

Mech 1601

Chapter 1601 Bright Star

The Bright Republic learned a very painful truth after waging several costly battles against the sandman fleets that adopted the swarm configuration.

The Starfighter Corps was not a silver bullet.

Against the wrong configurations, the many weaknesses of starfighters became very pronounced.

Without costly exotics to fortify their armor systems, their mundane armor plating was barely better than that of a commercial shuttle!

Their designers cut so many corners in their design that their armor plating was only really good enough to resist spacedust, micrometeorites and the occasional space junk floating in deep space.

They fared poorly against high-volume firepower!

Not only that, but their starfighter pilots were hardly as professional and disciplined as actual soldiers.

By far, most starfighter pilots were young and poorly-educated citizens of the Bright Republic or the fallen border states.

Before the Sand War, they might have been students or laborers. None of them envisioned a career in the military. As norms, there was no glory in serving in an auxiliary regiment.

Though a number of professional soldiers and officers from the auxiliary regiment had been transferred to the Starfighter Corps to make up a somewhat competent cadre, that was hardly enough!

Against an overwhelming sandman opponent, there was little an officer could do to prevent their ill-trained subordinates from panicking.

Several instances of routing had already occurred, leading to severe losses among the mechs and starfighters that held their ground.

Even though the cowards had all been caught and executed within a matter of days, the problem was still in place!

Until the Starfighter Corps managed to train their pilots to a higher standard, instances like this might occur at any time.

Fortunately, the proliferation of Desolate Soldiers managed to stem the bleeding in many cases. A lot of battles could have ended off worse if not for their miraculous glows!

Their ability to stabilize the morale of starfighter pilots and encourage them to do their duty in a moderate range was very helpful in preventing many potential collapses.

These interventions already saved the lives of mech and starfighter pilots. Though not infallible, the Desolate Soldiers were still effective enough to warrant an even greater level of interest from the government.

The brass realized that the Starfighter Corps wasn't nearly as dependable as they thought.

In their enthusiasm to deploy as much cannon fodder as possible to consume the firepower of the sandman fleets, they failed to account for the consequences.

Starfighter pilots weren't dependable at all!

Due to the immense demand for cannon fodder, over a hundred-thousand starfighters were being produced throughout the entire state.

All of those machines were only useful when paired with actual human pilots.

Faced with an acute need for lots of starfighter pilots, the Bright Republic and every other state that employed these spacecraft were rushing through their training.

Three weeks of hasty training was not enough to transform a civilian into a soldier!

At most, they could only present a facade of discipline and dedication during fair-weather circumstances.

Whenever a battle turned difficult, their many deficiencies became acute liabilities, threatening to collapse an entire formation and inciting panic among the better-trained mech pilots!

The very welcome glows from the Desolate Soldiers helped a lot, preventing most wavering starfighter pilots from abandoning their duty.

As this valuable solution became more and more evident, Ves and the LMC earned more and more acclaim.

Their Desolate Soldiers were increasingly being regarded as a necessity!

No defensive force at the front and rear was complete without at least a handful of Desolate Soldiers.

With the advantage given by their glows, the Ministry of Defense estimated that the Bright Republic would have lost at least eight minor star systems and three major star systems at this time!

However, aside from the loss of a few emptied star systems, the Bright Republic fared incredibly well considering the opposition they faced.

No one rested easily, however. The sandman invasion was far from over. There were many more sandman fleets on their way to raze the territories of the Bright Republic, each of them more clever and tricky than before.

The average intelligence and experience level of the sandman admirals increased by a worrisome rate. They grouped up more and more and shared their insights with each other, causing them to adopt very strange and unusual configurations.

Though many people looked down on the sandmen as a stupid, bot-like race, the truth was that they followed a different trajectory of development.

By far, most of the sandman admirals that commanded the fleets had been elevated to their positions rather recently. The leader castes of the sandman empire sacrificed a lot to produce so many sandman admirals, so it shouldn't be much of a surprise that they started off as amateurs.

Yet even if they started at the lowest level, the sandman admirals actually possessed a frightening ability to learn from their experiences and mistakes.

One such example assaulted a fortified star system.

Three enormous monoliths that exceeded the size of CFA battleships advanced indomitably towards one of the three populated planets in the star system.

While the monolith configuration was not as scary as the swarm configuration, they still proved thorny to fight, especially when their sandman admirals stopped conserving energy.

Ordinarily shaped in humongous spheres of sand and other animated matter, they advanced like battering rams.

Though slower than other sandman configurations, the spherical monoliths chained their sandman in a way that made their outer layer incredibly resilient!

What was more, their interior wasn't entirely solid. Instead, the sandman admirals adopted a very hollow wireframe that limited the damage of explosive and concussive weaponry!

Though disparagingly called balloons by some combatants, this huge but largely-hollow configuration was incredibly resilient to damage.

What was more, they possessed a variety of means to hit back!

Every sandman admiral developed their own favored means to attack. While some stuck to firing their heavy laser strikes, others adopted more versatile solutions.

The three monoliths that simultaneously invaded this star system showcased the creativity of the sandman admirals when they had time to develop.

One monolith took cues from the high volume of fire it encountered in a previous battle and unleashed a storm of lasers from its surface!

Just like a swarm configuration, the swarm of lasers unleashed by this humongous monolith damaged over a hundred starfighters with a single salvo!

What was worse was that this monolith quickly began to fire continuously! Even though the swarm monolith consumed an enormous amount of energy, the casualties it inflicted upon its opponents were just as frightening!

In the command center of a fleet carrier, Mech Colonel Ark Larkinson observed this alarming development with hardly any change in emotion.

His solid demeanor did much to maintain the morale of his subordinates. The entire 1st Havensworth Division remained absolutely stable despite the flood of lasers striking their mechs.

"Link up these elements." Ark commanded, manipulating the projection of the battlespace with his hand. "Break up these mercenary and Planetary Guard units and spread out their Desolate Soldiers among the starfighter units as planned. Every starfighter squadron should be basking in the glow of at least one Soldier mech."

The defenders responded smoothly to his orders. As an expert pilot and a mech colonel, Ark Larkinson possessed an immense amount of authority and respect among the defenders of this star system.

Even the starfighter pilots didn't dare to disobey this famed war hero!

Nonetheless, the losses mounted fairly quickly. While the starfighters performed their job as cannon fodder, many of them barely got their shots off before a bunch of lasers melted through their thin and feeble armor plating and struck the delicate internals!

"Alert! Monolith Beta is showing signs of activity!"

The second sandman monolith began to show some unusual changes on the surface. A hole opened up in the side facing the Brighters and began to emit some very alarming energy signatures.

After a few more seconds of charging, the monolith launched a substantial projectile that rapidly traversed the battlefield!

Before anyone could make sense of the launch, the insanely-fast projectile splattered against the exterior of a military combat carrier.

"The Hazy Dream has been struck by an unknown projectile! Initial signs of damage are minimal! Her armor has held!"

Ark grew suspicious and studied one of the projections depicting the Hazy Dream. He spread out the projection, magnifying it so that he could study the details.

The sand splattered over the exterior of the Hazy Dream seemed no different than the splashing of mud, but Ark soon noticed something very disconcerting.

The 'mud splatter' was still alive!

"The Hazy Dream has reported signs of intrusion! An unknown quantity of sandmen has entered the ship through its open hangar bay ports!"

The news coming from the Hazy Dream grew alarmingly more frantic as the bad news started to pour in. As long as just a modest quantity of sandmen managed to sneak into the interior of a ship, they could wreak untold havoc inside!

Just as Monolith Beta prepared to launch another 'mudball' towards another ship, the third monolith began to show signs of activity as well!

"Monolith Gamma is accumulating an enormous amount of energy! A powerful attack is incoming!"

Ark could no longer stay unmoved. He turned to his deputy. "Take over in my absence. My presence is required in the field."

The lieutenant colonel standing by his side acknowledged the order. "Good hunting, Colonel Larkinson."

After activating a command, a hole opened up in the deck. Ark fearlessly jumped inside in order to reach his destination as fast as possible.

The third monolith began to shake and glow as it accumulated a prodigious amount of heat and energy.

For an instant, most combatants who noticed the buildup of heat and energy began to have an impression that a CFA battleship was about to fire her main cannon at the defenders.

A ripple of fear spread out among the mech and starfighter pilots. Not even the experienced and hardened veterans of the 1st Havensworth Division could remain unmoved.

Not even the glows of the Desolate Soldiers could prevent them from wavering! In fact, if the mechs weren't in place, at least a quarter of the starfighters would have already fled in fear!

The only upside about this development was that the third monolith required a lot of time to prepare its attack. Though everyone could tell that it would probably be immensely powerful, the lengthy delay gave everyone the illusion that they could save themselves out of this predicament.

"Direct all available fire towards Monolith Gamma! Do not let it finish charging up its attack!"

Thousands of mechs and starfighters changed their targets from the first and second monolith despite their threats.

Though the first two monoliths were already threatening by themselves, the third one appeared to be planning to unleash almost all of its energy in a single, overwhelming attack!

Monolith Gamma began to adjust its shape as its energy levels neared its peak. A lengthy rod appeared in front as if to direct a powerful energy attack towards the human forces standing in its way!

Just as some of the energy began to transfer to this humongous rod, a single mech deployed from the fleet carrier situated in the center.

The mech threaded through the ships and mechs enveloping the fleet and rapidly accelerated towards the front!

"It's the Bright Star! Colonel Larkinson has taken to the field!"

An incredibly powerful flight system strained the Bright Star to its limits. External boosters installed a few days ago began to activate as well, accelerating the magnificent-looking hybrid mech beyond its usual parameters!

In addition, a very powerful resonance field began to excite the Bright Star and the surrounding space.

A glowing field began to form around the Bright Star, causing its acceleration to triple!

The upgraded inertial dampeners of the expert mech's cockpit did their best to preserve the life of the mech pilot, but Ark knew that he couldn't persist in this insane acceleration for long!

The Bright Star deployed with an ornate lance this time. It braced the weapon straight and closed the distance to the third monolith with an astounding level of speed!

As electric crackles began to surround the third monolith's rod, the Bright Star glowed as bright as a comet!

As everyone held their breaths, Monolith Gamma finished its accumulation just as the Bright Star crashed into the rod!

An incredibly bright explosion momentarily blinded every sensor!

Seconds later, the sensors readjusted, showing a half-destroyed monolith!

The rod failed to fire! The monolith's abortive attempt to unleash its firepower resulted in an immense backlash!

"Where is the Bright Star!?"

A quiver of fear shook the hearts of every human on the battlefield.

"Look over there! Venerable Larkinson is alive!"

The Bright Star had managed to punch straight to the center of the damaged monolith and only just exited before the sandman admiral could trap it inside!

Though its energy field had weakened and its lance was gone, the expert mech was intact!

Thousands of roars flooded the communication channels!

Chapter 1602 Lattice Configuration

The battles being waged in the larger, more prosperous star systems took a toll on the Bright Republic.

The Mech Corps only managed to control its rate of attrition through the protection of the Starfighter Corps.

Hundreds, if not thousands of starfighter pilots died in a battle against large, abnormal sandman fleets.

There was no time to mourn the dead. Every effort had to be put into reinforcing the front, salvaging the wreckage floating in the battle site and preparing for the next battle that might come in less than half of a day!

The high frequency of sandman incursions forced the defending forces to implement a rotation.

For example, the arduous battle that the 1st Havensworth Division just won against the three sandman monoliths depleted the strength of their accompanying outfits and starfighter regiments severely.

If the mech forces under Ark Larkinson's command had to fight again, they would certainly suffer severe losses. The lack of sufficient cannon fodder meant that the sandmen might inflict heavy losses against the military mechs and mech pilots of the 1st Havensworth Division!

Such an outcome had to be prevented at all cost!

The Mech Corps formed the core of the Bright Republic's defensive strategy. Having seen what happened to other states, the Bright Republic clearly saw how the collapse of the military led to a collapse of the state.

This was because no one else possessed the courage, discipline and sacrifice to stand strong against a relentless foe like the sandmen!

The more losses suffered by the professional military, the more the defense of a state rested in the hands of mercenaries and conscripts.

No matter how much of the latter two a state could muster up, there was simply no substitute to genuine soldiers!

"Mercenaries value their life above duty. Conscripts don't even know what duty means."

For these reasons and more, each mech pilot of the Mech Corps had to be treasured like high-grade exotics. The better the Bright Republic preserved their lives, the greater the chance of lasting through this crisis!

