

# Mech 1581

## *Chapter 1581 Approved User*

Sales of the Desolate Soldiers shot higher and higher. As did the sales for the Holy Soldier.

The introduction of the Prideful Soldier opened up a third meteoric sales run. Many outfits and organizations who found the Desolate Soldiers to be uncomfortable finally received a viable alternative.

The lower price point along with the aggressive, prideful aura became an instant hit among gangs and underground organizations!

The Soldier product line was on track to become the defining mechs of the Sand War. Due to the product line's cost efficiency, auras, proliferation in the media and the Stripes of Humanity, the LMC heavily overperformed to the point that the industry started to compare them to companies run by Seniors!

The LMC contracted an unprecedented number of third-party manufacturers to meet the astronomic demand of the local mech markets. Pretty much every state under threat and even the states not under threat began to harken for the Desolate Soldier model or its variants.

With the Militant Soldier and the Peaceful Soldier halfway to completion, Ves anticipated an even greater boost of sales!

In the second month of the Desolate Soldier's release, the LMC and its partners already shipped almost 200,000 mechs!

200,000 mechs! That was an immense figure that completely blew the sales figures of the LMC's older mech models out of the water!

Though there were already signs that the sales for the Desolate Soldier had reached a high point, it stood to reason that the LMC earned an immense amount of money!

"Sadly, inflation keeps getting worse." He muttered.

In the first month since the Desolate Soldier's release, inflation averaged at around 10 percent.

In the second month, inflation had already approached 20 percent, which meant that everyone's savings and cash accumulations were worth that much less!

The consequences of inflation reached far and wide, disrupting nearly every aspect of the regional economy. Both mech manufacturers such as the LMC and average people felt the pain of rising prices and decreasing discretionary incomes.

When the Desolate Soldier model first went on sale, a bronze label edition could be bought for 20 million bright credits.

Now, the same mech sold for 26.4 million credits. Inflation grew so significantly each day that the LMC was forced to correct its list prices every day!

Even though the LMC's monthly earnings surpassed 100 billion credits due to high sales volumes and rich license fees, the actual value of these piles as cash was not as immense as everyone hoped!

"The rate of inflation tracks the growth of prices from a huge and diverse basket of goods and services." Ves reminded himself. "Some products have outpaced the rate of inflation, and they just happen to be the ones that we need the most!"

He could outright forget about buying a starship unless he promised to fork over ten times the price. Even a second-hand rust bucket built in the time when his grandfather was born suddenly became as expensive as a light carrier!

If not for the immense scale of the mech industry, the prices of mechs would have outpaced the rate of inflation as well!

While inflation brought plenty of bad news, Ves recognized an unanticipated benefit from this recent development.

Didn't the rise in prices mean that the System awarded him with even more DP than before?

His eyes widened! He shot out from his bed in his mansion, grabbed Lucky who was staring at him creepily and raced towards his bathroom!

Once he sat down at his toilet and activated the necessary security precautions, he activated the System.

"Come on, come on, gimme more DP!" He hollered excitedly.

The System took an unusually long time to boot up. It was as if it was prolonging its user's anticipation!

After a minute, the System finally booted up. A notification instantly popped up but Ves swiped it aside.

"Status!"

All he cared about right now was ascertaining how much DP he earned in the last few months!

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Journeyman Mech Designer

Specializations: Spiritual Man-Machine Symbiosis

Design Points: 1,183,622

Attributes

Strength: 1.6

Dexterity: 1.6

Endurance: 2.0

Intelligence: 2.2

Creativity: 2.1

Concentration: 2.1

Spirituality: 1.8

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Journeyman - [3D Printer Proficiency IV] - [Assembler Proficiency IV] - [Masterwork Mech Assembly I]

[Battle Mechatronics]: Apprentice - [Knight Mech Mastery I] - [Rifleman Mech Mastery I] - [Space Knight Mastery I] - [Hero Mech Mastery I] - [Custom Mech Design II]

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Journeyman - [Mech Hacking II]

[Electrical Engineering]: Journeyman - [Structural Pathway Configuration IV] - [Energy Storage IV] - [Conductors III] - [Ultracompact Energy Storage I]

[Materials Science]: Journeyman - [Crystallography III] - [Crystal Laser Propagation II] - [Lithic Materials I]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman - [Simulations IV]

[Mechanics]: Senior - [Jury Rigging IV] - [Speed Tuning IV] - [Mechanical Fault Detection I] - [Fine Motion Control I]

[Metallurgy]: Senior - [Alloy Compression III] - [Fixed Armor Specialization III] - [Flexible Armor Specialization I] - [Smart Metal IV] - [ASMAS III] - [Internal Structure Specialization I]

[Metaphysics]: Apprentice - [X-Factor IV] - [Spiritual Senses II] - [Spiritual Exploration I] - [Spiritual Manipulation II] - [Spiritual Engineering II]

[Interfacing]: Novice

[Physics]: Senior - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization III] - [Gamma Laser Weapons I] [Lightweight Armor Optimization II] - [Mediumweight Armor Optimization IV] - [Melee Weapon Optimization IV] - [Polarizing Shielding II] - [Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation II] - [Optics III] - [Ballistic Weapon Optimization IV]

[Propulsion]: Journeyman - [Flight Systems IV]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice - [Field Repairs III]

[Signals and Communications]: Journeyman - [Anti-Stealth Detection II]

[Stealth and Cloaking]: Novice

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

[Inventorize]: Unavailable.

Evaluation: A qualified Journeyman Mech Designer with developing spiritual abilities.

"Over 1 million DP! Hahahaha! I'm rich!"

Ves practically went into an ecstasy when he saw how much his DP he earned since he lasted activated the System!

"Meow?" Lucky titled his head as he lay in the washbowl of the bathroom.

"Hahahahaha—wait a minute! Shouldn't it be more?"

The LMC sold well over 200,000 units of mechs these past two months. Even though much of the mechs had been produced by third-party manufacturers, they still adhered to his design, which meant the System still recognized them as his own.

The System used the full sales price of the mech to determine how much DP Ves was entitled to receive. Even if the mech sold at a loss, Ves would still gain in DP because the System did not take expenses into account.

According to the formula the System used to calculate his DP earnings, 1 million bright credits corresponded to 1 Design Point.

Ves did not need to draw upon his Journeyman-level Mathematics Skill to know that 200,000 mechs that sold for at least 20 million bright credits each corresponded to more than 4,000,000 DP!

In fact, it should have been even greater due to the consequences of inflation!

"Where is my missing 3 million DP! Answer me System!" Ves roared at the System comm.

As usual, the System didn't respond at all, but Ves wasn't satisfied with the lack of answers!

He removed the comm from his System and slammed it against his toilet bowl!

Fortunately, Ketis designed his toilet to be extraordinarily resilient. Made with expensive exotics, it took a mech to inflict actual damage to the toilet bowl!

Loud impact noises echoed loudly in the bathroom as Ves attempted to force an answer from the System!

After the twentieth strike, Ves subsided a bit. There was no point tormenting the System like this. With how exceptional his System comm looked, it was probably tougher than his toilet bowl at this point!

"Wasn't there a notification at the start?" He suddenly recalled.

Ves manipulated the System's interface until he came back to the message he initially brushed off in his haste to view his Status.

[Congratulations for earning 1,000,000 Design Points from a single mech design! Reaching this pivotal achievement marks the end of your introductory period.

The Mech Designer System has observed your growth and improvement throughout your usage of the various services made available to you. Your progress during your introductory period has been deemed adequate.

As a reward for passing the introductory period, the Mech Designer System now deems you an approved user.

Becoming an approved user means that your usage rights have been expanded. The following changes will be enacted as a result of your change in status:

An approved user can extend or revoke access to the Mech Designer System to other mech designers.

An approved user must exchange 1,000,000 Design Points to extend access of the Mech Designer System to other users.

The Mech Designer System will not refund the Design Points when access is revoked. The full amount must be exchanged again to extend access to the same guest user again.

Guest users who have been granted access to the Mech Designer System cannot earn Design Points.

Guest users can only spend Design Points from the account of the approved user that has given them access.

An approved user will no longer be eligible to earn Design Points under the subsidized awarding scheme.

From this point onwards, an approved user can only earn Design Points upon designing a mech and making notable achievements such as creation masterwork mechs. The Mech Designer System has adjusted the awarding formulas as a result.

Skills from the Skill Tree and items from the Shop will no longer be offered at subsidized terms.

Please endeavor to complete the Supply Missions issued to you to improve the current terms of exchange.]

Ves practically puked blood at this incredibly shocking announcement!

What introductory period?

What subsidized awarding scheme?

"Are you messing with me, System?! At least give me back my 3 million Design Points!"

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!

This time, Ves slammed the System comm against his toilet bowl for three straight minutes! Abusing it for one minute for every million DP he missed out on did nothing to relieve his heartache!

"Meow!"

Lucky was so alarmed as Ves' insane behavior that he floated all the way up to the ceiling of the bathroom!

After some time, Ves finally grew tired of tantrums. He wearily inspected the System's interface in order to see what kind of benefits he received as an approved user.

[Mech Designer System Menu]

Status

Designer

Missions

Skill Tree

Shop

Lottery

Inventory

Access Management

He ran down the menus one by one and tried to see what changed.

The Designer suite had expanded. The System offered him a lot more tools while empowering the existing ones to offer him more assistance.

Ves hardly cared about this benefit because it wasn't wise to use the Designer in the company of others.

Missions remained unchanged, and so did Inventory.

Shop and Skill Tree experienced major changes. Ves could only obtain some of the items and goods on offer if he met certain prerequisites.

The amount of DP he needed to exchange for a Skill had also been increased! In fact, the prices would increase even further as Ves accumulated more and more Skills and

Sub-Skills, as if the System discouraged him from overloading his mind with too much irrelevant knowledge!

What alarmed Ves quite a bit was that while he could continue to upgrade his existing Skills and Sub-Skills, he already reached the limit of what he could learn!

In fact, according to the System, he overdrafted his current limitations, which meant that at this moment, he couldn't buy anything else!

His nagging suspicion from before that he couldn't accumulate an endless amount of knowledge had been proven right!

"How can I expand the amount of Skills I can learn?!"

[Please complete your Supply Missions or increase your Intelligence to raise this limit.]

"Is this your revenge on me for neglecting your Supply Missions?!" Ves shouted. "How am I supposed to learn anything new?! Is my mind full?!"

[This limit does not apply to self-learned knowledge.]

Ves relaxed a bit. He was not without options. The limit on accumulating Skills only applied to knowledge exchanged from the System, so he could still expand his knowledge base if he hit the books.

He continued to inspect the System by checking out Lottery. He noticed that all the lower-tier lottery tickets had been removed. The only offering available to him at the moment was a golden lottery ticket, and the System charged him a whopping 500,000 DP to exchange a single ticket!

"What a ripoff! How am I supposed to earn so much DP now that you are no longer awarding me any points for selling my mechs?!"

[An approved user and mech designer must rely on their own achievements to achieve success. The Mech Designer System has generously eased your growth by lowering many requirements and offering various subsidies. As a result, a substantial deficit in energy has arisen which must be addressed to ensure the continued functioning of the Mech Designer System.]

"Does that mean this whole 'approved user' nonsense is nothing more than an excuse meant to cut back on what I can exchange from you, System!?"

[Please contact customer support if you require any assistance.]

CLANK! CLANK! CLANK!



## *Chapter 1582 Owing A Deb*

Ever since Ves received the Mech Designer System, he became astounded by how much it was capable of. It could materialize objects out of nothing, integrate a lot of knowledge in his mind, transport his consciousness back into the past and more.

Yet one question always haunted him in the back of his mind.

Where did the System obtain all of the resources and energy to accomplish these reality-bending feats?

Someone as paranoid as Ves never took the System for granted. The more wonders it showed off, the more suspicious he became at the price he needed to pay.

"Nothing comes for free. Not even the System is exempt from this rule."

Now, the truth came out.

Whether the System had always intended to end its so-called 'introductory period' once one of his designs earned him 1,000,000 DP or not, Ves would have exhausted its generosity at some point or another.

