

# Mech 1611

## *Chapter 1611 The Other War*

In a bedroom transformed into a luxurious refuge, Gloriana calmly sat in front of a mirror projection as a couple of beauty bots treated her hair and applied makeup.

She needed to be in her best appearance at all times. She could never allow Ves to see her in a less-than-perfect state!

As Gloriana calmly waited for the bots to complete their work, Melody reported the latest situation from home.

"The advantage that our Hegemony has gained in the Komodo War is spent. While Operation K has given us a considerable advantage in initiative and morale, it also shocked the Coalition into forming a unified response. We didn't expect the partners of the Coalition to set aside their grudges and unite as extensively as appears to be the case."

"Can you give me an example, Melody?"

"Perhaps the most far-reaching example is the Gauge Dynasty's extensive willingness to support the beleaguered Carnegie Group and Vermeer Group. Despite Gauge's remoteness from the front, it has not shied away from supporting the two groups with financial aid and military aid. More and more mech divisions of their Sundered Phalanx are reinforcing the frontlines every day."

The unwelcome news caused Gloriana to grow unsettled. "That's outside of the predictions I've read. Aren't the Fridaymen supposed to be squabbling boys who will continue to argue with each other even if their state is falling apart around them? Isn't Gauge the most unliked and uncharitable partner of the Coalition?"

The distribution of territory of the Friday Coalition resembled a round pie. The slices occupied by Carnegie and Vermeer pressed squarely against the border with the Hexadric Hegemony.

Due to this unfavorable arrangement, the two groups always endured stifled development. Many investors and citizens were reluctant to commit too much in their territories because their assets and their lives would immediately be at risk in the event of a cataclysmic war between the two giants of the star sector!

In contrast, the Gauge Dynasty happened to be placed on the opposite side of Coalition space. If the Hexers ever advanced into enemy territory, Gauge would be the last one to knock down.

For this reason, the Gauge Dynasty always enjoyed the highest development. Its favorable position caused it to grow into the strongest partner.

"The rulers of the Gauge Dynasty may be selfish, but they aren't stupid." Melody sighed. "Apparently, the Coalition partners have already formed some secret deals that our spies haven't managed to uncover. While we haven't been able to figure out the details, some of the results are already evident. Their militaries are showing increasingly more signs of meshing into one, unified organization that answers to an overarching central command."

"That.. sounds as if they are copying us. Aren't they supposed to be distrusting towards each other?"

"We've underestimated the Fridaymen. They made a good show of exaggerating their internal divisions. Our biases towards the Coalition reinforced our assumptions that the Fridaymen would continue to be distrustful towards each other even as they are fighting us off. It turns out they managed to fool all of our spies and analysts."

This was a grave error on the part of the Hexers. Gloriana's face turned ugly as she realized the importance of Melody's remarks.

Before Gloriana set foot out of the Hegemony and became exposed to a different culture, she always held a dismissive attitude to boys.

She easily understood how most of the Hexers she knew back home had a tendency to look down on the Coalition. Though the Fridaymen did not explicitly discriminate by gender, the Coalition was mainly led by men, perhaps as a response against the ideology of their biggest rival.

"How will the war proceed now that the Fridaymen appear to be coming together?"

Melody looked uncertain. "I'm not versed in military matters, so I can't say. At the very least, we won't be able to sweep Coalition space within a few years anymore. The Komodo War will likely devolve into a prolonged slugfest between two giants. The frontlines will turn into meat grinders which constantly consume more mechs. The side which is not able to persist will falter first."

One of the goals of Operation K was to convey the Hegemony an immediate advantage in the outbreak of the Komodo War. The Hexers hoped that the devastating results of the operation would put the Coalition on the backfoot.

Along with the expected internal discord among the partners, the Hegemony expected to convert their initial advantage into a considerable amount of momentum that magnified their early gains.

The more advantages the Hegemony gained at the start, the greater the likelihood of maintaining the upper hand throughout the course of the war.

Unfortunately, the Coalition recovered faster and coordinated more extensively than expected. The rapid reinforcements from the Gauge Dynasty and other partners stabilized the frontlines, stalling the Hegemony to the point where it lost its momentum!

"Attrition warfare." Gloriana curled her lips into a frown. "How barbaric."

Having witnessed the brutality of the Sand War in the Bright Republic, Gloriana quickly understood how bloody the conflict could get if it reached this stage.

Without a killer weapon, sudden betrayal or other change in circumstances, the winner of the Komodo War would probably be weakened to an incredible degree.

"Has mother sent any instructions?"

"Madame Constance has not sent any new instructions as of late. The war demands all of her attention. While the Scimitar System is unlikely to be at risk, there is a lot of unrest at home due to the sacrifices the citizens need to make to support our war effort."

This was the war that decided the ultimate victor in the Komodo Star Sector. The Hexers could not afford to hold back if they wanted to come out as the victor. The living standards of every Hexer decreased as the state entered into a war footing.

Many luxuries and conveniences became scarce as the production of consumer goods made way for the production of armaments.

"The situation will grow worse over time."

"Now that the war has entered a different trajectory, our circumstances here will change as well. For now, the Fridaymen aren't inclined to meddle with us on account of the Sand War. However, the status quo won't hold forever."

Gloriana looked at her mirror projection with determination as she inspected the work of her beauty bots. As always, the expensive bots had done fine work.

"It appears my previous merits won't be sufficient to sustain my leave." She concluded.

"That is so. Madame Constance will insist on your return before the situation here becomes too dire. The Glory Battalion already received instructions to escort you home within three years."

"I can take care of myself!" Gloriana burst out! "I'm a Journeyman! Just like Ves, I'm more than capable enough to depend on myself!"

"Your mother worries for you, Gloriana. Your brothers and sisters are also concerned."

"Well, we aren't here just to sightsee and room with Ves. How is our other mission coming along?"

"Not very well. Our investigation is still ongoing. I will update you if there are any new developments."

Gloriana idly nodded. She wasn't very optimistic that they could complete the additional mission. Unfortunately, if she didn't accept this responsibility, the Hegemony wouldn't have let her go at this sensitive time.

An idea suddenly sparked within her mind. "You know, maybe there is another way we can contribute to the war effort."

"Do tell."

"Seeing as how the Soldier mechs are pivotal in stabilizing the fighting forces of the states involved in the Sand War, what if we designed a mech that can give our side an edge at the front?"

Melody frowned. "The Hegemony has always been very strict in which mech models are allowed to be deployed at the front. You're not qualified to submit a design to the panel of Masters, let alone Ves."

The Hexadric Hegemony had always been a centralized state. Though the individual dynasties ruled their own individual territories, the state maintained a strong power.

The centralization of power extended to the military of the Hegemony. The Hex Army placed a heavy emphasis on standardization and uniformity. By utilizing the same mechs, doctrines and standards, the Hex Army benefited enormously from interchangeability and economies of scale.

In order to prevent the Hex Army from gaining too many vulnerabilities, each military mech model had to be vetted extensively by a panel of Masters.

This was an extremely strict demand that prevented most mech designers from contributing their own designs. Only well-established Seniors and Masters had a realistic chance of gaining approval for their work.

This impassable hurdle formed an enormous hindrance to Gloriana. "You've witnessed the power of Ves' glows in person. Don't you agree that it can be a major help to us in the frontlines?"

"You're not wrong." Melody reluctantly admitted. "I am beginning to see why you are infatuated with Mr. Larkinson. Even if he is a boy, his specialization is very unique. It's unfortunate that he isn't a fellow Hexer."

Another idea suddenly came to mind to Gloriana. "The Hex Army isn't the only force that is fighting on behalf of our state! There are many irregular units assisting our main forces!"

While the lack of diversity and versatility was a major shortcoming of the Hex Army, it was not the only entity participating in the war.

Various dynasties volunteered a portion of their household troops to the war effort. Strong Hexer mercenary corps also contributed to the war by accepting government contracts.

"It won't work." Melody shook her head. "Usually, these secondary forces are prohibited from deploying in the hot zones of the war. The Hex Army does not tolerate any unexpected elements from their side. Even if you manage to convince an outfit to field a second-class mech model with a glow, it won't be able to showcase its value because its copies will only be employed to garrison occupied star systems or defend valuable infrastructure in the rear."

Gloriana did not look deterred. "I have the Glory Battalion, right?"

"The Glory Battalion is not your personal plaything, miss." Melody placed her hands on her hips in reproach. "I will not allow you to risk your own protection in a foolish quest to meddle in the war. You're too young, Gloriana. It is up to your mother and the older generation to shoulder the burden."

"I don't believe that, Melody. I know that Ves and I can achieve great things. The Soldier mechs that we've designed have already shifted the course of the entire Sand War! Think of how much we can affect the Komodo War if we can prove that our products can give our sisters an edge!"

"No one back home will pilot a mech designed by a foreign boy." Melody ruthlessly crushed her dream.

The Hegemony generally favored mechs designed by women. While males weren't prohibited from becoming mech designers, they generally subordinated themselves to female mech designers.

"I think there is still a way to get my foot in the door."

Gloriana came up with several ideas. One option would be to partner up with a more established mech designer from the Hegemony.

She had no hopes of convincing a Senior or a Master to collaborate on a potential project, but she might be able to appeal to her fellow Journeymen.

Another option was to establish her own force and equip them with her new mechs.

The problem there was that she lacked the funds and manpower to do so. Second-class mechs were extremely expensive, and the second-class mech pilots of the Hegemony were already employed by the Hex Army or other established organizations!

"Is there no way at all?"

Suddenly, she thought of the Avatars and Battle Criers under the control of her boyfriend.

Weren't they completely under his control? Her eyes lit up as she thought of how professional they seemed. Ves even made plans to elevate their warriors into second-class mech pilots!

"This is an excellent opportunity!"

#### *Chapter 1612 High-minded*

Ves had no clue what his girlfriend was plotting behind his back.

He mainly concerned himself with finalizing the Militant Soldier and Peaceful Soldier designs.

However, the release of the Breaker product line resulted in an enormous shock in the mech market. Ves had to divert some time to address the changes taking place in his organizations.

"Why do you want us to spend fifteen billion credits on advertising and public relations?" Ves frowned as he read through a data pad at his office. "Even if this sum is inflated, this is still a ludicrous sum of money!"

"Our Marketing Department has submitted a plan to hinder the rise of the Dawnbreaker and Duskbreaker." Gavin reported. "Due to Ansel's extensive influence, we won't achieve much results if we publish a couple of critical ads on those mech models. We have to resort to a full-fledged media offensive to shift public opinion."

"I personally tasked the Marketing Department to flesh out a strategy to hinder our rivals." Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson added. "The Dawnbreaker is already guaranteed to sell by virtue of its quality, so we can't affect its growth too much. It's the Duskbreaker that is our true concern. While it's only around ten percent more expensive than our Desolate Soldier, the two mechs are occupying the same position in the market. We can't allow the Duskbreaker to "

Ves did not look pleased. "It's a waste of money. I would much prefer to spend this money on something useful, like building more production facilities or expanding the Living Sentinels."