All the surviving states had to do was outlast the sandman offensive. As long as they endured the worst, they could launch a devastating counterattack against the depleted alien forces and take over the territories that had been overrun!

Such a rich reward would do wonders in transforming the trajectory of the Bright Republic and other forces!

Secret negotiations and tacit deals were already being made behind the scenes. None of the states wanted their victory to be cheapened if they managed to survive the sandman onslaught.

Of course, all of that was not very relevant at the moment. Right now, every star system along the Bright Republic's borders had to endure frequent sandman attacks.

The fortified star systems only accounted for a small proportion of border systems under assault. Their richer energy and resource endowments made them much more attractive to the invading sandmen, but that did not mean that the aliens let off the smaller and less developed star systems.

The sandmen generally ignored systems that contained brown or red dwarf stars. These weak, low energy stars were the equivalent of nutrient packs to the sandmen. If there wasn't any choice, the sandman fleets would never choose to invade these star systems!

That still left a lot of other star systems with higher energy levels, such as those with giants or binary star pairings.

Knowing that the sandman fleets generally favored these star systems over others, the Ministry of Defense conducted an extensive study and modelled the likely distribution pattern of the invasion force.

They then used the results to decide how many mechs and other forces needed to be stationed at a star system to resist most intrusion.

So far, the model earned a lot of acclaim. Though a couple of accidents had occurred, most of the time the defending forces proved sufficient to deal with the sandman fleets wandering into the border systems.

However, MinDef's model only made projections based on past and present circumstances.

It could not predict the various ways the sandman admirals evolved based on their prior experiences.

In one small star system, around two-hundred mechs and double the number of starfighters deployed from their carriers.

The small craft flew out into deep space and formed up in a formation centered around a company of mechs from the 4th Luminant Angels of the 5th Havensworth Division.

The Luminant Angels were famed for their specialization in energy weapons and focus on mobility. Their spaceborn laser rifleman mechs excelled in medium-ranged harassment and mobility warfare, though their endurance left much to be desired.

Due to the eruption of the Sand War, the Luminant Angels had been forced to put down their elegant laser rifles. Their mech designers and mech technicians worked around the clock to convert their mechs around handling kinetic rifles.

While the modifications weren't necessary, the mechs of the Luminant Angels came with an excess of energy reserves and a lack of ammo carrying capacity. Overhauling their designs was a necessity in order to give the mechs a lot of punch against the sandmen.

Now that their mechs had undergone this transformation, they became bulkier, heavier and much less refined.

This did not fit with the tradition of the Luminant Angels, but they couldn't afford to procure new, purpose-built mechs designed from the ground up to handle kinetic weapons.

Everyone had to make do with less. Even the mech regiments of the Mech Corps.

"Commander Larkinson, I'd like you to spread your Avatars to each separate detachment as planned." A gruff male voice ordered through the command channel.

Sitting in the cockpit of a golden mech, the Avatar Commander narrowed his eyes behind his visor.

"My Avatars work best when grouped up together. We discussed this earlier. The Planetary Guard detachment possesses a sufficient amount of Desolate Soldiers to cover the same needs."

"A battle is imminent, kid. Orders are orders."

Melkor grimaced deeper. "Understood, sir."

He did as instructed and spread out his squad of Avatar mechs throughout the formation of mechs and starfighters. Their glows shot a dose of determination in the hearts of the pilots, just as Captain Zorke of the Luminant Angels intended.

As for Melkor, he kept his Desolate Soldier close to the Angels.

Though the Avatars enjoyed a high status at the LMC, Captain Zorke put them in the same category as other private sector outfits.

It didn't help that the Avatars only brought their Desolate Soldiers and Aurora Titans to the front.

While the Desolate Soldiers earned a lot of regard for their glows, their combat performance was not very exceptional. They were no different from other budget mech models in terms of specs.

As for the Aurora Titans, Captain Zorke left them on standby in their mech carriers.

He had never ordered the Aurora Titans to be deployed. Even now, when they were facing a very threatening sandman configuration, the stubborn mech captain never considered making use of the incredible defensive power of the super-medium space knights!

"Stupid!" Melkor softly cursed, though he made sure to mute his transmitter.

As a Luminant Angel, Captain Zorke preferred mobility tactics over anything else. Even if it wasn't particularly effective against the sandmen, it was all this inflexible mech officer knew!

Though Melkor lacked the rich combat experience of Captain Zorke, he had not wasted his time at the Avatar base.

He allocated a small portion of the generous budget of the Avatars into a lot of self-study. By enrolling in some of the best virtual courses that money could buy, he acquired a considerable repertoire of knowledge to command an elite force like the Avatars.

Splitting up the Avatars was a complete waste of the training of their mech pilots. Each and every Avatar was already a proficient mech pilot, but that was not what made the Avatars special.

Just like a military mech regiment, Melkor focused on teamwork, coordination and formation combat.

The Avatars truly fought at their best if they fought as a collective!

Yet Captain Zorke was in command. That was the rule.

Melkor did not necessarily disagree with this arrangement. He knew that even if he was confident that he could command this combined force, he lacked the reputation and authority of a genuine mech officer of the Mech Corps.

Every mech force assigned to defend a star system had to incorporate at least one military unit. If the defense was left to a loose collection of mercenaries and other scum, then the chance of routing was significantly higher!

Therefore, despite his disagreements with Captain Zorke, Melkor appreciated the presence of the Luminant Angels.

"Mercenaries won't hesitate to ignore my orders, but it's a different story if Captain Zorke issues the same orders."

Authority. Reputation. Honor. Prestige.

Melkor lacked in each of those departments.

Aside from the Avatars of Myth and Living Sentinels, no one would entrust their lives to Melkor.

In fact, the only reason why he could command the Avatars and the Sentinels was because Ves lent his own authority and reputation to him.

What could be given could easily be taken away.

Melkor did not want to be left naked if Ves became disappointed in his performance.

"I have to make my own accomplishments." He reminded himself. "There are many older Larkinsons who are eagerly waiting for me to fall."

The pressure on him increased as Ves and the LMC became more successful. The Larkinsons who used to ignore Ves now treated him like a treasure. Many old dogs in the family regretted their disdain towards the Avatars.

"I built the Avatars with my own two hands. No one is going to take them away from me! Not even my old mentors and instructors in the family

This was also one of the reasons why Melkor insisted on participating in battles. To earn genuine respect and secure his lofty position within Ves' organization, he had to be baptized in blood and fire.

Once the defensive force entered into combat range, Captain Zorke issued his final orders before giving the fateful command!

"Reverse course and fire!"

The mechs and starfighters no longer flew forward, but reversed their flight direction while firing their weapons! They also scattered and spread out, making it more difficult for massed laser fire to land a hit.

Each outfit happened to be accompanied by at least one Desolate Soldier from the Avatars of Myth. The individual Avatar mechs appeared completely unexceptional when left by themselves, but it was enough for them to keep up and fire their weapons on command.

"Careful! The sandmen are about to unleash hell!"

Every mech and starfighter evaded as best their flight systems allowed. While the sandmen were very accurate when it came to their targeting, their predictions could still be fooled to an extent.

If the defenders only faced a standard sandman fleet, then this was sufficient to minimize casualties.

Unfortunately, the sandman fleets that arrived in this star system combined into a very large and hollow lattice pattern!

Appearing as a humongous wireframe cube with plenty of internal lattices, it was incredibly difficult to destroy in a short amount of time!

The lattice configuration combined the advantages of both the swarm and monolith configuration. Not only did it benefit from its size, but the small and skinny lattices made it very hard to land a solid blow.

Sixty percent of the shots fired by the mechs and starfighters went through the lattice configuration without hitting anything solid!

The counter-attack of the lattice configuration came quickly. After a brief charging period, each lattice began to fire laser beams at the defenders!

Most of the starfighters which had been positioned in the front of the formation sustained severe hits!

The weak starfighters didn't possess enough mobility to reliably foil the targeting capabilities of the sandmen!

"Keep firing! Our starfighters can't keep this up for long!" Captain Zorke admonished.

Commander Melkor gritted his teeth. Captain Zorke opted to keep the forces under his command at a distance from the sandman lattice.

This was the wrong decision to make. The accuracy of ballistic and kinetic rifles at this distance was too awful compared to the accuracy of the laser beams fired by the sandmen!

If he was in command, he would have ordered his mechs and starfighters to close the distance in order to make it easier to damage the lattices!

Sadly, this was no time to challenge the command of Captain Zorke! Melkor could only pray that not many Avatars would perish as a result of adopting the wrong tactics!

"If I want to earn respect, I have to make sure I manage to stay alive!"

"...and that's why we almost lost this battle." Melkor spoke over the comm.

Ves drummed his fingers against the surface of his desk. "I see. This Captain Zorke fellow sounds like he's only competent enough to command a single mech company. Now that the Mech Corps had put him in charge of a defensive force of hundreds of mechs and starfighters, he's clearly out of his depth."

"At least he's not around anymore to lead us into another disaster." Melkor's projection shrugged, not caring if he spoke ill of the dead. "Right now, the survivors here are divided and demoralized. The lieutenant that took over as acting commander is mainly a fighter. He's an excellent marksman but a poor tactician."

"What's in store, then?"

"The higher ups only told us that a replacement is on their way, but I really doubt that whoever they send is better than Captain Zorke. Everyone knows the Mech Corps is stretching their manpower thin. There are simply too many star systems to cover. An evacuated star system that we've been assigned to is so worthless that our priority is at the bottom."

"Do you need me to pull some strings?"

"Your offer is appreciated, but it's best you don't interfere." The Avatar Commander calmly replied. "At this stage, the status of the Mech Corps is incomparable. The military won't allow a commanding officer of a private outfit to take charge."

"You're a Larkinson."

Melkor chuckled. "Our family's reputation isn't enough to override the concerns of the Mech Corps. Protocol has to be followed. Don't worry about me. I have the situation handled. Once the Sand War develops further, I believe there may be opportunities for the Avatars to excel."

"Good luck then, Melkor. Stay alive."

"Don't slack off back at home. Your mechs have made a huge impact at the front. I have a lot of expectations for your next designs."

The comm call ended. Ves leaned back in his chair and digested what he learned.

Though he could access various sources to learn about the circumstances at the front, it was a lot more personal when someone like Melkor vented his frustrations.

"Not everything is going according to plan." Ves concluded after summing up the insights he gained in recent days. "The lack of competent commanding officers is leading to much more severe losses than the Mech Corps initially anticipated."

It wasn't as if the Bright Republic lacked commanders of this caliber. The problem was that the Mech Corps only had so much of them. The remainder consisted of commanders of various private sector outfits.

It was not very wise to put them in command. Not only did they favor their own forces, they also possessed erratic command styles.

While that might not be a problem when they commanded their own men, once they started bossing around strangers, a lot of animosity might ensue that would ruin the camaraderie between allies.

The problem was so bad in fact that the Mech Corps recently requested retired mech officers to return and relieve the pressure.

The Cloud Estate emptied out considerably as a result. Ves missed the old dogs who decided to answer the call of duty.

"I hope they're happy." Ves muttered. "Perhaps to them, dying in the course of fighting the good fight is better than languishing quietly in my estate."

Having spent a considerable amount of time among his aunts and uncles, Ves knew that they were all Larkinsons to the bone.

Their advanced age may have made them unsuitable to pilot mechs, but as long as they had command experience, it wouldn't be too much of a problem to direct a battle from a command center.

His next appointment arrived a moment later. Dr. Lupo Guernica strolled into his office without cleaning up the stains on his fingers.

If not the exobiologist's newly-purchased self-cleaning lab coat, his clothes would have looked just as soiled!

"Take a seat, Lupo." Ves gestured.

"Alright."

"How is the institute doing?"

"It's doing great!" Lupo gushed. "The budget you've set is generous enough for me to procure most of the machines that I need to perform my research! While the ongoing crisis is making it harder than I like to acquire precision lab equipment, I'm fortunate that

they're still in stock in Bentheim. I can begin performing advanced experiments immediately!"

Ves gently knocked his fist against his desk. "I did not establish the Larkinson Exobiology Institute to fund your pet projects."

"You didn't?" Lupo answered in confusion.

"While your area of specialization sounds interesting, I'm a mech designer, not a business magnate. I have no desire to diversify my business holdings."

"Then.."