The System finally had enough of his easy earnings and his lavish spending. It turned out that the bills he racked up in using the System had never been forgiven. The System only deferred his debt to the future.

Once Ves finished venting his latest bout of anger, he stopped bashing his System comm against the toilet bowl and began to process what he learned.

"Earning a lot of DP won't be as easy as before. Many offerings have also become more expensive."

It was impossible for him to retain the same level of benefits at his current stage. Only when he advanced to Senior or Master and became incredibly good at designing mechs would he be able to reach the same level of prosperity as before.

Ves always considered Design Points to be a fantasy currency. The System never explained what it represented and why it rose in response to his achievements. It turned out that the sales volume of his products wasn't as important as he thought.

At the very least, the System cared much more about creating new mech designs than profiting off existing ones.

The result was that Ves could no longer rely on designing a single extremely successful mech like the Desolate Soldier and sit back for a decade while the DP kept rolling in as more and more copies got sold.

"This also puts an end to profiting from selling virtual mechs." He muttered.

Selling virtual mechs had always been a source of great DP income to Ves. Even though the System capped its income to 250,000 DP for up-to-date mech designs, that was still a hefty bonus!

The drastic changes in the System's remuneration schemes essentially meant that Ves would have to keep designing mechs regardless of the commercial success he enjoyed.

Such an abrupt transition did not seem entirely unfounded.

Low-ranking mech designers predominantly obsessed over earning money to fund their careers. Regardless of their abilities, as long as they weren't able to earn any money, they could forget about progressing further!

High-ranking mech designers no longer shared those concerns. Any casual mech they designed was bound to sell. While Journeymen and Seniors still cared about their earnings, they cared even more about their progression.

The System's changes directly reflected this change in priorities. Incentivizing Ves to keep designing mechs was an indirect way of encouraging him to remain on the correct path.

"This also means that I shouldn't waste too much time on designing variants."

Designing variants may enhance his sales and business success, but did not yield that much design experience and DP to him. Only when he designed original mechs did he feel as if he gained the most in terms of progressing his design philosophy.

Now, it had also turned into his primary source of DP income if he interpreted the System correctly.

"Designing lots of mechs has been my intention anyway." He grumbled. "Were you worried that I would stop being so diligent just because I wanted to wait until the next mech generation has commenced?"

Ves could have designed more original mechs in the same amount of time if he focused his full efforts in doing so. However, he did not regret the way he spent his time in the past few years.

He experienced so much and learned a lot from his various adventures and experiences.

For example, Ves would have never developed such an enormous repertoire of spiritual techniques if he didn't get inspired by various circumstances.

"Well, whatever. What's done is done. I can only accept this new reality."

The main problem that underpinned his relationship with the System was that he held no leverage at all. He was completely at the mercy of the whims of the System.

Perhaps the only reason the System hadn't taken complete advantage of him was because of the deterrent of his mother.

"She definitely holds some leverage over it or tampered with it somehow." He guessed.

Aside from this, what stood out to him was that the System kept reminding him of his long-stalled Supply Missions.

To be honest, Ves had nearly forgotten about them entirely. For the System to remind him of their existence meant that it really wanted to absorb those exceptionally rare exotics!

"It seems like I can't derive too much benefit from you unless I sate your hunger, is that what you're trying to tell me, System?"

Ves owed a debt to the System, simple as that. As a fair, honest and principled mech designer, he did not entirely object to the notion of paying back what he owed.

"It's just that you're demanding a lot. I still haven't heard anything about the materials you've mentioned in your Supply Missions, let alone get anywhere close to getting them into my possession!"

To be honest, he hadn't tried very hard in searching for them. He hadn't even approached Gloriana to help him in tracking down the required materials.

He was deeply afraid that if the Five Scrolls Compact got a hold of this list, they would instantly figure out that he held their long-lost Metal Scroll or something!

"Maybe too much caution is not a good thing." He crossed his arms and adjusted his posture on his toilet. "I don't know what other surprises the System will spring on me if I keep stalling those Supply Missions."

One final detail about the changes came to mind. Perhaps it had listened to his thoughts and ramblings, because his approved user status had given him the right to allow others to access the System.

How exactly, he didn't know. Would they have to approach Ves every time they wanted to access its interface? Would they receive their own System comms?

Whatever the case, the introduction of Access Management meant that the System tacitly approved of his intention of allowing others to benefit from the System. The only caveat was that he would have to pay for all of their DP spending.

"Everything depends on earning DP! Without DP, this function is useless!"

He couldn't help but notice that Ves currently accumulated a bit over 1,000,000 DP. This was just enough to exchange for the right to extend access to a single person.

"What a coincidence." Ves harrumphed.

How much energy and resources did it cost for the System to extend access to another user? Probably not that much. This meant that the System profited immensely every time Ves introduced another guest user!

Paying such a high price was especially grievous to Ves because the guest users benefited from the System at his expense!

The more people he introduced, the higher his total spending burden.

Fortunately, Ves never intended to extend the System to too many people. At most, he only considered turning Gloriana and possibly their heirs into guest users. That would not amount to too many people.

As for extending guest access to people outside of his immediate family?

"Hahaha!" He laughed. "I would never do such a stupid thing!"

Once he went over the implications, Ves reflected over what they all meant to him. How should he use the System in the future?

"I'll just continue to use it in moderation like I always have."

He eventually realized that even if the System curtailed his spending, it did not impact his current trajectory very much. All the regular Skills and Items no longer held that much attraction to him at his current level, though they might still be useful to any potential guest users.

What Ves truly valued from the System at this point was that it granted him the opportunity to obtain rare and valuable things.

The copy of the Amastendira was one of the amazing items he obtained from the System. The Grand Dynamo Elixir he obtained after redeeming a radiant lottery ticket was another life-changing prize!

The System also continued to offer him access to lots of smaller valuables such as Attribute Candies which he could redeem in order to empower the people around him. Their ease of use and lack of side effects made them far more preferable to any genetic modification treatments!

Such fantastic benefits that far exceeded anything he could obtain by himself. For this reason, Ves still had a need for it despite his ambivalence over its origin and its motives.

"I don't really need anything from the System at this moment. I should just let it be. I'm not in a hurry to grant Gloriana guest usage rights either."

He still wasn't sure whether his relationship with Gloriana would work out. Even though she seemed more than willing to commit herself to him, her family might not agree.

Only until he earned the Wodin Dynasty's approval would he be willing to rethink his choice.

"I have enough of sitting here. I should get ready for work."

After Ves freshened himself up, he met with Gloriana downstairs for breakfast.

As they enjoyed their sumptuous meals, Gloriana quickly noticed something different about her boyfriend.

"What's wrong, Ves? You look kind of weary today. Did you have a good rest?"

Ves sipped his coffee and sighed. "It's nothing."

"Your current condition doesn't look like nothing."

"To be honest, a change took place that I'm not entirely pleased with. I can't really describe it to you at this moment."

She quickly grew more concerned. "Is it related to your design philosophy?"

"You don't have to worry about that." Ves smiled to reassure her. "I'm still as capable in designing mechs as before. It's just that some of my future plans require some adjustments."

"Okay."

As they continued to eat breakfast, an idea suddenly came to mind.

One of the limitations the System imposed on him was a cap on the amount of Skills he could redeem from the Skill Tree.

Right now, he simply acquired too many Skills. The System outright blocked him from acquiring more.

Fortunately, it also gave him two potential ways to raise this cap.

One method was to complete a Supply Mission.

Another method was to increase his Intelligence.

Recalling the reason for Gloriana's insane 2.4 Intelligence score, Ves began to take an entirely new interest in cranial implants.

As long as he could bump his Intelligence at her level, he would probably be able to compensate for his overdraft in Skills! He might even be able to open up some breathing room to acquire additional Skills!

This was very important to Ves as many of the Skills and Sub-Skills offered by the System were extremely rare and difficult to obtain through conventional channels.

In addition, some knowledge could only be obtained through practice and experience. It was very difficult for Ves to learn them from a textbook.

As long as Ves could find a way to safely and securely install an implant into his head, his capacity to absorb knowledge from the System would probably receive an enormous boost!

The Archimedes Rubal he obtained from the Starlight Megalodon seemed exceptionally suitable for this purpose! Though it wasn't very versatile, it excelled in storing lots of data!

"Gloriana?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Do you happen to know a trustworthy biotech expert who is good at installing cranial implants?"

*Chapter 1583 Help Wanted*

"In fact, I do Ves. Our Wodin Dynasty employs and retains many fantastic implant surgeons." Gloriana calmly answered his question.

"Can they be trusted?"

"Of course! As long as they are given time and resources to prepare, they never botch an implantation surgery. They've served the Wodin Dynasty loyally and almost never

threatened the lives of my relatives when they were put under their care. I can refer you to the surgeon who implanted my Erestal-015 implant in my head if you want the best!"

Ves slowly shook his head. He had little doubt of the competence of the biotech experts working for the Wodin Dynasty. The problem was that they only answered to the Wodin Dynasty. Who could say that they would have his best interest in heart?

Cutting open his head and messing with his brains was one of the most precarious situations he could imagine! Someone as paranoid as him would never allow a stranger to have unfettered access to his head!

Who knew if Constance Wodin ordered a surgeon to slip in some kind of control implant.

Would he take an expert's word that they hadn't tampered with the Archimedes Rubal bioimplant?

Unless he could obtain much greater assurance from the surgeon in question, Ves simply didn't want to take the risk of anything going wrong!

He tried to explain his concerns to Gloriana as carefully as possible. Her face grew grave as she learned of his worries.

"You don't trust our surgeons?"

"I'm sure they've been nothing but loyal and diligent in the service of your dynasty." Ves replied. "It's just that they ultimately answer to your matriarch, right?"

"Matriarch Xiaphna is in charge, but even she has to answer to the Wodin Hexagram." She corrected him. "I understand your point, though. Even if I refer you to one of our implant surgeons, I can't guarantee they'll abide by our wishes. My mother or any other senior member of my family has much more say. If they happen to dislike you..."

"...then they can easily sabotage my treatment." Ves finished her sentence. "Please think for a moment and consider whether it's possible your dynasty would resort to such a means to eliminate me from contention."

She paused for a while and thought it over. Her face grew grimmer and grimmer as she began to entertain several unpalatable scenarios.

"It does sound like something some of my relatives would do." She admitted reluctantly. "I'm sorry, Ves."

Ves waved at her. "It's fine. I'm aware your dynasty has a lot of vested interests and factions. What I'm asking for is if there is an implant surgeon or relevant expert who you can trust with operating on me. Can you think of anyone who is suitable?"

"Well.." Gloriana pressed a finger on her lips. "We'd have to rule out our retainers. They work on behalf of our entire dynasty, which means they effectively answer to Matriach Xiaphna. She's quite distinguished and old, so she probably doesn't favor our relationship."

"Then there is no one you can trust?"

"I didn't say that, Ves. I can still turn to a relative I'm close to. In fact, I know exactly who to approach!"

"Wouldn't that basically be the same?" Ves frowned.

Gloriana shook her head. "My younger cousin Ranya won't stab me in the back. We've been close to each other since we were young! We pretty much belong to the same faction within the Wodins, so she won't listen to any of our opponents within our dynasty. She just happens to graduate as a biotech expert. I'll see whether she's available and willing to travel to the Bright Republic."

Though Gloriana expressed a lot of confidence in this Ranya Wodin, Ves remained on the fence.

"I'm not sure, Gloriana. I really want to take your word for it, but that's not enough. I'll reserve my judgement until I meet her. If I meet her. Won't she be busy now that the Komodo War has erupted?"

"She's just a fresh graduate." His girlfriend dismissively remarked. "Right now, she isn't needed or valued. It would be as if she was a Novice or Apprentice Mech Designer. As long as I call her and promise her enough rewards, she'll probably race to the Bright Republic as fast as possible. She's always short on money."

"Why is that? Aren't you Wodins rich?"

"Not everyone has a mother like me, Ves. Ranya had to make do with much less investment. Her research is also a huge burden."

"Won't she be able to earn that money herself in the Hegemony now that she graduated?"

