mechs to add extra firepower to the fight while attracting the attention of the sandmen."

Ves realized the brilliance of this plan. "I see! The sandmen have never shown themselves to be selective in their targeting! Whenever they fire their heavy lasers, they always seem to pick a random target!"

The sandmen's dreaded heavy laser strikes constantly exacted a toll on the defense forces. Its sheer might meant that few mechs ever survived the blow when struck. The only reason that mechs managed to cope with it was due to its poor firing rate.

In such circumstances, adding more stuff in space gave the sandman vessels more targets to fire at. If half of the targets consisted of cheap, disposable starfighters, then the casualties suffered by mechs would probably be cut in half as well!

"The value of a mech is incomparable to the value of a starfighter." Gavin noted. "Aside from the cost difference, the manpower issue is even more crucial. Don't forget that our state has recently gone through a war. Compared to the Ylvaine Protectorate, we actually have less mech pilots per capita!"

As a mech insider, Ves was well aware that the Bright Republic had fallen into a low point with regards to their mech pilot reserves. By alleviating the pressure on mechs and mech pilots by attracting firepower away from them was a great solution.

The only downside was that this solution required the sacrifice of others.

"A lot of starfighter pilots will die."

"They're norms. Even if thousands of them die, we can replace them with a million more." Gavin grinned in a bleak manner. "Manpower for starfighters is the one resource that the government is the least worried about. Not only does the Starfighter Corps have a huge population of Brighters to draw from, they can also hire tons of refugees to take revenge against the sandmen!"

The logic surrounding starfighters became more and more compelling. Both the humans and machines were purposely kept as cheap as possible to add as much cannon fodder to the battlefield as possible.

"The more interesting question to me right now is how this will affect our business. Will our Desolate Soldiers still sell as much?"

"Our analysts don't expect demand to change. Mechs still play a leading role. It's just that they have a lot of company now. It's kind of like where before we only waged war by deploying cavalry. Now, we decided to add a lot of infantry to our armies."

That was a good analogy. Both cavalry and infantry had their own roles to play.

"What is the longevity of starfighters and the Starfighter Corps?"

"I don't know. If you ask me, unless there are other alien races bearing down on us, the Starfighter Corps will probably fade into the background after the Sand War."

That satisfied Ves. He really didn't want starfighters to stick around and divert attention from mechs.

In truth, he felt a little uncomfortable. The reintroduction of starfighters signalled that mechs alone could not shoulder the burden of protecting a state against external enemies.

Even though the second-rate states hadn't moved out in force against the sandmen, resorting to starfighters still represented an indictment against mechs.

"Do you think mechs have a future, Benny?"

"They'll always be around, I think. I'm not sure they'll remain as popular as you would like them to be. The Sand War has exposed the biggest defect of mechs. We simply don't have enough mech pilots to field as many mechs as we like."

Ves had no good response to that. The limited supply of mech pilots could only be alleviated if genetic aptitude no longer restricted humans from piloting mechs.

What were the chances of that happening?

Chapter 1579 Starting A Trend

Ves could already predict that the launch of the Starfighter Corps would definitely result in a huge success. The brutal attrition that the sandmen relentlessly inflicted on their victims would become a lot less effective once it shifted from mechs to starfighters!

The only complication was that the effectiveness of starfighters might drop when deployed against abnormal sandman fleets.

"I'm not sure that committing so many resources on starfighters is a sure bet." Ves voiced his doubts.

Aside from the basic configuration, newer varieties emerged for quite a while now. Though rare, the Komodo Star Sector witnessed enough of them to form loose categories.

From the titanic monolith configuration to the incredibly insidious swarm configuration, dealing with them always demanded a different response.

Of the current known modes of sandman fleets, Ves could already tell that the starfighters would fare especially poorly against the swarm configuration.