"Oh, I'm not saying that you aren't allowed to pursue your interests as long as you keep me in the loop. It's just that the focus of the LEI is not on developing better nutrition solutions. Instead, it's meant to assist me in designing mechs by studying the properties of powerful and interesting exobeasts. Forming an exobeast reserve on Cloudy Curtain is the main priority. How much progress have you made so far?"

"Uhh..."

"I see." Ves sighed. "I hope this is the last time I remind you of your assignments. You work for me. The next time you forget something, I'll reduce your budget by ten percent."

"NO!" Lupo stood up. "You can't do that, Mr. Larkinson! Biotech research is incredibly expensive!"

"Then do your job and take your responsibilities seriously. The LEI is not your personal property!"

To a research-mad scientist like Dr. Lupo, Ves did not have to employ any complicated tricks to bring him to heel. Merely threatening to withhold money was enough to make the exobiologist honest.

Once Ves put Dr. Lupo on his toes, he brought up the real reason why he called the fellow to his office.

"You can leave most of the work involved with setting up an exobeast reserve to your new subordinates. What I really want from you is something different."

"Hm?"

Ves activated a jammer before retrieving something very special from a pocket sewn into one of his Synthra Umbra garments.

The small transparent cube glowed in soft white, allowing Dr. Lupo to see the bioimplant frozen inside.

"This is a stasis cage!" He uttered in shock. "And this implant! What kind of implant requires such luxurious treatment?"

"What you're looking at is a Tito Biosystems Archimedes Rubal 1002-Z Cranial Codex Bioimplant that I happened to salvage from the frontier."

"Tito Biosystems! That's a huge name in the galactic biotech community! How in the galaxy did you manage to obtain one of their products?!"

"It's a long story." Ves chuckled. "Don't ask too many questions. What matters is what you can do with it. Are you able to inspect the integrity of this bioimplant?"

??I don't recognize this model or implant type. I've only dabbled in implants in a general sense. I'm far from a specialist in this field." Lupo answered honestly, still perplexed that Ves held a piece of high technology.

"You're still a biotech expert, right? Due to the sensitivity of this object, I can't trust too many people with knowledge of its existence in my hands. I want you to keep what I told you to yourself and verify whether this implant is still safe to install in my cranium."

Dr. Lupo frowned deeply at the stasis cube. "Just because I'm well-versed in bioscience doesn't mean I'm adept in every specialty. Implant studies are far from my area of interest."

"I can be very generous as long as you achieve some results." Ves smirked. "I will double your personal budget every time you complete a major assignment. Well, at least for the first four times or so. I can't keep this up forever."

"Really?!"

"I promise." Ves grinned. "While I set high expectations for you, as long as you do what I ask, I'll increase your annual budget so you can pursue your pet projects in your free time to your heart's content. Does that sound like a good deal to you, doctor?"

Dr. Lupo thumped his palm against his chest. "You can rely on me! Archimedes Rubal? I'll unlock its secrets within a day!"

"Don't make any boasts you can't back up. This is a very advanced if somewhat outdated implant. Treat it with care and don't make any changes without my express permission."

Seeing as Ves valued it very much, Lupo adopted a serious expression. "I'll do as you say."

Ves watched on as Dr. Lupo picked up the stasis case and placed it into a small protective container he carried in his lab coat.

Though Ves really did not feel entirely sure about placing the Archimedes Rubal in Lupo's care, he couldn't afford to sit on it any longer.

If he wanted to make some progress, he just had to go out on a limb and put his trust in someone.

At the very least, Ves had a good feeling about Dr. Lupo. Ves had observed the exobiologist carefully and saw no sign that the man was compromised in any way.

"There is something else I want you to do." Ves addressed the next topic. He retrieved a sack from his pocket and passed it on to Dr. Lupo. "Can you identify the spice within?"

Lupo opened up the sack and studied the dark spice contained within. "What a pungent smell! Is this geril spice? It smells different from what I'm used to! This must be the authentic formula!"

Ves smiled. "You're correct. I've got a lot more geril spice stored in my vault. You see, they're somewhat special to me. Aside from making spicy Nyx dogs delicious, geril spice is also useful for blocking special tracking methods based on metaphysical scent."

"Pardon?"

"Geril spice has an extraordinary quality to them that is very valuable to me. Imitation products may taste the same, but they lack this special quality. What I want you to do is study this spice and see if you can isolate this extraordinary component. It would be ideal if you can find a way to produce what you've identified. As far as I know, the only source of authentic geril spice is the Nyxian Gap, and that is far from ideal."

"Interesting.." Dr. Lupo smiled and boldly sampled the spice. "What a unique flavor profile. No wonder spicy Nyx dogs have become a cult classic. I've been missing out!"

Ves coughed. "Studying the Archimedes Rubal and setting up the exobeast preserve come first. Don't spend too much time on the geril spice before you're done with your main responsibilities. Understood?"

Lupo looked as if he couldn't restrain himself. With great difficulty, he closed the sack and placed it in his pocket. His mouth still rolled and quivered as if he was savoring the taste of geril spice.

"I.. will make sure not to forget about my other responsibilities, Mr. Larkinson."

"That's not all I want you to do." Ves spoke and retrieved a data chip from his desk drawer before sliding it across the desk. "Take this data chip. It contains all of the scans and physiological data of my physique, in particular my biological augmentations."

"I'm aware that you have an abnormal physique." Lupo said. "While I am reasonably versed with the human body, your augmented physique is quite perplexing."

"I know. Every exobiologist told me that they don't have a clue how the so-called Jutland organ works. I don't expect you to figure out its functioning immediately. I just want you to tackle this issue step by step."

"You are putting a lot on my plate. Even if you've promised to double my budget each time I've completed an assignment, I'm afraid it will take many years for me to satisfy all of your demands."

Ves did not look worried. "I have one more thing for you. Take this and have a bite."

He threw a candy at Lupo, who merely observed and sniffed it for a moment before popping into his mouth.

"Hmm.. sweet.. it doesn't taste like any candy I am familiar with. Wait a minute.. this sensation.."

Lupo's eyes slowly lit up as his mind experienced a profound transformation.

"Do you have more of these candies?"

Ves grinned and opened his palm, revealing four more identical candies.

Chapter 1604 Toady

Dr. Lupo became incredibly intrigued by the Intelligence Candies that Ves handed out.

"I have to bring these candies to my lab right this instant!"

Ves shook his head. "No. Eat them up. You're not leaving this office until you've consumed them all."

"That is an immense waste! These candies are too exceptional!"

In the end, Ves had to call Nitaa over to restrain the exobiologist and force the candies into his mouth one by one.

Lupo looked incredibly resentful afterwards. How could those precious candies be wasted without giving him the opportunity to study their properties?!

"Do you have more of these candies?!" He pushed.

Ves did not mind the lack of respect. In fact, he preferred it if his subordinates were blunt. Lupo wasn't being disrespectful on purpose. He just expressed his dissatisfaction at missing an opportunity related to his specialty.

As a mech designer, Ves understood Dr. Lupo's frustration. That did not mean that he was willing to give the doctor another candy for him to play around.

Attribute Candies were some of the most important advantages he possessed. Ves was not interested in figuring out their makeup or reverse-engineering their method of production.

With how hard it was to keep secrets, Ves was very sure that once Dr. Lupo began to study the candies, someone would eventually find out.

Perhaps the MTA would pay a visit to him the very next day!

To minimize the risks, Ves could only deny Lupo's request.

The exobiologist already had a busy schedule. Even with his abruptly-boosted intelligence, he still needed to do a lot of research and investigation in order to complete his assignments!

"You don't look so good now, doctor. I suggest you take some time off and think on how you can fulfill your responsibilities."

"I.. you're right." Lupo wearily replied. "Please excuse me. My head is pounding."

Unlike with Ketis, the candies hadn't strained Lupo's head too much. Perhaps it was because Lupo was a pure intellectual with a better-developed mind. He required fewer candies to boost his intelligence attribute to 2.0.

Ves called over a guard to escort Lupo back to his accommodation at the newly-erected site of the Larkinson Exobiology Institute.

As he was watching his eccentric new subordinate go, Ves contemplated whether he was making the right decisions.

He knew that he was taking some very substantial risks.

First, entrusting Dr. Lupo with the Archimedes Rubal was very delicate. Even if he already ordered Crindon to keep a close eye on Lupo, a spy was not an exobiologist.

Lupo could easily tamper with the implant and leave no one observing Lupo's actions the wiser.

The only ones who might be able to restrain Lupo was another biotech expert, but that just perpetuated the same problem over multiple people.

At this stage, putting his trust on a single exobiologist in his employ was his limit. There was no way Ves would accept extending his trust to yet another specialist.

The downside of piling up so much work on a single person was that there was no way Lupo could address so many priorities.

This was why Ves took a second gamble and fed this fellow with enough intelligence candies to boost it all the way up to a score of 2.0!

Ves knew the risks of doing so. Someone as knowledgeable as Lupo would definitely be aware of the effects of the candies.

He could only hope that Lupo could keep the secret to himself. As long as Crindon detected anything amiss, Lupo would not be able to stay alive for long.

"I expect good results from you, doctor." Ves smiled in anticipation.

Anyone whose intelligence had been elevated to this height would definitely be able to improve quickly. Lupo would definitely become much more useful to him after a few years of focused study.

The only concern aside from leaks was the possibility that Lupo might quit and work for someone else. He wasn't a slave or refugee, so Ves did not have any way of preventing his defection.

After the incident with Carlos, Ves had become much more reticent about handing out attribute candies.

If not for the necessity to implant the Archimedes Rubal in his head, Ves would have stuck to his earlier decision to withhold them from his subordinates.

"I hope Lupo is smart enough to realize the implications of my actions." Ves muttered.

Revealing the attribute candies and feeding them to Lupo so he could experience their effects for himself was a show of strength.

Someone who had access to such remarkable goods was not a normal person.

Working for Ves would allow Lupo to gradually come in touch with the goodies that Ves held back from everyone.

As long as Lupo completed his assignments and proved his worth, Ves did not mind rewarding his pet exobiologist with another treat.

"Researchers are so easy to manipulate." He grinned.

Part of the reason why he was confident in keeping his new biotech expert in line was because hardly anyone was as generous as him. To a junior exobiologist like Dr. Lupo, they could forget about receiving a few billion bright credits to play around with every year.

Even though Ves wasted a lot of money that he could have spent on expanding his mech forces or acquiring new ships, he did not regret this investment.

A brilliant exobiologist could not be obtained so easily. Even if Ves could poach a senior exobiologist, it was very hard to be assured of the loyalty of those with past connections to other organizations.

This was also why so many powers emphasized nurturing loyal subordinates early on. Hiring them young and indoctrinating them straight away minimized the chances of defection.

"Working for me is a lot better than working for someone else."

If Lupo worked for someone else, then they had to work under the direction of a senior exobiologist. He would have to work as a coolie for a few years before he earned enough trust to perform more advanced research.

Even then, it was doubtful whether Lupo would be allowed to pursue his own research interests.

Ves shook his head and stopped considering whether he had made the right decisions. Just like Dr. Lupo, he was swamped with responsibilities.

"Send in the next appointment."

Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson entered the office with a confident gait. Though he looked a little older since Ves last saw him at his birthday party, the elder looked a lot more respectful than before.

"My thanks for inviting me to your office." Raymond said with a mild smile. "I hope I can take charge of the LMC quickly. The company urgently requires the direction of a real leader."

"Are you trying to say that I'm an incompetent leader?"

"Ah, no! That is not what I meant! I merely wanted to convey that I should lessen your burden by taking over from where Mr. Altern has left off. As a mech designer, you should not waste your time on these trivial matters."

Ves and Raymond began to converse with each other.

Unlike last time, Raymond made a sincere attempt to rein in his attitude towards Ves. Despite his advanced age, the status of Ves in the Larkinson Family was incomparable.

Raymond clearly knew how important it was to earn the trust and appreciation of the real man in charge of the LMC.

If Ves could fire the previous Chief Operating Officer on a whim, he could easily do the same with the successor!

Though Raymond came across as a toady, that wasn't a bad thing to Ves. As long as this toady knew who was in charge, it was fine if the man wanted to take advantage of his new position.

"How do you envision the LMC ten years from now?" Ves asked.

"Limitless."

"Even I'm not that optimistic."

"I think the LMC under your charge has a very bright future!" Raymond elaborated with a worshipful expression towards Ves. "You are a miracle of a mech designer. I can sense that you have propagated your bloodline's love for mechs in your products. This advantage is so great that I'm confident that we can take the mech markets by storm!"