"We can't let Ansel popularize their new mechs without hitting back, boss. Don't you remember how those Ansel guys tried to badmouth our Desolate Soldiers when it initially came out? Even before that, they constantly tarnished the LMC by painting our mechs as brainwashing machines. If not for securing early support from the Planetary Guard, we wouldn't have been able to overcome the opposition against our mechs!"

All of them recalled how extensively the backlash against the LMC used to be during the time when Ves toured the star sector. His absence at home gave his critics the opportunity to fund a protest movement against his mechs.

More and more people started to believe that the Blackbeak, Crystal Lord and Aurora Titan brainwashed their mech pilots into becoming loyal fans of the LMC.

Fortunately, the widespread adoption of the Desolate Soldier by many powerful organizations and outfits negated this trend.

Just as Ves predicted, as long as the Desolate Soldier became indispensable, the ruling powers would not allow anyone to stigmatize his products!

However, the Desolate Soldier was old news now. While people accepted its existence, they no longer paid too much attention to it unless they directly came under the influence of its glow.

The Dawnbreaker, Duskbreaker and Novabreaker were all novel creations, and the hungry news portals instantly pounced on them to provide new content to their subscribers!

Hearing the resentment from Gavin and Raymond, Ves frowned at them both. "Are you out of your mind?"

"You.. don't agree, boss?"

"Think about what we're doing. Instead of investing resources into developing our company and increasing our security, you want us to waste money on smacking the competition."

"What's wrong with that? Didn't Ansel already do that to us? We could at least return the favor!"

Ves wanted to palm his face. "We survived their attacks and grew stronger from it. My products were always vulnerable to the points they've raised. This was a problem that we had to address sooner than later, so I'm glad we already got it over with. The



acceptance we've obtained from the public and the rulers at the top will serve as our shield in any future endeavors."

"You're still letting off Ansel lightly for what they've done." Gavin grumbled.

Raymond sided with him as well. "I don't see the point in sticking to your high-minded ideals, Ves. I know enough about doing business that it's vital for the LMC to portray strength. By doing nothing or appearing to do nothing, we will appear weak. Our company's standing in the mech industry will suffer a hit as a result. Less third-party manufacturers will agree to fabricate mechs for us. Some companies might cease to ship our products or offer favorable terms."

"I don't care about these petty losses." Ves stated. "Our brand will remain strong regardless if we play this game or not. Ansel's position in the mech market is so strong that I don't think that a couple of billion credits will affect the sales of their latest products. Besides, there is one more reason why I'm disinclined to engage in this pointless venture."

"Do tell, Ves."

"I want the Dawnbreaker and its variants to succeed."

That took Raymond and Gavin aback. Even Nitaa, who stood quietly on guard, reacted with some shock!

??Are you still the boss we know, or did someone replace you with a clone?"

Ves smiled at them. "I'm not joking. I mean what I say. The Dawnbreaker is a genuinely good midrange rifleman mech. I've studied the public documents about the new design extensively and I fully believe in its value. Its ability to guarantee the life of a mech pilot in event of getting hit by a heavy laser strike is something that no mech at its price range can match!"

Both Raymond and Gavin shared an uncertain look. Had Ves gone mad? Why was he praising the competition all of a sudden?

Of course, this obvious gesture didn't escape Ves. Seeing as his two subordinates didn't get it, he growled in frustration.

"You're treating this like some zero-sum game. It's not! Think of our circumstances right now. If we were at peacetime, then I would have considered your suggestion more, but this time it's different! While I don't like those stuck-up Ansel mech designers, they are not our opponents! Our real enemy is the sandman race! Whenever we make an important decision, we should consider whether it benefits the LMC and helps the war effort! In my eyes, casting shade on the Dawnbreaker accomplishes neither!"



Ves raised a finger.

"Our weaker media presence means that we'll just waste a lot of money while gaining little in return. This does not benefit our company."

He raised another finger.

"The current situation at the front demands a mech that is more resilient and more powerful than the Desolate Soldier. The Dawnbreaker perfectly meets this demand and has an added bonus of preserving the lives of skilled mech pilots. Hindering the adoption of such a good mech does not help the war effort!"

A realization swept through the minds of Raymond and Gavin. The former looked especially hard-hit.

"This is my mistake." Raymond admitted. "I was too caught up in thinking what is best for the LMC that I have forgotten to take the greater picture into account."

Such a mistake was understandable. Raymond had only recently become the COO of the LMC. Even if he made a lot of preparations, he still had to immerse himself in his new responsibilities.

"The Desolate Soldier, Dawnbreaker and their variants are all competing mech models. That does not mean that the gains of one side is a loss to the other side." Ves explained. "In truth, we are all on the same side. A little bit of tension due to rivalry and factionalism is inevitable, but don't let it go too far. Right now, I think the Dawnbreaker is a necessary mech to strengthen the Bright Republic."

"That only counts for the Dawnbreaker, right?" Gavin interjected. "The Duskbreaker is the knockoff version of the Dawnbreaker. It doesn't have the compressed armor system of the base model. As a budget mech model, the Duskbreaker competes directly against our Desolate Soldiers and therefore poses a direct threat to our bottom line. Shouldn't we at least do something to prevent this variant from taking away our lunch?"

Ves smiled. "That's a much more reasonable argument. If you came up to me with this in the start, then I wouldn't have to remind you two to take the overall war situation into account."

"So.. will you agree to a plan to suppress the Duskbreaker?"

"Nope." Ves replied. "Let Ansel sell as many Duskbreakers as they want. I have no intentions to put any obstacles in their way. Let the market and the customers decide which one they prefer. Both of them have different strengths. It's better if outfits have more choice."

"That's.."

"Let me be clear. I'm not necessarily being generous or charitable towards Ansel. I'm just confident in my Desolate Soldiers. While it's true that the Duskbreaker offers superior performance in almost every aspect, it's a mech without a heart. I think that many mech pilots who have tried both mechs will prefer my product in the end."

Neither Raymond nor Gavin believed in that assertion. However, Ves was the boss, so they had no choice but to accept his will.

Under his instruction, the LMC did not allocate any money towards hindering the market's enthusiastic adoption of the Dawnbreaker and Duskbreaker. Sales of both commercial models went through the roof!

In the meantime, some mech regiments already decided to procure or produce the first Novabreakers.

The mech regiments stationed in the most hard-pressed fortified star systems became the first converts to this promising new military mech model. Due to frequent combat, these units suffered continuous casualties and lost a decent amount of very expensive mechs.

The Novabreaker offered solutions to both problems. It was priced as a premium mech which was very affordable in the eyes of the military and also excelled in protecting mech pilots.

In addition, the Novabreaker's custom neural interface which heightened the responsiveness of the mech showed its full potential in the hands of well-trained military mech pilots.

All of these qualities were highly prized by the hard-hit mech regiments!

The Novabreaker turned out to be such a hit that when the LMC finally published the Militant Soldier, it hardly caused a ripple in the Mech Corps.

"Well, I'm sure that the military will remember my work." Ves muttered as he observed the lukewarm reaction from the military.

Fortunately, Ves and the LMC could at least console themselves with the much more successful launch of the Peaceful Soldier.

Ves, Gloriana and the design team worked hard to design a viable landbound iteration of the Desolate Soldier. While it was a shame that the Peaceful Soldier was exclusive to the Planetary Guard, the mech at least turned out to be a smashing hit in those organizations!

A lot of orders had already poured in, which conveniently compensated for the moderate drop in sales of the Desolate Soldier. The LMC quickly recovered from the setback induced by the competition.

"There is no way that Ansel can design any mech that can compete against my Peaceful Soldier." Ves confidently stated to Gavin. "The main quality the Planetary Guard is after is its glow. By now, law enforcement is very clear about its effects and how to make the most of it. No mech designed by others can top the Peaceful Soldier's value proposition."

Unfortunately, one more incident took place that tested his principles.

Commander Magdalena Larkinson visited his office one day to submit a proposal.

"After an extensive cost-benefit analysis, we think it's best for my Living Sentinels to field the Dawnbreakers. I think you are probably clear of the advantages of this mech model, so I won't bother explaining the reasons why we should adopt it. I just want to know whether you are okay with it. From what I've heard, you don't exactly enjoy the best relationship with its designers."

Ves did not expect Magdalena to propose such a difficult question to him. It was one thing to tolerate the Dawnbreaker as worthy competition, it was another thing to allow his own forces to adopt it as their mainstay mechs!

How could Ves feel proud about himself if his subordinates openly piloted the mechs designed by his rivals?

For a moment, Ves glowered at Magdalena. He resented her for putting him on the spot today. Couldn't she have opted for a different choice?

#### *Chapter 1613 Procurement Choices*

"The Dawnbreaker is by far the most suitable mech for our needs." Commander Magdalena elaborated when Ves fell into thought. "I'm aware that you're not entirely open to the idea, but it is not my intention to make things difficult. It is just that from an objective perspective, the Desolate Soldier is not enough to ensure the Living Sentinels can protect the Larkinsons and the LMC from danger once the sandmen reach this star system."

The Sentinel Commander even handed Ves a data pad. It contained an extensive analysis on which mechs the Living Sentinels should procure in order to strengthen its combat ability against all kinds of threats.

While the Dawnbreaker performed exceptionally well against the Sandmen, it was not as good against human forces. For this reason, Magdalena only asked to equip a single mech company with the mechs designed by his competitors.

Even so, this was forty mechs too much for Ves. He really wanted to avoid this decision, but the analysis performed by the Living Sentinels was very sound. They compared the prevalent mech models on the market that met their needs.

Out of the hundred or so midrange rifleman mechs, the Dawnbreaker clearly stood out at the top. While the mechs designed by other Seniors and Journeymen were no slouches, most of them were older designs that had been adapted to fight other mechs.

They lacked the innovations and optimizations that made the Dawnbreaker into an incredibly powerful solution against the aliens. In some studies, the effectiveness of the Dawnbreaker against the sandmen was a whopping thirty percent higher than comparable mechs that cost the same!

Such a huge difference was too much for the established competition to overcome! Sales of older models plummeted as the Dawnbreaker greedily absorbed their market share!

For this reason, Ves did not find much in the analysis performed by the Sentinels. Even a nine-year old kid could come up with a way to justify the purchase of Dawnbreakers due to the incredible value they provided.

If Ves put his selfishness and his ego aside, then he had no choice but to admit the Living Sentinels benefited most from adopting his competitor's product right now.

Of course, Ves could also decline the offer and design his own midrange mech, but was that even useful?

He didn't think so. The Dawnbreaker already occupied this role so well that there was little demand for something comparable.

The Desolate Soldier already fulfilled a necessary function on the battlefields with its glow. Adding a second glow from a more expensive mech did not bring much added value.