"Maybe. Perhaps if the war hadn't broken out, she could have started her own company and attracted a lot of investment. Now that our state is engulfed in war, I don't think any investor has any attention to spare on her odd research projects."

"What does she specialize in?" Ves curiously asked.

"Something about combining plants with humans." Gloriana murmured. "What matters is that she's capable of installing implants in human bodies."



"I don't know. It sounds rather iffy to entrust something as important as this to a fresh graduate. No offense to your cousin Ranya, but experience matters."

Even if Ranya Wodin studied at a prestigious medical school in the Hegemony, Ves knew very well that inexperienced professionals still needed to prove themselves.

The two discussed the matter for a moment before making a decision.

"I'll contact Ranya and see if she's willing and able to visit us." Gloriana promised. "If she isn't available, I'll try and contact a close friend. I'm not sure whether they'll be available due to the war, but I'll do my best to lure them over."

"That sounds great." Ves nodded. "I'll see if I can't recruit more qualified implant surgeons on my side. I would feel much better if more than one knowledgeable biotech expert is involved. They can keep each other in check that way, especially if their backgrounds are radically different."

He activated his comm and browsed the personnel database of the LMC and his mech forces. While his organizations actually employed a fair amount of doctors and medical personnel, how many of them worked with implants?

A ten-minute search revealed that Ves employed no suitable specialists.

That meant that if Ves wanted to hire an additional surgeon to keep Gloriana's cousin in check, he would have to recruit one from somewhere else.

His thoughts quickly turned to the masses of refugees milling about at one of the many farming settlements that had sprung up on Cloudy Curtain.

From what he heard, all kinds of professionals and skilled workers were currently stuck in the refugee settlements because the government couldn't deal with them at the moment.

Over time, the government would eventually sort all of the professionals out and find some way to make use of their services, but right now the Starfighter Corps and many other defense efforts required their attention.

This was also why a window had appeared where powerful and well-connected people and organizations could poach the refugees in advance.

Ves already ordered his subordinates to draft a list of potential recruits. He composed a quick message to Gavin so that he could add a biotech expert that was capable of performing implantation surgery to the list.

Once they finished breakfast, the two rode a shuttle to the Mech Nursery. While Gloriana hummed and headed to the underground lab, Ves first diverted to his office.

He had a morning appointment to meet.

"Marcella!"

"Good to see you again, Ves." The middle-aged woman nodded at Ves with respect as she waited outside the door to his office. "Let's get inside. We have a lot to talk about."

While Ves hadn't spoken to Marcella Bollinger in person for quite some time, he still kept in touch with her through the LMC.

As a minority shareholder who supported the company from the beginning, Marcella enjoyed a special status in his orbit.

Even though the LMC had recently surpassed the scope of what her mech brokerage firm originally dealt with, she hadn't been sitting idle while the dividends kept rolling in. From what he heard, she invested billions into expanding the reach of her firm, allowing her to gain access to a lot of foreign markets.

While Ves preferred it if the LMC could depend on entering foreign markets by itself, he didn't mind letting Marcella continue to play a role.

Once they sat down in his office, Marcella grinned and looked at him appreciatively.

"Well, you're certainly grown up a lot. No wonder you managed to attract a rich girl like Gloriana. You know, it doesn't surprise me at all that you're into Hexers."

Ves glowered a bit at her. "Let's not joke around, please. Our time is valuable."

"Oh, come on, Ves! We're old friends, right?"

"We are, but right now we are in a very hectic time. Every second we waste is another second the sandmen get closer to annihilating our state."

Marcella scoffed. "Relax, Ves. Even if you slack off, the Bright Republic won't fall so easily. You may have forgotten this, but you're not the only mech designer around."

"Well, my Soldier product line is making a pretty great impact in the Sand War."

"Don't get complacent too soon, Ves." Marcella warned him. "Your competitors are already on the move. Not just in the Bright Republic, but also in other states."

Ves smiled confidently. "I welcome any honest competition. If someone manages to upstage my Desolate Soldiers, then I'll readily acknowledge my defeat."

Such a thing would never happen, of course. There was no way another mech designer would be able to overcome his spiritual component monopoly!

Marcella helplessly shrugged. "Have it your way, then. Let's get to business since you're so eager to get back to fiddling with your mechs. Do you know why I've come?"

"Yes. You said something about presenting an important proposal that will have wide political ramifications." Ves recalled before frowning. "You know I don't like to get involved in politics."

"From what I've seen so far, you're doing quite well for yourself on that front. Everyone knows you're implicitly backed by the Tovars."

"Not entirely by my own will, I might add."

"That's not important. In fact, the reason why I mentioned the Tovars is because my proposal is related to this founding family."

"What do they want? And why go through you instead of someone else?"

"That's because this proposal, or should I say commission, is very controversial. If you don't have someone like me to smooth things out, this could easily blow up in everyone's faces."

"Stop teasing me and just tell me. What is this commission about?"

Seeing that Ves was reaching the limits of his patience, Marcella grinned and placed a data pad on his desk.

As Ves reached out to pick it up, he couldn't as Marcella kept pressing it against the desk.

"Will you let me see already?"

"Only if you promise not to go bonkers."

"I'm a mech designer, Marcella. We never lose control."

"We'll see."

Once Marcella let go, Ves quickly swiped the data pad and read through the first document.

"Hmm.. a commission for a completely new custom mech, huh? Demands that both Gloriana and I will take part in the design. Well, someone sure did their research. The customer is..."

Ves fell silent while the data pad dropped from his fingers. The device clattered against the surface of his desk.

While Ves remained in shock, Marcella did her best to stifle a laugh.

"Are you kidding me, Marcella?"

"I'm very serious, Ves. From what I've heard, Senator Tovar personally approved of this commission! He thinks it would be a nice way to forge friendly ties with old enemies!"

"But.. THIS IS VINCENT RICKLIN WE'RE TALKING ABOUT!" Ves erupted and lifted himself off his seat. "THIS BASTARD IS A MURDERER AND A TERRORIST!"

Marcella sighed and closed her eyes. "I agree, but times are changing, Ves. Later this afternoon, the bright president will hold a press conference where he'll grant full amnesty to the Bentheim Liberation Movement. As long as they agree to fight on behalf of the Republic, the government will wipe the slate clean!"

#### *Chapter 1584 Old Enemies*

"You have to accept this commission."

"No!" Ves stubbornly shook his head. "I can't accept the Bentheim Liberation Movement as my customer, let alone Vincent Ricklin! Do you know how much trouble I got into when he used the mech I customized for him to tear apart the Ricklin Family?!"

Early in his career, when he was still desperate to earn money, he couldn't afford to be picky with his customers. Accepting Vincent Ricklin as his customer was one of the worst decisions he had made, especially considering how much trouble he got into afterwards!

Marcella patiently allowed Ves to vent his objections to her. "I understand your frustrations, but it's exactly because of your contentious history with Vincent Ricklin that we need you to take this commission."

"Who is this 'we' you're talking about?"

"Everyone who supports reconciliation with the BLM."

Ves sighed and saw that this issue was a lot more serious than he thought. He sat back down on his desk.

"Explain, please."

"Let's start at the beginning. First, do you know what the BLM are fighting for?"

"They want to turn Bentheim independent. Feh, as if that would ever happen."

Marcella nodded in agreement. "It's a fool's quest, but plenty of Bentheimers support their cause. Do you remember that at the recent Bright-Vesia War, the Vesians launched a strong offensive that tore straight in the direction of Bentheim? It seemed that after several centuries of war, this was the closest that Bentheim directly came under contention."

"I remember." Ves nodded grimly. He had been on Bentheim during that time busting a BLM smuggling ring at the Kadar-Neyvis Group. "People also started to fear if the rebels would launch a huge uprising at the same time the Vesians invaded the Bentheim System. Attacked from within and without, the Mech Corps and the Bentheim Planetary Guard would be forced to fight a battle on two fronts."

"It's a good thing the war did not extend past this point. The Vesians merely used the threat of invading Bentheim as a bargaining chip in the negotiations for peace. While we're still paying a price to the Vesians because of that, it beats tearing Bentheim apart."

Both Ves and Marcella had seen their fair share of war, so they both favored this solution.

"The sudden onset of peace disrupted the BLM's plans, right?" Ves pointed out. "I remember that after the war, a sentiment began to spread that the BLM wouldn't be able to hold back their accumulated forces."

"Those were dark days. Luckily, nothing happened. The BLM simply withdrew and hid their forces, which exist to this day. This is exactly what gives the BLM leverage. Even if they're rebels, do you think they are weak? Since they seriously planned to attack the most populated and prosperous planet in the Bright Republic, they can give the heavily-fortified garrisons a serious run for their money!"

Ves was starting to see why the Bright Republic sought to compromise with the BLM. "You mean..."

The mech broker nodded. "The Sand War threatens every Brighter, no matter if they live on Rittersberg or Bentheim. The Bentheim Liberation Movement isn't exempt from this. In fact, they have more to lose than everyone else because Bentheim will almost certainly become a magnet for the sandmen!"

"Isn't Bentheim being fortified as we speak?"

"We can't underestimate the sandmen, Ves. We don't know how many fleets the sandmen have in reserve. Under these circumstances, the mech divisions stationed at Bentheim as well as the Bentheim Planetary Guard will have to put as much effort as possible into repelling the relentless flood of sandman fleets."

"Thereby leaving them less able to guard against the BLM." Ves concluded.

Marcella nodded gravely. "The government is in an awkward position. According to their internal projections, it's very much possible that Bentheim will fall if they don't commit enough assets. However, if even a portion of their mechs are assigned to guard critical infrastructure on land, then that means there's a lot less mech pilots that can be assigned to defeat the sandmen in space."

Due to Bentheim's insane population density and large accumulation of materials and energy sources, it would be devastating if even a single sandman vessel made landfall. Beating the sandmen in space had to be prioritized at all cost!

The Bentheim System concentrated an immense amount of industry and trade. No other star system in the Bright Republic carried as much economic and industrial weight as this vital port system!

The loss of Bentheim to the sandman represented the death knell of the Bright Republic. The fallen border states already showed everyone the consequences of losing such a pivotal economic center. Just the impact on morale alone was enough to make the rest despair!

With all of these consequences looming over everyone's heads, Ves came to an uncomfortable conclusion.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

"To be more precise, the struggle on both sides has been supplanted by a greater threat from afar. If the sandmen win, both the Bright Republic and the BLM will lose everything. Freeing Bentheim becomes meaningless if there's nothing but broken wrecks and tides of sand proliferating on its surface. Do you think it's any surprise that both sides have put down their animosity towards each other to defend against the greater threat?"

Rationally, such a decision made a lot of sense. Emotionally, Ves couldn't accept it. How could centuries of death and destruction be forgiven in a matter of months?

"There's way too much bad blood on both sides, Marcella. The BLM are all fanatics. How can they ever stomach fighting alongside government forces?"

"I agree that the relationship between the central government and the BLM is precarious. As a Bentheimer myself, I can see both sides of the equation. However, I'm also aware that the sandmen really do need to be addressed. This is why Senator Tovar and a number of other high officials took the initiative to negotiate with the leaders of the BLM. These crucial negotiations have been rocky because it's incredibly difficult for both sides to lay down their grievances towards each other. After a few months of arguing, they finally managed to agree to a difficult compromise."

"Do you know the details?" Ves curiously asked.

She nodded. "It's not a secret by now. The gist of it is that in exchange for committing the bulk of their accumulated mech forces against the sandmen, the BLM and all of its members will receive full amnesty. In fact, the government will help the BLM transition into a legal political entity that can take part in the planetary political process. The military wing will have to be divested from the political wing, though, but their mech forces are free to form outfits as long as they don't grow too powerful."

Ves raised his eyebrows. "Full amnesty? You mean that even the most murderous rebels with a lot of blood on their hands get to start anew?"

"The BLM accepted no less. While there is a lot of discontent in the government for agreeing to this demand, in the end the decision has been made. In exchange for letting off every separatist no matter how many crimes they have to their name, the BLM agreed to divest and fracture their military wing. This is a very important concession that will ensure future stability as long as the Bright Republic survives the Sand War."