Ves chuckled at Raymond's optimism. "That sounds good, but the LMC is not the only game in town. The more exceptional we are, the greater the risk of suppression. There are already a bunch of mech designers from Ansel who are deeply displeased with my success. Other competitors are also doing everything they can to guard their market share."

"Your concerns are very valid, but it is too late. Every state involved in the Sand War has seen how helpful the Desolate Soldiers have been in stabilizing the front and rear. Within the third line of defense, our Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate have achieved the most success in defending their territories. I don't think it has escaped any observers that these two states also happened to be our most successful markets!"

Ves nodded in agreement. "That's true. The Sand War has been an amazing opportunity for the LMC. The role of the Desolate Soldier is so indispensable that our critics don't have any opportunity to complain. Yet what about later? Ten years is a long time."

The focus on thinking beyond the immediate future forced Raymond to make a lot of predictions on the spot.

While Ves could already tell that Raymond was well versed in the mech industry and the present circumstances of the LMC, that wasn't enough.

Ves needed someone who shared his dreams and aspirations. If Raymond was too small-minded, then he would not be able to hold his position for long.

"I think.. the LMC will become a powerful entity that transcends the borders of the Bright Republic or any other state for that matter." Raymond eventually voiced. "If your relationship with Miss Wodin progresses further, then the LMC might even be able to get a foothold in the Hegemony's lucrative mech market. Of course, it's not certain yet if that will be the case. If the Hegemony loses against the Coalition, then the LMC won't be able to stay in existence."

"The LMC's position is not secure at all." Ves plainly stated. "Some factors are within our control, such as the mechs I decide to design. Other factors are out of my control, such as the outcome of the Sand War and the Komodo War. There may come a point where we have to abandon what we've built and flee from this star sector. Are you willing to accept these possible outcomes?"

What Ves said put a lot of pressure on Raymond. Though he grew up as a norm within the Larkinson Family, he still inherited some of the Larkinson's love towards the Bright Republic.

"To be honest, I don't want to be driven out from the state I grew up in." The older man replied. "My grandson is an expert candidate in the Mech Corps! My other offspring are also successful! I do not wish to see my entire family and everything they've accomplished go to dust because of unwelcome entanglements."

"I'm sorry, but I can't guarantee that you and your family will be able to avoid persecution. This is the game that people on this level play. The Larkinson Trust Fund you managed earlier is just peanuts compared to a rising mech company like the LMC. Do you have what it takes to run a mech company that has the potential to exceed the Bright Republic?"

Raymond had to make some very important choices.

Family, or ambition?

Tradition, or progress?

Safety, or risk?

"I think.. the Larkinsons have already changed due to you." Raymond eventually answered. "The Larkinson Family has remained stagnant for too long. While we are not used to change, that does not mean I reject it. The LMC has done a lot of good. Many Larkinsons have benefited from the wealth you have brought to the family. I cannot

imagine turning back the clock. I think it's time that we stopped serving the people, and instead look towards serving ourselves."

Ves slowly began to grin. "I think you'll do well in my employ as long as you hold this attitude. Welcome to the LMC."

Chapter 1605 Tribulation

The arrival of Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson improved the mood at the LMC. Whatever Ves thought about the elder, he prepared well.

Not only did Raymond right the ship, he also set a new course that entailed a greater emphasis on expanding the LMC's foreign presence.

He also allocated more resources to promoting the Prideful Soldier model, which severely lagged behind the Desolate Soldier in awareness and sales.

"With all of the publicity surrounding the Desolate Soldier, we don't have to lift a finger to promote them anymore." Raymond reported to Ves a few days after assuming his role as COO. "Our resources should instead be spent on the Prideful Soldier. There are a lot of outfits that are in the market for a cheaper and more aggressive alternative of the base model."

From what Ves had heard from Raymond so far, the old Larkinson was fully up to date with the internal and external circumstances of the LMC.

After keeping a close eye on the new COO for a few days, Ves felt relieved that his new hire was not about to run the LMC to ground.

While the LMC fared better than ever before, the same could not be said for the Bright Republic and the other states in the third line of defense.

So far, the Bright Republic achieved plenty of positive results. However, the defenders only had to fail a single time to leave an entire star system exposed.

Several minor border systems had already fallen, giving the sandmen more opportunities to penetrate past the border and invade the relatively less-defended interior.

As for the major border systems, the pressure on the defenders mounted at a worrying rate. The sandmen fleets that invaded the systems increasingly pooled their strengths together while adopting very tricky configurations.

In addition, they sometimes split up and attempted to approach the inner system from multiple directions.

This forced the reserves stationed at the fortified systems to deploy and fight without sufficient reprieve.

While the disciplined mech pilots of the Mech Corps easily coped with the pressure, the same could not be said for starfighter pilots.

Their mental and physical resilience was not up to par to trained warriors and soldiers. When they were forced to fight three or more separate waves of sandmen within the span of a few days, the cracks already started to show.

The Bright Republic simply asked too much of a military branch that was only a few months old.

"Now that the halo has worn off, everyone has become aware of the true purpose of the Starfighter Corps, sir." Commander Magdalena Larkinson remarked. "It is nothing more than a disposable shield for the Mech Corps."

"The Starfighter Corps enjoys a fraction of the budget but is already on its way to field at least double the number of mechs in the Mech Corps." Ves shrugged. "It's hard to put them to any other use if the government isn't willing to budge from its strategy of churning out cheap starfighters and cheap starfighter pilots."

The Sentinel Commander nodded gravely. "It takes at least eight years to train a basic mech pilot, sir. More years are needed if you want to train an advanced mech pilot. To train a starfighter pilot that is on the same level of competence will require at least five or more years. It's not worth it, especially since they are norms who are incapable of interfacing with their spacecraft. A mech will always outfight a starfighter if everything else is equal."

"It's not just the starfighter pilots that pose a problem. On the production side, our state's industrial capacity is completely geared towards producing mechs. While it's possible to retool our factories towards producing cheap and simple starfighters, it's another story if they surpass a certain level of complexity."

Both of them knew that the Bright Republic had no other choice but to treat the Starfighter Corps as a sacrifice to ensure its survival.

In terms of cost, Ves estimated that the prevailing starfighter models he had seen so far cost less than 2 million credits a piece.

This was because they incorporated hardly any exotics at all. While the supply of exotics was always scarce, the same could not be said for more mundane materials such as titanium and uranium!

Within the bountiful amount of star systems, planets and asteroid belts, prospectors could easily stumble upon deposits of these materials and mine them in rapid tempo.

Even the most prevalent low-grade exotics were much harder to find than mundane metals!

In fact, Ves expected the price of starfighters to drop over time as savvy industrialists optimized the supply chain further.

It was absolutely no problem for the Bright Republic to produce hundreds of thousands of starfighters even if they printed money like no tomorrow. In fact, the frantic production of starfighters likely accounted for most of the inflation wrecking the economy.

"The question is, will the Bright Republic be able to keep up? Will we be able to keep up?"

Both of them looked at each other with uncertainty. The situation was already precarious, and this was just the starting phase of the Bright Republic's tribulations. If something went wrong, their home state might not be able to hold anymore.

Ves used to think that the Bright Republic was overreacting a little when they engaged in desperate stunts such as granting amnesty to the BLM and fulfilling nearly all of its wishes.

Now that thousands or more starfighter pilots sacrificed their lives in battle every day, he fully understood why the state compromised so many of its existing principles and traditions.

He wasn't even upset anymore about the commission to design a custom mech for Vincent Ricklin!

This was no time to let his private grudges get in the way of any initiative that could help his home state cope with the sandmen.

Not only was the BLM a force to be reckoned with, its vast influence in the Bentheim region could also be leveraged in many useful ways.

Securing this alliance was a pivotal accomplishment of Senator Tovar and his negotiators.

As Ves and Magdalena discussed the war situation further, the topic inevitably turned towards their circumstances.

"How will Cloudy Curtain fare against a possible sandman incursion?" He asked.

"Not great." Magdalena answered glumly. "Though we have hundreds of Living Sentinels stationed on this planet, not all of them are up to standard or adept at spaceborn combat. Don't expect us to perform as well as the Avatars or the Mech Corps in combat. I've been drilling my people more frequently now in order to make them get

used to the pressure of fighting back-to-back battles, but we simply don't have enough depth to sustain a prolonged campaign."

The Living Sentinels mainly existed to guard LMC assets. Fighting off pirates, troublemakers and an occasional incursion was doable, but it would be too much to ask them to endure the same pressure at the front.

"Beef up the Sentinels." Ves ordered. "Even if most of the Living Sentinels opted out of volunteering to fight at the front, the sandmen won't be stuck there forever. If the frontlines are ever breached, then Bentheim and Cloudy Curtain will certainly come under assault. This is our home. I won't accept abandoning everything I've built here to the aliens."

"It will be difficult to increase the strength of the Living Sentinels any further, sir. Every mech pilot that is available has already been snapped up. Those who remain free have already fled the state. The only way we can elevate our fighting strength is if we have better mechs than the Desolate Soldiers. Although I understand why you've designed them to be cheap and easy to produce, their lack of resilience has led to elevated losses against abnormal sandman fleet configurations."

He knew what she was referring to. Having studied the footage and after-action reports of many battles in the front, Ves was aware that armor wasn't completely useless in the Sand War.

Whenever the sandmen employed a swarm configuration or any other configuration that encouraged massed laser fire, the better-armored mechs always fared better.

Unfortunately, Ves did not have a good response at this time.

"I'm sorry commander, I don't have a better alternative on hand. While the Militant Soldier that I'm working on is much better armored and equipped to face the sandmen, it's a model that's exclusive to the Mech Corps. With all of the proprietary hardware and standards incorporated in its design..."

As a veteran of the Mech Corps, Magdalena needed no further elaboration.

"Am I allowed to procure better mech models sold by other mech companies?"

Ves casually waved his hand. "I've never prohibited the Avatars and Sentinels from purchasing external models. While I have great faith in my products, I'm well aware that my mech catalog is far from complete. If you need to fulfill a role in your mech roster, just base your decisions on what is best for the Living Sentinels."

"Thank you, sir." Magdalena answered with a hint of relief. "I think we'll have to draw more money from the LMC to invest in a few mech companies of midrange or premium mechs."

"Feel free to invest as much as you need to strengthen our combat strength. Money is one thing we aren't short of, and it's rapidly growing more worthless anyway. I'd rather be sitting on a pile of mechs than several hundred billion bright credits."

They spent some time discussing how to expand the LMC's strength. Aside from buying mechs, the Sentinel Commander also wanted to beef up the fixed defenses of the LMC.

A lot had to be done before Ves was happy. "At least we don't have to shoulder the responsibility of defending Cloudy Curtain alone. The government will definitely station a garrison force here soon. We're so close to Bentheim that it would be a disaster if the sandmen overrun our star system."

Even so, Ves would never place his life in the hands of others. The periodic setbacks and defeats at the front already showed that the Bright Republic was not infallible.

Worse yet, the situation was worse in many other states. The Reinald Republic for example had already lost a significant chunk of territory, while the Vesia Kingdom was hard-pressed to hold the line.

"The Vesians aren't doing so well." Magdalena bitterly smirked. "The Mech Legion may be stronger than the Mech Corps, but they've been a bit slower than us in deploying starfighters. Their divided nature and lack of central direction has come back to haunt them. By the time the royal house gained enough authority to command the state, the sandmen are already hitting the Vesians hard."

"It doesn't help that the spatial geography is much more unfavorable for the Vesians." Ves remarked.

On a star map, the Bright Republic resembled an apple while the Vesians resembled a mango.

If the narrow side of the mango faced the direction of the sandman invasion, then the Vesians could easily defend this narrow front.

Sadly for the Vesians, their state was oriented on the side, which meant that the sandmen crashed against the entire length of this extended front!

The Mech Legion and its auxiliary forces had to stretch themselves thin to cover a huge territory! Breakthroughs already occurred in some places, and the Vesians had to expend a lot of effort to plug the gaps!

In fact, Ves even read in the news that the rebels in the state had all received similar deals to the Bentheim Liberation Movement.

Organizations such as the Vesian Liberation Front received full amnesty and many other concessions in return for lending their strength.

The value of strength trumped anything else!

In any case, the Vesian rebels who agitated against the nobles had no problems burying the hatchet this time. This was because they fought on behalf of the commoners, all of whom were under grave threat!