This was basically a sandman admiral's attempt at imitating mechs. Deciding to fight fire with fire, they split up their huge and cumbersome sandman vessels into tens of thousands smaller sandman 'drones'.

Though small and fragile, their sheer numbers and the fact that they were all capable of firing weak lasers meant that defense forces were always heavily outnumbered!

It was the best configuration the sandman race came up with to counter mechs. Its relative success compared to other configurations meant that more and more sandman admirals adopted this trend!

Of course, the swarm configuration also suffered from a critical weakness. The sandman admiral no longer enjoyed excellent protection. It had to hide itself by hiding itself in a regular drone.

Destroying this camouflaged drone would always guarantee that the rest of the swarm lost cohesion!

Naturally, the chances of this happening was not very large. The drone carrying the sandman admiral was always positioned away from the enemy.

Just as Ves was about to go on the galactic net to get the latest updates on the Sand War, he received another message from Gavin.

[Check out these news reports!]

Ves clicked the links and observed the footage that Gavin picked out for him to watch.

A large number of mechs that Ves instantly recognized as Desolate Soldiers flew in unison. The mechs all faced the advancing sandman vessels while flying backwards.

Since Ves already knew that his Desolate Soldiers would mostly be flying backwards, he specifically selected an omnidirectional flight system for their design.

Nothing about the footage stood out to Ves except for all of the orange vapor trails they released from the Rescue Particle Generator mounted on their chests.

As Ves intended, the trails of vapor lingered for at least a minute, resulting in an iconic sight where the trails marked the passage of the mechs.

Sometimes, the formation of mechs flew backwards in a fairly straight line, thereby producing an incredibly inspiring sight.

Mechs only did that to make themselves and their outfits look good. During actual battles, the mechs adopted irregular evasion patterns, thereby producing crooked trails that didn't look as clean as straight trails.

Even so, the Desolate Soldiers still made a powerful impact in the media with this gimmick alone!

Some outfits even started experimenting with shifting the color of the trails. When Ves switched to the next clips, he encountered formations of Desolate Soldiers that adopted different colors.

From a rainbow pattern to imitating the colors of the flag of the Bright Republic, each squad or company of Desolate Soldiers expressed the playfulness of their mech pilots in a different fashion!

Even the Ylvainans got in on the action and switched the default pure white trail of their Holy Soldiers into other colors to accentuate their devotion to the Great Prophet!

"This is good publicity!" Ves smiled in satisfaction.

Such sights only served as needless distractions during regular battles between mechs. It was only because the sandmen were so stupid most of the time that the mech pilots resorted to this method to alleviate their stress and worry.

"Everyone needs some hope during these trying times."

When Ves watched the next clips, he began to see more and more mechs releasing vapor trails in formation.

The only difference was that Ves distinctly didn't recognize their models.

"..What?"

Ves quickly leaned closer and studied the mechs carefully. Just like his Desolate Soldiers, the unknown mechs featured a Rescue Particle Generator over the position where the heart should be.

"Have other mech designers stolen my idea?!"

His anger rose at the thought. This required deeper study!

Zooming in to the deepest detail revealed the shoddy jury-rigging that took place to install the module to a mech that originally lacked this part.

Other mechs featured the same improvised addition, making it clear that a bunch of mech technicians were responsible.

"This footage is only a week old." Ves noted.

He switched to more recent footage and saw more and more mechs adopting the same trend. Since the Rescue Particle Generator was incredibly cheap and simple to make, it was stupidly cheap and easy to add this component to every mech!

Within a matter of days, the trend had spread throughout the entire Bright Republic and Ylvaine Protectorate!

Not wanting to be left out, even the Kronon Dynasty and the Mech Corps started to add similar modules to their own mechs!

Like wildfire, the trend rapidly spread through every state involved in the Sand War! The journalists responsible for publicising this trend far and wide even came up with a name

Stripes of Humanity!

"So long as the Stripes of Humanity fly, our state shall never fall!"

