

# Mech 1591

## *Chapter 1591 New Deal*

All of the gambits he employed so far culminated to this moment. Though Ves had taken some enormous risks, he believed that Senator Tovar was farsighted enough to take the bigger picture into account.

A short moment passed in silence as Senator Tovar steadily worked out the implications of what Ves had just said.

Though Ves boldly inflated his own worth in front of Tovar, he had cause to do so. Not a single Journeyman in his generation could match his prowess in mech design. His design philosophy alone was so remarkable that anyone with a brain could tell that Ves could make greater achievements in the future.

The only complication was that the future was never set in stone. There was always an element of uncertainty involved in making assumptions of the future.

Who could tell if Senator Tovar was optimistic about his trajectory? If the old man believed that Ves was unlikely to make it very far, then the response wouldn't be very good.

As time stretched on, Ves tried his best not to show any hesitation. Maintaining a confident demeanor was essential in negotiations. If he showed any weakness, someone as formidable as Senator Tovar would instantly pounce.

Fortunately, Gloriana was by his side. The presence of his girlfriend not only restrained the old man, but also boosted his confidence.

Eventually, the senator finished his deliberations.

"Our Tovar Family already maintains strong ties with several famed Seniors. For example, Professor Ventag happens to mentor a number of promising descendants."

While Ves hadn't spent any specific research on how many Tovars went on to become mech designers, they were sure to be involved.

From what he knew of the Tovar Family, they mainly engaged in politics, administration and commerce.

Since this was the Age of Mechs, any influence involved in the latter would never neglect the mech industry. Mech designers occupy such an important position in the economy of a state that the Tovars would definitely try to occupy a piece of the pie.

Ves happened to memorize the identities of each Senior Mech Designer in the Bright Republic. As far as he knew, none of them were Tovars. Even if allies such as Professor Ventag happened to be on their side, that was not as good as raising a high-ranking mech designer in the family itself!

The amount of money and effort the Wodins put into turning Gloriana into a promising Journeyman already signified how difficult it was to nurture a good mech designer.

It wasn't difficult to nurture a random relative into an Apprentice or something. It was an entirely different matter to raise a Journeyman or Senior.

In truth, Constance Wodin lucked out in the case of her daughter. Ves never asked how many attempts the Wodins had made to nurture a mech designer like her. There must be many Apprentices in her dynasty who would never be able to surpass the extraordinary threshold because of the absence of spiritual potential.

Considering how rare it was for someone to develop spiritual potential, Ves was not surprised to know that the Tovars failed to nurture their own high-ranking mech designer.

"I have great respect for every Senior in our state." Ves responded politely. "However, in my eyes mech designers such as Professor Ventag have already approached the limits of their potential. Even if they are able to prolong their lives for a couple of hundred years, it's doubtful if they will ever be able to surpass their current ranks."

"I do not think these eminent mech designers will appreciate you for saying that." Tovar retorted with a frown. "There are over a hundred Seniors in the Republic. Any one of them can achieve a breakthrough at any moment."

"How likely will that happen, do you think? Even if a Senior from our state manages to buck the trend and go further, what are the odds that he or she will be a mech designer that is friendly to the Tovars?"

"And you think you stand a better chance?"

"Oh, I know I do." Ves grinned and boldly stretched his arm over his girlfriend's shoulder. "The Desolate Soldier is a product of collaboration, right Gloriana?"

Gloriana smiled and gazed at him in infatuation. "Correct. Both of us have applied our respective specialties on the Desolate Soldier design. Our mechs wouldn't be nearly as exceptional if I wasn't involved."

Normally, she wouldn't take pride over a relatively modest contribution to the design of a mass market mech.

Yet this was different. The Desolate Soldier design was the first product of her collaboration with the man she loved.

Not only that, she also knew that Ves needed her support in order to strengthen his position in these talks.

Ves appreciated that and kissed her on the cheek, which elicited a happy giggle from his girlfriend.

Of course, Senator Tovar was not amused at their display of affection. "What is your point, Mr. Larkinson?"

This was the second time the old man referred to Ves in that manner. Whether deliberately or not, the senator signalled that Ves had gained the right to negotiate with him on more even grounds.

"If you aren't confident in me, then why not place your confidence in Gloriana?" Ves proposed. "Second-class mech designers always enjoy brighter prospects. The advantages they've received from birth and during their upbringing is very difficult to surmount. At the very least, I don't think any current Seniors in the Bright Republic can equal Gloriana when she matures."

The old man shook his head. "Miss Wodin is not a Brighter."

"I know. She's with me. As long as we are together, we're a package deal. My students are her students. If I promise to do my best to mentor a student, my girlfriend will readily do the same."

Gloriana vigorously nodded. "If Ves can't meet his promises for some reason, I will certainly pick up where he left."

Bringing in Gloriana must have taken Senator Tovar aback. The old man paused yet again as he stared at them with a powerful gaze.

Ves waited patiently for the senator to make up his mind. He believed in his argument.

It was very difficult to catch the attention of a future Senior or Master from a very advanced state.

Even if Ves once managed to become apprenticed to Master Olson, his background heavily limited his future accomplishments. Without the expensive genetic treatments and augmentations that many second-class mech designers enjoyed, those who emerged from poorer states would always be a step behind.

What Ves promised was different. Though he hadn't been explicit in his offer, he intimated that Gloriana and him would do more to nurture any potential Tovar mech designers under their care.

Not even a man as powerful as Senator Tovar could get a Master from the Coalition or Hegemony to accept one of his descendants as a disciple.

Ves was different. One of his greatest shortcomings was his lack of subordinate mech designers. He welcomed any competent mech designers that wanted to work under him at the LMC.

"You think very highly of yourself."

"I think we have the capital to do so if the Desolate Soldier is a sign." Ves easily responded.

He would never dare to act so confidently in front of Senator Tovar if he hadn't already proven himself.

To a mech designer, designing a successful mech was the most direct way of demonstrating their value.

The senator slowly tapped the surface of his wooden armrest. The man had to make a lot of considerations. No matter what decision he made, the repercussions would be great.

Ves had steered Senator Tovar into making his own gamble. Was the old man confident enough in Ves and Gloriana's future prospects to entrust some of his Tovar descendants in their care?

At this time, his finger stopped tapping. "Very well. You've convinced me to give you a chance. I will allocate five mech designers of my family to your company. Treat them well, and I shall do the same to you. Is that understood?"

"I'll do my best to mentor them, but I'm no miracle worker." Ves cautiously raised his palm. "We can't provide much guidance to mech designers that are too old and set in their ways. We also can't do much if your mech designers turn out to be spoiled brats."

"Beggars can't be choosers, young man. It is very problematic to gather these mech designers from their existing positions."

Ves frowned. It sounded as if Senator Tovar expected trouble.

"I'll smack anyone around if they cause any problems in my company. Regardless of status or background, only competence matters to me. Will that be a problem?"

Tovar shook his head in dismissal. "Do what you will. As long as you act within your limits, I will only pay attention to the result."

That was such a Flashlight thing to say. Ves shouldn't be surprised that Tovar expressed such a sentiment. He knew that the old man possessed a great amount of influence in the military intelligence agency.

For that reason, Ves actually felt that the gap between him and Senator Tovar had shrunk a little.

Though they were still very different people, Ves succeeded in transforming his relationship with the Tovars, and by extension the government.

Before, the Tovars only looked out for Ves because he was a useful asset in their eyes.

Now that Ves convinced the Tovars to place some of their mech designers under his wing, it was not proper anymore for them to treat him as a disposable pawn!

No further words needed to be shared. A basic verbal contract with many implied terms had formed between them. Both of them nodded to each other, as if confirming their agreement.

"My assistant will be in touch." Senator Tovar spoke with a noticeably lighter tone than before. "Due to the current circumstances, the mech designers I intend to place under your care might take a few weeks to arrive. Be sure to receive them properly once they arrive at your planet."

"I will do my best to welcome your men." Ves smiled.

After sharing a few more platitudes, the call finally came to an end.

As soon as the projection disappeared, Ves sunk back in his couch as if he lost all strength.

"That was nerve-wracking!"

Gloriana instantly dropped her formal posture and went back to acting like an adoring lover. She turned towards him and caressed his smooth cheek. "You did really well, Ves. From what I can tell, you managed to convince the senator in betting on our ascension. Now that he has agreed to place some of his descendants under our care, he'll do everything he can to cover for you in the Bright Republic."

This was what Ves wanted to accomplish!

Though he initially wanted to get Senator Tovar to treat him differently, he realized that he wouldn't be able to gain respect if he didn't give the old man any concrete benefits.

By making this promise, Ves automatically tied their interests together.

If Ves encountered any setbacks, the Tovars would also suffer.

If Ves achieved success, then the Tovars would also make some gains!

This was the best way to achieve a stable relationship!

From now on, his relationship with the Tovars no longer centered around his past services and associations with Flashlight and the senator.

"Our new deal is a much stronger basis for an alliance!" Ves happily spoke.

He didn't necessarily make this deal for himself. If the Bright Republic became hospitable to him, then he did not object to moving to another state.

What he truly wanted was to avoid any repercussions to the Larkinson Family. If Ves fell out of favor for whatever reason, he did not wish his family to suffer in his stead.

To put it bluntly, the Larkinson Family was the strongest shackle that tied him to the Bright Republic.

The Tovars would definitely watch out for the Larkinsons from now on! Even if his family hadn't been explicitly included in the deal, there was no way they would neglected!

So long as the Larkinson Family was able to shelter under the umbrella of the Tovar Family, Ves would have no more worries when it was time for him to embark on his grand expedition!

#### *Chapter 1592 Hedging*

"There's a big problem with the deal you just made with Senator Tovar." Gloriana remarked. "If my home state ever loses the Komodo War, you'll instantly become a pariah."

"I know." Ves nodded gravely. "Such a thought hasn't escaped the senator either. This is why my proposal was so precarious. If Tovar erred on the side of caution, he would refuse my terms because he would not want the Tovar Family to develop any ties with Hexers."

"So by playing along with your deal, he essentially placed a vote of confidence in the Hegemony."

Ves shook his head. "A wily old statesman like him would never be so simple. The Tovar Family is a behemoth in the Bright Republic. Together with the other four founding families, they control many levers of the private and public sectors.

Considering how our state often trades with the Friday Coalition, the Tovars must maintain at least some ties with them. Perhaps they are even more extensive than we think."

"That means that one of the reasons the Tovar Family has agreed to put some descendants under our care is to hedge their positions." Gloriana concluded. "That's quite clever, especially considering that it's unlikely that they maintain any ties to the Hegemony."

It couldn't be helped. The highly secular Bright Republic vastly preferred to treat with their own kind. Brighters and Fridaymen shared many common values, while the Hexers were so radically different that their beliefs directly clashed with every 'normal' culture!

In fact, one of the reasons why Ves doubted if Senator Tovar would accept his proposal was his scruples as a man.

Almost everyone in the Bright Republic rooted for the Fridaymen. Senator Tovar and his powerful family should be no different.

By supporting Ves, the Tovars actually went against their inclinations. This would definitely earn them a lot of flack, thereby reducing their standing among their peers.

Evidently, Senator Tovar judged that this tradeoff was worth it if he could gain some insurance.

If the Fridaymen won the war, then the Tovars would only suffer some minor disfavor. With all of their existing ties to the Coalition, they could easily take this hit.

If the Hexers vanquished over their rivals, all of the existing powers of the Bright Republic would instantly be put in an awkward position. In this precarious situation, a single, strong connection to the Hegemony put the Tovar Family on a much higher position than the other powers!

In fact, such an advantage might be enough for the Tovar Family to become the premier influence in the Bright Republic, surpassing every other founding family who lacked this connection!

"Aside from hitching his wagon to us, this is the second benefit that Senator Tovar has secured." Ves confirmed. "No matter which state comes out on top of the Komodo War, the Tovar Family is guaranteed to survive and stay in power. For a patriarch responsible for ensuring the continuity of his line, this is an exceedingly important concession."

Ves never aimed to appeal to Senator Tovar's charity or good impression of him. Only concrete benefits could make the old man use his influence to shield Ves and the Larkinson Family.

Just as Ves offered Senator Tovar an opportunity to hedge his positions, so did he receive the same opportunity.

If the Friday Coalition ever came out on top, then Ves and Gloriana would no longer be able to stay.

As for the Larkinsons, Ves knew that many of them held too much affection for the Bright Republic to follow him into exile.