Between getting oppressed by nobles and massacred by sandmen, the rebels did not hesitate to choose the lesser of two evils!

Recalling the Vesian rebels made Ves think on how a certain mech designer in their camp was doing.

"I haven't been in touch with Iris Jupiter for so long. I wonder how she's doing?"

Chapter 1606 Real Design Team

Recent hires and additions to staff reduced the workload on Ves.

The most critical change occurred when the Tovar mech designers finally arrived at Cloudy Curtain.

Ves and Gloriana welcomed them in a grand fashion, making sure to put on a show by dressing up and bringing out as many mechs of the Avatars and Glory Battalion as possible.

Just the presence of elite second-class mechs was enough to suppress any arrogance from the young mech designers of the Tovar Family.

"Miles Tovar, at your service." The man leading his family members said. "I'm an Apprentice and a DCTI alumni."

"Welcome to the LMC." Ves smiled and shook his hand.

"We will be sure to treat you well." Gloriana promised with a reserved smile.

The other Tovars introduced themselves as well. Each of them studied at good schools, though none of them were lucky enough to attend a second-rate institution.

All of them were fairly young, with Miles being the oldest one at thirty-five.

The Tovar Family wouldn't waste this opportunity by sending older mech designers to Ves. Not only had they already expended much of their potential, they also wouldn't be able to live as long.

It was best for the Tovars to send out their younger mech designers in the hopes that Ves could unleash their potential.

Though Miles was the most outstanding among the new arrivals, the other four Tovars weren't too bad. Ves quizzed them along the way to the underground and developed some initial impressions.

Gilbert and Cherie Tovar were the only Novices among the five. Despite their lack of experience, they were also the youngest of the group, having graduated just one or two years ago.

Vela and Pachtold Tovar happened to be Apprentices with a decent amount of design experience, mainly by assisting in various design projects. They were also a bit older but not too much.

The only Tovar mech designer that Ves bothered to engage beyond a perfunctory talk was the eldest. Unlike his younger cousins, Miles was the only one who possessed spiritual potential.

In addition, Miles used to run his own mech company, which made him the only independent mech designer of the five.

"How well did your mech company do?" Ves curiously asked.

"Not as well as yours." Miles honestly admitted. The pressure exerted by Ves and Gloriana was so much that he couldn't put on airs at all. "If not for the aid and resources of the Tovar Family, my company wouldn't have been able to grow."

"Why did the Tovars assign you to us, then?"

"My business is really not worth sustaining. Once the Sand War erupted, all of my mech models stopped selling. Even the aerial rifleman mech I've designed hasn't attracted any attention."

"I see."

A mech company in such straits still had some options available. It could accept a contract to produce mechs on behalf of another company. It could accept government commissions to produce starfighters or other war materiel.

"My role in my company is redundant after we switched to producing other hardware. The only way I can get out of this rut is if I design a mech that is good enough to compete against the prevailing mechs in the mechs."

For an Apprentice, that was incredibly hard.

"Did your Family consult you when they pulled you out of your company and assigned you to work under me?" Ves asked.

Miles smiled bitterly in response. "Having struggled for almost a decade on my own, I'm far from reaching your level. As a mech designer, I have to accept the facts. There is little for me to gain by persisting on my own. So when my family asked me if I am willing to work under you, I accepted the offer within a heartbeat. I believe that I can achieve much more under your guidance."

"You are putting a lot of faith in our ability to guide your progression." Gloriana remarked.

"The two of you are stars in our generation. It's obvious to everyone that your futures are bright. When your fortunes rise, ours will rise as well."

Ves nodded in response. "That's the deal I've made with Senator Tovar. While we can't promise we'll be available all the time, we will make sure to act as your mentors."

Once they reached the lab and workshop floor, Ves introduced the five new additions to the design team to Ketis. Both of them regarded each other with wariness and confusion.

"Don't underestimate Ketis. She's my first student." Ves proudly patted her in the back. "Whenever Gloriana and I aren't around, she's in charge. Do you have a problem with that?"

Perhaps they didn't necessarily agree. After all, they were part of the proud Tovar Family that possessed a storied heritage in the Bright Republic. It was one thing to bend their heads to esteemed Journeymen such as Ves and Gloriana, but why should they let this woman boss them around?

Fortunately, Ketis knew exactly what she should do. She moved forward, displaying hints of her strong, athletic physique.

"If you think you're better than me, you're welcome to challenge me!" She grinned and cracked her knuckles as if spoiling for a fight!

Miles gulped. "We will defer to your teacher's arrangements. We are not familiar with how you work."

"Good!" Ves clapped his hand. "Let's begin the day by initiating you into our design team. Since we're currently engaged in some very important projects, we'll have to get you up to speed while we work."

Different from the Larkinson seeds, the people sent by the Tovar Family consisted of actual mech designers.

Due to their privileged backgrounds, each of them were bright and knowledgeable. At the very least, Ves was very pleased by their substantial foundation. Schools such as the DCTI never neglected this aspect.

The reasons why these Tovar mech designers failed to excel in their careers was because the competition was too cutthroat and numerous. A good foundation was not enough to excel in the market.

It didn't even matter if they had access to easy money from the Tovar Family. The mech company that Miles had founded would have been shuttered long ago if his family wasn't so generous. Like a zombie, his mech company perpetually existed in a state of undeath.

Money alone couldn't buy success.

Though Ves clearly knew that the Tovars could have sent better mech designers to him, he was very pleased with what he received.

These mediocre Tovar mech designers lacked the arrogance that he expected of their ilk. Having experienced the harshness of the mech industry which cared little about their backgrounds, they had long been humbled.

Lack of confidence did not make for good independent mech designers, but it was a different story now. Ves only required them to perform basic design tasks and tedious calculations.

The humbler his subordinates, the more obedient they became.

After the initial week, Miles and the other Tovars adjusted to their new roles as assistant mech designers.

With their considerable foundations, Ves did not have to tutor them too much to get them up to speed on how to perform a specific task.

Productivity, which initially plummeted due to the need to bring the Tovars up to speed, now exceeded the previous levels.

With more mech designers working on the same design projects, Ves and Gloriana tackled a lot more issues at the same time. They performed the most critical design work themselves while farming out the lesser work to their design team.

Previously, only Ketis was available to assist. As much as Ves favored her recent progress, she was just a single mech designer.

Adding five more mech designers to the mix made a qualitative difference. The design team which mainly existed in name for such a long time now took on a real identity.

Though Ves wasn't entirely adept at setting up and managing a design team from scratch, Gloriana possessed a lot more experience in working with a design team.

With her assistance, she made sure to develop the most perfect framework of rules and protocols for their design team.

The clear set of rules and guidelines gave the Tovars some much-needed direction. So long as they knew what was expected of them, they executed their responsibilities without any complaint.

The lab had become a lot more boisterous now that a lot of people started working here. The Tovar mech designers along with the Larkinson seeds that frequently visited here made Ves harken back to the time he'd been assigned to a design team of the Flagrant Vandals.

He briefly wondered how they were doing and whether Professor Velten was still alive.

"I haven't heard any news about the death of a Senior in the Bright Republic, so she's probably fine for now." Ves muttered.

He knew that she wasn't long for this reality, though. The loss of her youngest protege hit her hard. It would be difficult for her to raise a successor in the few years that she had left.

"I'll make sure I'll attend her funeral."

A few weeks more weeks passed by. The Militant Soldier and the Peaceful Soldier both reach the final phases. Once they entered the prototype testing phase of both projects, Ves and Gloriana were no longer as preoccupied.

They earned some much-needed reprieve.

As the Sand War raged on elsewhere, the two lovers cuddled up to each other in the gardens of the Cloud Estate.

"Our work is far from over, Ves. We still have another design project in store."

Ves tried to hold back his grimace. "I'm aware. Vincent Ricklin is scheduled to arrive in a week or so. He will be our next client."

"Are you still upset at this commission?"

"Let's just say I have mixed feelings about it." He sighed. "I don't have the best impression of this prick. The stunts he performed with the second mech I've fabricated in my career was almost enough to kill me or drive me out of business. He's also a

terrorist who readily consorts with other lowlives. It's tough for me to restrain my animosity towards Vincent for these reasons."

Gloriana leaned her head against his shoulders. "I can tell from your tone that you're not as upset anymore."

"Don't misunderstand me. I'm still upset. It's just that the crises taking place in this star sector has forced me to broaden my horizons. It's difficult for me to care about my petty grievances in the face of potential annihilation. The survival of the Bright Republic is a lot more important than my feelings."

"That's good, Ves. You're putting duty over selfishness."

"You're not entirely correct. I'm still following my own interests." He responded. "Helping the Bright Republic advances my own goals. I'll work with any devil or scumbag if it means I get ahead."

Their cats soon wandered over and climbed up on their laps. As they petted and cuddled with their pets, they enjoyed a wholesome moment with each other as the cloudy skies started to darken.

The recent departure of a fair amount of Larkinsons made the Cloud Estate a bit less cozy. Nonetheless, plenty of Larkinsons still remained, particularly the younger ones.

As they watched the children run around and play with each other, Ves and Gloriana couldn't help but smile and enjoy this peaceful moment.

"It's a shame that war will disrupt everyone's lives." Ves sighed.

"Humanity has never been at peace." Gloriana sagely responded. "If we aren't warring against ourselves, we're fighting against the countless alien races we've antagonized. The sandmen are the least of them, and already a lot of states have succumbed against their aggression."

Many people who lived in quiet states held the illusion that they lived in a time of peace. Yet the Age of Mechs was not as different from the Age of Conquest as everyone expected.

Under the facade of peace, the embers of war still stirred. Ves had a feeling that the Sand War was just a harbinger of what was to come.

Chapter 1607 Limited Scope

While the situation at the front continually deteriorated, the LMC constantly got better.

Sales of the Desolate Soldier and Holy Soldier were as high as ever. Under Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson's lead, the Prideful Soldier caught on very quickly and started selling like hot cakes.

The three predominant gangs of Bentheim bought them by the thousands while the lesser gangs tried their best to keep up!

If a gang did not possess a Prideful Soldier, then they weren't keeping up with the current trend!

With the Soldier product line receiving so much acclaim, it had become a must-have for every possible outfit!

Gangs and underground organizations from other regions were just starting to learn about the Prideful Soldier as well. Since the Prideful Soldier hadn't spread out as much, these customers only ordered a couple of copies at first to test the water.

Once they tested out the mechs themselves, Raymond believed that sales would soon explode.

"With the addition of your upcoming two variants, we have four different versions of the Soldier line in our current mech catalog." Raymond reported to Ves in the office. "Sales of our earlier models hasn't abated yet. As more and more mech buyers become aware of the importance of having their glows on the battlefield, demand has continued to rise beyond our means."

Ves looked up sharply at those words. "What do you mean by that, Raymond?"

"We don't have enough production capacity. Let alone our inhouse manufacturing, we haven't been able to contract enough third-party manufacturers to scale up our production capacity. It's becoming an increasingly more severe problem. I'm very concerned what will happen once you release your latest two models."

"I don't think you have to be concerned about choosing whether to sacrifice the production of one model over another." Ves reassured the elder. "The Mech Corps will produce their own Militant Soldiers while the Planetary Guard doubtlessly have their own solutions. The Ministry of Defense only requested me to design some mechs. They didn't say anything about producing them ourselves."

"Ah. If that is true, then many of my concerns are gone. It's just that the production of the Desolate Soldiers and the Prideful Soldiers has already reached a limit. Demand is rising, particularly in distressed states such as the Reinald Republic, but production capacity has become incredibly scarce. Everyone is in a rush to produce more mechs, starfighters, turrets, defensive platforms, ship components and anything else that can help resist the sandmen."

Ves furrowed his brows. This problem had been nagging at him for a while now.

"Will it help if we increase the remuneration in the contracts?"

Raymond shook his head. "It's not purely about the money anymore, young Ves. The government has suborned many mech companies through various means. Whether directly or indirectly, the state decides what to produce. For now, many officials are satisfied with the current production levels of the Soldier mechs in their states. It only takes a dozen or so Desolate Soldiers to cover hundreds of mechs with their encouraging glows."

"In other words, the prevailing doctrine is to use my Soldier mechs in a supporting capacity. Their combat power is not as important as their glows."

The higher ups weren't fools. They wanted to keep the Desolate Soldiers alive as long as possible to make maximum use of their glows as force multipliers!