Some news reports even mentioned that the Starfighter Corps planned to adopt this trend as well!

Soon, thousands of starfighters would be releasing the Stripes of Humanity on the battlefield!

"Copycats!" Ves shouted.

He quickly calmed down, though. He didn't exactly own this idea. Most people at least became aware that he was responsible for forming it in the first place. The news media also did a good job crediting the Desolate Soldiers as the product that started this trend.

Wherever the Stripes of Humanity spread, the demand for the Desolate Soldier increased!

While every mech started to mount particle generators, a lot of customers were interested in obtaining the original machines that started this trend!

"So this is why Benny told me that I would love this development."

His assistant was right. While his Soldier product line may have lost their exclusivity, it had already made its mark in history!

"All of the history books about the Sand War will feature this sight! My Desolate Soldier model along with any derivatives will surely earn a place there!"

A very grand mood overcame Ves all of a sudden. As a mech designer, he always hoped he would be able to influence the development of states and the course of history through his products.

Before, Ves always got the sense that his mechs were just a few machines among many in the huge mech markets.

Now that his Desolate Soldier model achieved massive success, its influence reached a height that Ves could only dream about a few years ago!

"Is this what it feels to be immortalized?"

Every human wanted to be remembered. With an uncountable amount of humans living in the galaxy today, it was extraordinarily difficult to earn fame. It was even more difficult to be remembered after death.

While the Desolate Soldiers only affected a single star sector, Ves already knew that it would probably become known for years in the states that survived the Sand War.

To Ves and the LMC, that amounted to a massive publicity coup!

After Ves calmed down a bit, he checked up with the LMC and learned that they had already formed a plan to capitalize on this trend.

"Good. The people working in my company aren't good-for-nothings."

When Ves cuddled up with Gloriana sometime later at the Cloud Estate, they shared their thoughts on the matter.

"It's pretty remarkable how this idea of yours caught on so much." Gloriana said admiringly while she leaned against him. "Did you plan to spread this trend so widely?"

Ves chuckled. "I wish! All of my mechs feature a particle generator. I've always used these components to enhance the look of my mechs. I came up with the idea of leaving behind a lingering trail because I didn't want to add anything too ostentatious to what is supposed to be an affordable mech. It's only because my mechs are fielded in such large numbers all of a sudden that the Stripes of Humanity became a sector-wide phenomenon!"

The Stripes of Humanity rapidly dominated the news cycle. Many battles that ordinarily seemed depressing suddenly gained an inspirational quality due to the proliferation of so many colored trails!

"Perhaps this will be the first of many trends started by you." Gloriana said hopefully as she leaned her head over his chest. "You're such a creative mech designer that I'm sure

you'll dazzle the galaxy once everyone gets to know you. Mechs like yours shouldn't be confined to a single star sector."

Ves softly leaned in to smell his girlfriend's lovely scent and kiss her head. "That's my hope, Gloriana."

As the two lovebirds continued to cuddle with each other, several kilometers away, a shimmering form crept up to the Cloud Estate through a picturesque forest.

Since the Cloud Estate was built atop a hill, it took a fair bit of climbing to reach the estate grounds. Mechs and other security measures constantly scoured the vicinity, thereby leaving no stone unturned.

Just as the invisible form took another step, it suddenly collapsed to the ground!

A smaller form shimmered into view. Lucky crawled up to the form it had just clawed and chewed on something invisible.

Soon, the cloaking field disappeared, revealing a man clad in a very sophisticated infiltrator suit. A backpack carrying the components of a gauss rifle was mounted on the dead man's back.

Once Lucky made sure the man was very much dead, the gem cat began to devour any hard metal objects on the body. He did not even let off the entire backpack!

"Meow~" Lucky squinted his eyes in delight.

"Miaow."

Clixie jumped out of a tree and landed on the ground in a graceful posture. With her tail raised in curiosity, she approached the corpse and licked the puddle of blood.