To the Larkinsons that stayed, Ves was afraid that certain parties would scheme against his stubborn relatives.

However, now that Ves secured the support of the Tovar Family, they would hardly stand still and let the Larkinsons get bullied.

As long as the Tovars covered for the Larkinsons, then Ves would not have to look back all the time when he finally left to explore the galaxy.

"I'm doing this for my family." He whispered to his girlfriend. "It's not fair for them to suffer from my mistakes. Although I'm not sure if the Tovars will be able to keep their word in such an event, it's better than leaving the Larkinsons high and dry."

As a Larkinson, Ves knew very well how deep his family's loyalty to the Bright Republic ran.

The Larkinson Ancestor himself fought and bled to help establish the state!

Starting from this legendary figure, many Larkinsons fought and died in the name of duty. Many Larkinson mech pilots felt obligated to inherit the noble mission of their predecessors.

Though Ves did not entirely agree with this noble mission, blood was thicker than water.

Whatever he thought of these noble idiots, Ves still wanted to preserve their wellbeing.

"I think it's pretty noble of you to look out for your family in this manner." Gloriana remarked with a smile. "It shows you care."

Ves helplessly smiled. "I don't want to leave any regrets when we leave this star sector."

"I think it will be okay even if you're gone. After all, we'll be back after a couple of decades, right?"

"Right.."

After this momentous day, the LMC slowly calmed down.



As Ves and Gloriana resumed working on the Militant Soldier and Peaceful Soldier designs, the company soon recovered and operated just as productively as before.

The Larkinsons appointed a new Chief Operating Officer to take the helm of the LMC. Since they had been the ones to put Jake Altern forward in the first place, the elders felt quite remorseful that the man had betrayed Ves' trust.

For this reason, the identity of the new COO surprised Ves a lot. As soon as he received the news while he was in the middle of refining the Militant Soldier's design, he instantly contacted Calsie.

"What's the emergency, Ves?"

"Why did you vote in favor of letting Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson take over as COO?"

Calsie looked puzzled. "Is there a problem?"

"Raymond is a greedy prick!"

"Oh. Your grandfather hasn't said anything of the sort. He along with almost every other elder has recommended Mr. Billingsley-Larkinson as the new second-in-command of the company."

That sounded weird to Ves. "Why so?"

"The Larkinson Family is afraid of repeating the past. They don't dare to put forth another retainer. They aren't satisfied with the candidates within the company and it's out of the question to hand over this vital position to an outsider."

"In other words, the Larkinsons are only satisfied with putting up one of their own in charge, is that right?"

Calsie nodded. "They make up a very persuasive argument. While I was skeptical at first, Mr. Billingsley-Larkinson happens to have the most qualifications. Not only was he in charge of the Larkinson Trust Fund for all these years, he has also put a lot of effort into preparing for this role. He has developed a very high understanding of the LMC and he has also studied the mech industry in great depth."

"And no one else is as qualified as this prick?"

Calsie shook his head. "The Larkinsons are nearly unanimous in putting him in charge."

"Are there any other alternatives?"

"I've tried my best to find replacements, but it is not that easy to find a worthy replacement for Mr. Altern."

As Calsie described some of the alternative candidates, Ves agreed that they did not seem up to par. Compared to Raymond who evidently prepared to lead the LMC ever since the company became a mainstay of the family, everyone else would need too much time and effort to get up to speed.

The LMC couldn't afford any paralysis, especially during a time of crisis. With the Soldier product line taking the regional mech markets by storm, it was vitally important for someone trustworthy and competent to

Raymond did not exactly fit that bill.

Oh, Ves was not too narrow-minded to believe that Raymond was a good-for-nothing. The Larkinson Family would have never put him in charge of their finances if he was bad in running an enterprise.

It was the trust issue that troubled him a lot.

Would Raymond make the same mistake as Jake? Probably not. Even if someone argued that there was nothing wrong with associating with Spotlight, the man knew better than to piss Ves off.

What made Ves hesitate was his impression of Raymond as someone who was willing to engage in nepotism.

Ves did not forget the time where Raymond solicited him for money in order to support his grandson who currently served in the Mech Corps.

While Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was a promising expert candidate, that did not mean that Ves would allow anyone to cut in line.

However, when it came down to it, this problem was not very severe. As long as Raymond did not enrich his pockets, then he was the best candidate that Ves could think of to take over as COO.

Ves turned his attention to Calsie. As the nominal CEO, she actually didn't do that much. Her only role was to ensure that the senior management remained loyal.

While she failed to detect anything amiss with Jake, Ves did not blame her. Without someone like Crindon at her disposal, there was no way she could come out ahead against organizations like Spotlight and Flashlight.

"I'll talk to Raymond when he gets here." Ves eventually decided. "If I think he's acceptable, then make sure to keep a very close eye on him. I don't entirely trust Raymond when it comes to managing our money."

After passing on a couple of judicious warnings, he ended the call.

Just like Vincent and the promised Tovar mech designers, Raymond still needed to arrive at Cloudy Curtain before he could go any further.

Gloriana, who sat close by, couldn't help but make a remark.

"You know, from what I learned about the Larkinson Family, it should be possible for you to take it over."

Ves firmly shook his head. "That's an awful idea. While most of the Larkinsons who have moved to Cloudy Curtain won't mind, there are also a lot of Larkinsons who want to stick to tradition. I'm fairly sure that many Larkinsons in active service will oppose letting a mech designer like me become the head of the family. That is simply not the way that our family is run."

The Larkinsons technically didn't really have a head. They saw no need to appoint one because the family never did anything that required active leadership.

Whenever the Larkinsons wanted to make any major decisions, they would just convene the steering committee and allow the elders to vote on various proposals.

The day-to-day running of the Larkinson Estate was left to a few trusted Larkinsons. However, none of them held absolute decision-making power.

Despite the lack of someone who was in charge of everything, the Larkinsons never had any problems with that. The Larkinsons never involved themselves in anything big enough to require an actual head.

However, now that Gloriana brought the topic up, Ves knew that the Larkinsons had changed drastically. His rise and the LMC's rise enriched the Larkinsons beyond their wildest dreams.

With money, many things became possible. The Larkinsons already invested enormously in taking over and expanding a basic mech academy on Bentheim. Now they planned to double-down on this venture by trying to gain permission to found an advanced mech academy!

The issue with all of these initiatives was that the Larkinsons were beginning to play with the big boys. This might land them in trouble and force them into a crisis if they inadvertently encroached on the interests of a powerful influence.

The slow and squabbling steering committee was unlikely to lead the Larkinson Family through such a crisis.

"Maybe you have a point, Gloriana." Ves murmured. "It's just that I don't think I'm influential enough in the family to gain enough acceptance."

It was still something that he would keep in mind, though. Perhaps he should divert some time into sounding the opinions of the Larkinsons who resided in his Cloud Estate.

### *Chapter 1593 Glow*

The brief 'service interruption' that happened on Bentheim confounded many people.

It couldn't be helped. The auras that seemed to be perpetually active had gone dark all of a sudden.

The consequences were drastic. Mech pilots who became used to the reassuring duty-focused auras of the Desolate Soldiers suddenly felt as if they were missing something essential.

Bystanders who felt reassured in the comfort of the emotions evoked by the mechs all experienced a gaping void in their hearts.

The repercussions of this two-minute interruption was incredibly shocking!

Even though the mechs quickly came back to normal, panic continued to run rife for a few days.

The LMC received lots of calls despite publishing a notification that purportedly explained the phenomenon.

Though many people bought the excuse, many more had begun to spread conspiracy theories.

What if the LMC implemented a backdoor in their mechs?

Such a question frightened many owners of the Soldier mechs. How could they rest easy fighting the sandmen when their mental support suddenly disappeared?

Sales stagnated for a time. Existing owners of the Desolate Soldiers and Prideful Soldiers paused the deployment of their mechs in order to form a thorough inspection of the machines.

Not a single investigation revealed anything amiss. The designs of the Soldier product line were so simple that hardly anything could be hidden.

Perhaps the ones who came closest to the truth were fellow mech designers. Several of them had already guessed that Ves possessed some means of controlling his products because of some unique property of his design philosophy.

Although such a thing wasn't unheard of, it was exceedingly rare.

Fortunately, the storm quickly passed after a few days. Hardly anyone remembered the incident after a week. The passage of time and the constant influx of news about the Sand War quickly dominated the headlines.

The LMC soon returned to its previous trajectory. Sales had recovered and the complaints and questions about the incident died down.

The interruption only happened once, after all.

In fact, some people even started to become more appreciative of the auras. A Bentheim without auras was a Bentheim that had lost its soul!

"It's very strange, boss." Gavin described with an odd expression. "I initially thought that the mech buyers on Bentheim would have held some lingering doubts about our mechs. Yet once people got a taste of what it was like to lose the glows, they became a lot more insistent on buying additional mechs, as if they wanted to have some spares around if one of their machines became defective for whatever reason."

Ves could hardly explain this irrational behavior either. "Well, I won't turn down any opportunity to sell more mechs."

Ever since Ves fired a bunch of spies, Gavin acted a bit more restrained than before. While the assistant did his best to seem normal, he inevitably betrayed some nervous tics.

Everytime he did that, Ves inwardly smirked.

Though Gavin should have been swept up by the purge, Ves decided to spare his assistant.

He didn't really have a good reason to do so. He just felt like keeping Gavin around despite his ties to Flashlight.

After all, a proper Benny never answered to a single master!

Fortunately, Gavin still remained as helpful as ever.

"By the way, I think we should address how we should name the effects. No one has come up with a standardized term, and everyone is calling it by a different name. Most Brighters have taken to calling it a glow, while others refer to it as the soul of a mech."

The assistant listed out a bunch of words used to describe the auras.

Glow, soul, heart, feeling, domain and even the word aura itself began to be associated with the influencing effects of his mechs.

Of course, those who disliked the LMC mechs used more disparaging terms. Calling the effect a brainwashing field was a good way to arouse vigilance in many people.

It was for this reason that Gavin brought the topic up today.

"I admit I neglected this aspect." Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin as he sat behind his desk. "Personally, I prefer to think of it as an aura, but in the context of my company's mission perhaps it's best to call it a soul."

"A soul implies that something is living in our mechs." Gavin warily pointed out. "Are you sure you want to push this belief? Calling it a glow is a much safer term. Not only does it come with warm and positive connotations, it also reflects our Brighter heritage."

"I considered that, but that's not what the LMC is about. What do the letters stand for?"

"Living Mech Corporation."

"What is our motto?"

"Living Mechs. Partners for Life."

Ves nodded. "What do you think I've been working towards all this time? When I told you that I'm out to design mechs that live, I wasn't kidding. What you are feeling from my mechs is a form of life! Though I'm not entirely satisfied with calling it a soul, it's the best way to make the public understand that the reason why our mechs are different is because they each have a soul!"

"This..." Gavin was taken aback by his description.

Even if he accompanied Ves for several years, he had never come in contact with the truth. As a normal citizen from the Bright Republic, it was very difficult for him to accept such an absurd statement.

Yet... his time with the LMC already made it clear that Ves was capable of many feats. Gavin did not dare to dismiss this latest claim.

There were still some problems, though.

"I don't advise you to call it a soul. Another reason why we stuck to calling it a glow is because it doesn't evoke negative reactions in different cultures. If we start calling it a soul, then the mech markets in certain religious states will react very violently at our claim."

"That... sounds like a problem, yes." Ves furrowed his brows.

As much as he wanted to propagate his vision for mechs, not every culture was receptive to the idea.

To claim that a soul resided in a mech would result in a lot of backlash in states where people believed that the dead went to the afterlife.

What if the LMC intercepted the souls of the dead and stuffed them into their mechs through conducting demonic rituals? Ves could scarcely imagine the backlash that might result!

Calling the effect a glow was a much better alternative because it allowed for many different interpretations. By sticking to such a vague term, the LMC could adopt different messaging strategies.

Ves sighed. "Alright. Let's settle for glow then. It's not the most accurate term, but it's the safest one out of all of the options."

An aura was nothing more than an outward expression of spirituality. He had no problems calling it a glow, though inwardly he preferred sticking to the original term.

After ending his daily meeting, he left his office and headed to his lab.

As he entered, he noticed that Gloriana was in the process of lecturing the four Larkinson brats. Each of them listened to the woman attentively. All of the four future mech designers knew that they would never be able to reach her height at her age.