In such a scenario, the Mech Corps and many outfits were inclined to treat the Desolate Soldiers in the opposite fashion of starfighters.

While starfighters expressly existed to attract sandman attacks, the Desolate Soldiers had to be preserved as much as possible!

In cases where the Desolate Soldiers were only available in small numbers, the mechs were prized to a ridiculous degree.

The increased demand and limited production weren't helping much either. While every customer managed to get at least one or two copies, it was far more difficult to fill out an entire mech company with the same mech model.

All in all, Ves became increasingly more disappointed that his mechs weren't being utilized in unison. He always believed that his products worked best when they combined their auras together.

Aside from sporadic cases in the Bright Republic, the only state which followed his intentions was the Ylvaine Protectorate.

Despite the many deficiencies of the Kronon Dynasty, they had done an admirable job in holding the line by putting their unflinching faith in the Holy Soldiers.

Of course, it also helped a lot that the Ylvaine Protectorate just happened to have a much narrower front to worry about.

Just like the Vesia Kingdom, the Ylvaine Protectorate was shaped like an oval. The main difference was that it was oriented 'upright' in the direction of the sandman invasion, so the Ylvainans dealt with fewer sandman invaders than the other states!

A lot of people cursed the Ylvainans for their luck. Who knew that the orientation of their territories mattered so much? The Vesians cursed the loudest of them all, regretting so much that their predecessors expanded the state in the wrong direction!

While Ves and Raymond discussed the problem for over half an hour, neither of them came up with a good solution to this problem.

"Some problems can't be solved no matter how much effort we put into addressing them." Raymond said in a resigned tone.

Ves shrugged and relaxed. "I'm not feeling too sorry about missing any further opportunities. The LMC is already doing extremely well for a mech company led by a Journeyman. It would be too disruptive if our company captures any more market share. As long as we don't step too much on the toes of others, they will be less inclined to oppose our business interests."

While Raymond had proven to be a competent executive in the LMC, he still carried some of the faults of the Larkinsons.

His horizons used to be a lot more narrow than before. The Larkinson Trust Fund he managed for so many years mainly amounted to babysitting a bunch of businesses and real estate on Rittersberg.

Such meager business activities did not expose Raymond to the higher levels of power. Ves still needed to remind Raymond to consider the political context of the LMC.

"I don't see why we need to pay too much attention to our position in the mech market." Raymond frowned in disagreement. "It's clear to everyone that our products are the most needed mechs in the Sand War. No matter how many we produce, we can always find a willing buyer. Think of the profits we can make!"

"What use is earning more bright credits when it's dropping in value by at least twenty percent a month? We're already spending money like drinking water. Also, just because the Tovar Family is sheltering us doesn't mean that we can act with impunity. There are four more founding families in the Bright Republic that will do everything they can to hinder us as long as we cross a certain line. Our Soldier mechs may be indispensable, but the LMC is not that important."

Routine talks with people like Leland and other voices slowly increased his awareness of the tenuous balance of power within the Bright Republic.

While the founding families didn't rule the Republic with iron fists, they still wielded a considerable amount of influence.

After he reminded Raymond to consider the reactions of other influences, Ves dismissed the Larkinson elder.

Another old Larkinson soon entered the office to talk about another initiative.

Clinton Larkinson strode forward in a slow, controlled gait. Though he looked like any other old Larkinson, Clinton was a veteran of two arduous wars.

All of those experiences left a lot of scars. At the end of the war that took place just before Ves was born, Clinton had become a crippled and disabled mech pilot.

Even with the generous medical treatment provided by the Mech Corps, Clinton still suffered from various issues.

It was because of Clinton's many experiences that Ves found it suitable to appoint him as the director of the Ves Larkinson Foundation of Wounded Veterans.

After all, how could he not put a wounded veteran in charge of a charity meant to heal wounded veterans?

So far, Ves had given Clinton a couple of weeks to assume his position and turn the foundation from an excuse to kidnap an expert pilot into an authentic non-profit organization.

"I have a problem, kid." Clinton began.

"I'm not a kid."

"Fine! I'll call you Ves, then. You're still a kid in my eyes."

Ves sighed and motioned his hand to the old veteran. "Get to the point. What problem do you want to address today?"

"Scope."

"Scope?"

"You heard what I said. Ever since I began to run this foundation of yours, I'm beginning to doubt your purpose for this organization."

"How so?"

"Because its scope is far too modest!" Clinton roared. "So far, we're only treating or funding the treatment of ten injured veterans while our budget easily allows us to treat hundreds of not thousands of distressed refugees!"

Though Ves did not like being roared at by his subordinate, it would be excessive to assert his authority to an honored war veteran.

He was used to the old dogs of the Larkinson Family acting however they liked. That was just who they are. Once they retired from the military, it was as if all of their respect for authority and decorum had melted away.

Besides, Clinton brought up a legitimate complaint.

"I don't want my foundation to bite more than it can chew. It has only existed for less than a month. While I'm sure that it can comfortably handle the treatment of ten or so beneficiaries, it will be very hard to manage the treatment of a hundred people. Do you even have enough staff on hand to keep track of their treatments?"

"I'm still in the process of beefing up our staff. At this point, I'm confident the foundation is capable of handling at least fifty beneficiaries. Give me half a year, and it's not impossible to assist a thousand beneficiaries at a time!"

Ves almost had a heart attack when he heard this huge figure!

"The foundation is not a hospital!"

"We can take over the burden from the state!"

"It's reckless if we expand too fast! People will inevitably die in our care!"

"People are already dying in droves due to lack of care! Have you seen how long the waiting lists are?! Too many bodies are being carted out from the farming settlements on this planet!"

Ves let out a deep breath. "I understand your desire to remedy this injustice, but we aren't the only saviors here. I'm more than willing to do my part, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. The foundation must grow and expand along the pace that I have set. Is that clear?"

Clinton looked a bit unwilling. He cared too much about the wounded veterans and refugees that were holed up in the farming settlement without access to the help they needed.

Yet what did their suffering matter to Ves? He only wanted the foundation to appear legitimate because he wanted to keep Davia Stark and any other possible treasures in his possession.

Beyond this goal, Ves didn't expect anything else from the foundation.

With all of the reputation, honor and prestige he accumulated so far, he did not value the reputation he could earn from becoming known as a generous philanthropist.

In fact, he considered the foundation to be a potential risk factor to his reputation. As long as people began to die under the auspices of his charity, a scandal could break out at any time!

The only way to minimize this risk was to treat as few beneficiaries as possible. If Ves could get away with treating just ten wounded veterans at a time, then he would gladly continue with this farce.

Unfortunately, the director that he selected to lead the foundation turned out to be a lot more sincere in his duties than anticipated.

Ves looked at Clinton's stubborn face with a glum expression. It appeared that he wouldn't be able to get away with shortchanging the foundation.

Chapter 1608 Ansel's Counterattack

A major took place before the release of the Militant Soldier and Peaceful Soldier models.

When Ves received the notification at the design lab, he halted his lecture and tuned in to the broadcast. Gloriana, Ketis, the Tovar mech designers and Larkinson seeds all stayed and watched as well.

Five illustrious mech designers appeared in projection form.

Miles Tovar immediately gasped. "Those are Ansel Seniors!"

Every mech designer from the Bright Republic immediately recognized the Seniors. Ves immediately grew serious as he realized the purpose of the press conference.

"They've developed their secret weapon long enough."

"Are you scared?" Gloriana leaned close and whispered.

Ves shook his head and smirked. "I'm never afraid of competition! In fact, I'd be depressed if there isn't any challenge in conquering the mech market!"

Perhaps other mech designers might not share the same sentiment, but Ves was very clear of the correct approach.

Only those who weren't confident enough in their own skill and ability wanted to reduce the competition!

In contrast, the giants of the mech design profession never shied away from competition. Even when they were young, they had the confidence to compete against mech designers who were hundreds of years older than them at the time!

When Ves turned around and observed the expressions of his design team, he could already tell who developed an ambitious mindset.

As expected, the Tovar mech designers and Larkinson seeds all gazed at the five Senior Mech Designers with worship and reverence.

The hierarchy of the mech design community was very clear! Wealth and background mattered less than personal accomplishments and pure ability!

Those who managed to rise to Senior were all great minds who designed great mechs! As the top-level design strength of the Bright Republic, these Ansel Seniors all enjoyed storied histories in their lengthy careers!

All of them had already designed mechs when Ves wasn't even born yet!

Of the entire design team, only Ketis and Gloriana kept their composure. Their confidence and ambition elevated them to another level.

Though they still respected Seniors, they believed they could surpass them one day!

Ves nodded in satisfaction at their responses. Even if they failed to live up to their ambitions, at the very least they pushed their potential as far as they could go. He could ask for nothing more.

As the Seniors worked their way through the introduction, Ves turned to Miles. "Ketis and Gloriana here aren't native to the Bright Republic. Please introduce these esteemed Seniors to them so they know their specialties."

Miles nodded. "All five Seniors are tenured professors of the Ansel University of Mech Design, the premier mech design university in Bentheim. In the center is Professor Caiden MacDonald, a specialist in spaceborn propulsion systems."

Professor MacDonald was over 150 years old and an established Senior in the local and regional mech community. He also happened to be a member of the Bentheim Mech Court.

"Professor Mimi Xu is the youngest Senior of the five and specializes in rapid-fire ballistic weapon systems."

The accomplishments of Professor Xu were pretty impressive at just 80 years old. She not only designed good mechs, but also excelled in designing practical ballistic rifles to maximize the firepower of her products.

"Professor Nimor Taphouse is a specialist in ablative armor systems. His mechs are always popular because his customers have greater assurance in surviving battles."

Though not the cheapest, many local mech designers licensed Professor Taphouse's self-developed armor systems. Not only did they offer all-round protection, their formulas all drew on materials and exotics that were easily sourced in the Bright Republic.

"Professor Petrus Summit is the most obscure Senior among the five. He specializes in neural responsiveness. It's said his products are some of the smoothest and natural mechs you can pilot."

His specialty immediately made it clear that he was one of the few mech designers who received MTA approval to develop neural interfaces.

Mech athletes and mech duelists loved his products. In a small, competitive arena environment, the responsiveness of a mech mattered a lot to mech pilots who depended on their skill rather than the quality of their mechs to win a match.

"Lastly, Professor Ivy Miller is a specialist in cockpit design. Her cockpits are some of the most reliable lifesavers on the battlefields."

On her own, Professor Miller might not be able to design great mechs. Yet Ves did not belittle her for her narrow specialty at all because he knew she was an incredibly popular collaboration partner!

Any mech that involved her always became more popular because they combined the specialties of others with the safety afforded by Professor Miller's cockpits.

Ves already made a preliminary judgement about the mech the Seniors collaborated on based on their specialty combination.

"It sounds like these Ansel Seniors are serious in competing against our Soldier line." Gloriana remarked after she digested the introduction. "The mech design they are about to introduce will not only feature great performance, but also offer great advantages to mech pilots."

In other words, the Ansel Seniors clearly intended to dethrone the Desolate Soldier by offering something different.

It was impossible for Ansel to design a mech that shared the same advantages as the products designed by Ves. Instead, they pooled their own advantages together to design a mech that offered different benefits.

This was the right way to compete against his products. There wasn't any way that other mech designers could replicate the glow of his mechs so long as Ves maintained his monopoly on spiritual components.

The press conference quickly moved on to the main event. The curtains drew back on the stage, revealing three different imposing mechs.

Ves and his design team leaned in and studied their characteristics.

"What fearsome mechs." Ves quietly gasped.

The quality of the three mechs impressed him a lot! The degree of optimization was so high that even Gloriana looked impressed! The Ansel Seniors hadn't spent their time in vain!

A spotlight shone over the mech in the center, causing its reflective coating to shine resplendently.

"Let me introduce to you the Dawnbreaker!" Professor MacDonald proudly announced.

This was the base model that the Seniors designed from scratch!

"The Dawnbreaker is the culmination of our collective efforts. It is a midrange, spaceborn rifleman mech design that is designed from the ground up to serve as the backbone of our resistance. Each and every aspect is completely dedicated towards fighting the myriad configurations of sandmen! We have incorporated all of the lessons our state has learned into making our product the best all-round solution against even the trickiest sandman opponents!"

The professor went on to describe the technical specifications of the Dawnbreaker design. A projection appeared that listed the full specs.

Ves gasped yet again at how well its individual parameters scored.