The private sector could already choose between the Proudful Soldier and the Desolate Soldier.

The Ylvaine Protectorate already bought so many Holy Soldiers that they were starting to run short of available mech pilots.

The Mech Corps recently gained the option of fielding their own mechs with glows in the form of the Militant Soldier.

The Planetary Guard organizations all welcomed the Peaceful with open arms.

William Urbesh was already making a splash at the front with his Resentful Soldier.

One mech design and so many variants already occupied a small but significant proportion of the mech market. However, all of this came about due to a combination of moving quickly and offering something indispensable to the war.

Now that both of these advantages had been spent, any mech design he came up in the future would have to justify its existence. The competition had already caught up in publishing anti-sandman mechs designs!

If Ves wanted to swing the pendulum of the Sand War, then he needed to come up with a product that fulfilled a different role.

That was for later, though. Ves turned his attention back to Commander Magdalena and made his choice.

"I have already given you permission to decide your own procurement." He said. "I'm thankful that you've run this decision by me, but I respect your judgement. Your arguments are sound and the addition of the Dawnbreaker will certainly increase the chances that the LMC will be able to survive this crisis. I have no valid reason to object to your proposal."

Magdalena relaxed her shoulders a bit. "Thank you, sir. To be honest, many of my Sentinels are looking forward to piloting the Dawnbringer. It's not that they hate the Desolate Soldier, but it is not a mech that matches well with highly-skilled mech pilots. We are still fielding plenty of Desolate Soldiers, but they are mainly reserved for our lesser-skilled mech pilots who originally specialized in landbound mechs or ranged mechs. Sentinels who are already proficient in spaceborn ranged mechs will feel much more at home in a mech that offers more higher-end capabilities."

Perhaps he should feel humiliated. Perhaps he should feel inadequate. After all, which mech designer could remain unaffected if their own subordinates favored a competitor's product over their own?

Yet Ves did not particularly care that much now that he issued his verdict. He knew in his heart that he made the best possible choice for the LMC and Living Sentinels.

Protecting their lives and defeating the sandmen came first. Satisfying his vanity came second.

His justifications offered him enough relief to lift the weight on his heart.

He did not consider his choice as an admission of defeat. Instead, he simply considered it as a consequence of being short on time. A mech designer could spend enough time on designing so many mechs.

Ves and Magdalena discussed some of the details about the procurement.

"We should also purchase a few hundred standalone Sandbreaker rifles and accompanying ordnance, sir." The Sentinel commander proposed next. "No offense to the rifle you've paired with the Desolate Soldier, but the Sandbreaker is plainly superior when employed against the sandmen. It's also fairly affordable. Many outfits and even the Mech Corps have already started to adopt this new weapon system!"

Now that Ves had gotten over the first dilemma, he did not feel any shame in accepting this second proposal.

"Acceptable. I'm aware of the effectiveness of the Sandbreaker in the Sand War and I do not want to deprive your Sentinels with this admittedly fantastic solution. I think it is probably the third-most important innovation in the war after the introduction of starfighters and my Soldier product line."

Again, Ves could decline Magdalena's request and develop his own dedicated ballistic rifle design, but what would that accomplish?

It was nigh-impossible for Ves to top the efforts of a Senior who specialized in ballistic weapons. He would just waste a lot of time and energy to design an inferior product that attempted to fulfill a role that was already occupied by an existing product.

For this reason, Ves did not have any qualms about outfitting all of his mechs with the invention of his rivals.

He would much rather preserve his life and his assets when the Living Sentinels beat the crap out of any sandman fleets that targeted the Cloudy Curtain System!

"I have a third suggestion."

Ves groaned. "It doesn't end."

The older woman chuckled in a lighthearted manner. "The most important decisions are often difficult. Otherwise, I wouldn't even bring them up to you in the first place."

"You're right." He sighed. "Let's hear it, then."

"Commander Melkor shares many of the same ideas as us. The Avatars of Myth don't want to be left out. In general, the Avatars are much more talented than the Sentinels. They deserve to be equipped with the best that you can afford."

"What does Melkor want, exactly?"

"The same as us. He wants you to phase out the Desolate Soldiers in favor of Dawnbreakers. He also wants to adopt the Sandbreaker as the default weapon system of the Avatars deployed in the front."

Ves did not immediately answer. Instead, he recalled his own priorities with regards to the Avatars before issuing his judgement.

"I will allow the latter, but not the former."

Just as he predicted, Commander Magdalena did not take that answer well. "Why? You agreed to upgrade the Sentinels. I don't see why you want to deprive the Avatars of better mechs."

Ves calmly crossed his arms and leaned back in his office chair. "It's because the Avatars need to prove themselves. I don't expect much from the Sentinels, but it's a different case when it comes to my elites. Do you know how much money I'm swimming in right now? If I really want to, I can equip my Avatars with mechs that cost 500 million credits per copy. Do you know why I declined to open my wallet in this case?"

The Sentinel Commander wasn't stupid. "You're testing the Avatars. You're using the Sand War as a crucible to forge your Avatars into battle-tested warriors."

"Correct. Before my Avatars are worthy to pilot superior mechs that they can use to crush any inferior mech, they need to prove that they can defeat their opponents with skill and determination."

"Isn't that asking too much, though, sir? While your Desolate Soldiers are fine mechs, they are a bit too fragile to keep up with the evolving battlefield. The sandmen are learning and improving. The situation at the front is incomparable to what it was like a few months ago. Since our enemies are constantly improving, we should at least keep up with their pace."

"That's a valid argument, commander, but for now the casualties suffered by the Avatars is well within my tolerance." Ves started to grin. "In fact, I'm pretty impressed by how well the Avatars managed to persist in these increasingly unfavorable circumstances. I think that they can excavate a lot more potential if they continue to meet their challenges with my Desolate Soldiers."

"You're playing with lives, Ves. I don't like the direction you are taking with the Avatars." She confronted him directly.

Ves shrugged. "It was their choice, remember? Those who value their lives have already made the decision to transfer to your Sentinels. Those who remain in the Avatars must accept my arrangement without question. That is the rule. Besides, the Avatars aren't the only ones who are toughening it out with budget mechs. There are countless outfits fielding Desolate Soldiers, but you don't hear them complaining. If these lesser mech pilots are okay with their machines, then the Avatars shouldn't complain either."

"I'm surprised that none of the Avatars have cracked."



"They're not suffering all of these hardships for nothing, commander. They all know that once they have proven themselves, I'll invest considerable money and resources into them to elevate their piloting ability and upgrade them into second-class mech pilots. This is such an attractive lure to ambitious mech pilots that they are gladly risking their lives to earn a shot at greater glory!"

By offering this incentive, Ves was very confident that his Avatars would stick to his arrangements. Which third-class mech pilot didn't dream of piloting a higher class of machines?

This was a fatal attraction!

Even if Ves risked losing half of his Avatars, at least he got rid of the unlucky and the incompetent. The mech pilots who managed to survive the Sand War would form the new core of the Avatars.

With their proven loyalty and commitment, Ves was not afraid of suffering from any defections once he invested in their growth.

While it sounded fairly brutal, this was a very fair arrangement in his eyes. Ves believed that no employer could offer any incentive that was as attractive as the one he offered.

Perhaps the only reward that could surpass this precious opportunity was to guarantee a mech pilot's advancement to expert pilot!

Sadly, Ves was nowhere close to developing a method that could accomplish such a heaven-defying feat.

He had plenty of ideas, but he was critically short on test subjects.

The discussion between Ves and Magdalena quickly petered off. Once Ves made his choice, the Sentinel Commander wasn't able to sway his mind.

"I'm already doing the Avatars a favor by permitting them to replace their old weapons with the Sandbreaker rifles." Ves remarked. "If Melkor isn't happy with this concession, then he can come back from the front and tender his resignation. While I commend his care towards his men, this is not the time to be soft."

The Avatars had to prove themselves, or die trying. Ves accepted nothing less.

#### *Chapter 1614 Plight of a Norm*

The Larkinson Family enjoyed a high reputation in the Bright Republic. The mech pilots bearing this distinguished name always lifted their heads in pride as they perpetuated the legacy of their predecessors.

However, these Larkinson pilots only represented a fraction of the family. Though the Larkinsons possessed good genes, the demand on genetic aptitude was simply too stringent.

Most descendants who grew up in this distinguished military family would inevitably have their dreams crushed when they reached ten. Upon learning that their genetic aptitude was not up to par, their path to becoming a noble mech pilot turned out to be a distant illusion.

This was a bitter pill to swallow for many young Larkinsons. Ves himself had wasted his entire teenage years because it took this long to get over his profound disappointment.

Fortunately, most Larkinsons readjusted quickly. The Larkinsons never stigmatized or looked down on the norms in the family. Each of them were related by blood, after all. No matter if they were potentates or norms, the Larkinsons always stuck together without any pretensions of status or superiority.

Moses Larkinson used to be one of those crushed ten-year old kids. Seeing a handful of cousins emerge out of the testing center with smiles hurt him deeply.

From that day on, the friends he used to wrestle with became the future pride of the family. The new potentates no longer had time to play silly games or waste their time on idle past-times.

The training of a Larkinson mech pilot started immediately. In order to insure that each Larkinson started off with a strong foundation and solid specialization, they needed to undergo a training regime that was far more arduous than the courses offered by the mech academies.

If not for the strong will and belief in the Larkinson heritage, most of the potentates in the family would have spat blood and given up early.

Of course, none of that had anything to do with Moses Larkinson. Though the family did its best to avoid treating norms as rejects or lesser beings, the lack of attention from the greatest of Larkinsons became very clear.

Many Larkinson norms eventually accepted their fate. They turned their attention to other vocations. With the help of their name and the modest financial support of their family, they could easily pursue other careers.

Some became respected doctors who worked at major hospitals.

Others studied business in order to land an easy job managing some of the assets of the Larkinson Estate.

Of course, a disproportionate amount of Larkinsons still chose to serve in the armed forces.

Even if the Mech Corps centered around mechs and mech pilots, they still required a lot of support to function optimally on the battlefield.

Many Larkinsons, by virtue of their background, rose up to become a part of the backbone of the Mech Corps.

Each of them served in the Mech Corps because they felt compelled to do so. It was the Larkinson way.

Moses Larkinson happened to be one of them. Leveraging his high understanding of mechs due to growing up in a family obsessed with them, he worked his way up the ranks of the Mech Corps as a tactical officer.

He even participated in the Bright-Vesia Wars, earning a respectable amount of merits and honor to satisfy his obligation as a Larkinson.

To Moses, it wasn't enough. Even if he did his duty, he always felt that he had it easy compared to the mech pilots who risked their lives directly at the forefront of the battlefield.

There was still a difference between mech pilots and norms.

With the war between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom over, Moses still found himself with a void within his heart.

He languished in his duties ever since the Bright Republic returned to peace.