Even so, that did not diminish their hunger at all. Each of them wanted to learn as much as possible from Ves and Gloriana so that they could fulfill their own dreams.

As Ves quietly watched the lecture, Ketis quietly walked up to him. "We've all been taking turns in teaching them. Do you think it will be useful? They're still too young."

"It's okay. I don't expect all of them to become successful. I'm content as long as one of them stands out from the crowd." He responded before turning his attention to her. "You should pay attention to your own progression. You're already at the level of a seasoned Apprentice in terms of knowledge, but you're no different from a Novice in terms of practical experience."

Ketis looked down. "Hardly anyone wants to buy a swordsman mech these days. It's hard for me to motivate myself whenever I want to work on my own designs."

"Every mech designer has their ups and downs." Ves patted her shoulder. "Even when you're struggling to come up with any ideas, you have to develop some persistence. If you are too dependent on ideal conditions, you will never be consistent. A true professional can do their job regardless if they are down or depressed."



She nodded. "I know. I am trying my best, but it's really difficult to get any work done when I don't have any hopes of selling any mechs."

Though Ves hadn't spent too much time on inspecting her work, he knew that she was making a fair amount of progress. She had already become reasonably versed at designing variants.

It would only be a matter of time before she was ready to design her first original mech.

"How is your design philosophy following along?"

Her eyes burned with determination. "It's still the same, more or less. I haven't given up on my principles. I want to develop a sword that is sharp enough to cut anything material, and I want to design a mech that is worthy enough to wield such a sword!"

Ves could sense the sincerity in her words. She was just as passionate as before, which alleviated some of his worries.

"I don't know if your path is correct, but it's the most suitable one for you. As long as you're happy, you won't regret your choice."

They began to discuss some of her recent designs. Since Ves had been absent for a year, he wanted to make it up by guiding Ketis forward.

Of course, he didn't straight up tell her how she should do things. It was best for her to develop the ability to come up with her own solutions.

For that reason, it was enough for Ves to point out the places where she needed to pay more attention.

"You're so good at spotting problems." She said in admiration.

"That's the benefit of having a lot of practical experience with mechs. It's not enough to work with numbers and schematics all the time. You need to get your hands dirty and spend some time in the workshop or manufacturing facilities."

In truth, Ves wasn't talented in this aspect. He simply cheated his way up by accumulating several helpful Sub-Skills from the System.

Without access to the System, there was little hope that Ketis would reach this level of proficiency in spotting problems.

It wasn't entirely necessary, though. Most mech designers already made do with average vision for faults. They merely relied on simulations and prototype testing to unearth the problems they failed to spot in the earlier design phases.



As Gloriana continued to teach the Larkinson seeds, Ves patiently enlightened Ketis with some of his valuable insights.

He took care not to impose too much of his own beliefs on her. Instead, he merely opened some doors for her that she could explore at her own leisure.

"How should I progress my design philosophy?" She asked. "No one ever gives me a straight answer."

Ves shrugged. "That's because it's different for everyone. It's a journey of exploration, and no one can tell you whether you're heading in the right direction. Everyone encounters different problems. The solutions you develop will form the basis of your toolbox. Of course, you won't be able to do much at the Novice and Apprentice stage."

Though Ketis looked discouraged, she was still young. Ves did not expect her to become a Journeyman anytime soon.

Unlike her, both Ves and Gloriana benefited from various powerful advantages to accelerate their progression.

While it was true that Ves empowered Ketis by feeding her with a bunch of Attribute Candies, that was not enough to narrow the gap.

Perhaps the only way she could catch up was to become a guest user of the System.

Ves did not consider this option for the time being.

#### *Chapter 1594 Farming Settlemen*

After Ves struck a new deal with the Tovars, the benefits of strengthening their relationship soon became clear.

The LMC's regulatory burden decreased. Permits were granted faster and inspections became less frequent.

These sounded minor, but to a company as huge as the LMC, they were very welcome.

The Tovars also allowed the LMC to transact with exclusive wholesalers and suppliers of raw materials.

Some of these companies were owned by the Tovar Family. Others maintained long-standing ties with the founding family. Whatever the case, the LMC managed to enter this circle.

This meant that the LMC not only gained access to cheaper materials, but also didn't have to worry as much about unanticipated shortages.

Another benefit of the new deal was that his refugee recruitment quota had tripled. He could hire a lot more gems in the rough than before.

Ves had already tasked the LMC to go through the list of refugees that the Bright Republic recently settled on Cloudy Curtain.

Among the billions of refugees, there were many treasures hidden in the crowd. The government had no time to look up their identities thoroughly, so the refugee database was far from complete.

Nobody believed it was accurate. With many official records and databases gone, it took too much time and effort to verify the statements made by the refugees.

Perhaps a self-proclaimed Journeyman Mech Designer turned out to be nothing more than an Apprentice.

Perhaps the lead programmer of a famous software company was a hacker who committed identity theft.

Perhaps a former military mech officer with a stunning record was a pirate leader who got mixed in with the refugees!

In short, the refugee database couldn't be trusted at all! It could only be used as a reference. In order to be sure that they hired the right people, the LMC organized several trips to the farming settlements in order to investigate the refugees up close!

Ves decided to accompany one of the visits. He boarded a shuttle which flew to a distant farming settlement. The reason for stopping by this specific settlement was because it supposedly held an exobiologist!

And not just any exobiologist, but a brilliant and talented one!

As Ves reviewed the exobiologist's flimsy registry data, he frowned a bit.

"I'm not sure whether this fellow is the real deal." He muttered.

"We've confirmed that Dr. Lupo Guernica really exists." Gavin replied from the opposite side of the shuttle. "We found mention of him throughout the galactic net. We found reliable sources that confirm that he has graduated with a degree in exobiology."

Ves looked up from the data pad. "He also appears to be a cooking enthusiast who participated in several cooking contests and wrote his own cookbook. It sounds rather strange to me that Dr. Guernica is both a biotech expert and a chef!"

Though the combination sounded dubious, it was not enough to dismiss Lupo as a blowhard. The proof they found on the galactic net was reliable enough to take this refugee seriously.

If this exobiologist was the real deal, then Ves would be happy to take him in. Not only did he graduate with distinction from a renowned university from a fallen border state, he also acquired a broad array of skills.

Though he mainly appeared to be an exobiologist, Dr. Guernica also dabbled in various other biotech fields.

Ves saw a lot of promise in this man. As long as he could convince the doctor to study implants and human augmentation, he might be able to become proficient in implant surgery.

It was very difficult for Ves to recruit a biotech expert who specialized in implants. It was even harder to get his hands on a qualified implant surgeon. The field of augmenting human capabilities was so complex that many doctors and biologists simply weren't good enough.

Ordinarily, someone as capable as Dr. Guernica would never be available. Companies scouted talents like him in their first or second year of studies and offered them juicy preliminary employment contracts. After they graduated, they instantly disappeared from the public.

Now, all of those arrangements were moot. Entire states had fallen. Many local companies and institutions fell as well, thereby freeing up a lot of valuable experts.

"What do you think, Nitaa?" Ves asked his bodyguard.

"I have nothing to add, save that we should be thorough in testing his capabilities." The tall woman said. "It's rather odd that he's still available."

That was true. Ves was not the only employer who wanted to recruit some local refugees. Many of the most promising refugees received multiple recruitment requests.

If that ever happened, the government randomly allocated a winner who received the right to approach a specific refugee first.

The LMC already requested to recruit a couple of hundred highly-skilled refugees, but only received permission to approach a fraction of that number.

To fill up its quota, the LMC had no choice but to consider other refugees.

Soon enough, the shuttle arrived at a farming settlement situated in the middle of nowhere. As Ves exited the shuttle, he briefly glanced at the mechs of the Avatars that escorted him before studying the settlement.

"These houses actually look pretty decent." Ves remarked.

"It was much better than before." Gavin noted. "The refugees used to live in metal boxes that were barely habitable. A lot of riots and social problems followed because the living environment was really depressing."

The houses in front of them might not be as classy as the ones in Freslin, but they looked much more pleasant than the industrial housing that they expected.

The brightly-colored pastel walls and fiery red roofs gave the impression of an idyllic village. If not for the lack of history and culture on the streets, Ves might have been convinced that it was older than a couple of months.

Of course, Ves spotted plenty of incongruities that revealed the very cheap and hasty nature of the construction effort. He could immediately tell that the construction companies hired to build these pleasant houses had cut a lot of corners.

"Well, let's get inside and find our exobiologist. We should also take a look at the other hires in this settlement."

Ves, Gavin, Nitaa, Lucky took the lead. Accompanying them was a group of guards as well as some administrative personnel to vet the recruits.

Once this procession entered the settlement, they immediately attracted attention.

In fact, the refugees already gawked at their shuttles and their mechs.

Clad in basic, machine-washed clothes, their hopeless gazes gained some light as they admired and envied the well-dressed visitors.

None of the refugees approached. Public order was very strict in the settlements. After the outbreak of several riots, the government deployed a lot of humanoid patrol bots to prevent any further trouble.

Due to limited manpower, only a couple of officers and administrators ran the farming settlements from a central office building.

Ves first paid a visit there. He briefly met with the 'mayor' and discussed some of the formalities.

Once that was over, they exited the office building and headed to the outskirts of the settlement.

Numerous refugees had come out of their homes to peek at the newcomers. The contrast between their attire and demeanor was simply too vast.

As Ves carried Lucky on his shoulder, he couldn't help but notice that most of the refugees looked broken.

They had lost almost everything. Their jobs, their relatives, their confidence, their dignity and their home state were no more.

Only the kids showed some signs of life. They happily chased each other or cast their curious gazes at the tall mechs in the distance.

Their liveliness resonated with Ves. Even in the bleakest of times, life still found a way.

"We should do something to cheer these refugees up." Ves suggested. "Benny, why don't you see if we can apply to place some Desolate Soldiers at these settlements."

"There are too many refugee centers and settlements, boss. We'd have to output thousands of them just to cover all of the settlements around Freslin. All of those mechs are better put to use in other places, such as the battlefield or stabilizing the moods of productive citizens."

Ves sighed with regret. "You're right. It's too wasteful to deploy my mechs to cheer up these refugees."

They didn't really have any jobs except assist in the cultivation of fast-growing crops. Even then, the farming bots and machines did most of the work. It hardly mattered if the refugees regained some hope.

Once they passed the outermost circle of houses, a vast field of cultivated crops entered their sight. Ves knew that each of the plants weren't very palatable on their own.

Instead, they had been genetically modified to be incredibly nutritious and suitable to grow under the local circumstances of this farming settlement.

Ves knew that the harvest would be sent to an industrial food processing plant. There, the harvest would be mixed with other crops and ingredients before turning into freshly-made nutrient packs.

This was the fastest, cheapest and most efficient way to feed a large amount of population. While the Bright Republic wouldn't be running out of food anytime soon, it was best to take care of the food problem early.

As Ves approached a depot of some sort, he stumbled across a very foul air.

"Urgh!" Gavin gagged. "What is this smell?! Are the refugees treating the fields as their toilet or something?!"

The smell came from the soil and from the flying platforms in the air that dropped some very foul-looking matter onto a distant field.

Fortunately, Ves was made of sterner stuff. "Buck up, Benny. Where do you think the plants get their building blocks? They're so fast-growing that they'll quickly deplete the nutrients in the soil after a couple of harvest."

The fields on Bentheim required a lot of fertilizer to grow enough crops to feed a lot of refugees.

The bulk of the fertilizer had been shipped from Bentheim. Due to haste and necessity, the fertilizer had only undergone minimal processing, which meant that it wasn't possible to make it smell any better.

Once they reached the depot, Ves talked with the manager who led the group to what appeared to be an improved lab.

"NO NO NO!" A man with stringy brown hair and dressed in a soiled white lab coat yelled at a lab machine. "Why are my babies so inconsistent?! It must be the fertilizer! Why do those stinking farming consortiums mix up the fertilizer from so many different sources?!"

Ves instantly had a bad idea about this. Nonetheless, he needed to make sure he got the right person.

"Dr. Guernica?"

The man turned around and took in the sudden arrivals with a sharp expression.

Ves became disconcerted when he recognized the man's gaze. It was the look of someone who was fanatical about their research.

Ves had seen it before in people like Dr. Jutland and the Skull Architect.

That was not good news.

"You're the bigshot mech designer who wanted to hire me, aren't you?" The doctor probed.