"Is that all to it?" Ves frowned suspiciously. "So far, it sounds like the BLM agreed to be defanged for a single concession. There got to be more to this deal, right?"

Marcella nodded. "The grievances of the BLM can't be assuaged with amnesty alone. The central government has decided to grant several important concessions to the BLM. These include giving Bentheim's planetary government more autonomy from the central government and drastically reducing the amount of money that Bentheim transfers elsewhere."

"Isn't that basically giving in to nearly every demand of the BLM?"

"The central government has little choice. They need to placate the grassroots of the rebel movement by giving them the impression that the cause they have fought for has not been in vain. Short of granting Bentheim independence, the BLM has essentially received everything they wished!"

A short pause ensued as Ves processed the situation.

"I can hardly imagine the central government stomaching these concessions." He remarked. "How in the hell can the powers that be swallow such a huge surrender?"

"That's the problem, Ves. Even if Senator Tovar and his allies are highly in favor of this solution, the more militant factions are less than pleased with the situation. The compromise the government has struck with the BLM is extremely shaky, make no mistake. If even a single thing goes wrong, the government could turn against the rebels and vica versa. Such a devastating outcome in the middle of the Sand War has to be avoided at all cost!"



"What does this have to do with the commission you've sprung on me?" Ves asked in confusion. "All of this sounds way over my head! I'm not a diplomat, Marcella! I'm just a mech designer!"

"Don't belittle yourself, Ves." Marcella grinned. "While you're right, you also happen to be a Larkinson and a famed war hero. In the eyes of the government, you're an In order to prove that both sides can get along with each other, the government has started a large number of initiatives. As an ally of Senator Tovar and a famous mech designer, you'll have to do your part as well to facilitate the integration of the BLM into our society."

"I really don't like getting caught up in another political game, Marcella!"

"Our masters don't take no for an answer, Ves. When your history with Vincent Ricklin became known, the masterminds have instantly concocted a plan to show that both of you have reconciled with each other. Seeing a prominent Larkinson and one of the public faces of the BLM getting along will help a lot in convincing everyone that a new future has arrived!"

"Public face?"

"You haven't been to Bentheim lately, it seems. Vincent has made quite a name over the years. He's very charismatic and photogenic. He's the ultimate bad boy in the eyes of many women on Bentheim. The BLM purposefully put him forward as one of their heroes in order to maintain public support!"

"That's ridiculous!" Ves slammed his palm against his desk. "Even if I haven't stepped foot on Bentheim very often, I still keep up with the news! None of the local news portals have mentioned anything about this so-called 'bad boy'!"

Marcella smiled ruefully at Ves. "All of those media outlets are controlled by the government, Ves. They would never publish anything that puts the BLM in a good light. That doesn't stop the BLM from running their own underground press outlets. Vincent has grown a lot over the years. He's not the scrappy young man he used to be. He worked his way up to become a cadre and a mech captain in their ranks!"

Everyone changed over time. Back when Vincent turned against the Ricklin Family and defected to the BLM, Ves had been just a trivial Novice Mech Designer who just took his first steps in the mech industry.

Now, both of them no longer resembled their earlier selves! While Ves had grown to become a prominent Journeyman, Vincent had become an idol of the BLM!

Ves found it hard to stomach that a lowlife like Vincent managed to survive and thrive as a fugitive and a rebel.



Was it too much to ask for Vincent to be caught and executed by the authorities? How come this bastard managed to live long enough for him to become involved in a scheme meant to foster cooperation?!

"I really don't like this, Marcella." He frowned. "And I don't believe that I'm not allowed to refuse. I'm no longer a small and inconsequential mech designer!"

"You're right. But do you truly think you can refuse the likes of Senator Tovar without suffering any consequences? This is why I've been chosen to break the news to you. While it's true that your status in the Bright Republic is different, you shouldn't rely on it too much. Fulfilling favors like this will strengthen your position and keep your allies content. You don't want to have a falling out with the Bright Republic, do you?"

Ves glowered at Marcella. Whose side was she on, anyway?

*Chapter 1585 Smooth-Shaven Skin*

After some thought, Ves understood Marcella's position.

She was a Brighter, a veteran and a Bentheimer. Her loyalty towards the Bright Republic was unquestionable. She also cared a lot about Bentheim and supported any solution that made it safer.

Even if she was a shareholder of the LMC, she saw no conflict between supporting the company and supporting her home.

"While it may seem to you that the politicians at Rittersberg have made huge concessions to get the BLM on their side, think about what will happen after the sandmen are defeated."

A short moment passed before Ves came to a realization.

"A lot of real estate has freed up." He murmured. "With the fall of the Coman Federation and the border states, the Bright Republic stands to gain a huge amount of territory as long as we manage to dislodge the sandmen!"

Marcella grinned. "Exactly! Just imagine it! Our state can easily double or even triple our claims!"

"While you're right, I don't think that it will be as easy as it sounds to defeat the sandmen that have taken over the planets and rebuild all of those settlements from scratch. Won't the Bright Republic need even more money to fund this expansion?"

"The bright senate has already thought of that." She retorted. "There's already word of a bill being drafted that will give private individuals and organizations the right to run the newly-resettled planets as long as they cover all of the expenses! It won't strain the

government's budget any further while providing everyone who has remained loyal a way to profit from the war!"

The cost of doing so was that the central government surrendered a lot of authority to the people and organizations who were wealthy enough to fund the reconstruction efforts.

If Ves actually cared about becoming a landowner, he might feel tempted to join this race as well.

"It will take a long time for those settlements to generate revenue. Decades, at the very least." Ves guessed.

"The government is patient, and so are the investors. Once these new settlements get up and running, the tax revenue they bring in will compensate for the loss of tax revenue from Bentheim. This is the key argument that Senator Tovar and the other supporters of this plan have put forward."

As far-fetched as it sounded, the plan still had a basis in reality. Though it depended on numerous assumptions, it was evidently enough to placate every faction.

"Even if the government has made nice with the BLM in this fashion, I still can't get over the fact that you're putting me up with Vincent again!"

In her eyes, she probably thought that Ves was making too much of a fuss about his animosity against Vincent Ricklin. Even though the latter was a scumbag, he happened to be a famous scumbag.

Of course, getting Ves to accept the commission was harder than she anticipated.

He had many objections to working for Vincent and the BLM. Aside from getting caught in the aftermath of Vincent's crimes, Ves also had another reason to turn up his nose at this commission.

"This guy had the temerity to demand a ridiculous mech from me." Ves growled with gritted teeth. "Just remembering that shameful mech is enough to ruin my day!"

He regarded the second mech that he had ever built in his career as a black mark on his record. Not only did Vincent abuse it to slaughter a lot of innocents, he also forced Ves to implement a ridiculous cosmetic addition to his custom mech!

A codpiece!

After the disastrous events that took place during that time, Ves did his best to forget the customized Marc Antony Mark I he built and delivered. Who knew that the government and the BLM would one day come together and shake hands!

Now that Vincent Ricklin was on track to receive full amnesty for his deplorable actions, Ves could not use Vincent's fugitive status as an excuse to refuse this commission!

However, as a respectable professional with a reputation for excellence in mech design, Ves simply couldn't stomach the idea of designing another mech that matched Vincent's aesthetic standards.

Ves was 100 percent sure that Vincent hadn't changed in that regard!

"Look, Ves, it's just a simple commission. One mech and you're done. You don't have to do anything else to help the integration of the BLM into society. Don't forget that your allies in the government have given you a lot of cover since your return. Do you think everyone is okay with your Hexer girlfriend and your affiliations with the Hegemony? Do you think the Ministry of Defense would be so lenient to support your Desolate Soldier model to the point of requesting a couple of variants?"

Ves looked at Marcella in the eyes with a measured expression. He was beginning to think that this minority shareholder of his company wasn't purely advocating for herself.

She was still a friend, though. Ves respected her and didn't particularly see anything wrong with her stance. It was just that the details rubbed him in the wrong way.

In the end, Ves thought it was unwise to appear ungrateful for all of the support he enjoyed so far. This was the nature of how connections worked. If someone scratched his back, he needed to return the favor.

Even if the other monkey's back had turned into a stinking, festering cesspool filled with lice, Ves found it difficult to refuse his obligations.

He sighed. "Alright. I'll do this if it keeps everyone happy. Don't expect me to be enthusiastic, though. If Vincent turns out to be a prick who wants to make things difficult, this venture is over, am I clear?"

"I'll pass that on." Marcella smiled in relief. "Thank you, Ves. As long as you do a good job, the Bright Republic will continue to support the LMC. In fact, do you know why the Ministry of Defense requested you to design the Prideful Soldier?"

Ves widened his eyes. "Don't tell me..."

"You guessed it! As you know, the BLM has a lot of mechs, but most of them are landbound machines. If the BLM is to meet their obligations, they will need to acquire tens of thousands of spaceborn mechs! Our Prideful Soldier is one of the models that is in contention for this massive procurement spree!"

Ves could barely contain his emotions when he imagined the BLM fighting the good fight with his products.

Compared to providing a custom mech to Vincent, this was much worse! If the BLM held any ill intentions, the consequences would be ruinous!

Nonetheless, a deal was a deal. Now that Ves agreed to fulfill the commission brought up by Marcella, he had to make sure to complete it to the best of his ability.

This wasn't just about pleasing his allies. His principles also compelled him to set aside his private grievances and fulfill the demands of his client.

As long as someone became his client, Ves would always put his full effort into completing the job. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to call himself a professional.

Even so, that didn't forbid him from grumbling about the situation.

"I didn't imagine I would still be put in the position of following someone else's orders." He wearily scratched his chin.

Ves was growing rather tired of his smooth-shaven skin. Maybe he should grow out a stubble or a beard in order to make himself appear more mature. He'd look much less like a pushover.

"It's war time, Ves. We can't let our biases and old hatreds get in the way of saving the Republic. Everyone needs to do their part, including you. At least you're spared from being drafted by the Mech Corps. Instead, you merely have to fulfill a few requests and repay some favors. Doesn't that sound like a good deal?"

From an objective point of view, Ves agreed with her. From an emotional point of view, Ves held nothing but resentment.

However, he did his best to suppress his belly of anger. There was no point acting like a spoiled kid right now. Marcella was absolutely right that designing a custom mech for Vincent as part of some publicity stunt was incomparable to the risks he took in the past.

Now that Marcella completed the main goal of her visit, she relaxed and began to talk about other topics.

There was no way she wouldn't bring up the explosive success of the Soldier product line.

"Right now, all of your Soldier models are doing well." She smiled. "The Desolate Soldier is still on track to sell over 100,000 copies a month. The Holy Soldier and Proudful Soldier models aren't slouches either. It's too bad that the margins aren't very generous and that the money the company is earning is rapidly losing its value. According to various sources, the authorities aren't going to loosen their spendthrift ways anytime soon. The most they will do is keep monthly inflation within 20 percent."

This was devastating news to any institutions with large piles of cash. Within less and a year, the same amount of money would effectively be worth ten times as less!

All kinds of awful consequences followed when money lost value this rapidly. As someone who studied the mech markets and made deals for a living, Marcella's livelihood was also at stake.

"Will there even be a functioning economy left if the Bright Republic survives the Sand War?"

Marcella nodded confidently. "Whatever ruin inflation has wrought on our economy, it beats total annihilation. There is no point in holding back if it reduces our chances of surviving the Sand War. Everyone needs to make some sacrifices to stave off complete and utter defeat."

The Sand War was very different from the Bright-Vesia Wars of before.

As much as the Vesians wanted to conquer Bentheim, their Mech Legion would always start to run out of steam after a few years.

At that point, furthering war would no longer benefit the Vesians. Instead, they needed to pay an increasingly greater price to make more achievements. The losses plainly outweighed the gains, so there was ample reason to end the war at that stage.

This was not so against a stupid race like the sandmen. Even their upper caste appeared to be dimwitted and inflexible compared to human leaders.

When the sandman leaders suddenly went crazy and sent enormous swathes of sandmen into human space, no one believed the war before one side or the other got wiped out in their entirety.

Since humanity occupied half of the galaxy, there was no way the sandmen would be left alive after the Sand War. Not a single human expected to compromise with the accursed aliens.