There may not be another war in twenty to thirty years. That was far too long for an impatient man like Moses.

Was he really destined to spend the bulk of his service in peace?

Then the Sand War erupted.

The horror that had beset the Komodo Star Sector shocked every Brighter. Border states with hundreds of years of history fell within a matter of weeks or months. The endless onslaught of sandman fleets overwhelming defenses sparked one of the greatest humanitarian tragedies in the star sector in hundreds of years!

The citizens of the Bright Republic became frightened when they heard about the collapse of so many states and the deaths of trillions of humans.

A war was coming, one that was greater and more terrible than the ones they fought before!

Yet to certain people like Moses Larkinson, he felt as if he found his true calling in this crisis.

Defending humanity against alien aggression was one of the most noble callings imaginable!

Since the Age of Mechs, most conflicts between humans and aliens had subsided. Many races were self-aware enough to avoid poking the strongest civilization in the galaxy.

As for humanity, the Big Two did not consider the risks of further expansion to be worthwhile. To fight any further would risk depleting an already-exhausted civilization. With so many lives at stake, the CFA and MTA could not afford to overextend their forces!

For this reason, clashes between civilizations became rare. So much so that many Brighters never imagined fighting against an alien race in their lifetimes.

To a Larkinson like Moses, the sandman crisis actually came as an opportunity.

Once the Bright Republic unveiled the Starfighter Corps, Moses saw his opportunity!

"I have to volunteer!"

Due to his accomplishments in the Mech Corps and the reputation of his family name, Moses immediately became an officer candidate of the Starfighter Corps.

While his piloting skills were just as average as any hastily-trained starfighter pilot, his discipline, wartime experience and dedication soon elevated him above his peers.

It took less than a month for him to become a Starfighter Captain and deploy to the front.

The brass randomly allocated him to lead a starfighter wing of the 243th Greedy Luxers.

Like every other starfighter regiment, the 243th only existed for a very short time.

Compared to his old mech regiment, the Greedy Luxers did not benefit from a long and storied history. The lack of martial tradition and camaraderie became very evident as Moses tried to forge his starfighter wing from a random collection of volunteers into a band of brothers.

"Captain Larkinson!" The comm in his starfighter crackled as Moses tried to dance away from the barrage of lasers fired by the distant sandman swarm! "Cover the mercenaries as best you can as we advance!"

Moses gritted his teeth as his starfighter endured a number of hits. He hit back as best as possible by firing the ballistic weapon mounted on his spacecraft, but he had little hopes of hitting one of the sandman drones at this range.

"Acknowledged, sir." He replied to his superior. "My men will keep up, though they will pay for it with their lives."

The price of closing distance to the sandmen was too costly to bear. Moses barely made it out alive in previous actions. Would he be lucky enough to be spared from the sandmen this time?

He shook his head and tried his best to immerse his mood in the distant glow of a Desolate Soldier hovering in the vicinity of his starfighter regiment.

Glancing at the mech designed by the most successful norm of the Larkinson Family in its entire history peppered him up. Respect and awe suffused his face as he recalled the incredible accomplishments of its designer.

Ves was a true role model of the norms in the family!

Even without piloting a mech, his accomplishments already put him on equal terms with the expert pilots among the Larkinsons!

Something like that had never occurred! Every norm, Moses included, took inspiration from his rise!

Just because they lacked the aptitude to pilot mechs did not mean they were destined to be sidelined!

Each Larkinson possessed the potential to become a hero!

Moses firmed up and commanded his starfighter pilots to advance.

His subordinates responded shakily. The torrent of laser beams had never relented. It took a lot of courage to advance into the storm!

As his wing formation grew more and more ragged, Moses continually exhorted his men to push forward!

"Are you pigs or starfighter pilots?! Remember your training!"

"Endure! The lives of 700 million citizens are at stake!"

"The swarm is already beginning to shrink!"

None of his subordinates were anything like his former comrades in the Mech Corps.

Most of the 'volunteers' had been lured into serving in the Starfighter Corps through deceptive means. Once they realized the dangers, it was too late for them to withdraw!

"The only way to survive is to fight!"

"Heroes never falter!"

"Your brothers and sisters are counting on you!"

His job as a starfighter captain mostly amounted to managing rookies. The naive and gullible starfighter pilots had to be treated carefully and with constant encouragement in order to keep them in formation.

If not for the Desolate Soldier accompanying their wing, Moses was sure that at least half of his subordinates would have fled by now!

"We're getting close! Focus on evasive maneuvers! Let the mechs whittle down the swarm!"

The starfighters under his command vigorously flew side to side, though its thrusters weren't powerful enough to fool sandman targeting systems.

Moses merely wanted to give his starfighter pilots the illusion that their sluggish maneuvers could make a difference in preserving their lives.

Giving his subordinates the illusion that they had control over their own fate was just one of the many lies he had been instructed to tell.

Once his wing arrived in position, their formation remained in place as the mechs using the starfighters as cover began to target the sandman drones with greater accuracy.

The initial results were better than Moses expected of mercenaries.

Hundreds of mechs and starfighters joined the fray. Moses even spotted a handful of the newfangled Dawnbreakers shooting down the sandman drones with abandon!

Though numerous starfighters exploded all around him, the sandman swarm dearly paid for these small successes.

"The swarm is disintegrating!"

"We took out one of their sandman admirals early!"

Roars of victory flooded the communication channels! Everyone expressed their raw relief at this hard-fought victory!

Though a number of sandman admirals still persisted, their advantage in numbers continually grew smaller and smaller until they didn't have any drones left to threaten the human defenders.

The battle was won!

Unfortunately, as Moses and his ragged subordinates flew back to their carrier, he had no choice but to tally their losses.

Less than twenty starfighter pilots gathered together at one of the hangar bays. Each of them looked glum as over half of their wing failed to make it back in time.

Perhaps at least half of them managed to eject in time, but the sandmen never let off the slow-moving escape pods. It only took one weak laser beam to pierce their flimsy shells and kill the starfighter pilot trying to flee.

Such an outcome became increasingly more prevalent as the sandman admirals started to ditch their heavy laser strikes for rapid-fire laser salvos.

"May our comrades who perished in battle rest in peace." Moses stated.

"Their light will forever burn in our hearts."

Scenes like this occurred everywhere. Moses had seen so many of his subordinates fall that he stopped memorizing their names. They died so frequently that Moses had grown numb to the losses.

"When will it be my turn?" He quietly whispered under his breath.

His starfighter was no different from the others. Skill made little difference due to the limitations of their spacecraft.

In the end, Moses Larkinson lasted for three more battles. After beating off some basic sandman fleets, another swarm configuration descended upon the star system.

The Greedy Luxers reluctantly answered the call.

Moses Larkinson died as one of many starfighter pilots that perished that day.

He died doing his duty under the glow of a Desolate Soldier.

He died with a smile.



## *Chapter 1615 Enemy Customers*

The specter of the war loomed heavily on Cloudy Curtain. It became increasingly more difficult for locals to maintain their cheer when they heard about the terrible battles taking place at the front.

It had gotten so bad that the Bright Republic became much more stringent about publicizing the war.

Morale had to be maintained at all cost. It did little good to everyone if they learned how many starfighter pilots perished each day. Otherwise, where would the Starfighter Corps get all of their fresh blood?

Due to his background, status and connections, Ves easily gained access to the truth.

The casualties were too horrible to imagine. If the survival of an entire state and the vast majority of its population wasn't at stake, a lot of people would have risen up in protest!

Unfortunately, everyone in the know was smart enough that the alternative was worse. The Bright Republic could not afford to let the sandmen grind its Mech Corps to dust before engulfing the people stuck on its vulnerable planets!

Every starfighter pilot deserved to be treated as a hero. Yet their lives were so short and fleeting that hardly anyone had time to pause and reflect on their sacrifices.

As cruel as it sounded, the Starfighter Corps existed to endure the losses the Mech Corps couldn't afford to sustain.

No one paused to remember the dead. A dead starfighter pilot was no longer of any value to the soldiers shouldering the burden of defending the Republic against the sandmen!

Only his closest friends and family remembered someone like Moses Larkinson. To everyone else, he was merely another name in a continually-expanding list of casualties.

Perhaps once the war was over, the Starfighter Corps would erect some pretty monument in Rittersberg that listed out his name for remembrance.

Of course, none of this had anything to do with Ves. Maybe he would have volunteered to become a starfighter pilot in a different life.

To the current Ves, answering this calling was beneath him. As a mech designer, he could make a bigger impact on the war by doing his job.

He had no desire to hop into a cockpit and blast the sandmen up close, especially when he heard how short the life of an average starfighter pilot spanned. Those lucky enough to survive six serious encounters were already regarded as veterans!

"The second generation of starfighter models are supposed to be more resilient." Raymond passed on the latest rumors that crossed his ears. "They feature much thicker frontal plating. While it's not enough for them to resist a heavy laser strike, they are able to resist at least double the amount of light laser attacks."

That could make a huge difference in the survival rate of starfighter pilots!

"The current starfighter models on the battlefields are cheap for a reason. Can the Bright Republic cope with the increased production cost?" Ves asked.

Raymond looked uncertain. "Our state has no choice but to invest in heavier starfighters. The loss in life has grown so severe that the officers and pilots of the Starfighter Corps are becoming increasingly more restless. It is one thing to ask them to do their duty, it is another thing to ask them to act as human shields. The pressure and trauma they are shouldering is enough to drive even the best of us to despair!"

Both of them fell silent for a time. Each of them had access to privileged information that painted a gruesome picture of the war so far.

"How is the LMC doing?" Ves changed the topic.

"The launch of the Militant Soldier and Peaceful Soldier added some much-needed diversity to our mech catalog. While the Mech Corps has been lukewarm in adopting the Militant Soldier, our Peaceful Soldiers are continuing to sell like hotcakes."

"It's too bad the Peaceful Soldier is exclusive to the Bright Republic." Ves said with regret. "If not for all of the proprietary tech, components and standards I've incorporated in its design, we could have easily sold millions copies throughout the entire star sector."

"You can still do so, Ves. With the experience you've gained with the Peaceful Soldier, it shouldn't take you too long to develop a civilian variant."

The LMC already received many solicitations from various governments and organizations throughout the star sectors. Each of them expressed a lot of interest in a true landbound version of the Desolate Soldier.

It was much more convenient to patrol a population settlement with such a mech! Their glows ensured that the locals became much more obedient in their vicinity!

"I've already considered the matter. While you are right that the demand for such a product is huge, any mech design that doesn't help in the war effort is not a priority to

me right now. In addition, popularizing a landbound mech with the same glow as the Desolate Soldier is extremely disruptive."

Ves constantly reminded the people around him that they shouldn't solely look out for the LMC.

His mech company would do well regardless of how many mechs it sold. Ves was more than satisfied with the success of the Soldier product line. There was not that much benefit to pursuing more sales, especially if he risked stepping on too many people's toes in the process.