"Yes." Ves stepped forward and tried his best to recover his poise. He couldn't afford to show any weakness against these types. "I'm interested in employing a smart and versatile biotech expert. You happen to catch my attention, so I decided to take a look and see if your record is accurate."

"Call me Lupo." The man said. "And yes, my record is very accurate. You can test me if you want."

"Please don't mind if we do. My subordinates will examine your knowledge and skills."

Lupo seemingly forgot about his experiment and began to grin at Ves. "Before we continue, please answer this question. Are you rich?"

Though the question came out of the blue, Ves decided to humor the man.

"I'm a Journeyman Mech Designer. My mech company sells over two-hundred thousand copies per month. I think you're smart enough to figure out the rest."

Ves could practically see the credit signs in the exobiologist's eyes.

"I have another question."

"Sure."

"Do you need a chef?"

"What?"

#### *Chapter 1595 Home Invader*

After an odd question-and-answer, Ves waved his subordinates forward in order to conduct an examination.

Though Ves was pretty convinced that Dr. Lupo was a genuine exobiologist, he still wanted to be sure.

"This guy is a real piece of work." Gavin quietly muttered. "Didn't you notice that he talked more about cooking than actual science?"

"It's actually mixed." Ves corrected. "Dr. Lupo appears to base his research on developing recipes. I'm actually intrigued with what he attempts to achieve."

"He's crazy! How can he possibly develop a recipe that can improve someone's genetic aptitude? I've never heard of such a thing!"

Ves agreed with Gavin's assessment. No one had ever succeeded in altering someone's genetic aptitude for mech piloting. If the best researchers of the MTA failed to make any breakthroughs, then how could a mere exobiologist from the galactic rim do any better?

Nonetheless, Ves did not look down on Dr. Lupo for that reason. Having an impossible ambition was very admirable in his eyes.

Just like many mech designers, Lupo wanted to change the galaxy with his dream. His was just a lot more difficult to achieve than other ambitions.

As Ves watched Lupo undergo various tests, he thought back on his meeting with Old Man Terrence.

Both of them wanted to unlock humanity's potential in similar ways. They both focused their research on finding a way to make genetic aptitude less restrictive.

Old Man Terrence wanted to make genetic aptitude irrelevant by developing a neural interface that worked with norms.

Dr. Lupo wanted to give norms the opportunity to become mech pilots by improving their genetic aptitude through a special diet.

No matter how unrealistic these dreams sounded, Ves regarded them as noble callings.

Even if it was almost certain that they would fail, there was always a chance of success. Just one ambitious dreamer had to succeed in order to make an incalculable contribution to humanity.

Enabling norms to pilot mechs would definitely transform human society by giving everyone access to mechs.

While some people might argue that allowing more people to pilot mechs was a very bad thing, Ves did not think so. As a mech designer, he welcomed any attempt at expanding the market for mechs.

The more people became capable of piloting mechs, the more mechs he'd be able to sell!

As for what all of these enthusiastic norms would do with their destructive toys, that wasn't his problem.

"It seems like Dr. Lupo is doing fairly well in the tests." Ves remarked.

From how deftly the exobiologist completed the tests and how satisfied the examiners behaved, Lupo must be a real talent for his age.

That was good. This trip wouldn't have been for nothing.

Of course, there were still some issues.



"I don't know, Ves. Dr. Lupo's attitude isn't very stable. He kind of reminds me of you sometimes."

Ves smiled sardonically. "That's not necessarily a bad thing, Benny. I think he's merely.. eccentric."

To be honest, Ves held some of the same misgivings. He could see the touch of crazy in Dr. Lupo's words and expressions. The refugee scientist was clearly passionate in his research to the point of obsessing over it night and day.

To Ves, it was akin to encountering a shadow of Dr. Jutland. The mere thought of it sent a shudder through his body.

However, as someone who was very passionate about his own work, Ves knew that these types of people were often brilliant. Perhaps they might not be able to fulfill their dreams, but they were definitely capable enough to make other great accomplishments.

Ves would not easily let such a person go.

The only issue that really worried him was loyalty. Their brief meeting did not allow Ves to get a good grip on Lupo's commitment to working for him. It sounded as if the refugee just saw Ves as a source of funding.

That could be good or bad.

If Dr. Lupo only cared about his research, then he wouldn't have any other needs other than sufficient funding.

Since Ves happened to be good at making money, he could easily keep this talented exobiologist in line.

The downside was that other people could easily poach Lupo away by offering even more money.

Other than that, there might be more to Dr. Lupo than what he appeared on the surface. Ves would not entrust his life to the man until he thoroughly vetted the exobiologist's loyalties.

For now, Ves just wanted to secure this man quickly and bring him over to the LMC before others cast their eyes to the doctor.

"What do you think, Lucky?" Ves asked the cat perched on his shoulder.

"Meow."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment or an insult?"

"Meow."

"Did Gloriana spoil you rotten with her exotics or something?"

"Meow!"

Ves regretted asking for Lucky's opinion.

Time passed by as Lupo demonstrated his breadth and depth of knowledge through various means. Two hours later, Ves received the results. He quickly perused them and nodded in satisfaction.

"While he's not capable of performing implant surgery, his foundation and intellect is quite good for an exobiologist."

Though Ves wasn't versed in the biotech sciences, he inferred that with Lupo's broad knowledge, it wouldn't be much of a stretch for him to get his foot in the door.

Unfortunately, it would probably take years of focused study before Lupo became a qualified implant surgeon. Ves couldn't wait that long.

The sooner he installed the Archimedes Rubal in his mind, the sooner he could go back to acquiring new Sub-Skills.

"Dr. Lupo isn't quite what I sought for." Ves concluded with a touch of disappointment. "He's still useful in many other ways, though. I think I can already make an early start in forming my exobeast reserve."

Since his adventure on Felixia, Ves had soured at the thought of tracking down exobeasts with spiritual potential in person.

Rather than getting involved in a life-and-death battle against a powerful exobeast, Ves would rather buy them from the market or hire others to capture them in the wild.

With an exobiologist like Lupo in charge, Ves would be assured the creatures wouldn't die before it was time for him to harvest their spiritualities.

Of course, all of this required a lot of setup. Lupo would have to hire caretakers and exobeast handlers to keep the dangerous lifeforms under control.

Once the doctor returned from the test, Ves made his offer.

"Interesting." Lupo fell into thought. "What is the purpose of this nature reserve? Why do you keep these animals around?"

"For research and inspiration." Ves blandly replied. "Due to my specialty, I can gain a lot if I observe various powerful organic lifeforms. I can gain even more inspiration if I witness their final moment. The mechs I design are partially inspired by these magnificent creatures."

"So... you don't need their meat?"

Ves blinked. "Not really.."

"Let me process their meat, then!" Lupo erupted into a grin. "I'll cook some of the greatest meals in your life if you allow me to use their meat!"

Both Ves and Gavin were taken aback at the exobiologist's fervent response.

"That.. is acceptable." Ves reluctantly answered.

They began to negotiate the terms of Lupo's employment.

Strangely enough, Lupo hardly cared about all of the clauses that Ves insisted to be put in the contract. Aside from the standard ones that relate to leaking proprietary research data and sabotaging assets, Ves also managed to squeeze in other favorable terms.

Though Ves could not prevent Lupo from quitting and leaving at any time, the exobiologist would have to pay a very heavy price if he wanted to depart before his contract was up for renewal.

Ves couldn't help but smirk when he turned around. Snatching these obsessive scientist types was trivially easy as long as he could provide them what he needed.

"I think we're done here, Benny. Let's return."

With Lupo in tow, they slowly exited the depot and exited the fields as fast as possible. As soon as they reached the houses, the odor instantly disappeared. The government installed some kind of equipment that kept the awful smells away.

"Ah, we're finally back to civilization!" Gavin breathed the filtered air in relief.

They took the same route back to the landing zone where their shuttle awaited. As they crossed the village, Ves began to frown before slowing down his pace. His entourage all slowed down as well.

"What's wrong, boss?"

"There's something odd here." He murmured before turning to Nitaa. "Have you sensed anything odd?"

Nitaa shook her head. "I'm not smelling anything notable at the moment."

Ves turned to Lucky and began to whisper some instructions to his cat.

"Meow."

The cat jumped down from his shoulder and began to sprint into a street.

The refugee kids that had been following them from a distance began to yell and chase after the fancy-looking mechanical cat!

"What's the matter?" Gavin repeated.

"Shh." Ves raised his palm. "Since we're already here, let's not leave so soon. I think I'm in the mood to pick up another recruit."

"What about Dr. Lupo?"

"Just send him and some people back to the shuttle."

As Dr. Lupo and a portion of his people returned to the shuttle, Ves and the rest remained in the village.

Ves pretended to act casual while casting his senses outwards. After catching a very subtle sensation, he smoothly turned towards the street where Lucky had run after before strolling forward.

They spent ten minutes of meandering through the streets before Lucky returned. The cat halted a few steps before Ves.

"Meow meow meow!"

"Good job. Lead the way!"

Ves and the others continued to stroll forward as Lucky padded forward with a raised tail. Though they looked incredibly silly, Ves didn't care. The more he walked, the stronger the sensation.

Eventually, they reached one of the many identical pastel houses. This one happened to be a smaller unit meant to provide space for a single occupant.

Ves carefully knocked the door.

Nobody answered.

Ves knocked the door again.

Nobody answered.

"Maybe nobody's home." Gavin suggested.

"I'm pretty certain someone is home." Ves muttered. Instead of knocking a third time, he activated his comm and sent a brief message to the mayor of the settlement.

Half a minute later, Ves received a reply.

Shortly after that, a click and a chime sounded from the front door.

Ves stepped forward and the door automatically slid open. The mayor had unlocked the door upon his request.

Before he went any further, he turned around and looked at his entourage. His guards alone amounted to a dozen men.

Entering a refugee's household with so many intimidating people wouldn't send the right idea.

"I'll only take Lucky and Nitaa inside. As for the rest of you, please wait outside."

Though Gavin looked rather cross for being excluded, Ves had no need for a Benny this time.

Once Ves, Lucky and Nitaa entered the home, the door automatically slid shut.

Soft footsteps sounded out from the stairs. A haggard-looking middle-aged woman descended from the upper floor.

Her dull eyes swept over them with hardly any emotion. "Outsiders. I did not invite you here. Leave."

Ves stepped forward. "Please hear me out, madame. Can we sit and talk?"

"No." The woman flatly replied.

Despite her objection, Ves pretended not to hear it. He picked up Lucky and calmly stepped over to the cheap set of couches in the living room.

Seeing that she could not get rid of this well-dressed intruder so easily, the resident of the home reluctantly followed suit.

As both of them sat down, Ves tried to offer a reassuring smile to the woman. "You have a good physique. I can tell you're a mech pilot."

"I'm far from my prime."

"Even so, you are still a warrior, are you not?"

The woman turned away from Ves, as if ashamed of her past.

Even though the mech pilot looked no different from any other refugee in the settlement, Ves treated her with the utmost respect.

This was because his spiritual senses detected something remarkable inside her head!

This bedraggled, defeated-looking woman turned out to be a bona-fide expert pilot!

### *Chapter 1596 Collapsed Will*

An expert pilot was one of the top mech pilots of any state.

Capable of resonating with special materials added to expert mechs, they were able to achieve reality-bending feats with the force of their will.

Each mech pilot who advanced to expert candidate, the precursor of this rank, always received favored treatment from the state.

They were both treasures and strategic weapons. States with more expert pilots than their neighbors always gained a significant advantage in any conflicts.

Regular mech pilots always worshipped strength. The presence of a friendly expert pilot fighting by their side always boosted their morale.

On the other hand, facing an enemy expert pilot in combat was deeply demoralizing.

It was nigh-impossible for normal mechs to defeat an expert pilot equipped with an expert mech that complimented their strengths.

Ves knew this very well. Not only had he heard all kinds of stories about the Larkinson expert pilots in his youth, he also had the distinct pleasure of seeing the ground forces of the Vandals and Swordmaidens wiped out by Venerable Foster.

As long as the expert pilot and expert mech were strong enough, mortals ceased to pose a threat.

He heard stories where mech armies numbering hundreds of thousands of mechs collapsed due to fielding too few expert mechs.

While most expert mechs still possessed distinct weaknesses and limitations, it was far too hard to cope with them. Faster, tougher, longer-lasting and more durable than any standard mech, they could always choose the terms of battle.