"Thanks to Professor Taphouse, we have equipped our Dawnbreaker design with a newly-developed ablative armor system that works extremely well against the energy weapons employed by the sandmen. By employing a combination of compressed ablative armor plating and thick internal structure that pushes the cockpit further to the rear, the mech pilot stands a good chance to survive a direct, head-on heavy laser strike according to our tests and simulations!"

Ves sat up straight when he heard that! While the advanced sandman configuration dominated the news, regular sandman fleets led by inexperienced sandman admirals still accounted for the vast majority of intrusions.

It didn't sound like the Dawnbreaker could remain functional after getting hit by a heavy laser strike.

It didn't need to be. If a reasonably-priced mech was able to preserve the life of a mech pilot in the event of a head-on heavy laser strike, then this product would doubtlessly be popular!

MacDonald continued on by highlighting the cockpit. "The life of a precious mech pilot is further guaranteed with Professor Miller's exclusive cockpit for the Dawnbreaker line. Not only does it excel in absorbing and bleeding any heat or energy damage, it is also remarkably swift in flying back to safety."

The appeal of this was obvious to many potential mech buyers. Due to the recent war against the Vesians, the Bright Republic didn't have enough mech pilots. The more their lives could be preserved, the better off their state would be after several months of arduous fighting.

None of the states resisting the sandmen could afford to run out of mech pilots, especially those serving in the military!

Many examples already proved that without a solid backbone of military mech pilots, a defensive force was prone to losing heart and running away!

Not even the glows of the Desolate Soldiers could restrain them from saving their own skins!

"While the Dawnbreaker offers a lot of protection, it is not short on mobility either." MacDonald continued. "I have lent my own expertise in this project, working around the clock to develop the most optimal flight system for the Dawnbreaker's frame!"

The flight system was fairly good. It offered a good balance of acceleration and efficiency. It was just fast enough to keep up with the pace of most battles against the sandmen without offering anything more.

Any excess acceleration and power would drastically decrease the efficiency of the flight system.

"Professor Xu has graciously designed a ballistic rifle that deals more damage against sandman opponents while occupying less space. The secret behind this extraordinary result is the new ballistic shell she designed in partnership with several different research institutions on Bentheim! The shell sacrifices penetration power, which is mainly useful against mechs, for much greater shock and concussion damage, which is far more useful against the sandmen!"

As someone who recently acquired Ballistic Weapon Optimization IV from the System, Ves fully realized the brilliance of the new ballistic rifle and accompanying shells.

"For the good of the Bright Republic, the Ansel University of Mech Design will also make the Sandbreaker ballistic weapon system available for standalone licensing. We

sincerely hope that every rifleman mech converts to Professor Xu's excellent rifle and ordnance so that we can fully maximize our firepower against the sandmen!"

This was the weapon system that everyone had been waiting for!

Ves regretted that he hadn't been able to come up with his own version of this concept. If not for his lack of time and his preoccupation with designing variants, he could have offered something similar.

Of course, Ves knew very well that it would have been a waste of time. Professor Xu was a full-fledged Senior who based her whole design philosophy around ballistic weapons.

Even if Ves acquired enough knowledge to design a good ballistic rifle, he lacked the esoteric toolbox that Professor Xu developed to give her ballistic rifle systems an edge.

"Finally, we cannot leave out Professor Summit's contribution to the neural interface of our Dawnbreaker design. We know that a split-second decision can make a huge difference on the battlefield. Rest assured that our Dawnbreaker is far more responsive and intuitive to pilot than any of our previous mechs!"

Ves smirked at that. He knew more than most that there were limits on what mech designers could do with neural interfaces. Responsiveness was just one of many factors that affected the strength that mech pilots could exert. It was mainly prized by higher-skilled mech pilots.

The Desolate Soldier targeted a different audience from the Dawnbreaker.

The latter was clearly aimed at mech pilots who already specialized in piloting rifleman mechs.

This was different from the Desolate Soldier, which Ves designed from the start to be cheap, accessible and easy to pilot.

Many of his customers who previously specialized in piloting landbound mechs or melee mechs had already successfully transitioned to fighting against the sandmen in space with a rifle.

Yet no matter how well the Desolate Soldier appealed to lower-skilled mech pilots, the true professionals desired something more.

The Dawnbreaker designed by Ansel just happened to fill the gaping void that Ves had neglected.

"What a well-positioned mech." Ves sighed yet again.

The Dawnbreaker offered considerable advantages in offense, defense and mobility. While it was at least twice as expensive as the Desolate Soldier, it was quite cost-effective. Ansel priced the Dawnbreaker at a range that was well within the tolerance of the mech market!

Chapter 1609 Competitive Spiri

Professor MacDonald of the Ansel University of Mech Design confidently highlighted some of the key innovations and solutions of their Dawnbreaker design.

The Ansel Seniors weren't afraid of copycats. At their heights, few could beat them in their own specialties.

Ves knew for certain that — in his current state — he had no hope of designing a mech that outperformed the Dawnbreaker in all of its aspects.

He could never design a better flight system than Professor MacDonald.

He could never design a better ballistic weapon system than Professor Xu.

He could never design a better armor system than Professor Taphouse.

He could never design a better neural interface than Professor Summit.

He could never design a better cockpit than Professor Miller.

As a mech design that combined the specialties of five renowned Seniors, the Dawnbreaker offered an extremely compelling set of advantages that not even Masters could replicate by themselves!

The abstruse effects of all of the design philosophies applied to this midrange mech design must have stuffed it full. In fact, Ves bet that interference and loss of efficiency probably reduced the strength of each Senior's individual specialty to a degree.

It didn't matter. The whole was greater than the sum of its parts. The Dawnbreaker possessed just enough advantages in many different aspects that the total package was exceptionally well positioned to function as the protagonist of the Sand War!

As for the Desolate Soldier, its mediocre performance and its supportive functions relegated it to the role of a supporting character.

Ves grimaced once he realized the devious strategy behind the Dawnbreaker.

"Looks like we're in trouble, Ves." Gloriana grinned as if she completely didn't mind this development. "While our Soldier mechs are still secure in their own roles, the

Dawnbreaker threatens to upstage our work and suck up all of the publicity we've enjoyed so far. It's not something we can counteract in the short term."

He had the confidence to beat any design that attempted to challenge his Soldier line directly.

Yet this oblique thrust the Ansel Seniors had come up with was much harder to deal with to Ves.

Neither of their products competed against each other directly. Just as Ves focused on standing out in the market by relying on his strengths, the Ansel mech designers each focused on adding their own advantages to their collaborative mech design.

"It's fine." Ves eventually sighed. "While it's true that we can't compete directly against the Dawnbreaker, we don't have to compete against their strong points in the first place. What truly matters is to design a mech that best meets the demand of the market. These Ansel Seniors are wise enough to focus on the value proposition of their work."

"What do you mean by that?" Ketis asked in confusion.

"If we ever want to challenge the Dawnbreaker design, we shouldn't look to beat it in the parameters that it is strong in, such as its weapon system, its armor system, its propulsion system and so on." Gloriana lectured to Ketis and the rest of the design team. "Competing against specialists in the area of their strengths is never a good idea. The only result of our efforts will be a pale and uninspired imitation that doesn't reflect our design philosophies at all."

Ves nodded in agreement. "Just the Sandbreaker ballistic weapon system is something that we can't surpass on our own. From the introduction so far, this is an amazing solution that clearly surpasses the ballistic rifle that we've designed for the Desolate Soldier. Right now, I'm seriously considering whether I should procure a license."

That caused the Tovar mech designers to look at Ves in surprise. Their family never had a good relationship with the AUMD. Instead, the Tovars favored the DCTI and other institutions that were far more aligned to the central government.

"Does it sound strange to you that I'm willing to procure a license for the Sandbreaker weapon system?" Ves declared after he saw the reaction he evoked. "You shouldn't be. As a professional, you should recognize your own strengths and shortcomings. While I can design a decent ballistic rifle if needed, I'm not as passionate about it as Professor Mimi Xu. She deserves genuine acclaim for developing what is arguably the most effective ballistic shell against the sandmen!"

Gloriana concurred. "Don't let your feelings color your judgement. Professional mech designers must have the awareness to channel their competitive nature in the right direction. How would you go about competing against the Dawnbreaker, Ves?"

"I would probably decide to design a midrange mech that is close to matching the performance of the Dawnbreaker. My new work doesn't have to surpass the Dawnbreaker in performance, but it absolutely must offer a higher value proposition. In order to do that despite my many advantages, I'll have to work hard to impart my mech designs with an exceptional glow!"

"You hear that, little ones? That's the proper way to compete against a fellow mech designer!"

"What if you license the Dawnbreaker and add a glow to it?" Miles proposed. "As long as your variant retains the same strengths as the base model while benefiting from your characteristic specialty, won't it be a superior product?"

Ves and Gloriana glanced at each other and shook their heads.

"You used to be an independent mech designer, right? Have you ever thought about progressing by upstaging your competitors by borrowing their own mech designs?"

An awkward silence ensued.

"While it's a valid response, it's not a proper one." Ves sagely spoke. "Variants are derivatives of other people's works. They don't fully reflect your own efforts. If you can only compete in the market by borrowing from the success of other mech designers, where does that leave you? In a decade or two, your rivals who diligently designed their own mechs have progressed much further while you've stagnated because you haven't accumulated any practice and experience in designing mechs from scratch!"

All of the junior mech designers got caught up in the high-mindedness of his argument. Miles looked particularly inspired!

"Trying to upstage a rival by developing a variant of their own work is a dead end. Do you think you understand them better than their own designer? If I licensed the Dawnbreaker, I don't think I'll understand at least twenty percent of what is going on in the design! I don't have the knowledge base and specializations to decipher all of their properties, let alone tweak them in a way that suits my purposes better!"

"Besides, regardless who designs a better mech, the original mech designer will never lose! A portion of the money that the LMC can earn from selling a possible variant of the Dawnbreaker will flow in the pockets of those Ansel mech designers!"

"Ah."

Hopefully, this was sufficient to suppress any improper suggestions.

As long as his rivals played by the rules, Ves did not feel inclined to bring out his dirty bag of tricks.

It was a different story if Ansel crossed a line.

"The press conference isn't over yet. Pay attention."

Once Professor MacDonald finished presenting the Dawnbreaker design, the spotlight finally fell to the mechs standing beside the mech in the center.

"The Dawnbreaker is our principal commercial mech design, but certainly not our only one. We have concurrently developed two variants of this fine mech to suit different needs."

The mech placed to the left looked less impressive than the base model. Ves could immediately tell that its armor system simply wasn't as good.

"The Duskbreaker design is our budget solution to those who require a more affordable solution. While it lacks the compressed armor system of its base model, the Duskbreaker is still a significantly more resilient mech than comparable machines in the market!"

That was an indirect thrust against the Desolate Soldier. Ves could already judge that while the Duskbreaker was a budget mech, it was still a few million credits more expensive than his own work.

Was it any surprise that its armor was tougher than the armor of a cheaper mech?

Unfortunately, the price difference was small enough that most customers would probably group them in the same category. That was to say, if a mech buyer didn't care about a glow, they would vastly prefer to buy a Duskbreaker!

"Don't be fooled by the affordable price tag of our Duskbreaker mechs." The centenarian Senior continued. "In almost every other aspect, it is identical to the Dawnbreaker. Only a minimal amount of cost adjustments have been made to ensure that a mech pilot that is used to piloting a Dawnbreaker will immediately feel at home in the cockpit of a Duskbreaker! To smaller outfits that can only afford to buy a limited number of Dawnbreakers, a Duskbreaker makes for an excellent spare to keep in reserve!"

That sounded like a fairly brilliant arrangement to Ves. Even if an outfit didn't have enough space in their carriers to bring any spares, they could still transfer their best mech pilots to a lesser but highly similar machine if they lost their primary mechs.

The spotlight faded from the left mech and intensified on the right mech.

This one was clearly an upgraded version of the base model. Not only that, Ves and the design team immediately widened their eyes as they recognized some faint similarities to the Militant Soldier!

"This variant is our tribute to the Bright Republic's Mech Corps! The Novabreaker is our premium solution to the needs of our military! Not only does it perform better than its base model in every aspect, its armor system is vastly more resilient against the rapid-fire lasers that the sandmen are increasingly favoring!"

The Novabreaker, coated in pearlescent cobalt coating, clearly looked the most magnificent of all! The Ansel mech designers clearly hadn't neglected to compete against Ves in terms of visual flair!