The Desolate Soldier and its variants mainly served to defend humanity against the sandmen. Nothing more. Ves even felt tempted to withdraw the Solemn Guardian from his position as design spirit because his glow was too vulnerable to abuse!

Sadly, Ves was quickly forced to set aside those notions. His reputation and the reputation of the LMC would be ruined if he intentionally sabotaged his existing products.

His customers bought his mechs with specific expectations. One of the biggest taboos in marketing was misrepresenting products.

Since the LMC never mentioned anything about expiration dates on their glows, every customer believed the Soldier mechs would continue to be useful for many years.

The discussion moved on to the Prideful Soldier. This cheaper variant had been out on the market for more than a month now. This was enough time to give the LMC a solid understanding of its market appeal.

"Sales of our Prideful Soldiers have actually exceeded our expectations." Raymond noted with a smile. "Their lower price points and their altered glows have become a huge hit among the gangs and underground organizations. The only downside is that it's hard to hide them, but even then they're rapidly becoming a staple in the Bentheim System!"

"Oh?"

"The BLM and the three dominant gangs have taken to the Prideful Soldier with great enthusiasm! Practically every Prideful Soldier rolling off the production lines at Bentheim ends up in their hands! In addition, its appeal isn't confined to our state. The Reinald Republic has actually become our second-biggest market for this product!"

Such a result astounded him a bit. Ves never realized that adding a mote of Zeigra's spirituality would induce such strong attraction in the auras of his Prideful Soldiers.

"I thought the Reinald Republic is barely holding it together."

"The Reinaldians are in bad shape, but the Frozen Leaf Alliance is still of value. The smaller states that haven't been hit yet are well aware that they'll be next once the Reinald Republic and the other states in the third line of defense are gone. The influx of foreign reinforcements in recent weeks have done much to stall the sandman advance."

A part of Ves was disappointed that the Reinald Republic hadn't croaked yet. He had bad memories of the state and regarded it as a tumor of the local region.

If it was up to him, he preferred it if the LMC stopped selling Soldier mechs to the Reinaldians.

Of course, that was just a petty impulse. No one would ever accept such a decision. Ves had a responsibility to treat his customers fairly.

"Is there anything else happening abroad that I should take note of?" Ves asked.

Hesitation appeared on Raymond's face. He carefully leaned forward. "There is one more issue that demands your attention. It's rather sensitive though..."

Uh oh. Ves immediately smelled trouble.

"What is it? Just spit it out."

"There is one more mech market in the vicinity which we haven't exploited yet. The demand for our product is growing, but our actual sales have been nonexistent due to one important reason."

It didn't take long for Ves to rule out the state that Raymond referred to. His products had penetrated almost every state in the region except for one glaring exception.

"You're talking about the Vesia Kingdom, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Ves immediately grew morose. Memories of the most recent Bright-Vesia War came to mind. The devastating defeat suffered by the ground forces of the Flagrant Vandals always haunted him from time to time.

He had seen too many Brighters die at the hands of the Vesians. Though he was fine with living alongside the latter in peace, becoming friends was a step too far.

"I take it that they are very eager to deploy our Desolate Soldiers and Prideful Soldiers, correct?"

"..Yes. In recent weeks, the LMC has received secret missives requesting us to open a direct sales channel to the Vesia Kingdom."

"Who are the people sending these missives?"

"Representatives from Imodris, Venidse, Hafner and so on. So far, the royal house hasn't contacted us yet, but according to our analysts, it's only a matter of time."

A very conflicting mood overcame Ves. "We aren't selling any Soldier mechs to the Vesians, right?"

"Not directly, but that hasn't stopped some of the more enterprising Vesians. Merchants are buying our Desolate Soldiers and Prideful Soldiers in enormous batches before shipping them to the Kingdom. Whether the merchants are reselling our products or fulfilling a commission on behalf of a Vesian client, the fact of the matter is that the Vesians have already surreptitiously adopted our mechs!"

Officially, mech companies from the Bright Republic never conducted business in the Vesia Kingdom and vice versa.

With all of the bad blood generated by so many generational wars, how could either side ever trade with each other?

That didn't stop smugglers and traders from exploiting this situation. In truth, a considerable amount of trade occurred between the two states. The trade ships merely made a detour through the former Coman Federation or the independent State of Pillis before entering the other state.

If Raymond was right, then the same took place with the LMC's Soldier mechs!

"What do you want me to do, Raymond? Establish a branch in the Vesia Kingdom in order to facilitate direct sales to their oppressive nobles?"

"The Vesia Kingdom is much harder pressed in the Sand War than us, Ves." The COO calmly pointed out. "We may not like it, but we need the Vesians to cover our flank. If the state ever falls, the victorious sandmen will certainly wheel around and hit the Bright Republic along a new front! With how thin the Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps has spread their forces, we simply can't afford to cover so much additional territory!"

Ves understood this logic just as well as Raymond. Yet the thought of strengthening the Vesians by selling them his products was a very difficult pill to swallow.

If anyone told him that he would one day sell his mechs to the Vesians, he would have laughed in their faces!

If not for the sandman invasion driving everyone, including the Vesians, to desperation, Ves would have never been confronted with this choice!

"What do the Tovars say? I don't believe they kept their mouths shut."

"From what we have heard, the Tovars have tacitly consented to opening a sales channel. In fact, the government might take advantage of this opportunity to increase the flow of trade between our two states."

Ves snorted. "Of course they don't want to go first. Cowards."

He knew for certain that his reputation and the reputation of the LMC would take a hit in the Bright Republic once they pioneered a sales channel to the Vesia Kingdom.

He didn't care, though. In fact, he looked forward to selling his mechs to the Vesians! Just the thought of humiliating their entire mech industry was enough to lighten his mood!

#### *Chapter 1616 Tormented Survivor*

Since the Vesians already got their hands on the Soldier mechs, the LMC might as well sell them directly.

Now that Ves gave his consent, Raymond quickly left in order to make the arrangements.

It was far from simple to overcome the centuries-old trade embargo between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom.

At the very least, the LMC needed to work closely with the government in the coming weeks. If the Bright Republic itself did not agree to this trade, the company would never be able to dream of entering the Vesian mech market!

Later that day, Ves enjoyed a break with his girlfriend. The two of them sat together in a lounge that Gloriana recently renovated in the lab and workshop floor of the Mech Nursery.

While their cats playfully chased after a very agile mouse bot that Gloriana imported from Centerpoint, both of them comfortably leaned against each other.

Their relationship had grown stable. Nothing special happened, but that did not mean their love towards each other had cooled down.

Both of them shared a love for mechs. Each new collaboration project provided them with another opportunity to learn about each other's passion for mechs.

A very special intimacy developed between each other whenever they worked together on the same mech.

This was why their relationship still remained in harmony despite their differences.

Regardless of what Ves thought about Hexers or what Gloriana expected from Ves, their love remained as stable as ever.

Ves became more and more comfortable with the thought of spending the rest of his life with Gloriana.

"What are you thinking about, Ves?"

"Ah, nothing important. Just some business matters."

"Oh? Do tell."

"I've recently decided to sell our mechs to the Vesians."

Since Gloriana frequently talked and gossiped with some of the Larkinsons at the Cloud Estate, she knew how badly the Brighters regarded the Vesians.

She attempted to comfort him by patting his arm. "That's.. Very magnanimous of you. I imagine it's as difficult as Hexers selling their mechs to Fridaymen."

"There's a difference between the two. Your state is in a direct conflict against the Coalition. In contrast, the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom are both being pressed by a common enemy that is far more threatening."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures."

"Exactly. I don't like this decision, but I know it will be worse for us if the Vesia Kingdom can't persist."

Even though it made sense, it still sounded absurd to Ves. He still couldn't quite get over the fact that every Vesian would soon become exposed to the wonders of his mechs.

Would they become his fans? Would they demand continued access to the products of the LMC?

Whatever the case, Ves was sure that the Sand War completely upended the old order. Just as the Bright Republic hungered to conquer the former territories of the Coman Federation, the Vesia Kingdom also looked forward to doubling or tripling its territories!

Digesting so much territory took decades, if not centuries. Depending on how extensively the sandmen devastated the cities and infrastructure of the formerly-populated planets, a lot of rebuilding had to be done before the new acquisitions turned into assets of the states.



Ves predicted that the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom would not go to war anymore in the next century or so. One of the primary reasons the Vesians hungered for war was to acquire more territorial acquisitions. Now that they stood to gain a huge amount of ownerless star systems, why should they bother their neighbors?

Perhaps the Bright-Vesia Wars might even become a thing of the past.

Once the contradictions between the two states faded, trade would probably flourish. A new generation of Brighters and Vesians would grow up in a time of peace and expansion. Without experiencing the previous wars for themselves, they would not be as hesitant in working together as their predecessors.

This would not take place for many years, though. Opening a trade channel just as the memories of the previous war were still too fresh sounded like a bad idea.

Ves didn't care. He looked forward to gloating over the Vesians as they helplessly came to depend on his Soldier mechs!

"Meow."

Their two cats tired of chasing after the darned uncatchable mouse bot and leapt up to their laps.

"Oh, are you hungry, Lucky?" Gloriana teased while tweaking Lucky's ears.

"Meow!"

Gloriana happily retrieved a treat from her pocket and threw it in his mouth. "Here you go!"

Meanwhile Ves rubbed his fingers over Clixie's soft fur. He still hadn't gotten over the novelty of petting a creature with actual fur. Clixie was a lot more adorable than his naughty cat in his eyes!

"You're such an elegant cat, Clixie. Lucky can learn a lot from you!"

"Miaow."

Times like these happened nearly every day. While not a lot of excitement took place, neither Ves nor Gloriana had any complaints.

Sadly, Ves couldn't afford to indulge in Gloriana's company every moment of the day. Even if he did his best to delegate his responsibilities, he still needed to divert some time on various matters.

The LMC increasingly grew more formidable. With several manufacturing facilities coming online in Bentheim, the Mech Nursery was no longer the only production site of the company.

Ves still had no intentions of moving to Bentheim, though. It was far too busy for his liking and it was filled with powerful players that Ves had no intention of meeting.

While it appeared that the recent developments on Cloudy Curtain attracted hundreds if not thousands of different influences, Ves and the LMC remained dominant on this planet!

Aside from the LMC, he regularly checked up on his other organizations. The Avatars, Battle Criers and Sentinels constantly grew stronger as Ves or the LMC invested considerable sums of money in upgrading their mechs.

The Larkinson Exobiology Institute also started to take shape. While it was too soon to gain permission to erect an exobeast reserve on Cloudy Curtain, Dr. Lupo already made some progress in some areas.

As for the Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans, he reluctantly watched on as Clinton Larkinson expanded the charity's capacity to treat the wounded.