If the foes they faced threatened to overwhelm them, the expert mechs could simply choose to withdraw or engage in guerilla tactics.

Even if a single expert mech faced an entire mech regiment, as long as the latter did not field an expert mech, the mech regiment was destined to be wiped out!

It might take weeks, but as long as the expert mech retreated and resupplied without issue, the numerically-superior force could only wait for death!

Considering their immense battle prowess and inspirational value, expert pilots should never be left alone and neglected.

Since force of will was an external expression of spirituality, the MTA eventually managed to find a way to detect its presence. In fact, the MTA continually refined their sensors to the point where it could be measured along the lavere scale.

Let alone expert pilots, expert candidates should never be able to escape detection!

This also made them exceptionally poor at stealth operations. It was far too difficult for them to sneak around unless their force of will revolved around hiding their presence.

Yet the reality in front of Ves shattered his misconceptions. The Bright Republic somehow rescued a genuine expert pilot only to dump her on this random farming settlement on Cloudy Curtain as if she was a discarded good!

What the hell was wrong with his home state!? Was it too much to ask that the government scanned the refugees for the presence of force of will just like they did with scanning for weapons, diseases, injuries, health problems and so on?

Yet as Ves discreetly studied the woman sitting opposite to him with his spiritual vision, he slowly figured the reason why she escaped everyone's attention.

First, she was a fairly weak expert pilot. The refugee was weaker than any other expert pilot he had seen, including Venerable Xie.

Ordinarily, that wasn't an issue, as a newly-advanced expert pilot still lit up like a beacon in sensors designed to detect resonance.

The problem was that the woman's force of will appeared to have collapsed!

Yes, collapsed!

Every expert pilot that Ves had met possessed a strong, overarching will that they had merged with their spirituality. The blending of will and spiritual energy produced a powerful field that acted on both people and material that specifically resonated with its properties!

It was actually similar to the glow of his mechs, but with actual force.

This was the basis of an expert pilot's application of strength. The empowered auras or energy fields they radiated acted on their mechs, thereby achieving selective resonance that resulted in powerful resonance abilities.

Yet what happened if a force of will stopped radiating an energy field?

What if the will that formed the core of their spiritual strength had weakened to the point of starvation?

What if an expert pilot... lost faith?

Something like this almost never happened, but that did not mean that it was impossible.

An enormous defeat, the death of loved ones or the collapse of her home state were some of the many possible reasons for the woman's descent into despair.

Once an expert pilot fell into this pit, they ceased to be strong. With their force of will rendered inert, there was no way they could use their strength to empower their mechs!

An expert pilot without resonance was just a very skilled mech pilot. While they still retained their superhuman level of skill and insane learning ability, they were as frail as mortals.

The woman's force of will was so silent and listless that sensors couldn't detect it anymore.

If not for his exceptional perception of spirituality, he wouldn't have detected a trace of this buried treasure in this forgettable farming settlement!

Though her force of will had grown inert, she still carried the unmistakable presence of an expert pilot in his eyes. It was just that her abnormally subdued and defeated demeanor caused her to be overlooked by those who hadn't come into contact with expert pilots.

Trying his best to maintain composure, Ves carefully tried to engage the woman in conversation.



"My name is Ves Larkinson. I'm a Journeyman Mech Designer from the Bright Republic. What is your name?"

"..."

"Where do you come from?"

"..."

"How long have you been stuck in this settlement?"

"..."

"I come from a military family with a long history of service. We are famed for producing expert pilots every generation."

"..."

The woman refrained from speaking. Instead, her dull eyes bore down on him as if she was dead and nothing else mattered.

His smile grew increasingly more brittle at the lack of response.

If she was anyone else, Ves would have prodded her more directly. Yet in the face of an expert pilot, he had to tread exceptionally carefully.

Since he found a lost and unclaimed expert pilot in the wild, he was determined to have her as his own! He would not allow anyone to snatch this treasure from his nose!

The Bright Republic could never find out. Having learned his lesson with Jannzi, Ves tried to avoid giving any sign that he believed that the woman was an expert pilot.

Ves merely babbled on a bit about himself and the Larkinsons. He referenced his family expert pilots rather frequently, though that shouldn't arouse any suspicions from the monitoring system that was doubtlessly built into this house.

Seeing as the expert pilot was giving him the silent treatment, Ves paused his chat to look up her record through her comm.

[Davia Stark

Former military mech pilot.

Former mercenary mech pilot.

Citizen of a fallen state. Participated in the Sand War. Member of a mercenary corps which suffered defeat and annihilation in a battle against the sandman race.

Traumatized. Demoralized. Suffers from depression.

Deteriorating physical condition due to lack of training and nutrition. Body suffers from chronic pain as a result of lingering battle injuries.

In queue for physical treatment and therapy. Estimated wait time: 633 days.

Unresponsive to AI-driven psychiatric treatments. Unresponsive to local group counselling sessions.

In queue for in-person psychiatric treatment. Estimated wait time: 1253 days.

Declared unfit for combat.]

Davia Stark needed help. That had become clear to Ves.

Sadly, due to the immense flood of refugees, the government's resources were far too strained. Providing intensive care and treatment to refugees was a luxury the government could not afford at this stage.

Ves tried to refrain from grinning.

The Bright Republic completely neglected the opportunity to approach Davia Stark and convert her into fighting on its behalf!

How could he miss such an exceptional opportunity? He had to fill in the void right away before the government got wise!

"Madame Stark." He shifted his tone. "As a brave and heroic veteran in the ongoing Sand War, I cannot allow you to languish in this boring refugee settlement. Why not come with me and allow me to arrange treatment and rehabilitation for you? The Bright Republic needs your strength. Humanity needs your strength."

Though Davia Stark remained unmoved by his offer, he noticed a couple of minute reactions from her listless force of will.

Calling her a brave and heroic veteran evoked a negative response. Mentioning that humanity needed her evoked a positive response.

Though her fluctuations were faint, it was enough for him to get a read on her. Through the conversation, he already spent a lot of time to figure out the properties of her force of will.

Its final response was the most telling. For just a single instant, her force of will showed signs of coming alive.

Then, her despair quickly reasserted itself, crushing her hopes and dreams before they even had time to develop.

His frown grew deeper as he witnessed what had happened. He could tell it wouldn't be easy to solve this problem.

Stark's condition reminded him much of William Urbesh's cowardice.

The latter's fear of fighting actual opponents was so deeply rooted that it made him unfit for combat.

Now that Davia Stark suffered from something similar, it wouldn't be easy to restore her to her prime.

From what Ves heard about expert pilots who lost their heart, it was very hard for them to regain their strength. They needed to undergo a long period of counselling and rehabilitation.

No medicine or treatment guaranteed success. They had to rediscover their reasons to live and fight.

That might take years. The worst part about this was that success wasn't guaranteed.

Expert pilots tended to be the strongest-willed humans in the galaxy. They were very clearly a notch above in this aspect. For them to suffer such a severe setback that caused their will to collapse was often enough to drive regular mech pilots to suicide!

Did he have to resort to spiritual surgery in order to mend her crippled force of will?

Ves minutely shook his head. That was too risky. The unusual condition of William Urbesh after he underwent his treatment was enough for Ves to know that messing with people's minds and spiritualities was exceedingly dangerous.

He could not afford to ruin an expert pilot beyond redemption due to performing hasty, untested spiritual treatments.

He decided to figure out a solution later. For now, he wanted to secure this buried gem and prevent anyone else from picking up this immense bargain.

"Have you considered it, Madame Stark?"

"Get out." She whispered.

Ves shrugged and turned to Gavin.

Motioning him to step forward, he whispered some instructions in his assistant's ear.

"Go set up a charity organization in my name. Let's call it something pleasant such as the 'Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans' or something. I don't care how many bureaucrats you bribe, but get it up and running as fast as possible. Once you've set it up, announce that we will be taking ten random veterans of the Sand War among the refugee population and invest in their treatment."

"A charity? You? Have you gone insane?" Gavin puzzlingly whispered back.

"Just do what I say, Benny! Make sure that Davia Stark is among the first beneficiaries of my charity. Set aside a budget of 1 billion bright credits to show that I'm committed to this venture."

"Umm.. I don't think Davia Stark looks willing to accept your generosity."

Ves chuckled under his breath. "She doesn't have any say in the matter."

They proceeded to set up the so-called Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans within an hour. With the LMC's immense influence in Cloudy Curtain, it hardly took any effort to turn it into a real, certified charity organization.

Now that the Foundation became a recognized entity, Ves began to apply his influence to the mayor of the settlement and elsewhere.

He quickly explored the settlement and picked out nine random mech pilots that desperately needed treatment. He even gave up ten slots in his recruitment quota to gain permission to take them away.

He ordered a shuttle to pick them all up and bring them back to the Mech Nursery.

Though the veterans he selected were more than willing to receive free treatment and rehabilitation, Davia Stark was a different story.

This was where his Foundation came in. If Ves wanted to take Davia away by force, then he wouldn't be able to do so. Yet now that he founded a charity, he could easily use it as an excuse to bring this unwilling mech pilot away for the greater good!

Though everything sounded a bit dubious, the mayor of the settlement and the officials in charge of managing the refugees didn't care. They were so overworked that they could hardly spare any thought to the wishes of a single refugee!

Davia Stark had fallen into his hands!

### *Chapter 1597 Ves the Philantropis*

Naturally, Davia Stark objected to being taken away by a stranger. She wanted nothing more than to wallow in her depression in her bare and lifeless accommodation.

She even fought back when a pair of guards from the Avatars of Myth arrived to take her away!

Of course, expert pilot or not, without her mech and force of will, she was no match against armored guards. A spray of sedatives in her face was enough to knock her out.

"Take her away, boys." Ves instructed as he watched his guards put her on a floating stretcher. "Make sure not to harm her or allow her to hurt herself. Restrain her if needed. I'll take care of all the repercussions."

Though his insistence on treating an unwilling patient seemed odd, Ves didn't care.

This was an expert pilot! An undetected one, at that! No matter how far he had to go, he was determined to claim her as his own!

As for pissing her off, Ves would deal with it later. He was confident he could melt her animosity as long as he found a way to reignite her will to live.

As Ves and his entourage boarded their own shuttle and left the farming settlement, they spent some time in fleshing out the charity.

"What's so special about that refugee?" Gavin couldn't help but ask. "You clearly set up this charity solely because you wanted to recruit her. What makes her worth all of this effort?"

Ves smirked at him. "As a Larkinson and a mech designer, I have a good eye for mech pilots. While she's far from her prime, I can already tell that she can be an asset to me. She's very special, so I want my charity to give her the highest care that we can provide in-house."

"You're not planning to send her to a medical center?"

"I'm not letting her go!" He stated. "Make sure to beef up our treatment capabilities. If the medical facilities of the LMC, the Living Sentinels or Avatars of Myth aren't enough, then we'll set up a separate facility. Please expand the charity and make sure that it has a fully-qualified staff and all the necessary equipment to treat wounded veterans."

The Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans had been set up so hastily that it didn't even have a director or a single employee to its name! It was literally an empty shell that existed only in the databases!

During the flight back to the Mech Nursery, Ves and Gavin called numerous people to turn the foundation real.

From contracting a construction company to erect a headquarters in a matter of days to hiring dozens of doctors, nurses and administrators, Ves and subordinates worked frantically to turn the Foundation real!

Even without asking assistance from the Tovars, his existing influence was already strong enough to smooth over any bureaucratic hurdles that could delay the operation of his charity organization.

Within a day, Ves easily managed to obtain the countless permits, medical licenses and certifications required to run a legal charity in the Bright Republic.

Certainly, no one thought much about the Foundation. Everyone else thought that Ves was merely engaging in an act of noblesse oblige to enhance his reputation.

Being known as a philanthropist was a good way to sanitize one's standing in the public. Even the biggest scumbags in the galaxy could turn into generous do-gooder after a decade of investing in good works.

It didn't even matter if the money spent on redeeming their reputation was earned through death and fire!

So long as the crime happened earlier than the act of generosity, then the notoriously forgetful public would inevitably forget about the former!

Ves knew that a lot of members of society engaged in charity for that reason. Though running a charity was a significant burden, nobody begrudged the money spent on this venture.

Philanthropy was one of the few ways where wealthy people could directly convert money into reputation!

They didn't need to spend any further thought on their charity. As long as they put the right people in charge, the charity practically ran itself!