"Miaow!"

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat spat out the blood and hissed in disgust. When Clixie gazed at Lucky, she arrogantly raised her head and padded away!

Unlike Lucky who was content with eating literal garbage, Clixie only ate the finest cat food from Gloriana!

"Meow?" Lucky opened his eyes to look at his departing companion.

"Miaow Miaow!"

"Meow."

Lucky simply returned to munching his spoils of war.

Only when he was done with his meal did the gem cat depart back to the Cloud Estate.

As soon as the cat went out of sight, a patrol of Living Sentinels who had already arrived beforehand approached the corpse.

"The cat could have left some evidence behind." A guard grumbled as he inspected the infiltrator's body.

A superior knocked the guard on the head. "Don't talk nonsense. You know these sneaky types don't leave any incriminating evidence on their bodies."

This was the sixth infiltrator that Lucky had caught. The Living Sentinels long stopped asking questions on how the cat was able to detect intruders far in advance of the Living Sentinels or the Glory Battalion!

The fact that these infiltrators were equipped well enough to evade the detection methods of the Glory Battalion meant that the culprit was very powerful! The infiltrator had likely been despatched by a power from a second-rate state!

"Okay, let's clean up this mess and file up a report. Commander Magdalena will have something else to report to our boss tomorrow."

The patrol expertly removed the body and cleaned up the traces. Soon, the site appeared as pristine as before.

Yet another attempt to infiltrate the Cloud Estate and assassinate Ves had failed.

Chapter 1580 Errand Boys

Work on the Militant Soldier and the Peaceful Soldier projects continued at a rapid pace. Ves and Gloriana both wanted to complete the projects quickly so that they could divert their time to more fruitful pursuits.

Designing the Militant Soldier went smoother than Ves initially expected. Ves and Gloriana were already practiced with overhauling the Desolate Soldier design to accommodate different needs.

Though the Holy Soldier and the Proudful Soldier required relatively little work, the Resentful Soldier required a lot of extensive overhauls.

All of this work allowed the two to accumulate an even greater degree of familiarity with the Desolate Soldier design. Nothing was a mystery to them anymore. They not only understood what the mech was capable of, but also knew how far they could push it in different directions.

Furthermore, the two also developed a thorough understanding of each other's design styles. Since they no longer wasted any more time on exploring different methods, they achieved greater progress than before.

All of this meant that their productivity had practically soared.

An extra bonus was that Ves knew the properties of the military components he picked out by heart. Having worked with them extensively in real wartime conditions, he was well aware of their individual quirks and traits.

The result of these factors was that the Militant Soldier project progressed a lot more smoothly than either of them anticipated.

It was only until they began to tackle the Peaceful Soldier project that they began to encounter obstacles.

"It's not that straightforward to convert a spaceborn design to a landbound design." Gloriana noted. "Practically every component has to be switched."

"According to the requirements set by MinDef, we'll have to design the Peaceful Soldier using component designs commonly used by the Planetary Guard organizations. They have their own set of licenses and technical standards."

As Ves and Gloriana began selecting components from a limited catalog, they had a harder time making their choices.

"I'm not familiar with these parts." Ves sighed in disappointment.

"It's okay. I don't expect you to be all-knowing, Ves. It's normal for mech designers to start with completely unfamiliar component designs. We'll slowly understand them better as we integrate them into our mech design."

Once they began to draft and envision the Peaceful Soldier, they quickly fell into a routine.

The main challenge was to translate the Desolate Soldier into a viable landbound mech. Since the base model was fairly simple to begin with, this did not entail too many complicated transformations.

In particular, the removal of the flight system freed up a lot of capacity. Though Ves had to reserve much of the freed capacity towards accommodating the varied weapon systems and external backpack modules of the mech, he also made good use of it to empower the Peaceful Soldier's mobility.