In fact, if Clinton got his way, he wanted the Foundation to build an entirely new medical facility on Cloudy Curtain, one geared towards veteran care!

Naturally, Ves did not agree to this. Expanding the Foundation's treatment capacity to a hundred patients was enough.

Speaking of patients, one of the issues that required his personal attention was Davia Stark. The doctors employed by the Foundation did a good job in treating the physical wounds of this hidden expert pilot.

However, the doctors could do nothing about her mental and spiritual wounds.

As Dr. Lupo guided him to the recovery room where Davia Stark rested, he explained the patient's condition.

"From what we can tell of her history, she used to be a mercenary pilot when the sandmen crossed into human space. The mercenary corps she used to be a part of suffered the same fate as most of the initial defenders."

Overwhelmed by sandmen.

"Have any of her former comrades survived?" Ves carefully asked.

It would be bad for him if her former friends, colleagues and family came to Cloudy Curtain and insisted on taking Stark away!

Dr. Lupo looked uncertain. "It's difficult to tell. The chaos following the fall of the border states has upended existing records. They're not up to date anymore so it's very hard to figure out if people are dead or alive."

"So far, you haven't found anything, right?"

"No. We have tried to reach out to known contacts, but no one replied to our messages. It is looking increasingly more likely that this poor woman is all alone now."

Ves tried his best not to erupt into a grin. That would be improper. Instead, he slowly managed to school his face in a sad and solemn expression.

"I hope we can give Madame Stark a new home here at the LMC. I'm always open to employing honorable veterans."

"That sounds very generous of you, Mr. Larkinson." Lupo fawned.

"Is she in a state to talk?"

"We can wake her up if you wish. It won't affect her recovery as long as you keep your discussion short and free of stress."

"Wake her up, then. I'll be holding a private talk with her. Please stay outside."

Lupo nodded as Ves stepped into the recovery room. Some kind of attached device beeped as it injected some chemicals in Davia's bloodstream.

The expert pilot slowly emerged from her slumber.

Once Nitaa closed the doors, Ves passed on an instruction to Lucky who outputted a weak ECM field that mainly targeted the monitoring system of the room.

Ves did not wish to ruin the medical equipment built into the recovery bed.

"Hello, Davia. Can I call you that?"

Davia stopped pretending to be asleep. Her dull eyes turned to Ves as if she was gazing at a worm.

"You kidnapped me."

"I wouldn't say that." Ves defended himself. "I merely took you to a treatment facility where I could give you the care you deserve."

"I don't deserve anything."

"Your wounds would have led to a lot of chronic pain if left untreated."

"Good. I deserve to suffer."

Ves twitched his mouth. What was wrong with this woman?

"I'm giving you a second chance."

"Who says I want one?"

"I know you're an expert pilot." Ves admitted. "As a member of the famed Larkinson Family of the Bright Republic, I'm very familiar with expert pilots. I recognize the same air from you as the expert pilots of my family."

That was a lie, but Davia didn't have to know that.

The woman scowled at Ves. "I am a disgrace of an expert pilot. I failed my comrades and I failed my state."

"You're not the first traumatized survivor I've met. You're not doing anyone a favor by knocking yourself down. Do you think you are doing your fallen comrades a service by giving in to your despair?"

Davia shrugged. "I'm a failure. I am one of the least deserving mech pilots in the star sector to be bestowed this power. I was completely unable to save the commander I admired."

Ves narrowed his eyes as he figured something out. "Did you fight against the sandman in a standard mech?"

"I haven't piloted an expert mech if that's what you're asking."

"Ah. That explains it, then. No expert pilot can exert their full strength in a mech that isn't designed to resonate with you. Expert mechs are expensive for a reason."

"THAT DOESN'T EXCUSE MY FAILURE! PEOPLE COUNTED ON ME! NOW THEY'RE DEAD!"

"Calm down! Your body is still weak! You won't do your recovery any good if you lash out like that!"

Fortunately, Davia was simply too tired and fed up to sustain her outburst. She quickly calmed down and entered into a depressed mood.

Ves cautiously walked closer until he stood at the side of her bed. Despite her treatment, Davia appeared much older and frailer than before. According to the record, she was about 50 years old.

"When did you become an expert pilot?"

"Not too long ago." She answered. "I never thought I would become an expert pilot after I finished my military service. I became an expert pilot once I became a mercenary, but only a few people knew."

That sounded strange. Ordinarily, expert pilots could never hide themselves as their force of will was too easy to detect with modern resonance sensors.

"No one else found out?"

"I wasn't an expert pilot for long, to be honest. We kept it a secret as best as possible by disabling the sensors of our mechs and ships. As long as I holed up in my cabin and avoided contact with other forces, it's easy to avoid detection. I have no stomach to rejoin the military."

"Others would have found out eventually."

"That's true. I just wanted to prolong my return."

"Then the sandmen came."

"Yes."

The sandman invasion changed her entire fate.

#### *Chapter 1617 Research Institutions*

Ves found it difficult to engage Davia Stark in conversation. The spiritually crippled expert pilot was a woman without spirit. She completely lacked the strong will and belief that normal expert pilots possessed.

While her state made her pliable to an extent, the problem was that Stark no longer possessed the will to live!

He frowned as he felt he wasn't making any progress in their one-sided conversation. Every time he attempted to prod her, she merely replied in a perfunctory manner.

It felt as if he was talking to a suicidal bot.

Fortunately, this was not the first time Ves encountered a traumatized mech pilot. It was just that this case was a lot more thornier than usual because Davia just happened to be an expert pilot.

Injury and death remained an ever-present risk to those who risked their lives on the battlefield. The Larkinsons were very familiar with this universal truth. Not even their expert pilots returned from war unscathed.

His grandfather Benjamin happened to be a good example. He used to be an expert pilot before he returned with some sort of injury that no longer made him an expert pilot.

Such an outcome should have been devastating to any expert pilot, but his grandfather managed to pull through that dark period and readjust his life without any issue.

Since the Larkinsons raised so many mech pilots and sent them off to war, they also became proficient in treating them when they became wounded, crippled or traumatized.

War was a messy business. Those who entered the meat grinder never emerged unscathed.

The main reason the Larkinson Compound accommodated so many Larkinsons was to provide a calm refuge to those who needed to heal their mental scars.

The Larkinsons always believed that leaving a traumatized mech pilot alone was incredibly negligent.

People tended to develop weird thoughts when they were left by themselves. This problem was worse among the wounded and the mentally-scarred.

Therefore, the simple, low-tech solution the Larkinsons came up with after hundreds of years of trial and error was to surround the traumatized with family.

While it didn't work all the time, the Larkinsons saw enough success in this approach to stick with it. Ves always remembered his time at the Larkinson Compound fondly.

"I have a suggestion." He began. "Recuperating in this isolated recovery room won't do you much good. Once your physical condition improves, I intend to bring you to my Cloud Estate where my relatives can keep you company. Is that okay?"

Davia snorted. "Do what you want."

"Okay."

Though she remained a tough shell to crack, at least she didn't express any intentions to leave. After losing her home and everyone she knew, she had nowhere to go. It made no difference to her if she stayed in his care or returned to the farming settlement.

Ves soon left her room, allowing the sedatives to put her back to sleep.

"Take good care of her, Dr. Lupo." He repeated his instruction. "Once she recovers enough to stand and walk on her own, transfer her to the Cloud Estate. Make sure to assign some caretakers to her to attend to her daily needs."

Though Lupo still didn't know why Ves paid so much attention to an ordinary wounded veteran, he knew better than to question his employer.

"I will make sure that she is taken care of, Mr. Larkinson. I'll also spare some time in my schedule to check up on her condition and form a customized diet to facilitate her physical recovery."

Ves smiled. "Good. Treat her just like you treat Gloriana and I. Don't skimp on anything."

Ever since Ves put Dr. Lupo in charge of ingredient preparation, every meal turned into a delight.

While Ves was initially dismissive of Dr. Lupo's obsession with nutrition, it turned out that this specialty was not as trivial as he thought.

Each meal incorporated ingredients that Dr. Lupo tailored to their individual physiques!

The meals that Gloriana ate became a lot more delicate and pure.

In contrast, Ves ate meals that became a lot more filling and dense with energy.

Ever since he switched to Lupo's customized diet, Ves never felt as full and energy-rich as before!

He realized that he was missing out an entirely different facet of life before he employed Dr. Lupo!

Gloriana was just as happy with Dr. Lupo's addition to the staff!

Though Dr. Lupo frequently demanded to cook their meals, he was not as adept in the culinary arts as the chefs employed by Gloriana.

Personally, Ves didn't mind, but Gloriana vehemently opposed any notion of replacing her chefs.



She always employed the best she could get her hands on! Dr. Lupo was incomparable to Chefs trained in a prosperous second-rate state like the Hexadric Hegemony!

Of course, who knew if that remained the same a few years from now.

The Intelligence Candies that Ves graciously fed to Dr. Lupo weren't cabbages!

After the exobiologist adjusted to his expanded intellectual capabilities, he devoured knowledge like a bottomless hole!

Ves expected much from Lupo in the future!

As the two walked out of the Foundation's medical center, Ves quizzed the exobiologist on his progress.

"It's too soon for me to achieve any results on my assignments." Dr. Lupo admitted. He spent too much time putting his new learning ability to use. "My understanding of organic food substances is the highest. I'm confident I can make some headway into cracking the secrets of geril spice."

"What about the Archimedes Rubal?"

Lupo frowned for a moment. "I've tracked down some old records. It's not a bioimplant that is used anymore. I found a lot of useful documents and files that can help me update its bioprogramming, but the problem is that I can't make heads or tails of the data yet. Even if most of it is outdated, we're still talking about high technology here."

"Prioritize this project over anything else. I don't want to wait too long to implant the Archimedes Rubal in my head. Gloriana's cousin who is supposedly capable of performing the surgery will probably arrive within the year. I want you to be knowledgeable enough about implant surgery to assist in the surgery."

Dr. Lupo ought to be smart enough to realize that Ves did not entirely trust Gloriana's cousin.

"Rest assured, Mr. Larkinson. I will make sure to devote my time to studying this field and deciphering the Archimedes Rubal. It's just that I won't be able to devote as much time on other priorities."

Ves lazily waved his hand. "That's fine. The Larkinson Exobiology Institute is not meant to be a one-man organization. Hire more people and delegate some of the less sensitive tasks to them. I trust you to know what you can share and what you need to keep to yourself."

He employed a bit of his Spirituality and applied some pressure to Dr. Lupo. In an instant, he turned from a mild-mannered mech designer into a ferocious beast in human form!

"I-I-I understand!"

It didn't hurt to remind Dr. Lupo of what he stood to gain if he continued to remain loyal to Ves. It also didn't hurt to remind the former refugee that Ves was not an ordinary man.

Once he parted ways with Lupo, he returned to his office to keep on top of the latest developments.