Of course, a charity could also explode in their owner's faces if they put the wrong people in charge. Stories of mismanagement, embezzlement and abuse ran rife in the news.

To prevent his Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans from erupting into scandal, Ves needed the right director to take the helm.

"Since your charity is centered around healing veterans, why not put a Larkinson in charge?" Gavin suggested.

Ves already considered this suggestion for a while. "I'm not sure. It's a good idea on the surface, but the best ones to put in charge are the older veterans in my family. I don't want to appoint a director I can't control."

He wanted someone principled enough to run the Foundation well. He wanted someone flexible enough to keep Davia Stark in their care despite her vehement objections.

Keeping an expert pilot captive against her will was very problematic, after all. Fortunately, her force of will had practically become braindead, so the sensors built to detect resonance strength wouldn't sense anything remarkable.

Even so, if not for his supposedly benign intentions, he would never get away with treating someone against his will.

As Ves considered various names, he realized that he didn't really have a close ally and confidant within the family.

Though he was close to cousins such as Melkor and Melkor, all of them possessed their own principles. They wouldn't compromise their beliefs of what was right in order to help Ves perpetrate something iffy.

Ves rubbed his head in thought. It was impossible to get what he wanted. The best he could do was to select a sycophant and impose strict restrictions on where the Foundation's money should be spent.

"I'll find someone when I get back to the Cloud Estate." He muttered. "There are so many retired Larkinsons hanging around in my home that one of them is bound to be interested in running a foundation."

For now, Ves had no worries about Davia Stark running off due to the necessity of treating her lingering battle injuries. Though they weren't life-threatening, they still caused significant pain.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Stark remained so locked in despair was because her injuries continually tortured her without reprieve.

In order to liberate the woman from her pain, the doctors employed by the Avatars of Myth chose to put her to sleep. This bought Ves some time to strengthen his excuses for keeping Stark under his care.

Unfortunately, he had so much to do that he could hardly spend enough time to fulfill all of his responsibilities.

Between leading the LMC, working on the remaining two variants of the Desolate Soldier, preparing for his next design project, making arrangements for Dr. Lupo, setting up the Foundation in absence of a director, Ves was desperately short on time!

He even stopped sleeping entirely in order to keep up with his work!

After another sleepless night, Ves wearily dragged his body to the dining room at his mansion at the Cloud Estate.

"You're running yourself ragged, Ves." Gloriana remarked with concern. "You have subordinates for a reason, you know. Why don't you delegate your responsibilities to others?"

Ves waved aside her concerns. "It's okay. It'll be better soon. Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson will soon arrive and be able to take the reins of the LMC. I've already interviewed enough retired Larkinsons at the Cloud Estate to make my final selection on the choice of director for my charity. The Militant Soldier is soon ready to enter the prototype phase."

"You should still take a break, though! I haven't seen anyone who works as hard as you! Even I never skip my beauty sleep!"

As the two lovers argued about his sleeping habits, their first breakfast dishes arrived.

While Ves stoically began to shovel what appeared to be a bowl of oatmeal into his mouth, Gloriana froze in shock.

"Wait a minute.. this is not supposed to be on the menu."

Confusion radiated from Gloriana as she inspected the strange bowl of oatmeal. It looked so abnormal that she instantly suspected that something had gone amiss.

She placed a hand on Ves, stopping him from eating his meal.

"Did you replace the chefs I brought here?"

Ves looked puzzled. "Uh, no."

She slammed her palm next to her bowl of oatmeal. "THEN HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THIS TRAVESTY?!"

"This isn't made by your chefs?"

"No!" Gloriana shrieked and pointed at their bowls. "Just look at these bowls! Where are my six-sided bowls?! And oatmeal?! I've never added this plebeian course to our breakfast menu!"

Ves frowned and looked at his half-empty bowl. "I can't say much about the taste, but it's very filling. It kind of reminds me of a nutrient pack."



"URGHH!" Gloriana practically tore her hair in frustration. "Guards! Inspect the kitchen and bring the chef before me! I want to see who has the temerity to ruin my perfect breakfast!"

Moments later, the guards of the Glory Batallion dragged a familiar-looking man in the dining room.

Dressed in a lab coat but wearing a chef's hat, Dr. Lupo looked completely fearless as he was being held by the arms by a couple of well-armed guards.

"You! Who are you?! Why are you in my kitchen?!"

The exobiologist smiled. "Why, I'm Mr. Larkinson's new chef! It was my turn to cook breakfast for the two of you today!"

Ves scratched his head. "I don't recall assigning you as my personal chef."

"Oh? But that's not what my contract says! You even confirmed my assignment as your chef just yesterday! Don't you recall the document you signed?"

"If I recall, I signed a paper related to your new lab." Ves frowned.

"I slipped in something extra."

"Oh."

Due to his immensely-packed schedule, Ves didn't have the time to read every document. He merely skimmed them before putting his virtual signature on them in order to move on quickly.

His negligence caused Gloriana to become upset. She glared at both him and Dr. Lupo.

"Kick him out! I don't want to see this clown again!"

"Wait, wait!" Lupo shouted. "You're making a big mistake here! I'm not just a chef! I'm an expert in nutrition! Mr. Larkinson, how did you enjoy your first course? I made sure to import the most nutritious ingredients, especially for my new boss here! Are you feeling better now, Mr. Larkinson? That is a sign that the enriched ingredients are already working to reduce your fatigue!"

"Hold on for a moment!" Ves raised his palm. "Don't bring him away just yet. He's my employee, not yours, Gloriana!"

Even if the Glory Battalion guards dragged him away, Ves could just bring him back. There was no point taking Dr. Lupo away for that reason.

Though Gloriana was not amused, she reluctantly relented.

"Halt. Let's hear what he has to say."

When the guards released the man, Dr. Lupo bowed in gratitude. "Thank you. It was difficult to persuade your chefs to stand aside. I had to wave the agreement that Mr. Larkinson signed in their faces in order to gain access to the kitchen. I mean no offense, Miss Wodin."

"Give me one reason to refrain from convincing my boyfriend from kicking you out." Gloriana crossed her arms.

"Just look at Mr. Larkinson right now!"

When Gloriana turned to Ves, he had already slurped the final spoonful of oatmeal.

"Uhh... I couldn't resist." Ves lamely explained himself.

"Do you see how much he enjoys my craft?" Lupo grinned. "My dishes are products of science! I didn't just feed him with high-quality ingredients! As a specialist in nutrition, I treated each and every ingredient according to his unique physical and genetic conditions! Your meals are completely suited to pepper you up and bolster your health! Just sample my oatmeal if you want proof. Don't worry, they're completely safe!"

"You should really have a taste." Ves urged his girlfriend. "It's really delicious."

She didn't immediately sample her oatmeal. Instead, she whipped out her multiscanner and made sure that it didn't contain any toxins or other dangerous substances. Only then did she lift a spoon to her lips.

The moment she tasted Lupo's oatmeal, her eyes widened in delight!

### *Chapter 1598 Sixth Offspring*

Gloriana's personal chefs were highly-trained and acclaimed in their craft. Their ability to manipulate ingredients and develop tasteful and sophisticated dishes was unsurpassed on Cloudy Curtain.

Dr. Lupo, the new chef and exobiologist that Ves recently recruited from a refugee settlement, possessed different strengths.

While he was not as adept in the culinary arts as as an elite second-class chef, he was a very capable exobiologist!

As a fully-fledged biotech expert who specialized in nutrition, he created and modified his own ingredients. This gave him an unsurpassed ability to cook meals that were extremely delicious, nutritious and fulfilling!

Perhaps his biggest value was that he could study a person's precise physical and genetic condition and use the results to tailor the ingredients for maximum benefit!

This was such a new concept to Ves that he quickly became intrigued.

According to Dr. Lupo's boasts, his food was so beneficial that they could strengthen someone's health, appearance and longevity over the long-term!

However, something like this sounded too good to be true. Ves soon became skeptical at Lupo's outlandish claims.

"How much does your food actually affect our health? How many years longer will I live if I keep you on as our chef?"

Lupo smiled sheepishly. "I'm still in the early stages of my research. For now, I've only started with studying ingredients that are already known to be nutritious and applied my own tricks to them. It will take some time and a lot of funding for my original research to bear fruit."

"In other words, you're far from a senior in this field, is that right?"

"I'll become an authority in the field of nutritious solutions sooner or later! Believe in me, Mr. Larkinson!"

Ves shrugged and turned to Gloriana. "What do you think? As long as Lupo doesn't poison us, I'm inclined to give him a chance."

While she looked troubled, she was sober enough to recognize Dr. Lupo's value.

After a moment, she came to a decision. "I'll allow him to work in the kitchen as long as he's limited to ingredient preparation. I want my chefs to do the actual cooking."

That sounded fine to Ves. He even added another suggestion.

"I'll also assign some guards to pay extra attention in inspecting the meals."

The guards from the Avatars and Glory Battalion already subjected all the meals reserves for Ves and Gloriana to rigorous scans.

To Ves, such a precaution was hardly necessary. His metabolism was so abnormal that he could easily digest most types of exobeast flesh without any problem!

Unfortunately, Gloriana was not as robust. Though her extensive genetic modifications and other augmentations made her much less susceptible to poisons and other toxic substances, she was much closer to a baseline human than her boyfriend.

If someone as smart as Dr. Lupo really wanted to kill Gloriana by poisoning, then he just had to develop an ingredient that was deathly without tripping any alarms.

This was why Ves posed an additional demand to Dr. Lupo.

"Don't use any customized ingredients without verifying their safety and effectiveness in lab conditions." He ordered. "I'll make sure my guards are capable of distinguishing between authorized and unauthorized ingredients."

"What?! That will take weeks, if not months!"

"SHUT UP! You'll accept this term, or you can kiss your generous budget goodbye!"

Dr. Lupo had no choice but to acquiesce.

Though he didn't know Dr. Lupo for long, Ves already figured the man out. He was just like any other obsessive researcher. As long as he enjoyed enough time, funds and facilities to pursue his research, he would agree to anything.

The extensive background check that Crindon performed on Lupo did not identify anything worrisome about his loyalties. His previous school and employer were normal companies that no longer existed once the sandmen overran their facilities.

Lupo also didn't appear to share any relations to fringe groups such as the Five Scrolls Compact.

While Lupo's obsessive tendencies strayed fairly close to uncomfortable territory, he was not as extreme as Dr. Jutland.

Since Ves required the services of a high-caliber exobiologist, he was inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. He just had to make sure to curb Lupo's enthusiasm with sufficient checks and balances.

Once this morning incident ended, they commuted to the Mech Nursery.

There, Ves and Gloriana first paid a visit to the Avatar's recently-upgraded medical facility.

Ves paid careful attention to Davia Stark's ongoing physical treatments.

"We have made fair progress in treating our patient's injuries." A doctor reported to Ves. "She should be ready to wake up within two to three weeks, depending on any complications or adverse reactions that might arise."

"Take your time and be thorough. Madame Stark is one of the first beneficiaries of my charity. I don't want any of the veterans I've selected to die under our care. Is that understood?"

The doctor gulped. "We shall do our best, sir."

As the doctor moved away to supervise Stark's ongoing treatment, Gloriana turned to Ves in confusion.

"I didn't object to your decision to start a charity. I think it will do good in increasing your reputation, which will only make you more pleasing in the eyes of my dynasty. I'm just unsure why you've diverted some of your precious time to check up on this refugee's condition."

"Davia Stark is not just a pity case, Gloriana. She's a future asset. Don't you see?"

Gloriana peered through the transparent wall and studied Stark's unconscious body for a few seconds.

"She must have been a decent mech pilot in her prime, but she hardly appears to be exceptional now. Her injuries and lack of physical conditioning has deteriorated her body so much that she's not fit to pilot mechs. While I can't judge her skill and mental state, they are bound to have degraded as well."

While this wasn't a strict rule, a mech pilot's health was roughly correlated to their piloting ability.

A mech pilot with a healthy body could bear a lot more strain. A fit and healthy body not only enhanced a mech pilot's fluency in combat, but also allowed them to maintain their peak condition longer.

As mech designers, both of them already knew this. In fact, both of them were also much more capable of assessing mech pilots than other mech designers.

Ves grew up in a military family with lots of mech pilots. Gloriana systematically studied the mental and physical properties of mech pilots in order to advance her design philosophy.

Yet even after several minutes of studying Davia Stark's medical data, Gloriana soundly dismissed the refugee as an ordinary wounded mech pilot!