The original Desolate Soldier mainly relied on its flight system to traverse space, so its legs and mech engine were very weak and underpowered.

Remedying this problem demanded completely new solutions that Ves and Gloriana hadn't employed in other projects.

"Mobility is very important to police forces." Gloriana taught Ves. "In populated settlements, mechs are often spread out over large areas. When an incident takes place that requires the intervention of mechs, the police have to respond as fast as possible. Aside from deploying aerial mechs, your Planetary Guard also seems to favor light and fast-moving medium mechs."

"You're right." Ves thought about the Planetary Guard mechs he observed on Bentheim. "I've never seen the Planetary Guard deploy a heavy mech."

"That's because they're too slow to respond to incidents and too destructive to deploy in urban districts. They're also a strain on the budget."

Ves continually nodded at her insightful words. "How do you know all of this?"

His girlfriend bumped him with her elbow. "Have you forgotten my mother's position? She's the Planetary Minister of Security of Scimitar II! She ordered me to customize several law enforcement mechs over the years! While the mechs I've worked on are a lot more advanced than the ones employed by the local Planetary Guard, the priorities are still the same. Just leave this matter to me, Ves!"

Recalling what Constance Wodin did for a living caused his body to shudder. For some reason, Ves deeply dreaded meeting Gloriana's mother.

His fears notwithstanding, Gloriana's personal experiences with working on law enforcement mechs came in very handy this time.

The Peaceful Soldier project progressed almost as rapidly as the Militant Soldier project.

In addition, just as Ves expected, working on multiple projects at the same time gave them more time to think on difficult issues.

If they ever encountered a problem they weren't sure about, they could simply halt the current project and work on the other one until they came up with a solution that wasn't immediately apparent.

The only thing that could make their cooperation better was if they had more help around. Hiring additional mech designers became a higher and higher priority to Ves. In fact, he already obtained permission to pick up a couple of refugees and offer them a job at the LMC.

"Let's go visit some of the refugee settlements tomorrow." He suggested. "It turns out that there are a number of mech designers mingled among the refugees. Most of them are worthless, but there are a couple of people who stand out."

"Really?" Gloriana frowned.

"Really. I'm not talking about students or failed mech designers here."

During the chaotic fall of the border states, a lot of people got mixed up. Even an Apprentice Mech Designer with a lot of money could barely obtain passage on an overcrowded cargo ship that had hastily been converted into an evacuation vessel.

As Ves worked on the variants and planned his upcoming recruitment trip, he also made sure to spend some time with others.

Though Gloriana always demanded attention, Ves still needed to make the rounds every now and then. Even if nothing required his attention, merely waving the flag did wonders in motivating others.

He deliberately paid a visit to the Battle Criers one day. He'd been neglecting the outfit lately ever since they arrived at Cloudy Curtain.

It wasn't hard to see why. The Living Sentinels were more than enough to protect the assets of the LMC while the Avatars of Myth had an easy time protecting Ves since he mainly spent his time at the Mech Nursery and his Cloud Estate.

When Ves visited the newly-erected base of the Battle Criers met up with Commander Cinnabar, the Kinner bondsman privately aired the complaints of his men in his office.

"Our men didn't sign up to sit on their thumbs. We've already received our batch of Desolate Soldiers from your mech company and we've had more than enough practice to get the hang of this new mech model. When will you send us into battle?"

"Are you that eager to fight?"

"We're born for battle. You know that."

He knew. In fact, he also knew that Cinnabar likely meant that literally.

Ves leaned forward and placed a data chip on the commander's desk. "Sorry for the wait. Here are your orders."

Cinnabar eyed the data chip with suspicion.

"Why do I feel as if you intend to do more than dispatch us to the front?"

"Fighting the Battle Criers is just a distraction." Ves pressed his fingers together. "What I really want your men to do is to hunt down a couple of individuals."

"We're not bounty hunters, sir. We don't specialize in tracking down people."