The LMC sold more and more mechs. The Sand War became increasingly more bloody. The introduction of the Dawnbreaker and its variants slowly started to strengthen the forces that procured their copies. The Sandbreaker weapon system spread out throughout the entire region in rapid tempo!

In fact, the Avatars and Sentinels had already begun to switch out their old ballistic rifles for the newfangled Sandbreaker rifles!

Ves even visited a training ground to witness the effectiveness of the Sandbreaker rifle with his own eyes.

A Sandbreaker round impacted a target dummy made out of grainy substance that resembled the composition of a sandman vessel.

The round exploded instantly upon contact! A powerful concussive shockwave emanated outwards in a semi-focused cone! The target dummy lost at least half of its mass, impressing everyone witnessing the test!

"This Sandbreaker round is thirty percent more damaging against the sandmen than a standard ballistic round!"

This was an enormous difference! Transitioning to this weapon system would certainly save a lot of lives! This was why Ves did not feel any qualms about adopting the Sandbreaker system despite its origin!

"What a killer product!" Gavin commented with a hint of regret. "Those Ansel mech designers will certainly be swimming in money from all of the licensing fees they earn!"

Ves shrugged. "This is what they deserve. There's no point feeling jealous about it. Don't forget that a lot of experts have worked on the Sandbreaker weapon system. One of Ansel's main advantages is that the school has forged a lot of partnerships with research institutions. Professor Xu didn't develop the Sandbreaker by herself!"

These kinds of partnerships became increasingly more prevalent in the upper end of mech design. As much as mech designers accumulated detailed knowledge, they weren't omniscient.

Partnering up with a specialized research institution allowed mech designers to incorporate more advanced solutions in their mechs!

This was a way for mech designers to overcome a gap in capabilities without involving additional mech designers. This was vitally important to the Dawnbreaker project, which already involved five fully-fledged Seniors.

"It's too bad we don't have any ties to research institutions."

"It's not easy to gain the cooperation of those research institutions." Ves shook his head.

For now, it wasn't necessary for him to partner up with them. The advanced Skills and Sub-Skills he redeemed from the System served as a partial substitute to the services provided by research institutions.

Though his mech designs no longer received any hindrance if he involved too many people in the project, he still preferred to keep the headcount low.

Working with too many people not only complicated the management of his projects, but also caused the development time to double or triple.

Under the current circumstances, Ves couldn't afford to delay his design work so much.

Of course, declining to work with research institutions also made it difficult to add a powerful gimmick or a fantastic component like the Sandbreaker weapon system to his designs.

Once Ves saw enough, he left the training ground and returned to the Mech Nursery.

There, he began to discuss his next design project with Gavin.

"According to the schedule, Vincent Ricklin is about to arrive soon, right?"

His assistant nodded. "Your next client is scheduled to arrive in two or three days. He'll be bringing some company along."

"Make sure his party knows that they shouldn't mess around in Cloudy Curtain. This is my home planet and I don't want these former rebels to provoke a fight."

He knew that Vincent would definitely be accompanied by his goons of the former Bentheim Liberation Movement. Ever since the separatists received amnesty, they no longer hid themselves in quiet asteroid belts or underground bases.

According to the latest news from Bentheim, the former members of the BLM still hadn't shed their savagery yet. Though they did their best to abide by the terms of their agreement with the Bright Republic, thugs still remained thugs.

"Inform Commander Magdalena of our new arrivals and tell her to make sure to assign some Sentinels to keep watch over them." Ves ordered. "I'm not reassured with letting them run around in Cloudy Curtain without supervision."

"They might not take a liking to that, boss."

"I don't care. I'm in charge here."

Vincent's impending arrival weighed heavily on Ves. Though the incident with Vincent happened a long time ago, it was hard for him to forgive this murderous bastard for entangling him in a lot of trouble.

Just because he outgrew the threat of the surviving Ricklin Family did not mean that Ves forgave Vincent for landing him in trouble in the first place!

#### *Chapter 1618 The Next Projects*

One day before the scheduled arrival of Vincent Ricklin, a pivotal event took place that stirred the entire galaxy!

At the time, Ves held a lecture for the Tovar mech designers while Gloriana and Ketis took care of the Larkinson seeds.

So far, Ves was very pleased with the addition of the Tovar mech designers to his design team. While they lacked imagination, they were no slouches in the technical department.

If Ves wanted to exploit their labor, then he did not have to go through so much effort in mentoring them. However, that was not what he promised to Senator Tovar.

Though he declined to make any solid promises, Ves still assumed that he had a responsibility to raise at least one Tovar to Journeyman.

Unfortunately, Cherie, Vela, Pachtold and Gilbert all lacked the required spiritual potential to form a design seed. At their ages, Ves did not believe that they would be able to develop any spiritual potential in the next couple of years.

For this reason, Ves directed a little more attention to Miles, who was the only mech designer among the five who might make it to Journeyman in his lifetime.

"Your specialty relates to aerial mechs, right?"

Miles nodded. "Mechs with flight capabilities are the future. This transition has already taken place in more advanced states. As soon as it becomes economical enough to incorporate a flight system in any mech, pure landbound mechs will become a relic of the past!"

What Miles just stated happened to be similar to what Gloriana taught him in one of her tutoring sessions to turn Ves into a second-class mech designer.

The division between landbound and aerial mechs used to be ubiquitous throughout the galaxy.

However, no one was satisfied with the limited mobility of mechs that could only tread on land. Aerial mechs could cover so much more ground. The downside of aerial mechs was that their flight capabilities took up too much mass and volume in their frames!

While this problem still existed in the mechs employed by third-rate states in the galactic rim, more advanced states no longer stuck by this convention.

As long as the tech and materials became good enough, it was possible to turn every landbound mech into a flying object!

In the Coalition and the Hegemony, many landbound mechs were already capable of maneuvering in the air or in deep space. While they didn't move as fast as dedicated flying mechs, at the very least they weren't helpless in the event of a battle in space!

Gloriana even believed that the distinction between landbound, aerial and spaceborn mechs might disappear in a few hundred years!

This transition already took place in the galactic center and most places in the galactic heartland. The multipurpose mechs that Ves encountered during one of his Mastery experiences already incorporated the ability to operate in several different environments by default!

Such an extravagant and complex feature was still unimaginable in a small state like the Bright Republic!

From that perspective, Miles picked a very good direction to specialize in. At the very least, he did not have to worry about his design philosophy becoming redundant with the passage of time! Every mech required at least some flight capabilities in the future!

"I can't give you any advice when it comes to your specialization." Ves remarked. "This is something you can only depend on yourself. I hope that you have set a concrete goal for yourself. From what I've seen so far of you, I'm not sure you've made up your mind on what you want to accomplish. Just making better flight-capable mechs is not a sufficient goal. Think about it some more."

As Ves was about to wrap up this session, everyone's comms beeped in alarm.

No one's comm was exempted from this alert! Even though Ves ordered everyone to put their comms in silent mode, the alarm superseded all silencing functions without any hindrance!

In addition, the alarm not only affected the comms of the mech designers. Nitaa and the guards stationed by the Sentinels and the Glory Battalion all reacted with surprise as the alarms also affected their communication equipment!

"This alarm tone.."

Everyone paused and widened their eyes. Almost no one had heard this specific tone before.

However, each of them memorized this specific tone at school! This was because it signified a very important event!

"The MTA is about to make a galactic announcement!" Gloriana gasped as she checked her comm first! "It's about to start in sixty minutes!"

While the guards didn't react too strongly to this news, the mech designers each shook with anticipation!

"The new mech generation is about to start!"

Ves and Gloriana anticipated this development for a long time! The entire mech industry was about to undergo a huge shift at the impending release of better tech and standards!

Unfortunately, the start of the next mech generation came at a very odd time to the mech designers of the Bright Republic!

With the Sand War raging throughout the rimward direction of the Komodo Star Sector, Ves had no time to design a commercial mech that served the general mech market.

The only mechs that sold in the local region were mechs designed to resist the sandmen!

This wasn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, Ves benefited hugely from this development because the crisis offered him an opportunity to propel his Soldier product line into an unprecedented level of success!

The success of the Desolate Soldier and its variants along with the spread of the Stripes of Humanity propelled Ves and his mech company into a household name!

In other words, Ves already achieved the results he originally wanted to make after the start of the next mech generation!

"The timing isn't too good." He sighed. "I promised to fulfill a commission."

Gloriana patted his back. "We don't have to work on one project at a time. Besides, we can immediately familiarize ourselves with the new tech and components by applying them to Vincent's custom mech."

"I know, but it's still a burden to juggle multiple projects at once when time is at a premium."

Despite these difficulties, Ves did not shy away from this challenge. He was more than confident enough in his ability to design a new generation mech within a matter of months!

As Ves and Gloriana waited for the announcement to start, they began to discuss which mech they should design next.

"I'm most comfortable with designing premium mechs. That has always been my strongest niche." Ves said after some deliberation.

"Your most successful mech design is a budget mech." His girlfriend pointed out.

"I know, but I feel like I can't express my strengths as well in more limited designs. I also don't want to make it easy for customers to gain access to my glow. The current circumstances with the Desolate Soldier has already shown me that making glows too accessible will devalue their worth."

This was something that Ves always felt uneasy about. While he did not object to selling more mechs and capturing more market share, he feared upending the mech markets too much by making his mechs too ubiquitous.

His Desolate Soldiers would have never sold so well if the Sand War made a lot of ruling powers desperate.

Once the crisis was past, he couldn't be as unbridled as before. His competitors wouldn't sit still if he continued to encroach upon their interests.



By making his mechs expensive, Ves sacrificed volume for quality. He believed that designing mechs for the upper end of the market was the way to go for him. Unlike most mech designers, he never dreamt of turning his mechs into a universal standard.

Naturally, that did not mean that Ves would stop designing cheaper mechs. He just wanted to be more careful about it in order to maintain a reputation for quality and stabilize the value of his glow.

After some thought, Gloriana agreed with his decision as well. "Designing more expensive mechs is a bit closer to designing a second-class mech than if you opted for something cheaper. If you keep designing mechs like the Desolate Soldier, you won't develop the right mindset of someone who is capable of designing a second-class mech."

Recently, Ves made a fair amount of progress in familiarizing himself with second-class mechs. Due to his high Intelligence, he absorbed all of the literature that Gloriana assigned to him within a matter of hours!

His learning speed deeply impressed his girlfriend. She became a lot more hopeful about his chances of becoming a qualified second-class mech designer within three years!

Of course, Gloriana hadn't started with the difficult stuff yet. There was a fair amount of high technology that Ves had to digest before he became capable of designing a higher-end second-class mech!

He had little choice. There were simply too many advanced technologies such as energy shielding and miniaturized flight systems that he needed to become proficient in before he could think of designing a mech that appealed to customers from a second-rate state!