"I don't see what you like about this mech pilot." She frowned. "Some of the other veterans you've rescued from the refugee settlements are much more promising. They only require a month of rehabilitation before they're ready to join your Avatars or Sentinels."

Ves cared nothing about the nine other wounded veterans he wasted his valuable recruitment quota on. Their only purpose was to give his charity something to do and obscure his reason for forcibly taking Davia Stark away.

"There is more to Davia than you realize. Perhaps you should study her more carefully."

Gloriana shook her head. "You have some odd hobbies, Ves. You're not the only one who is busy. I don't have time to waste on this pet project of yours."

Inwardly, Ves sighed. Gloriana's inability to discern Stark's true potential was a very hopeful sign that he could keep this treasure in his possession.

Crippled or not, a real expert pilot was simply too valuable. Even if Stark opened her mouth and claimed that she was an expert pilot, with her inert force of will, not a single resonance detector would be able to prove her claims!

Ves had already checked. She was so incapable of exciting her force of will that she was even weaker than an expert candidate!

This meant that in everyone else's eyes, she was no different from a mortal!

Though expert pilots were often seen as superhuman demigods, their physical bodies were no different from regular humans.

Most of the time, a state invested in an expert pilot by paying for a significant amount of expensive genetic treatments and augmentations.

However, Stark appeared to be a clear outlier as she seemed to be a pure baseline human.

That puzzled Ves a bit. How could any state, even an impoverished border state, neglect their expert pilots?

Had this woman somehow advanced to expert pilot under the noses of everyone?

Whatever the case, Ves was determined to solve this puzzle sooner or later.

As the pair left the Avatar base, Ves asked a question to his girlfriend.

"Have you ever worked on an expert mech?"

"Not really." She shook her head.

"What does that mean?"

"While I haven't had the privilege of contributing to the design of an expert mech, I did enjoy an opportunity to assist in the design of one." She explained. "I mostly helped with testing, verification and number-crunching. It was an amazing experience. If the intended end user of the expert mech wasn't my older brother, the lead designers would have never allowed me to participate in this project!"

"Ah, I recall that your older brother is an expert pilot."

"Yup. Brutus has always been the closest brother to me. I love him very much. It's too bad he's not happy about being born as a boy. He's always been obsessed about proving himself. That's probably why he managed to break through to expert pilot."

Just like any other proper Hexer, Constance Wodin had six children.

Gloriana was the youngest and the apple of her mother's eye. As a woman and the sixth child, she enjoyed a level of pampering incomparable to her other siblings aside from the firstborn.

What Ves found very remarkable about her branch of the Wodin Dynasty was that Constance managed to raise both an expert pilot and a Journeyman Mech Designer!

Although the expert pilot was a man who was a few years older than Gloriana, it was still an impressive feat that provided Constance with a lot of acclaim!

Hexer society regarded her as a model mother! Every child of hers went on to become exceptional in their chosen vocations!

"What makes an expert mech an expert mech?" Ves asked. "Besides the obvious, that is."

Gloriana wistfully sighed. "Expert mechs are very fascinating to me. You could say that my specialty is already geared towards designing expert mechs. It's impossible for expert pilots to leverage their abilities with a standard mech. Even if they're put in the cockpit of an expert mech tailored to someone else, they're only able to display a fraction of their potential."

"Expert mechs are custom mechs by definition."

"Exactly." She nodded. "It's a shame that low-ranking mech pilots aren't as valued. It's always been my dream to give every low-ranking mech pilot the opportunity to buy a mech tailored to their piloting ability."

"There are way too many mech pilots to service them all, Gloriana. At most, you could develop a base model with a lot of adaptability. You could then develop a very advanced software suite that would accept all kinds of input about the mech pilot and let it churn a modified mech design that somewhat fits the customer better."

She smiled ruefully at him. "I've already thought about that. It's a potential solution, but way more complex than you think. A software suite can't possibly be as good as me in customizing a mech. Even if I somehow develop one that is, I'm not sure that it's wise for me to release it. Won't I be making myself obsolete if I do?"

"I think there's much more to mech design than that. You'll doubtlessly be able to explore a way to distinguish your mech designs outside what an automated design suite can do."

As someone who already handled a Terran auto designer, Ves knew what he was talking about. No matter how good these nifty software could get, they could never completely make a human mech designer redundant!

#### *Chapter 1599 The Sanctity of Duty*

While Ves worked himself to the bone at Cloudy Curtain, elsewhere the Bright Republic began to enter the direst period of its existence.

The full might of the sandman race began to push against the defenses of the Bright Republic!

Sandman fleets began to batter the star systems at the Bright Republic's border with the former Coman Federation at a frightening frequency!

Even if the star system was only home to a couple of million people, the Mech Corps and the various auxiliary forces tried their best to hold the line!

As long as the systems at the border held, the more populated and strategic systems came under much less threat!

Intermediate star systems with populations in the billions simply couldn't be evacuated in a matter of months.

In addition, allocating valuable ships to evacuation would not only waste valuable shipping capacity that could be used to supply the frontlines, but also render a very valuable star system useless!

For these reasons, the state had long ago decided to commit minimal resources towards evacuation. The only time when it would do so was if the situation had become unsalvageable!



The only case where evacuation was warranted was emptying out the rural star systems at the border.

With populations ranging in the hundreds of thousands to a few million people, it didn't take too much effort to lift them elsewhere. The state contracted many transportation companies to evacuate as many people from the border systems as possible.

As for the more populated star systems where over a hundred million people resided, the Bright Republic did not consider the tradeoff to be worth it. While it was possible to empty them out entirely, it would take at least a few months to accomplish such a major operation.

It cost too much to pull these people out. Instead, the war planners decided to double down on these vulnerable star systems by fortifying them to an insane level.

A considerable amount of defensive platforms surrounded the populated planets. Every major city on the surface had undergone significant transformations to make them more 'sandproof'.

Even if the sandmen managed to make landfall, they could still be beaten off by landbound mechs supported by a considerable amount of turrets and defensive emplacements.

Due to the importance of the border systems, the Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps stationed entire mech regiments and starfighter regiments at these places.

With thousands of mechs and thousands more starfighters ready to defend the Republic at its doorstep, the sandman fleets failed to break through!

Nonetheless, the defenders didn't grow complacent. The frequency of intrusion increased to the point where multiples of sandman fleets arrived at the fortified border systems every day!

The battles began to grow heated. Enormous laser strikes and multitudes of ballistic shells slammed against mechs and sandman vessels alike!

To the sandmen, a scary amount of sandman vessels perished every day, yet more arrived to keep up the pressure!

To the Brighters, attrition had begun to take its toll. Each battle, a handful of mechs and starfighter never returned.

At most, the salvaging parties managed to collect the scraps that had flung away once a powerful laser beam punched through a fighting machine.

Perhaps the only consolation was that the constant reinforcement of starfighters at the front alleviated the pressure on mechs.

With the cheap and flimsy starfighters acting as cannon fodder, the valuable mechs which still served as the mainstay of the Bright Republic's military lasted longer.

Though it seemed grossly unjust to sacrifice a multitude of starfighter pilots to preserve the life of a mech pilot, the Bright Republic had no choice.

Against a basic sandman fleet, the performance of a starfighter did not deviate too much from the performance of a mech.

For example, at one star system, several mech companies joined forces with an entire starfighter regiment.

The force adopted a grand formation of 400 mechs surrounded by 2,000 starfighters!

Facing a combined fleet of six sandman motherships and thirty-six sandman escorts, the mechs and starfighters pounded the motherships one at a time!

The fact that the sandman admirals began to join forces instead of ignoring each other was another detrimental evolution!

Even though the states that had fought against the sandmen before had significantly reduced their numbers, the surviving sandman admirals constantly grew wiser and more adept at warfare!

When several of them moved as one, defeating them was not so simple anymore!

"Fire!"

Thousands of shells and kinetic projectiles slammed against a single mothership! The sandman vessel shuddered as significant chunks of sand and exotic materials flew out in different directions!

A gaping hole had formed which the sandman mothership frantically tried to heal!

"Fire!"

Yet before the gap could be closed, thousands of rounds landed in the same hole, deepening the cavity and inflicting much more damage to the amalgamation!

Though the sandman motherships and sandman vessels struck out their lasers with fury, only a handful of starfighters and two unlucky mechs got hit!

"Fire!"

The valiant defenders quickly battered sandman mothership into pieces, giving no time for the sandman admiral to evacuate!

Dead!

A victorious roar rang out in the communication channels of the starfighter and mech units. The fall of a sandman admiral meant that its six escorts quickly lost control!

Without high-level direction, the escort vessels drifted away from the combined sandman fleet as they chaotically pursued different directions.

If the remaining sandman admirals gained some time, then they would have been able to convert these orphaned sandmen.

Yet that took time!

The defenders weren't stupid enough to give the surviving sandman admirals the time to beef up their numbers.

"Attack! One down, five to go!"

"For the Bright Republic!"

"We are the light in the dark!"

The sight of so many mechs and starfighters resisting the combined sandman fleet appeared incredibly valiant to the scouting ships assigned to record the battle in extensive detail.

The visual particle generators that the Bright Republic's forces adopted caused the performance of the machines to appear much more stunning!

"Wherever the Stripes of Humanity flies, the flame of civilization will never be extinguished!"

The thousands of starfighters and mechs flying backwards as they fired their weapons at the advancing sandmen each released an iconic trail.

Combined in an immense mass, the stripes combined in an enormous, semi-coordinated pattern that was shaped in the form of a torch!

The symbol of the Bright Republic lit up the surrounding space! With the base of the torch depicted in white and the oversized flame depicted vividly like actual fire, this humongous lifelike torch inspired every citizen that was watching the battle on the surface of the fortified planet!

"As long as as one hand remains to lift up this torch, the Bright Republic will never falter!"

Hope sprung from this majestic sight! Almost no panic had spread on the surface of the planet since the Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps began to play around with the Stripes of Humanity.

Even though the vapor trails served no actual purpose in battle, when used creatively, they served as excellent means to keep hope alive!

"The Volari Starhawks have promised to protect the lives of every civilian! Not a single innocent must come to harm! This is our promise!"

The 1st Volari Starhawks of the 4th Bentheim Division put up a valiant defense. After the fall of the first sandman mothership, the second one fell at the cost of sacrificing a bunch more starfighters and mechs.

The immediate reduction in effective sandman forces caused the pressure on the human forces to decrease.

With the disparity in numbers widening, the outcome of the battle had already been set! All four remaining sandman admirals perished one after the other, and their orphaned escort vessels easily succumbed against the organized human starfighters which impeccably whittled them down at their leisure!

Standing by in the cockpit of his recently-developed expert mech, Captain Ghanso Larkinson witnessed the end of the battle with a touch of relief.

His Glittering Comet expert mech remained in the hangar bay of the fleet carrier throughout the battle.

His intervention wasn't needed this time.

An unsettling emotion soon affected his mood as he looked at the Stripes of Humanity.

Since when did the military turn into a giant circus troupe?

He knew the origin of the Stripes of Humanity which inspired every human in the states swept up in the Sand War.

His cousin's gimmick looked so mesmerizing in the battlefield that every participant in the Sand War quickly adopted the cheap module that generated the Stripes of Humanity!

Many Larkinsons took pride in this accomplishment. Ves Larkinson managed to influence the direction of the Sand War with a single invention!

Along with the sudden proliferation of the Desolate Soldiers, the reputation of the Larkinson Family had skyrocketed to the forefront of everyone's minds!

The amount of attention that the only successful mech designer of the Larkinson Family sucked up was so immense that every other notable Larkinson had become side characters all of a sudden.

Ghanso Larkinson did not mind the lack of focus on him. He was an expert pilot, and his will was incredibly firm. He did not chase after fame, glory, honor or reputation.

He merely wished to do his duty and protect the Bright Republic. He wanted to continue the legacy of his predecessors and stay true to the name of the Larkinsons.

Yet thinking about duty quickly caused his face to sour once he thought about those newfangled Desolate Soldiers that were taking the state by storm.

More and more private sector outfits began to field these middling mechs.

Ghanso saw nothing special about them. They were cheap, flimsy machines that performed no better than any other comparable mech in the market.

Their only merit was their so-called 'glow'.

Having approached a couple of Desolate Soldiers during shore leave, Ghanso's feelings on this popular new mech model had grown more complicated.

"What is up with those weird mechs?"