His blood couldn't help but boil when he saw this mech design. The reaction from mech pilots, particularly those in the military, must probably be even stronger!

This was a mech that was worthy enough to serve as the steeds of true soldiers!

Gloriana clicked her tongue at the sight of this impressive military mech design. "This Novabreaker has come at a very bad time for us. It's a direct competitor of our Militant Soldier design!"

Not only that, but they hadn't published the Militant Soldier yet! Even though they were just a week away from completing the tests and putting the finishing touches on the variant, the fact was that the Novabreaker was one step ahead!

The quality of the Novabreaker design and the reputation of the Ansel Seniors was enough to ensure that it would enjoy a great amount of momentum in the Mech Corps!

Many mech regiments which were still on the fence on what kind of mainstay they should adopt in the Sand War.

Ves had intentions to convert at least some of them to his Militant Soldier. Yet just as he was about to reveal the culmination of his efforts, the Ansel geezers stole the thunder that was meant for him by announcing their Novabreaker first!

The first-mover advantage they managed to capture was extremely strong! Ves was sure that a lot of mech officers who learned about the fantastic Novabreaker model would immediately start discussing whether they should procure it for their own mech regiments.

If the Militant Soldier wasn't released during their deliberations, then Ves missed a significant opportunity to increase his influence in the Mech Corps!

As Professor MacDonald wrapped up his presentation, Ves sighed and slumped in his chair.

"What a great counterattack!"

"Are you mad?" Gloriana softly asked.

"Ha!" Ves grinned as his eyes burned with competitive spirit. "I'm not! If Ansel thinks they've managed to press me down, then they're sorely mistaken! The Sand War won't end so soon. We still have plenty of time left to design other mechs. Besides, the Desolate Soldier still enjoys an unassailable position in the mech markets!"

"Mmhmm. I think it's kind of silly that Ansel is targeting you in the first place. Don't you think it's absurd that the only way they can compete against a pair of Journeymen is to combine the efforts of five established Seniors?"

"Hahaha! That means they're scared!"

The LMC was not going to rest on its laurels. The Soldier product line was just the start of a new era in its history! Ves had many more ideas in store to elevate his mech company to the forefront of the mech market!

Chapter 1610 Fade to Darkness

Just as Ves expected and Ansel anticipated, the bombastic release of the Dawnbreaker and its variants sucked up all of the attention for the remainder of the week!

While Ves and his design team were still in the process of finalizing the designs of the Militant Soldier and Peaceful Soldier, the entire Ansel alumni network spared no effort to promote and publicize their new standard bearers!

The power and influence of the Ansel alumni network turned out to be quite dreadful!

Not only did many Ansel mech designers leverage their close connections to the media, they also pooled a considerable amount of production capacity to output as many Breaker mechs as possible during this initial period of exposure!

It seemed that one of the reason why the LMC could no longer expand its production capacity was because Ansel already secured agreements with many third-party manufacturers.

With the formal release of the Breaker product line, those production facilities immediately went to work!

Thousands of Dawnbreakers and Duskbreakers quickly entered the market.

The highly-anticipated Sandbreaker weapon system also made a huge splash in the mech community!

The mechs soon earned a lot of praise from authoritative mech reviewers. It was hard not to fall in love with these high-performing mechs!

Not only did they offer excellent performance at their price points, they also incorporated most of the lessons of the Sand War into their designs.

Almost every mech design released earlier in the Sand War mainly assumed that the sandmen would predominantly attack the Bright Republic in their basic fleet configuration.

While this assumption wasn't entirely wrong, the latest developments at the front showed that there was still a role for more expensive and resilient mechs.

Now that Starfighters took on the role of cannon fodder, the lives of professional mech pilots had to be preserved as best as possible.

The Starfighter Corps wasn't able to resist the sandmen by itself!

Starfighter pilots lacked the fortitude to endure arduous battles while their flimsy spacecraft shattered too easily against more formidable sandman fleets!

For these reasons, the true strength of the Bright Republic always rested on its mechs!

Though Ves had earned a lot of acclaim for his Soldier product line, so far he hadn't strayed from designing a cheap, affordable and disposable mech!

Even the Militant Soldier, which was at least twice as expensive as its base model, was still a relatively affordable midrange mech design!

A significant gap in performance existed between the Militant Soldier and the Novabreaker designs. Although there was a significant cost difference as well, the Mech Corps generally did not pay attention to the price!

It would have been a slightly different story if Ves had not rejected one of the suggestions of the Ministry of Defense.

The Worthy Soldier would have been able to upstage the Novabreaker, Ves was sure. As a military variant geared towards elites, he was confident that it could surpass the Novabreaker in might due to its excellent materials!

Even if Ves wasn't as good as the Seniors in their specialties, relying on more expensive exotics was the most direct way to surpass an excellent design!

Unfortunately, Ves refused to invest his time in the Worthy Soldier. If he could turn back the clock, he still would have made the same decision.

"I don't have enough time." He whispered.

Once he published the Militant Soldier and Peaceful Soldier designs, he had no further intentions to expand the Soldier product line.

With one base model, four commercial variants and one custom mech in the form of the Resentful Soldier, Ves was incredibly tired of working on the same concepts for the last couple of months.

Deep within his heart, his burning passion urged him to discover new ideas and innovate new solutions!

This was the heart of a true mech designer!

While Ves was very proud of what he achieved with his Soldier product line, he was not the sort of mech designer who enjoyed retreading his old successes.

Halting too long after a single success was no different from stagnating. If Ves wanted to keep his passion alive, he needed to get back in the saddle and pursue new challenges.

His overarching goal wasn't to earn a lot of money or earn a lot of acclaim from designing a single successful mech design!

No, he set his sights much higher! If he wanted to make any progress towards fulfilling his ambitions, then he had to resist as many comforts as possible!

While Ves greeted the release of the Breaker product line with confident acceptance, the LMC adopted an entirely different reaction!

Everyone in the LMC knew that the good times might not last much longer! Even though their Soldier product line was still indispensable in the battlefield, it couldn't fulfill every role!

At the very least, Ves had no good answer to the demand of an excellent midrange spaceborn rifleman mech.

During a morning meeting between Ves, Raymond, Gavin and Calsie, the four discussed the impact of the Breaker line to the LMC.

"The Ansel mech designers and their new works are in the limelight right now." Gavin reported. "It's incredibly difficult to insert any mention of the Desolate Soldier or Proudful Soldier in the local media."

"This only applies to the Bright Republic, right?" Ves proposed.

"Correct. Ansel is always highly oriented towards the Bright Republic. Both the Dawnbreaker and the Duskbreaker are clearly designed to conform to Brighter tradition.

However, that doesn't mean that Ansel doesn't have any foreign presence. Various players in states like the Reinald Republic have already signalled their intentions to order batches running in the thousands!"

Just because Ansel was kind of stuck up didn't mean that it only had eyes for the Bright Republic. Senior Mech Designers generally enjoyed a considerable amount of success in other markets.

Many mech buyers didn't actually pay too much attention to the origin or background of the mech designers. They simply wanted to obtain a mech that best fulfilled their needs.

Who cared if the designer of their chosen mech came from the Bright Republic or the Reinald Republic?

They only wanted the best!

While Ves oriented the LMC towards foreign markets much sooner than normal, pretty much every Senior already expanded their reach long ago. Their rank and reputation alone was enough to allow them access into any open market that did not reject foreign competition.

That reminded Ves of something. "What is the response from the Ylvaine Protectorate?"

Calsie answered with a smirk. "Their initial impressions are lukewarm. While Ansel purposefully shipped a batch of Dawnbreakers and Duskbreakers to the Protectorate, most Ylvainans have flatly pushed them aside. According to the Ylvainans, compared to our Holy Soldiers, the Ansel mechs are completely faithless!"

The four of them laughed.

"It's understandable that Ansel failed to break into to the Ylvainan mech market." Raymond remarked. "While I haven't visited the state in person, I've read the internal reports to know that they have very strange tastes. Ansel has not made any effort to conform their products to the local circumstances."

Right now, the Holy Soldier enjoyed an invincible position in the Ylvaine Protectorate. Though the Dawnbreaker fulfilled a role that the cheaper and more inferior Holy Soldier couldn't match, not a single Ylvainan mech pilot preferred to pilot a mech without faith!

"From what I understand, the Ylvainans are already piloting midrange mechs designed by their own Seniors. The Ylvainans need to have a very good reason to resort to a foreign mech." Gavin added. "In fact, I've heard that there is another reason the Ylvainans have rejected the Dawnbreaker and Duskbreaker models."

"Oh?" Ves raised his eyebrow.

"It's in their names! Of all the possible ways the Ansel mech designers could name their products, making a reference to the motion of stars is one of the worst possible ways to appeal to the Ylvainans!"

Realization struck through Ves. He couldn't help but erupt into laughter.

"HAHAHAHAHA! Dawnbreaker! Duskbreaker! Novabreaker! They're all related to stars!"

This turned out to be an incredibly unfortunate coincidence.

Of course, Ves guessed that Ansel probably didn't care about the Protectorate mech market in the first place. It was fine for them to ignore strange mech markets that pose unusual demands.

Gavin stopped smiling when he said the next words. "Unfortunately, the same reason why the Ylvaine Protectorate has rejected the Breaker line is also the reason why the Star Faith Collective has embraced the new models! Preorders are already through the roof if my sources are accurate. While they haven't adopted the Dawnbreaker and Duskbreaker as extensively as the Ylvaine Protectorate has adopted the Holy Soldier, it's still a very lucrative opportunity."

Ves nodded in understanding. While the Duskbreaker was pretty affordable, the same could not be said for the Dawnbreaker. If Ansel wanted to upstage Ves, then they needed to make their sales figure as impressive as possible.

"How is the Novabreaker catching on in the Mech Corps?" He asked.

"There has been a lot of discussion about the Novabreaker at every level of the Mech Corps." Raymond answered. "I won't lie to you. A lot of mech pilots are looking forward to piloting the Novabreaker. Just its ability to safeguard the life of a mech pilot in event of getting hit by a heavy laser strike is enough to turn it into a highly desirable model!"

As a Larkinson elder, Raymond was frequently in touch with his grandson Tusa and the older generations of Larkinsons serving in the Mech Corps. This turned out to be an excellent boon for Ves, who lacked direct connections to the armed forces.

"Boss, can your Militant Soldier do the same?"

Ves shook his head. "No."

"Can't you just change it to make it so that it matches the Novabreaker in this quality?"

"Don't you think I've considered this option as well? I've rejected it because it does not conform to my vision of the Militant Soldier. It is principally a military version of the Desolate Soldier that shares the exact same glow as the base model. That way, the Mech Corps doesn't have to rely on third-party outfits to benefit from my glows."

"That.. sounds stupid."

Ves could only smile in response. "It's not worth it to delay the Militant Soldier project by at least a month. I have to throw away a lot of work and develop a way of matching the efforts of Professor Taphouse and Professor Miller without letting the total cost of my mech run out of control."

Raymond concurred with Ves. "While it's a shame, I think that Ves has made the right decision. The Desolate Soldier, Holy Soldier and Prideful Soldier have sold extremely well. They are the LMC's pride and joy. I think we can afford to suffer a couple of misses. In any case, I don't think the Militant Soldier will only exist in the archives. There is always a demand for our glows."

"Don't forget about the Peaceful Soldier." Calsie added in a hopeful tone. "The Planetary Guard has long been hankering for a landbound version that is suitable to be employed in a law enforcement capacity. With all the attention we're placing on the competition between the Militant Soldier and the Novabreaker, I think that some of you have forgotten that Ansel hasn't come up with an answer to this variant!"

That was true.

"Thank you for the reminder, Calsie. According to the reports I've read, the Planetary Guard organizations are salivating for the Peaceful Soldier model. I'm not about to disappoint them. I'm pretty proud of what Gloriana and I managed to accomplish within a limited amount of time."

As the discussion went on, it became clear to all of the participants that the Soldier product line was not about to fall into darkness anytime soon.

However, the magnificence of the Dawnbreaker and its variants was undeniable. In the long term, Ansel could ride the wave of momentum and gain even greater stature in the regional mech community.

If the LMC kept its head down and failed to attract any attention in the coming months, then the company and its products would slowly fade away from everyone's awareness.

While this was not a fatal consequence, Ves did not wish to see his Desolate Soldiers turn into background pieces!