While human civilization as a whole could easily swat this bug, the same could not be said for the states that made up part of human space.

Humanity was destined to win, but the Bright Republic and many other struggling states might fall before that happened.

This was the reason why everyone was resorting to all kinds of unthinkable means to mobilize more forces against the sandmen. The Bright Republic needed to hold the line and defend its star systems until the sandmen finally exhausted their military might!

"You're right on one thing, Marcella." Ves sighed. "The Bright Republic will become a very different place after the Sand War is over."

"Well, the Sand War isn't the only crisis that will determine the fate of our Republic. The Komodo War is also hanging over our heads! Regardless who wins, the Komodo Star Sector will be their oyster!"

If the Hegemony ever triumphed over their foes, the rest of the star sector had no choice but to align themselves with the winner.

While it was unlikely that the Hegemony would bother to annex the poor and impoverished third-rate states around them, it hardly even mattered.

Cultural and economic diffusion from the Hegemony to the weaker states would ensure that the entire star sector would soon take on a single, dominant identity.

"At least you're a woman." Ves remarked. "If the Coalition wins, you won't lose anything. If the Hegemony wins, you might even gain something!"

Marcella chuckled. "Guilty as charged!"

#### *Chapter 1586 Defanged*

Marcella stayed for half a day as she and Ves discussed all kinds of issues.

As a well-connected Bentheimer, Ves got to learn all kinds of news that wasn't publicly known.

The mech broker and marketer freely divulged all kinds of details that gave Ves a greater understanding of Bentheim.

"Bentheimers know that their planet and star system will attract countless sandmen." She explained. "Maintaining public confidence is crucial in keeping its existing economy and production functioning. If panic ever spreads, then everything will stop working in Bentheim. If Bentheim stops working, the rest of the Bright Republic will quickly fall apart!"

"Our state is too dependent on Bentheim." Ves concluded.

"Exactly. That has always been a problem, but a manageable one. Now that an enemy like the sandman race has emerged, the faults of concentrating so much economic and industrial weight in a single star system has become painfully clear. The politicians have already resolved to reduce their dependence on Bentheim. As long as the Bright Republic manages to survive and annex the territories of the former Coman Federation, everything will be fine in the end."

"How do you think the local Bentheimers will react to the deal the central government has struck with the BLM?"

"They'll be pleased, of course. Even though not everyone agrees with their cause, they're still considered folk heroes by many locals. The working classes who benefit the least from all of the economic activity will be particularly enthusiastic about the concessions. They will probably expect that all of the revenue that was ordinarily sent to other star systems to be spent on improving their living standards."

Ves studied Marcella's sardonic smile carefully. "You don't believe that will happen."

"Of course not. Those in power always occupy most of the wealth. That won't change whether Rittersberg or the former rebels are in charge. The people at the top will always prioritize their own interests first before considering anything else. Once the former leaders of the BLM transition into politicians and administrators, they'll be faced with enormous temptations. Who can keep their fingers off the vast amount of money that is circulating on Bentheim?"

Human nature was always like this. Even if the former rebels fought on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged locals, once they came into power, it was hard to remember their original mission.

At least Marcella thought so. Her words conveyed a cynical prediction of the future.

"Is that what the central government is after, Marcella? They readily agreed to pardon the members of the BLM and even gave in to their demands to grant Bentheim greater autonomy so that the BLM would be on the hook for everything that followed?"

Marcella's grin grew wider. "Exactly. It's easy for the separatists to boast that Bentheim will do better under their rule, but now that their wish has come true, will they be able to back up their boasts? The government doesn't think so. The BLM is good at stirring up trouble, but they don't have any experience in solving actual problems."

"I take it that separating the armed wing from the political wing is a crucial part of defanging the BLM."

She nodded. "The upper echelon maintains a solid grip on their cells. That's not acceptable to the government. Forcing the upper echelon to give up direct control and letting the cells go their own way will reduce the leverage that the former rebel leaders hold. While they can still unite again if the government fails to keep their word, as long as everything abides by the agreement, nothing of the sort will happen."

"By separating the armed wing from the political wing, the former cells will slowly drift from the control of the upper echelon. They will also veer away from the central ideals of the BLM. Once the former military wing of the BLM becomes divided, the BLM will cease to pose a threat against the Bright Republic."



"This is especially the case if the leaders-turned-politicians become divided as well, right?"

"Correct. With so much power and money at their fingertips, it's impossible for any single leader, faction or ideology to remain in power. The higher-ups will quickly begin to squabble and fall out with each other. New factions will emerge that each promote a different their own ideas on how Bentheim ought to be run."

Ves had to hand it to Senator Tovar and his band of schemers. They sure laid out a wonderful plan to transform a former threat into a bunch of harmless interest groups.

However, if Marcella could spot the problem, so should the BLM.

"Will the BLM seriously fall for this trap?"

"It's an open conspiracy, Ves. Even if the rank and file of the BLM are clueless to the political and societal implications of the deal, the higher ups and the senior cadre aren't stupid. They know that once the BLM has accepted this deal, their unity will soon be a thing of the past."

"Then why..."

"Do you think it's glamorous to be a fugitive? To live a life where you are being hunted every second of the day? Now that the central government is amenable to the idea of issuing blank pardons to the separatists, why should they refuse? The pressure from the sandmen along with getting almost everything on their wish list is enough to push them into a corner. If the separatists won't agree to such an attractive deal, the BLM will probably fracture!"

"What about the upper ranks?"

"They'll all become future commanders, politicians and administrators. That sounds quite cozy to me. It's better than living a life on the edge. Vincent Ricklin is senior enough to become one of the beneficiaries of this transition. That's why it's important to earn his support. As long as he plays along, he won't be using his substantial voice to agitate against the deal."

Ves grimaced at that. This was one more reason why he should do his best to fulfill the commission.

"Let's not talk about this stuff anymore. All of this statesmanship sounds way over my head." He said tiredly. "Tell me about the commission. What kind of mech am I supposed to design?"



"Vincent will come to Cloudy Curtain in person to convey his demands. However, I can already tell you that the BLM and the central government has both invested a substantial amount of money for this publicity stunt."

"What's my budget?"

"530 million bright credits."

"What?! Is the BLM that rich?!"

That sum amounted to around 400 million pre-inflation bright credits, which was still a hefty sum for a single mech!

"As I've already mentioned, the government is footing at least half of the bill. Vincent insists on piloting a powerful mech to inspire his fellow comrades in battle. He's not getting it for free, of course. Not only will he set a heroic example for the former separatists who have now been drafted into a war against the sandmen, he'll also put his full support behind the deal."

"And that's worth half a billion bright credits?"

"I think we got off rather cheap. While Vincent doesn't have that much sway among the higher ups, he's definitely capable of swaying the opinions of the lower ranks. He's simply that popular."

Ves wanted to palm his face. How could a sleazy kinslayer like Vincent ever become a role model for so many rebels and Bentheimers?

"What else does Vincent want?"

"He wants a mech that is similar to the Caesar Augustus and Marc Antony Mark I and Mark II's. So that means a hybrid mech equipped with several diverse weapon systems. Of course, all of them have to be adapted for the Sand War, so you can leave out the laser weapons."

Hearing those names made Ves reminisce about the past. Back then, the System awarded him with the license for the Caesar Augustus. With his paltry finances, he had no choice but to work with this complex, lastgen mech design.

In hindsight, Ves believed that it wasn't a coincidence the System dumped the troublesome Caesar Augustus license in his lap. The white elephant forced him to innovate a lot in order to solve the mountain of issues associated with the premium mech design.

Ves had definitely learned a lot from the experience. So much so that he did not blame the System for foisting a problematic mech design on him. He wouldn't have improved

so fast and attracted Master Olson's attention if he took it easy during that critical period.

"Anything else?"

"That's all I know, Ves. If you want to know more, you'll have to hear it from Vincent himself."

"I can't entertain this commission immediately. I still have my hands full with designing the Militant Soldier and Peaceful Soldier."

"How soon will you be able to finish their designs?"

Ves made a quick estimate. "Three weeks. Gloriana and I are halfway into completing their designs."

"I'll pass that on to the relevant authorities. We don't want you to delay the release of those two variants. They're sorely needed right now."

"Sounds good." Ves sighed in relief. "Aside from repaying favors, can I expect anything else in return for playing along with this scheme?"

"I'm sure you can gain enough leverage to demand some small favors. For example, isn't your Larkinson Family trying to gain approval to start an advanced mech academy on Cloudy Curtain? You can easily speed this process up and block rivals from gaining approval."

"That benefits the Larkinsons, not me..."

Seeing that Ves remained unswayed by vague promises and minor favors, Marcella leaned in. "I'll let you in on a secret, then. I've heard some big plans from some of my contacts. Certain factions in the government believe that it would do them a lot of good if they assist you in propagating your Desolate Soldiers and other highly-promising mech models."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that the LMC won't have to promote your products on your own. You'll have the entire Bright Republic standing behind you and your mech designs. While your mechs have plenty of detractors, it's undeniable that they are very useful in the right situations."

"That sounds very iffy, Marcella."

"The government already owns 21 percent of the LMC. It's in their best interests to see your company flourish."

"And gain greater influence and control over the LMC as a result."

"No one loses out, Ves. To be honest, these kinds of arrangements aren't unusual. The government usually extends this kind of support to companies run by Seniors, though. It's virtually unheard of that a young Journeyman like you gains the support of the state. That makes this move all the more remarkable! The Bright Republic is essentially willing to declare that your mech designs have so much promise that they'll be able to sell in many different mech markets!"

While Ves could see the immediate upside of government support, Ves never depended on it in the first place. The entire reason why Ves played along with Flashlight's games during the war was because he wanted to get rid of the tentacles of the odious Ministry of Economic Development.

Wouldn't it be rather backwards if he suddenly turned around and embraced government intervention?

"The LMC doesn't need any government support. As long as the authorities stay out of the LMC's way, I'm confident the company will grow regardless of any assistance. My mechs are just that good."

He made his stance loud and clear, which did not entirely sit well with Marcella.

"I'm not sure you're making the right decision, Ves." She slowly responded. "Perhaps we should explore this idea further with the board of directors. You're not the only person who has a say in the company. The Larkinson Estate and the government own a fair chunk of the company. If my vote is added to the mix, then you've lost your majority."

"Hahaha!" Ves burst out. "I'm not the naive little Novice Mech Designer of before, old friend. That trick won't work on me. Regardless of how many shares I own, I'm the lead designer of this mech company! If I'm no longer around, the LMC will soon become worthless!"

He brazenly pointed his thumb at himself!

"Like it or not, I am the LMC!"

*Chapter 1587 Old Friends*

Ves watched Marcella leave his office with a mixed expression.

For old times' sake, he refrained from pushing back too hard.

Yet his forbearance had its limits.

His relationship with the Bright Republic had gone through a sea of changes. While he was not yet the equal of Seniors in several ways, his specialty and his future potential was much more promising.

Ves thought that his allies would have recognized his new value the best, but evidently not everyone received the message.

He had to offer a rebuke to that old coot who was used to treating people as pawns that he was already reaching the end of the board.

The fantastic sales of the Soldier product line and its increasing proliferation in the star sector already hinted at his great appeal.

No other product in the market could match the benefits brought by his mechs. His Transcendent Messengers already transformed the Ylvaine Protectorate and now his Soldier product line was about to take the Komodo Star Sector by storm!

He was no mere pawn. Not anymore.

If he was by himself, then the people at the top might have been tempted to strengthen their control over him. There were many ways for Senator Tovar, Flashlight and other factions to exert pressure on him. If Ves would just let himself get rolled over all the time, then how would he ever get rid of the shackles that bound him to petty officials and regional snakes?

"Fortunately, I'm not alone. Gloriana is my biggest talisman."

Even though his girlfriend was a foreigner, her status was incomparable. Few Brighters would ever dare to mess with her directly, let alone touch someone she professed to love.

While her presence at Cloudy Curtain was rather awkward due to the heating Komodo War, as long as the Hexadric Hegemony remained in contention, there was no way the government would dare to go too far.