Though he heard some conspiracy theories about the new mechs, Ghanso personally didn't buy them. He believed in the MTA. Since the powerful association allowed the Desolate Soldiers to be sold on the open market, the mechs were obviously not as harmful as everyone feared.

The actual reason why Ghanso did not welcome their introduction in the market was because of how easy it was for their glows to inspire duty.

"Duty must come from the heart." Ghanso stated his beliefs. "When duty can only be compelled through the use of a tool, can it still be regarded as duty?"

In his own perspective, the so-called glow that inspired duty was nothing more than an abomination which turned the people affected by them into sheep.

Their mech pilots most of all became a lot more obedient to their superiors, to the point where they didn't object to being treated as cannon fodder. They also behaved disturbingly orderly, as if they were nothing but virtual intelligences that followed their instructions to the letter.

"Are they still even humans?" Ghanso muttered in vexation.

The proliferation of Desolate Soldiers cheapened the sanctity of duty. By making it so easy to induce, true soldiers and warriors got mixed up with amateurs who only persisted in battle with the help of artificial courage.

Everything was starting to become more and more fake, and it was all the fault of Ves Larkinson.

Even if Ghanso had no intention of piloting his cousin's mechs, he simply couldn't escape the richest Larkinson's influence!

Yesterday it was the Desolate Soldiers. Today it was the Stripes of Humanity. What would his greedy and power-hungry cousin push into his face tomorrow?

Through his connections with the higher ups, Ghanso already got wind that his cousin would soon release a military variant of his Desolate Soldier design!

Once that happened, the Volari Starhawks might very well field a number of those mechs, even though the Starhawks absolutely didn't need any additional encouragement!

Just the thought of it increased Ghanso's frustration!

"If not for this stupid crisis, I could have forced the steering committee to make a choice by now! It's not enough for Ves to corrupt the Larkinson Family!"

How long would it take for the Larkinsons to become known for their mech designers rather than mech pilots?

"Our heritage and traditions must be preserved, one way or another!"

#### *Chapter 1600 Natural Counter*

Not a single Larkinson remained unaffected by Ves Larkinson's meteoric rise to prominence.

Now that he designed an incredibly popular mech and earned an immense amount of money, the Larkinson Family no longer resembled the Larkinson Family of the past.

While the changes provoked a lot of discussion among the Larkinsons, the sandman crisis occupied most of their time.

Whatever Ghanso and his faction of like-minded Larkinsons thought, defending the Bright Republic came first.

Many other fortified star systems came under threat. While the sandmen dispersed their forces along the entire length of the border, their numbers seemed inexhaustible.

If not for the first and second line of defense slowing down the sandman offensive, the Bright Republic wouldn't have been able to bolster the defenses of the border system.

Along with the plentiful amount of orbital defensive platforms, the gradual reinforcement of starfighters granted the overextended Mech Corps a great amount of relief.

Casualties among mech pilots had plummeted! Even though their lives had only been preserved at the cost of the lives of hastily-trained starfighter pilots, the Bright Republic didn't care.

The state could draw from an immense pool of manpower to replace the lost starfighter pilots!

By simplifying the designs of their starfighters and automating many complicated functions, even an office worker could be turned into a suitable starfighter pilot!

Though their training standard was barely better than a kid who casually played an immersive starfighter game, that was enough to resist basic sandman fleets.

Yet.. what if the sandman fleets adopted a different configuration? What if the sandman admirals that followed their directive to sweep through human space became more inventive?

In one star system defended by the Apocalypse Heralds, a humongous sandman monolith advanced indominably towards a planet populated by billions!

With so many lives at stake, the Apocalypse Heralds were just one of many forces assigned to defend this critical border system.

Yet the immense firepower unleashed by their numerous medium to heavy artillery mechs caused them to take on the leading role in this battle!

"Unleash the apocalypse on the sandmen! Let them know that their extinction is at hand!"

The Apocalypse Heralds modified their powerful heavy mechs to better cope against the aliens. All of their laser weapon mounts had been removed and replaced by kinetic or ballistic weaponry.

Though it was very cumbersome to modify so many heavy mechs, the Apocalypse Heralds employed sufficient mech technicians to transform all of their mechs in time to defend against the main waves of sandman intruders!

With the help of their immense ammunition capacity, their ranged mechs had become the worst nightmares of many of the sandman fleet that intruded in this star system!

"We are the bane of the sandmen! We are the doom of every alien!"

Ever since a detachment of Apocalypse Heralds arrived at this border system, the sandmen never managed to cross into the inner system. The heavy mechs unleashed such prodigious firepower that not even the biggest sandman mothership could last against weapons powerful enough to annihilate entire asteroids!

Unfortunately, this time was different. The latest sandman fleet to barge into this border system adopted a very different configuration.

Not only did the fleet combine the strengths of at least nine sandman admirals, they all adopted a different configuration.

"The sandmen have adopted a swarm configuration!"

"Damnit! There's too many of them! My sensors can't even track how many of them are buzzing around!"

An immense swarm of small, shuttle-sized sandman drones advanced relentlessly towards the inner system. The first defenders already tangled against the swarm, but aside from swatting a large number of inconsequential sandman drones, they failed to affect the overall strength of the swarm.

Only until the defenders consolidated their forces did their attacks begin to hurt the sandman swarm.

Yet their preliminary success did not cheer up the mech and starfighter pilots.

Instead, a feeling of creeping doom built up in their hearts as they waited for the inevitable.

This was not the first time humanity encountered the swarm configuration.

Different from basic sandman fleets, the swarm accelerated much faster than normal.

One of the lessons that sandman admirals learned when fighting against human forces was that speed mattered! The faster they moved, the easier it was for them to engulf the mechs, starfighters and carriers that hindered their invasion.

Another lesson they learned was that this was no time to conserve their energy!

As a race that depended highly on energy, inexperienced sandman admirals tended to be very conservative in their energy expenditure.



Even as their sandman motherships fell apart, they were highly unwilling to waste more than fifty percent of their energy reserves.

The story was different once they faced how difficult it was to defeat their human opponents on the battlefield.

If the sandmen didn't put in their full effort, then they could forget about winning the battle!

The sandman swarm the Apocalypse Heralds and their allies faced today held nothing back.

Even if the swarm depleted 90 percent of its energy reserves, it could easily recoup its losses by devouring the rich energy sources of the highly-developed planet orbiting the inner system!

"Wait for it! Get ready, men! The real fight starts at any moment!"

After an agonizing wait, the sandman admirals finally issued their latest command!

The entire swarm unleashed a swathe of weak but incredibly numerous laser beams!

Thousands of mechs and starfighters had been struck by these lasers!

Fortunately, the power behind these laser beams were very weak compared to the massive strikes that could easily take out an entire mech.

The sandman drones couldn't fire anything stronger. It was already admirable enough for them to match the power of a light laser rifle.

The problem was that their firing rate was very prodigious!

Every dozen or so seconds, the drones unleashed another salvo of laser beams, striking thousands of machines yet again!

With their machine-like accuracy, only a portion of their laser beams missed!

"We're taking too much damage!"

"Fire at will! Whittle down the swarm as much as possible! The more drones we knock out, the more mechs and starfighters we'll save!"

Facing a sandman fleet in a swarm configuration was one of the worst nightmares of the soldiers and warriors at the frontlines.

Their increased mobility not only allowed them to close the distance faster, but also made them very hard to hit with projectile weapons.

Even though the drones were so fragile that one or two knocks could take it out, they were so darned agile that even light mechs had to admit defeat!

Not only that, but their incredibly loose formation meant that the powerful cannons of the Apocalypse Heralds wasted the bulk of their firepower.

Against a larger sandman vessel, their heavy mechs could easily damage ten or twenty drones worth of sandmen!

Yet because the sandman admirals dispersed their strength into tiny, disposable drones, each and every round wasted the bulk of their damage potential!

Due to all of these reasons, the swarm configuration was actually superior in firepower, mobility and defense! Against a large but cumbersome unit like the Apocalypse Heralds, its effectiveness skyrocketed!

Unlike the Stripes of Humanity that gave the civilians hope, the swarm configuration's shower of laser beams impacted the defending forces like a rain of death!

The worst-off in this engagement were the starfighters!

Small, cheap and fragile, the starfighters lacked the mobility to confuse the sandman's targeting methods and the resilience to withstand too many attacks.

Even though the sandman drones only fired very weak lasers, their volume and firing rate was incredibly powerful!

Casualties mounted rapidly as the starfighter regiments faced their natural counter!

Even though the mechs and starfighters hit back hard, too many lives and machines were being lost!

The Starfighter Corps reaped what it sowed. By pursuing a strategy of fielding as much cannon fodder as possible, their pronounced weaknesses exacted an incredibly painful toll in this battle.

Hundreds of starfighters succumbed after absorbing five or more hits!

In fact, some starfighters even collapsed entirely if the sandman drones just happened to penetrate their poorly-armored cockpits!

With the rapid rise in losses, the formation of defenders began to destabilize. The poorly-trained starfighter pilots especially broke down first!

They were too green and barely better than a civilian! Against an ordinary sandman fleet where victory was almost assured, they easily remained confident even if a number of unlucky starfighter pilots got shot down.

Yet now that a sea of laser beams pelted their fragile starfighters at a very worrisome frequency, their morale quickly dropped to rock bottom!

Already, more than fifty starfighter pilots lost their nerves and turned around to flee the battlesite, leaving their comrades in the dust!

Even though they couldn't flee very far due to their limited reserves and lack of FTL capability, humans who broke down a battle didn't pay attention to logic anymore.

They only obeyed their primal instinct to flee!

With the sudden and chaotic departure of so many starfighters, the formations they left began to destabilize even further!

"This is bad! We have to bolster the starfighter regiments before their pilots crack!"

Just as an entire wing of starfighters showed signs of succumbing to the fear of death by laser, an astounding heavy mech with glowing wings positioned right in front of them! Its massive polarized tower shield soundly resisted the weak lasers targeting the craft piloted by the wing commander!

"Get your act together!" Jannzi Larkinson shouted as her scarred Shield of Samar continually resisted laser beam after laser beam. "There's nowhere you can run once the swarm sweeps over this entire star system! Our carriers won't evacuate any cowards who abandoned their comrades when they most needed your help! Hold the line and keep firing your weapons!"

Her intervention managed to sober up the wing commander, who quickly rallied his men.

Though the wing still appeared a little shaky, Jannzi could not afford to coddle them any further. Her Shield of Samar slowly flew elsewhere as she spotted another faltering starfighter wing that already lost half their numbers!

Unfortunately, she was just a single mech pilot. Even if she was a promising expert candidate, in a large-scale battle against the swarm configuration, her ability to affect the outcome of the battle was too small!

"Come on! We have to hold! Billions of innocent Brighters will die if we don't hold!"

While the casualties among the starfighters reached the hundreds, the swarm configuration did not fare that much better. The number of drones visibly dropped with

each passing second. Their rain of lasers grew lighter, thereby reducing the pressure on the defenders.

Yet because so many starfighters had fallen and more were getting struck every moment, the intensity of the battle was still incredibly high!

As long as the starfighter regiments held formation, the sandman swarm would inevitably run out of drones.

"We have to endure! Don't give up too early! We've almost reached the light at the end of the tunnel!"

Unfortunately, the shaky starfighter pilots, most of whom used to be laborers, shuttle pilots, customer service representatives and the like, had already reached the brink of their brittle courage.

Just as the surviving starfighter units reached their tipping point, the Desolate Soldiers that used to fight in the center of the formation had finally dispersed to cover the bulk of the starfighters!

A surge of duty and obligation filled every shaky starfighter pilot's heart. The glow affecting their moods banished some of the terror that threatened to overwhelm their minds.

"Do your duty, pilots! The battle is not yet done!"

Though the Desolate Soldiers couldn't prevent every starfighter pilot from breaking down, their intervention nonetheless prevented a complete rout, at least for the moment!

With the Desolate Soldiers propping up the shaky starfighter units, the defenders persisted long enough to strike a number of sandman admirals, thereby severely weakening the already-diminished sandman swarm.

The battle had turned for the better!

"We've won!"

It was a costly victory. At the end of the day, the starfighter regiments lost over a thousand spacecraft.

The Bright Republic hadn't lost so many machines and pilots in the Sand War until this battle!

If not for the crucial intervention of the Desolate Soldiers deployed by the local Planetary Guard, the battle could have taken a much more awful turn!