"I'll introduce you to a contact who developed an extensive information network throughout this region. You'll have all the information you need."

"Can you tell me who exactly you want us to hunt?"

"You can read that for yourself. The data chip has all the instructions you need, commander."

"Do you want us to bring in your targets alive or dead?"

"Preferably alive, but don't take too many risks. It's fine if you have to resort to killing them. Just bring proof and make sure to destroy the brains."

Cinnabar nodded after taking the data chip and slipping it into his uniform pocket. "We'll carry out your orders as best we can. With the Sand War heating up, a lot of outfits are moving around. Our movements won't attract too much attention."

"Good to hear."

The two discussed some details about their missions. This wouldn't be the last time Ves intended to dispatch the Battle Criers to run a dirty errand.

Though Ves could have issued a request to Calabast or her C-Men, it was better if he could rely on his own forces to deal with certain matters.

"As long as you complete my errands without issue, then I'll entrust you with more important missions. You'll all be eligible to participate in the training to become second-class mech pilots."

"We'll fulfill your orders to the best of our ability, sir!" Commander Cinnabar replied fervently!

Even Kinnars lusted after piloting second-class mechs. Ves found that dangling this reward in front of mech pilots proved to be an extremely effective means of motivating his mech pilots.

Once they finished discussing various matters, Commander Cinnabar showed Ves around. They visited various facilities and looked at the new batch of silver label Desolate Soldiers that had just arrived from the Mech Nursery.

Even when they were dormant, their strong duty-oriented auras impacted every Kinner.

Not that they needed more devotion to their duty. Their loyalty and willingness to work for the person who bought them out had already reached an extreme. The actual effect of the auras only marginally increased their conviction.

Among the group of off-duty Battle Criers milling about, Ves immediately recognized a familiar face.

Wearing the brown-and-red uniform of a mech pilot of the Battle Criers, Dietrich already managed to worm his way into their ranks.

Regardless of whether he was the only foreigner among the Kinners, the former heir to the Whalers already treated his fellow Battle Criers as brothers.

"Looks like your latest recruit is already fitting in." Ves smiled at the sight.

Commander Cinnabar smiled as well. "Mr. Kotz here is a welcome surprise. He's not as stuck up as Casella and Imon Ingvar, for one. He has never looked down on us even once, which isn't a surprise considering what we managed to find out about him. He's also a decent leader. If you ever want to expand the Battle Criers, then I suggest putting him in charge."

That sounded surprising to Ves considering that Dietrich lost control over the gang he was supposed to inherit after his father's death.

"How is he a good leader?"

"Oh, he isn't suitable to run an entire outfit like me, but he'll make for a fine mech officer after a couple of years of seasoning. He just needs to get up to speed on how to run a mech unit."

"Make sure to guide him as best as possible." Ves instructed. "Dietrich is a friend of mine, so I want him to succeed. Make sure not to go easy on him. One of the reasons why he suffered a huge setback is because he's been far too complacent. Some pressure will do some good in drawing out his potential."

"That's what I think as well."

Once the two approached the group of mech pilots, the Battle Criers quickly stood up.

"Sirs!"

"How are you doing, Dietrich?"

"I quite enjoy it here. I feel right at home with the Battle Criers."

"That's good. I've just handed over some tasks to the Battle Criers, so you'll probably be on your way soon. Are you okay with leaving Cloudy Curtain?"

Dietrich shrugged. "I don't care. While this planet is still my home, it doesn't belong to me anymore. The Cloud Whalers have made it more than clear that it's their turf now. Maybe leaving this mess behind will help me get over what has happened to me since my father failed."

"I hope you can find your way again with the Battle Criers."

"I hope so as well. I didn't imagine myself working for you, but now that I am.. I kind of enjoy it. It's a very welcome change not to be in charge of everything for once."

The lost tone in Dietrich's voice revealed that he still had much to go before he was actually ready for a senior leadership position.