However, that did not preclude smaller actions and more indirect ways to influence him. Sending Marcella to convince him to repay the favors he received from the government certainly qualified. Though his business partner approached him with a smile, it did not change the fact that she convinced him to design a custom mech for someone he hated.

"Can I still trust her?" He seriously questioned.

Right now, the answer was no. Ves highly suspected that she had been bought by Senator Tovar or Flashlight because of her relationship with him and her minority stake in the LMC.

"Someone like Marcella is a nobody in the eyes of the higher ups. They don't have to put much effort into converting her to their cause."

He learned an important lesson today.

He had outgrown his old friends.

Perhaps at the start, Marcella used to be a figure he looked up to. Her wealth, connections, experience and capabilities were far beyond his reach.

Back then, he needed to borrow from her strength to gain a footing in the mech market.

Yet that was in the past. Now, the tables were turned. Ves succeeded in designing a mech that sold over 100,000 units a month. His products sold well in dozens of markets and several variants derived from the original design also fared very well!

In comparison, how did Marcella do? Though she had benefited hugely from her bet on Ves early on, she was still the same mech broker as before.

The only thing that had changed was that she invested much of the dividends she received in expanding her firm and setting up branch offices in many foreign states.

"All that is well and good, but at the end of the day, Marcella is still bound in Bentheim. Her network doesn't extend past her home planet."

As the LMC continued to focus on expanding outwards, his old business partner became less and less relevant. The LMC's Marketing Department could already take over her role entirely with just a modest drop in effectiveness.

Once his company got used to establishing relations and opening up markets on its own, there was no meaning in keeping Marcella around anymore.

"She should relinquish her 5 percent stake in the LMC." He muttered.

Unfortunately, this was not the time to do so. For now, he had to let Marcella maintain the illusion that she still had the ability to influence Ves and the direction of the company on account of their friendship.

"I should still send a signal to express my dissatisfaction." He mumbled.

Ves began to rub his clean-shaven chin while contemplating ways to change the status quo. He originally wanted to keep his head down and quietly design mechs, but the situation forced him to reconsider his approach.

"I should throw my weight around."

He spent a few minutes to consider his options before settling for one of the plans he had prepared. He activated his comm and sent a quick summon to one of his subordinates.

Fifteen minutes later, the door to his office opened to let in Captain Crindon. The Kinner walked all the way up to the desk before calmly sitting on the chair vacated by Marcella.

"You called, sir?"

Ves nodded. "How much progress have you made in your spy hunt?"

"At this moment, I've identified over a hundred suspected personnel that I'm reasonably confident are spies or informers. It's difficult to determine who they are answering to. Even with... your cat's help, there is far too much data to comb through."

"Let's just get rid of them all."

"Pardon?"

"Fire them all. I want to get rid of them immediately!"

"Sir, let's not be too hasty here! Some of the suspected individuals occupy key positions in your company! Simultaneously terminating their employment will disrupt many operations and lead to preventable mistakes and interruptions!"

"I don't care!" Ves roared and slammed his fist against his desk! "We need to draw a line here! People are messing around with me, thinking that I'll just take it like a good boy! Well, no more!"

Though Crindon cautioned calm and suggested further deliberation, Ves did not see the need to delay. He wanted to send a powerful message as soon as possible. To delay his actions for a few days would signal that he still had scruples.

"Crindon, while I respect your opinion, frankly I don't give a damn right now. I'm confident that the LMC is robust enough to weather this storm. There are so many capable people under my employ that I'm sure that there are plenty of replacements for the traitors I plan to get rid of. Even if some friction occurs.. it's better than leaving these parasites in place."

"This isn't how the game is played, sir. Didn't we agree beforehand that we would depend on tact and patience to remove the suspect people from your company?"

"Patience is a virtue, but too bad I'm a devil." Ves smiled deprecatingly at himself. "It's time to let the rest of the galaxy know that. Execute my orders, captain."

Crindon looked troubled, but he had no choice to obey. "Very well, sir. I will work with Miss Calsie to see if the people on my list can be removed without any incident."

Though Ves clearly dismissed his subordinate, Crindon remained on his seat.

"What's the matter?"

"There's one notable individual on the list which requires special attention. This person's position and influence in the LMC is exceedingly high."

"Who?"

"Jake Altern. One of the longest-serving executives and the Chief Operating Officer of the LMC."

A small shock went through Ves as he heard the name. He slowly closed his eyes and began to recall the early days when his company still operated from a modest workshop in the suburbs of Freslin.

The Larkinson Estate bequeathed Jake to him in order to beef up the early management of the LMC. With the help of an old and experienced hand like Jake, the LMC grew from operating a single workshop to a major mech manufacturer that produced thousands of mechs in-house and many more through external partners!

Ves never worried too much about Jake. As a Larkinson retainer, the most he might do was pass on information back to the Larkinson Family.

"Tell me more."

Right now, Ves needed to know whether Jake answered to the Larkinsons or to some other party.

If the latter was the case, then Ves had no choice but to see another old friend out.

Crindon activated his comm and projected some of the evidence he gathered.

"Mr. Altern initially did not come to my attention, but due to his high position in the company I diverted a lot of time in monitoring the actions of the LMC's top management team. My patience has been worth it, because I've caught Altern acting very suspiciously in several instances. In particular, his routine business trips to Bentheim, supposedly to manage the affairs of the LMC in the port system, are very concerning."

The evidence his Kinner spymaster gathered did not reveal a lot. Possible dead drops, innocent conversations with supposed business partners, odd movements and more did not serve as definitive proof that Jake was communicating in secret.

However, the prevalence of so many strange incidents suggested a deliberate pattern.

"Was he contacting the Larkinsons?"

Crindon shook his head. "I've already ruled them out. It's a different party. After a lengthy investigation, which includes borrowing your cat's hacking ability, I've managed to ascertain the identity of the other party."

"Who?"

"The Bright Republic's domestic intelligence agency."

"Spotlight." Ves snarled. "How sure are you?"

"There is always the chance that I'm wrong. Perhaps the other party is merely pretending to be Spotlight."

Ves squeezed his hands, trying his best to remain in control. "Regardless of that, this doesn't change the fact that Jake has betrayed the LMC."

"Did he?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ves narrowed his eyes.

"It's the same with your assistant Gavin. Jake is not only the COO of the LMC, but also a loyal citizen of the Bright Republic. If an arm of the state requests his assistance, is he a traitor or a patriot?"

That was a difficult question that Ves still couldn't answer. Nonetheless, Ves had enough with dealing with this ambiguity.

In his eyes, it was time to cut the Gordian knot.

"I won't tolerate this double-dealing anymore." Ves emphatically stated. "I'll deal with Jake in person. You can let Calsie deal with the rest. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then go."

Once Crindon left the office, Ves let out a tired breath and leaned over his desk.

Flashlight and Spotlight wouldn't be pleased with his decision, he was sure. While Ves didn't blame them for trying to keep an eye on him and his company, that did not mean he would let their spies and informers in place once their double-dealing became known.



"It's time to clean up the rot and make a new start. I have to clean up my company to take advantage of the end of the Sand War and the start of the next mech generation."

How many old friends and allies did he need to get rid of before everyone got the message?

Just because he was young didn't mean he lacked the ruthlessness to swim with the sharks.

Though Ves held several doubts, he did not regret his choices. Taking any action, even an ill-advised one, was better than taking no action.

By responding proactively to the circumstances, he would let everyone know that he had teeth.

"The Bright Republic will always be my home, but that does not mean that I'll work selflessly for the state. I'm not like the other Larkinsons."

Perhaps he was being selfish, but so what? He knew he would outgrow a third-rate state sooner or later. Once he became capable of designing second-class mechs, his value and earning potential exceeded anything the Bright Republic could handle!

By then, his home state would have zero leverage over him! No matter what kind of agreements he made in the past, there was no way the state could continue to enforce their old rules!

*Chapter 1588 / See*

Ves entertained the first guest to his office of the day. Appearing older and more weary than a couple of years ago, Jake Altern calmly trudged towards the chair and sat down with contentment.

"Ah. What a comfortable chair." The old man sighed. "How have you been, Ves? We haven't spoken alone for a while."

"I'm.. not doing very well right now." Ves replied while watching the Chief Operating Officer like a hawk. "You see, I'm dealing with a thorny relationship with the state right now."

Jake quickly frowned. "What is the matter, Ves?"

"I don't have the patience to explain it to you, but in short the state and certain powerful people think it's alright to push me around."

"That's a very cynical view, Ves. If you haven't noticed, the Bright Republic is in the middle of a war for survival. The sandman race has already annihilated the border

states. Now that the Coman Federation has fallen, our state is the next in line. It's not surprising therefore that the government and various factions are resorting to many means to save as many Brighters as possible."

"They're being very heavy-handed, Jake. So much so that my patience is wearing thin."

The old man looked troubled at his words. "Tough times call for tough measures. The Bright Republic is on a war footing. The comforts we've enjoyed in the past are no more. Every citizen has to make some sacrifices. Those who are wealthier and more capable must be ready to make even greater sacrifices."

"Because of duty, right?" Ves directed a playful smile at his old friend.

"Because we are fighting for something greater than ourselves." Jake replied, sounding a bit more forceful despite his frail form. "The LMC and you are in a position to do much good. You've already made a great contribution by developing the Desolate Soldier. Once you've completed the two variants in the pipeline, I'm sure the state will be intimately grateful for your help."

"I'm not so sure about that last part. I've been thinking that the government has taken me for granted for a while now. It's difficult to shed the impression that they are using me in the same way as before."

Jake began to frown. "I think you're overreacting, Ves. While the government can come across as heavy-handed, they are shouldering an immense burden. The lives of trillions of citizens and refugees are at stake. How can anyone hold back in such a precarious situation? Saving lives is a noble calling, Ves, but it is never an easy one."

"I'm getting rather tired of hearing that. Everyone keeps lecturing me about duty, calling and sacrifice, but what about me? Does anyone care about me at all, or do people just see me as a gullible fool who easily succumbs to manipulation?"

"I wouldn't say that, Ves. You're a mech designer. You climbed your way out of a humble background and you have made many stunning achievements that allowed you to eclipse your peers. I don't think any Brighter mech designer of your generation has shone as brightly as you. Even Edwin McKinney, that famous prodigy of yesterday, is still begging for scraps in the Coalition. Now that the Komodo War has broken out, I think he's quite remorseful for abandoning our state."

Ves crossed his arms and straightened his back. "That sounds nice and all, but I don't think that the people in power are treating me like an adult."

"Please. Before you grow angry, think about what is going on. Your Avatars of Myth and Living Sentinels are risking their lives to fight the sandmen. Aren't they fulfilling their duty? As mech pilots, they have an obligation to put their capabilities to good use. The

situation is no different when it comes to you. As a mech designer, there is no expectation of you to risk your life."

Ves chuckled at this remark. "I earned my combat awards for a reason, you know."

"And you got better after you've completed your service, right?"

"I can't argue with that." Ves responded while scratching his smooth-shaven cheek. "I've fulfilled my obligations, though. Even if a great and terrible war is going on, I'm not a young and powerless Apprentice anymore. I'm a Journeyman with great influence and ability."

"I would be careful with your words. You're sounding rather full of yourself."

"Do you think any mech designer can achieve as much sales as me? I think I deserve a pat on the back."

"There's a line between confidence and arrogance. Young men like you who have grown a lot are always straying towards the latter. I've seen it many times in Larkinsons like you. The expert candidates in your family are especially prone to overestimate their abilities."

"I'm not a wannabe, Jake. I'm the real deal. Just like the expert pilots in our family, I have the strength to back up my confidence."

The atmosphere had grown more and more strained. Jake started to sense some problems. In his memories, Ves had never been so blunt and forceful in his views.

"What's going on, Ves? Obviously, you didn't call me up to have a chat."

"I'll get to that. We're not finished with this discussion yet." Ves smiled in a compelling manner. "How do you see the LMC in ten years?"

The question came out of the blue. "I don't know. It depends on the outcome of the wars that are currently raging in the star sector."

"Let's assume we've won the Sand War while the Hexers kicked the Fridaymen out of the star sector."

"Then I would say that the LMC enjoys a bright future. While I'm not sure what Hexer dominance will mean in the star sector, your relations with Gloriana will probably be of great assistance."

"How big do you think my company can get?"

Jake paused for a bit. "If your other products are just as promising as your Desolate Soldier design, then you have the potential to penetrate the entire star sector. Maybe you'll even find a way to break into the Hegemony's mech market."

"Who do you think is bigger at that time, my mech company or my home state?"

"Such a question is moot. Companies and states can't be compared. No matter how fast the LMC grows, it will never be able to employ more people than the citizens of the Bright Republic. This apples and oranges comparison is extremely unfair."

"You haven't answered the question. Let me specify a bit further. Do you think there will come a time where the value of the LMC exceeds the gross domestic product of the Bright Republic?"

Jake frowned as he fell in thought. "I'm an old man, Ves. I doubt I will live long enough to see that happen, but I admit you have the potential to do so. The only question is whether I will live to see that happens. It would be the proudest moment of my life."

"Since my company under my leadership has the potential to reach this point, don't you think there is something wrong about the Bright Republic imposing their demands on me?"

"Potential is just potential. There is no guarantee that you will reach this promised future. Many Journeymen that have made waves in their youth have fizzled out in their later years. In addition, anything can happen in between. You are not an esteemed Senior or a powerful Master. Right now, you still have a lot to go before you reach those heights. Until then, I suggest you remain humble and play the role that is expected of you. Only by working within the system will you be able to maintain your support."

"What if I don't necessarily need the support?" Ves proposed.

"Everyone needs support. That is the way society functions."

"I don't think you're wrong, but some support is better than others. Though you just disparaged McKinney, I don't think he's made the wrong choice. He just made his move too early, that's all. I'm already starting to forge relationships with greater powers. Why should I let the Bright Republic hold me back?"

This time, it became very clear to Jake that this was a different conversation from what he envisioned.

"That sounds.. treasonous."

"Nothing so extreme. I just want to reboot my relationship with the Bright Republic, that's all. Doesn't it sound fair if the state actually affords me the treatment I deserve?"

Jake continued to look troubled. "While your argument sounds reasonable, your rhetoric is disturbing."

"Some people call me the Devil Tongue."

"I'm aware. I thought you only reserved your Devil Tongue for your enemies."

Ves looked sharply at Jake. "That's true."

A tense silence followed as a slow realization began to dawn on Jake. The old man closed his eyes and began to process the situation calmly. Ves allowed the COO the time to think through the situation.

The old man eventually opened his eyes. "Just to be clear. What turned you against me?"

"Spotlight." Ves spoke out a single word.

"I see." Jake sighed. "I see. I see. I see."

"You see but you don't see. If you remained loyal, you would have made great achievements and leave behind an enduring legacy. Now, just as the LMC is experiencing another round of meteoric growth, I find out that you've been blind all this time. You know my stance on spies. Why did you ever think it was a good idea to associate yourself with Spotlight?"

Now that the truth came out, the COO looked at Ves in the eyes without any regret or remorse. "I won't deny your accusations or make any excuses. You deserve better than that, Ves. All I'm willing to state is that we are both Brighters, and that has never changed. We all serve the Bright Republic in different ways."

"You could have stuck to your job description and serve the Bright Republic by ensuring that one of its most promising mech companies is running smoothly."

"That's not enough for the state. The more the LMC grows, the greater its value to the state. It's impossible for organizations such as Spotlight to leave your company be. Some monitoring will always take place."

Ves snorted. "Don't make it sound as if you're innocent. Perhaps Spotlight only started off with some light requests, but what if they don't like the direction of my company? What if they come up to you one day and tell you to convince me to change my mind?"

"I'm doubtful that such a thing would ever take place. As long as you don't pose a threat to the state, the intelligence agencies will never do anything drastic."

Obviously, Jake did not know to what lengths that Flashlight would go to achieve their objectives.

From what Ves heard, Spotlight was a lot tamer than Flashlight. That did not mean that the former was squeaky clean. Ves preferred to assume that all spy agencies were threats regardless of what others have professed.

Perhaps Spotlight's bumbling reputation was just an act. The Bright Republic wasn't as fractured as the Vesia Kingdom. If his state's domestic spy agency was really so inept, then it should have been abolished a long time ago.

For an agency that was meant to spy on its own citizens, the last thing Spotlight wanted was to gain notoriety.

Even Ves had been tempted to dismiss the spies and informers of Spotlight when Crindon first brought them up.

"You don't have to make excuses for Spotlight. You've made your bed. Now lie in it." Ves spoke with a tone of finality.

Both sides saw no further gain from continuing this conversation. Jake rose up with a heavy heart and looked at Ves with a forlorn expression.

"You grew up so much in these past few years. Almost a decade has gone by and you have already grown to be the pillar of the Larkinson Family. It is amazing for me to be a part of your early growth. No matter what you think of me, the LMC will always be my pride and joy."

Ves already diverted his gaze from the old man.

"You can tender your resignation by the end of the day. Don't do anything stupid."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Ves. I'll make sure to leave behind some notes so that my successor to my position can start off right away."

When Jake walked out of the office, Ves had a feeling that an era had come to an end.

#### *Chapter 1589 Polite Conversation*

Ves stayed in his office. He already called ahead to inform Gloriana that he wouldn't be doing any design work today.

Even though the Militant Soldier and the Peaceful Soldier had to be completed as fast as possible, Ves needed to be in the right mood.

Both designs served as contributions to the state, but right now Ves did not feel very charitable towards the Bright Republic at this time.

For this reason, he called Gloriana to join him in his office. When his girlfriend entered while clutching Clixie, Ves stood up from his desk and moved over to the sofas. There was no need to talk to his girlfriend as if he was holding a business meeting.

"You look.. different, Ves."

"A lot has happened today." He spoke while reaching over to Clixie.

"Miaow."

The cat jumped in his arms and allowed him to caress her fur.

"Why don't you tell me about it?" Gloriana leaned up next to him while gazing at him in the eyes.

Ves briefly described what took place. He also shared his own thoughts.

While Ves vented his frustrations and aired his tangled thoughts, Gloriana continually reassured him. Both of them grew more comfortable in each other's presence.

"To be honest, the Bright Republic and the people in power aren't acting unreasonably." She said. "It is not ungrounded for them to ask some favors of you, especially in a time of great need."

Though Marcella and Jake made the same argument, hearing it from his girlfriend forced him to reconsider his response.

"Do you think I'm overreacting?"

"I think you are. That doesn't mean I think you're doing anything wrong. I know you well enough that you don't like to be controlled. Regardless of what you do, I'll always support you, Ves."

The two shared a modest kiss.

After some thought, Ves understood why Gloriana reacted that way.

Unlike him, Gloriana had always been in the care of her mother and the Wodin Dynasty. As a valuable investment, she had always been treated well and never had been treated as an instrument.

Her view on authority was much different from his own. While Ves desired to free himself from the control of others, Gloriana did not mind remaining under the control of the Wodins as she never had any cause to rethink this relationship.

Right now was not the time to ask whether Gloriana would choose him over the Wodin Dynasty. That would be unfair to her and put undue pressure in their relationship.

Still, Ves wanted to make it clear that he would not follow in her footsteps.

"You're right, Gloriana. I don't want to be controlled. I want to take my destiny in my own hands. While I'm grateful for growing up in a nice state like the Bright Republic, both of us are meant for greater things. There may even come a point where we'll outgrow the Hegemony."

"The Hegemony will always reign supreme!"

"Be serious, Gloriana. Think of what I can do. Think of what we can achieve together. Are you content with limiting yourself to a single star sector?"

"Why do you think that my state will be content with holding a single star sector?"

Ves ruefully smiled. "Let's not speculate on that. My point is that as mech designers, we should look towards marketing our products beyond the narrow confines of our state or region. In fact, we shouldn't constrain our ambitions to the local star cluster. Don't you think that everyone in the galaxy should get to benefit from our products?"

His words successfully entranced Gloriana. Her eyes sparkled as she imagined this vision of the future.

Both of them knew that Ves wasn't talking nonsense. As long as they progressed to Master and beyond, such a grand outcome would already be in reach!

"I... I share your dream, Ves. That said, I don't think I'll ever forget my family and my home state. I don't see anything wrong with sticking by your side while also remaining loyal to my roots."

The two shared different thoughts on the matter. That was okay. A couple of disagreements wouldn't put their relationship under strain.

"Stay with me for the rest of the day, okay?"

"Okay." Gloriana nodded.

As Ves cozied up with Gloriana, a storm began to rage throughout the LMC.



Over a hundred well-placed people in the company were suddenly called to the offices of their superiors. The employees left the offices moments later with crushed or flat expressions.

Regardless of how they took the news, their employment at the LMC had come to an end. Fellow colleagues received new instructions and made sure to accompany the fired personnel out of the company premises.

Unlike Jake, Ves was much less forgiving towards these lesser spies and informants. He would give them no time to siphon away data or inflict some petty sabotage. They had to leave quite away, which shocked every other employee of the company.

"Don't forget." A manager said to his people as he watched a fired subordinate shuffle out of the floor. "We work for the Living Mech Corporation. Ves Larkinson is the only person we look up to. As long as you remember that, you won't go wrong."

Similar situations happened throughout the headquarters and the manufacturing floor. The people that Crindon pointed out came from all walks of life and worked in all kinds of positions. Managers, receptionists, chief technicians and more all received the boot due to a fateful decision from Ves.

In a way, the necessity of removing so many people from the company represented a failure in vetting the hires.

However, both Ves and Crindon knew that infiltration could never be prevented entirely. Spotlight and Flashlight would find a way to turn other employees into assets and insert some of their people into the LMC again.

"I'm primarily sending a message with my actions." Ves patiently explained to Gloriana. "By firing all of the spies and suspected people, I'm sending out a signal that I'm done with dealing with nonsense. I want to be treated seriously."

"I don't think the Bright Republic will let this matter rest. What's your endgame, Ves?"

"I have no idea. I'm kind of winging it, to be honest. It's a consequence of acting on my emotions as opposed to acting on rationality. I just hope that my message has been received."

The day slowly went by as Ves and Gloriana kept each other company. Along the way, Lucky phased into the office and began to ask for scratches.

As the pair and their cats all enjoyed a good time, Gavin arrived at the office and entered with a hesitant stride.

"Um, boss.."

"Yes Benny?"

"There's an important call waiting for you."

"Who?"

"Senator Tovar."

"Directly?"

"Yes. He's waiting on the company line right this instant."

"Well, it sounds like he doesn't want to wait if he's willing to talk to me remotely. You can go now, Benny. I'll take the call."

Gavin meekly bowed and left the office briskly.

"What's wrong with your assistant today?"

Ves shrugged. "He's probably affected by today's events."

"You're about to talk to someone important now, right? Should I go?"

"No. You can stay. If the good senator is willing to talk with me over the galactic net, then he won't be mentioning anything sensitive. I'd like you to listen in and show that we're in this together."

Gloriana smiled brilliantly at Ves. "I understand!"

He actually just wanted to use Gloriana's presence to restrain Senator Tovar. As long as someone as important as her was thrown into the mix, there was no way that old coot would do anything rash.

Not that Ves believe that the good senator would do something so stupid. It was enough for Gloriana to exert silent pressure by being present in the conversation.

Once Ves took a deep breath and centered his mind, he accepted the call.

The projection of a stately old man came into being. He sat on a dignified, high-backed chair that seemed more in place in a solemn council room.

Compared to before, Senator Tovar actually looked more spry despite the immense responsibilities he shouldered.

This must be his life-prolonging treatment taking further effect. It always took some time for someone's body to adjust to the wondrous changes.

"Ves Larkinson. We meet again." The man said simply.

"Good afternoon, senator."

"I see you have your lovely amour with you as well. How are you today, Miss Wodin?"

Upon the senator's appearance, Gloriana went from clinging to Ves like a lovesick girl to straightening her posture and adopting a noble demeanor.

"I'm doing well, senator. Your quaint little state is very lovely. Shame about the sandmen, though."

"Well, the sandmen are only a temporary nuisance. I apologize if the Bright Republic is less hospitable than you anticipated."

"Oh, it's hardly an issue. Your state is still faring pretty well."

Ves felt as if he was pushed to the side as Gloriana and Senator Tovar held a polite conversation.

This was not what he intended when he let Gloriana stay.

"Ahem." Ves coughed. "We should talk about more pressing matters."

The senator nodded. "Correct."

A short pause followed. Since the senator did not wish to bring up the issue first, Ves decided to take the plunge regardless of how he came across.

"I just did some spring cleaning in my company earlier today."

"I've heard."

"An infestation grew under my nose. I was disinclined to address it until I got pissed."

The senator kept a polite expression, revealing not a single hint of what he thought. "It is generally a poor idea to act when you are angry. It is always better to take the time to cool your head."

Ves already did that when Gloriana screwed him over by uploading a contentious recording on her Commbook page.

This was because he cared about Gloriana. Even if she made him angry, he would never want to hurt her. Being firm with her was enough.

It was different this time.

"I think it's better if nothing happens that makes me angry to begin with. Unfortunately, we don't live in a perfect reality. Something awful always happens that ruins my mood for the day."

The senator decided to stop beating around the bush. "Is this about the commission that Mrs. Bollinger has conveyed to you? I apologise for the tone she adopted. Due to the controversial nature of the commission, I thought it was best to allow a friend of yours to explain the circumstances behind my request. In hindsight, that was a mistake."

Ves chuckled under his breath. "I think Marcella was very clear. Refusal was not an option. You simply assumed I would agree with designing a mech for someone who least deserves one."

"Please understand what is at stake, Ves. Our negotiations with the Bentheim Liberation Movement proceeded very arduously. There are a lot of interests involved and each of them want their own needs prioritized over other needs. The deal I've helped negotiate is much more fragile than you think. Do you think it is easy to integrate mass murderers and lifelong terrorists back into society?"

"That's not my problem."

"As a Brighter, I would think it is. In any case, the initiatives that you dismiss as publicity stunts are vitally important to show that the former rebels can get along with loyal Brighters. Each successful example is another step towards making Bentheim more secure."

"I won't deny that this sounds helpful, but I don't see why I have to work with Vincent Ricklin again. Even if he's become one of their spokespersons, you could have assigned any other mech designer to design his personal mech."

"Captain Ricklin insisted that you be the one to design his custom mech. In fact, he is very adamant about it. If he does not get his way, then he can pose a serious threat to the stability of the deal."

Ves frowned deeper and deeper. What was this bastard up to? Why must Vincent haunt him after so many years of separation?

### *Chapter 1590 Leverage*

While Ves mainly took this course of action to vent his anger, he did not act aimlessly.

What he truly sought was a realignment in his relationship with the Bright Republic.

At the very least, he wanted people like Senator Tovar to change their view of him. Rather than being treated as a pawn who would automatically follow their orders without question, he wanted to be seen as an ally whose interests needed to be met.

Ves had no illusion that this was a very difficult thing to do. Though Ves was already an adult at over 30 years, he was just an upstart baby compared to a legendary statesman who almost reached 300 years!

Such an immense age disparity made many average people quail. How could Ves ever hope to match wits against a living relic who lived ten times as much as him? Even if Ves believed he was capable of exceeding anyone in the star sector, he was just a young Journeyman at the moment.

Someone who lived this long and maintained their grip on power for so long could never be overcome.

So Ves decided not to become his enemy.

Even if he harbored resentment against the old man, neither of them had any reason to hate each other.

Both sides had always used each other for their own purposes. It was just that Ves used to be so weak and trivial that he could only accept his role as a pawn.

It was different now. Although Ves only revealed a hint of his amazing potential, he believed he already had the qualifications to negotiate with the senator.

From the moment he accepted the call, Ves already knew that he had entered a negotiation. The outcome of this comm call would decide whether he could earn Tovar's respect as an ally rather than a pawn.

"As a mech designer, it's not proper to compel me to design a mech for someone I consider an enemy." Ves softly spoke while embracing Gloriana.

The senator, seated on his impressive high-backed chair, folded his leathery hands together. "There is too much at stake, Ves. If there was another alternative available, I would not have brought this commission to you in the first place."

"Don't you see that Vincent Ricklin is screwing us around? I doubt he's sincere!"

"I believe you're wrong, there. From what I have gathered, Vincent is quite a fan of your products. The release of your Desolate Soldiers and Prideful Soldiers has been the main catalyst for his request."

"I don't work for anyone." Ves crossed his arms.

"You disappoint me, young man. I thought you would be better than this. I knew many Larkinsons who would never hesitate to do what is right for the Republic. Even if the mission itself is unpalatable, the gains are very clear. Is that not why you've accepted the commission in the end?"

"I accepted it to repay some favors. Nothing more. That doesn't mean I'll tolerate another incident like this. I expect to have a say in the matter the next time you want my assistance."

Senator Tovar slightly shifted his posture, making him appear a bit more imposing. "You are still young and inexperienced. My views are incomparable to yours. Now that the Bright Republic is locked in the greatest crisis since the founding of our great state, we must let wisdom prevail."

"Humans aren't emotionless bots. Our feelings matter. My Desolate Soldier and its variants are all predicated on this belief. No matter how smart you are or how well you've thought out your plans, you won't be able to execute them if you can't inspire the masses."

"Even without your mech, we still have ways of controlling the population. While your mechs are helpful in suppressing unrest, they are not indispensable."

"Are you willing to bet on that?" Ves smirked.

He had been waiting for this moment.

Tovar narrowed his eyes. "What is the meaning of your words?"

"Let me give you a demonstration."

Ves dramatically raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

At the same time, he concentrated his mind and began to think about the Desolate Soldier model. He quickly made contact with the Solemn Guardian, who had grown considerably due to the feedback of the hundreds of thousands of mech pilots.

While the Solemn Guardian was an independent spiritual product, it still recognized Ves as its creator. When Ves communicated a silent request to it, the spiritual product only hesitated for a moment before obeying its instruction.

For the first time since their conversation, Senator Tovar showed an inkling of doubt.

As long as the discussion was limited to words, the senator was confident he could remain in control. Even if Ves gained the moniker of Devil Tongue, his rhetorical abilities were nothing in the eyes of a centuries-old diplomat and statesman!

Ves was very clear about this as well, so he came up with a means to fight against Senator Tovar where he held an insurmountable advantage.

"What is the meaning of your gesture?" Tovar finally asked.

"Perhaps you should check the news or let your assistant inform you what is going on outside your accommodation."

The senator turned to someone out of view of the comm projection. Ves guessed that Tovar was probably speaking to Alistair Cordwraith, his long-serving Benny.

Though Senator Tovar kept an admirably stoic face, there was no way he could remain unmoved. The old man quickly turned back to the comm call.

"What have you done, young man?"

"I only snapped my fingers, senator. Nothing more." Ves replied while continuing to grin. "Shall I do it again?"

Without waiting for the senator's answer, he snapped his fingers yet again.

At the same time, he gently issued another instruction to the Solemn Guardian.

Everything should go back to normal now.

Just two minutes had passed since the first and second instruction, but Ves knew that he had accomplished something incredibly impactful.

The first instruction he issued was to make the Solemn Guardian withdraw its strength to any Soldier mech on Bentheim.

For two perplexing minutes, every Desolate Soldier, Holy Soldier and Prideful Soldier on the planet suddenly lost the bulk of their auras! This immediately alarmed all of their owners and mech pilots and incited a considerable amount of panic!

The constant presence of auras had formed a reassuring presence to much of the population. If the Soldier mechs all lost this quality, the damage to everyone's confidence would certainly be great!

Unfortunately, this stunt did not come without a price. Aside from disturbing everyone on Bentheim, Ves and the LMC also incurred a substantial hit to their reputation.

So far, every authentic Soldier mech had always been dependable. For their auras to weaken all of a sudden would make many people more hesitant about their reliability.

Fortunately, Ves had already made some preparations earlier. He briefly glanced down to a secondary projection and pressed a virtual button.

Very soon, the LMC transmitted an official notification to every Soldier mech on Bentheim. The message simply stated that an unknown interference field disrupted the functioning of the mechs for a brief period of time.

The LMC promised to study what occurred and patch the vulnerability as soon as possible.

Hopefully, most people bought this excuse.

The notification might even reassure the detractors of his mechs that they weren't infallible. As long as certain people believed that there was a way to sabotage or neutralize the auras, they wouldn't feel so threatened at his products anymore.

For this reason, Ves willingly paid the price of this disruption.

Of course, the main purpose of his stunt was not to feign weakness in front of his rivals and enemies.

Instead, he wanted to prove that he had leverage.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Larkinson?" Senator Tovar asked with a bit more steel in his voice than usual.

Ves figured he succeeded with his aim when he noticed the statesman's change in tone.

"I'm a mech designer, but that does not mean we are limited to creation. What we give, we can take."

As Ves spoke his daring statement, Gloriana quietly gazed at him with admiration. She had become more and more impressed at how confidently he stood up against this old man!

Even though Camden Tovar was just a very old boy in her eyes, she knew she was far from his opponent. Only someone like her mother would be able to humble this long-living fossil.

Naturally, this old fox wouldn't concede so easily. Especially against someone as young as Ves.

"I don't think it will do your reputation any good to strip the most important advantage of your mechs. Your customers bought your products with certain expectations in mind."

Ves shrugged, brushing off the very real danger in Tovar's words.

"Who knows what is responsible for the interruption. Perhaps a certain faction has grown jealous of the LMC's accomplishments and developed a countermeasure against our products. How do you think my huge customer base will react to such a revelation?"



This was a naked threat. Ves didn't even care if he spoke these words over an unsecure comm channel. In fact, it would be better if other powerful factions came to know what might follow if they harmed his interests.

"You are playing a very dangerous game, Ves." Tovar spoke directly. "There is no reason for you to lash out at us. We are just doing what is best for the state."

Ves chuckled. "Please don't misunderstand my intentions. I have always respected you, and that has never changed. I merely wish you would reciprocate my feelings."

"If you want respect, you have to work for it, young man. Acting disrespectfully is counterproductive."

"I never meant any disrespect, sir. I apologise for coming across as such. I merely wanted to catch your attention."

"You certainly have it." Tovar almost spat out.

"Good." Ves smiled, taking no notice at Tovar's increasing discontent.

To change his treatment, Ves needed to stand his ground and push back against the senator.

This was very risky.

If Ves pissed Tovar off too much, then he risked turning his greatest ally in the government into an incredibly potent threat.

Once Tovar turned against him, Ves had no choice but to abandon almost everything he built in the Bright Republic.

However, if he succeeded, then he could enjoy a completely different relationship with his benefactor in the government.

An incident like before where the Senator imposed an instruction on Ves would be a thing of the past.

The payoff was worth it. Ves recognized that he needed a staunch ally in the government. While he already enjoyed a lot of support, that was because of other circumstances.

Once the situation changed, who could say that he would still enjoy the same level of care?

Everything was predicated around interests.

Having spent some time with manipulative bastards like Senator Tovar, Ves learned that these types of people always paid attention to gains and losses.

They were kind of like AIs in a sense. At their age, they never acted on emotion and impulse. Only cold hard benefits could sway their minds.

When Ves thought about what he could offer to the good senator, he came up with one possible idea. Though tenuous and uncertain, it was the best he could offer to a man who already controlled some of the reins of an entire state.

"Let's not play this game any further, Ves. You youngsters are too crass." The senator spoke, apparently reaching the limits of his forbearance. "What do you want?"

Ves laughed. "I want many things, but let's not talk about that right now. Instead of focusing on what you can do for me, let's address what I can do for you."

Tovar looked intrigued. "Go on."

"I'm sure you're a very smart man, senator. You're also known to be farsighted due to your distinguished age. I respect that, sir. I'm also sure that you have developed a comprehensive evaluation of me. Personally, I think of myself very highly."

"And that matters because...?"

Ves leaned in and grinned. "I happen to have a lot of vacancies in my design teams. Tell me, how many mech designers are in the Tovar Family?"