"If the Sand War didn't take place, I would have been more inclined to design a melee mech. Still, it's not that big of a deal to design another ranged mech. I just want some variety."

"What about designing an artillery mech?"

Ves shook his head. "I've already considered that option. A heavy artillery mech will take too long to design while a medium artillery mech doesn't offer enough firepower to make my product compelling."

"What about a light mech, then?"

"The sandmen are too accurate in their laser fire. Fielding a light mech is little better than fielding a starfighter. The risk to the mech pilot is too much."

"A missileer?"

"It's not an efficient weapon system against the sandmen. A mech armed with missiles will shoot its launchers dry after firing several salvos. This is why rifleman mechs enjoy vastly more favor right now. Their damage output per sortie is higher compared to other mech types."

Both of them looked troubled as they contemplated which option they should go for next.

None of the options sounded attractive except for designing a premium rifleman mech. Yet the recently-released Dawnbreaker already filled this niche. Ves saw no point in designing a mech that offered similar performance to an existing popular mech model.

"Why not go for your marksman mech idea?" Gloriana suggested. "Even if it's a sub-type of rifleman mechs, it lends itself well to the premium mech category because of its high skill demand."

Ves mulled over the suggestion and found it doable. "You're right. There aren't any exceptional mech models that focus on long-ranged precision fire on the market."

While the sandmen were lethal up close, they possessed a definite range advantage due to their reliance on laser weapons, which struck their targets at the speed of light! The only reason why the sandmen missed their shots every now and then was because their targeting systems weren't perfect.

In contrast, humanity had to rely on ranged weapons that dealt physical damage as opposed to energy damage. This was bad because physical projectiles traversed a lot slower in space.

The larger the distance, the bigger the problem.

For this reason, marksman mechs didn't really receive too much attention. While they were useful in engaging the sandmen at longer ranges, their total damage output was not as good because they carried less ammunition.

As mechs designed to take out distant opponents, marksmen mechs often resorted to heavier calibers. This was not as efficient in combating the sandmen.

"I'll think about it after the announcement is over." Ves eventually decided. "Who knows, maybe the MTA will introduce some new tech that will make a marksman mech a lot more viable."

In truth, Ves did not have much hopes for that. From what he heard, the next mech generation mainly revolved around significant improvements in laser weapons and other related energy weapon technology.

This happened to be completely useless to Ves at this time!

### *Chapter 1619 Galactic Mech Councilor*

Everyone patiently waited for the announcement to start.

Ves, Gloriana and Ketis sat together while the Tovar mech designers and Larkinson seeds sat further back. All of them faced the design lab's central projector, which Gloriana had already tuned to the MTA's official broadcast channel.

They choose to watch the announcement on their best projector for a good reason.

Every time the Mech Trade Association introduced a new mech generation, the spokesperson often showcased vivid examples and schematics!

All of these new advancements drove every mech designer in the galaxy wild!

Of course, the MTA only devoted time to introduce the most important innovations. The tech showcase also covered both low technology and high technology. Much of the latter wouldn't be very relevant to Ves unless he became a first-class mech designer.

At the moment, the projector depicted the stunning logo of the MTA.

A heroic-looking knight mech surrounded by orange flames burst out of a meteorite! Twelve planets orbited this stylized depiction.

There was a lot of symbolism and meaning behind this logo. The MTA considered themselves to be the protectors and standard bearers of humanity.

If Ves hadn't been exposed to some of the dirty secrets of the MTA, he would have been fooled by their act!

Still, no matter what Ves thought about the organization that rebelled against the Five Scrolls Compact, it still stood up for mech designers and mech pilots throughout the galaxy.

Ves had no choice but to play by their rules because it was a hundred times harder to engage in his profession in every other way.

Even a solemn Senior like the Skull Architect had been forced to eke out an existence in the frontier after he crossed the MTA!

That reminded Ves on what had happened to this dreaded pirate designer. Before the sandmen assaulted the Komodo Star Sector, they first swept through the Faris Star Region.

Malligan's Pitstop and all of the other pirate station in the frontier should have been wiped out by the sandmen by now.

Reportedly, most pirates packed up their bags and fled into civilized space, taking advantage of the chaos to mix in with the refugees.

Someone as powerful and resourceful as Professor Jimenez shouldn't have ended up in the jaws of the sandmen.

Ves hoped the Skull Architect fled very far away. His identity was very problematic in civilized space.

"The announcement is starting!"

Everyone turned their attention to the projection. The logo of the MTA began to rotate once before fading away to reveal a vast and impressive expanse of stars!

Though starscapes were common sights, this was not a regular sight! The density of stars was unimaginable to those who lived in the galactic rim!

"This is the splendor of the galactic center!" Gloriana admiringly explained. "Just look at all of the stars and interstellar gasses floating in between! The rudimentary FTL drives that we are used to are completely unable to function in this dense stellar environment!"

All of those stars and nebulae represented an unimaginable amount of wealth.

Higher stellar activity directly correlated to more exotics! The high-energy reactions that took place in this perilous space also produced much higher grades of exotics!

A person materialized into view in the middle of deep space. Ves figured that this wasn't some kind of special effect. The representative of the MTA literally teleported into the void without wearing any thick, protective suits!

Instead, the old and dignified-looking woman appeared to float in space garbed in nothing but a resplendent, hooded robe!

Once the woman drew back her hood, Ves immediately announced her identity!

"That's Galactic Mech Councilor Dorothea Veyron!"

Councilor Veyron was one of the hundred members of the Galactic Mech Council. The GMC pretty much served as the highest decision-making organ in the MTA, akin to a senate or a legislative assembly of a state!

Veyron used to be a citizen of the Triad Empire, a first-rate state in the galactic center. While she was well-versed in mechs, she wasn't a mech designer.

Instead, she joined the MTA more than 300 years ago as a bureaucrat!

By working her way up the ranks and earning the appreciation of her superiors, she continually promoted up the ranks.

The MTA became more and more impressed by her administrative ability, which was exceptional even when compared to the best in the galaxy!

For Dorothea Veyron to become an august member of the Galactic Mech Council by virtue of her competence in administration was an amazing feat!

Now, this old woman seemingly floated in space without relying on technology to sustain her body in this dangerous vacuum environment.

Whether she managed to survive in space due to advanced technology or extreme modifications to her body, Ves wasn't sure.

Most people probably thought the former was the case. Perhaps they even speculated that this was nothing but an elaborate virtual illusion.

In contrast, most members of upper society suspected that Councilor Veyron was truly floating in space right now!

Continuous advancements in genetic modification and human augmentation enabled many options previously unavailable to humanity!

The woman opened her mouth. Though sound didn't transmit through vacuum, there were countless ways to broadcast her words.

"Sons and daughters of humanity." Her dignified voice rang in everyone's ears. "Our civilization is about to advance once again."

Councilor Veyron's voice possessed an indescribable quality that commanded everyone's attention. Ves did not even think about what he was doing as he sat up straight and listened attentively to what she had to say to the galaxy.

This was the spokesperson that the MTA selected to convey their message to human space! She was anything but an average speaker!

"Over four-hundred years have passed since the start of the Age of Mechs. The current generation of mechs have existed for nearly thirty years. It is time for us to close this period and welcome a new era for mechs."

"Our civilization has grown larger, more powerful and more prosperous than ever before! We live in a golden age of mechs where we have continually pushed the boundaries of our most versatile weapon platform!"

"The Age of Mechs has pulled humanity from the brink of destruction and allowed us to become more refined in the art of war! After centuries of continuous progress, our race has become more efficient in the application of force! The age where our kind used to hammer all of our perceived enemies from existence with the most destructive weapons we have on hand is long past!"

"I am proud to live in this great era! Not only have we pushed mechs to a height that we could scarcely imagine at the beginning of the Age of Mechs, but we have also solidified our dominance throughout the galaxy!"

??Though we are divided by states, our civilization stands as one! We are humans, who emerged from an insignificant planet in the Orion arm of the galaxy to become the most dominant race among countless alien races!"

"Our race has overcome many odds in our rise. We have even confronted our inner demons and come out stronger and more united in the end! For over four-hundred years, the MTA has ensured that war will never be able to threaten the survival of our race again!"

Councilor Veyron kept airing lofty words about humanity and the Age of Mechs. Ves soon pulled himself out of the trance he had inadvertently fallen into. He recognized when he was being indoctrinated!

Ves turned to Gloriana and found to little surprise that she looked fully taken in by Councilor Veyron's pro-human, pro-mech and pro-MTA views!

He prodded her side with his finger. He failed to catch her attention.

Should he do something more drastic? He decided to leave Gloriana alone. Councilor Veyron may be attempting to indoctrinate her audience, but many mech designers already bought into her viewpoints!

Every mech designer believed that mechs were the weapons of humanity!

Every mech designer believed that the Age of Mechs was the best time for a human to be alive!

Every mech designer believed that the MTA was the biggest contributor to peace and prosperity in human space!

Though Ves held some diverging opinions, he knew he wouldn't be able to convince Gloriana of his views at this point.

Fortunately, the councilor soon ended her introductory spiel and went on with the meat of this galaxy-wide announcement!

"Our galactic mech industry has never stood still. The brightest minds of our race are constantly pushing the boundaries of science, allowing us to integrate newer and better technologies into our mechs. The latest mech generation that we will commence this day will alter the landscape of battle! Let me introduce you to the most far-reaching advancements that we have pushed in the latest mech generation!"

Two mechs flew into view, stopping just behind the councilor!

As a human, Councilor Veyron appeared very small in comparison to the huge mechs!

Despite that, the gravitas she conveyed through the projection made it difficult for every mech designer to direct their attention towards the mechs!

It didn't take any explanation for Ves to realize that the mechs belonged to different generations!

The mechs appeared to be a pair of very advanced second-class rifleman mechs. The laser rifles they wielded looked incredibly stunning in the arms of these exquisite mechs!"

Gloriana reacted first. "Those are masterwork mechs!"

Every aspect about their construction appeared flawless in their eyes!

Before they can spend time on admiring the mechs, Councilor Veyron immediately pointed out the critical differences between the two mechs.

"In much of human space, laser weapons are ubiquitous." She explained. "They are efficient, accurate, versatile and convenient. Our Association has expended a considerable amount of effort to introduce innovative new technologies related to laser weapons. Let us demonstrate the results right now!"

A few mechs flew in range. Without much delay, the two rifle-armed mechs fired at the targets which attempted to resist incoming fire with their armor or leverage their mobility to dodge the aim of the pilots!

"Look at the difference in power!" Gloriana exclaimed. "The latest generation laser rifle is at least twenty percent more powerful! Look, the mech on the right has already defeated the defensive mech that attempted to resist the lasers head-on!"

Ves was well-versed in laser weapons, so he quickly spotted another discrepancy. "It's not just the power that received a boost. The rifle is generating considerably less heat. That can mean that it is more efficient or its components take up less space and therefore offers more capacity for heatsinks."



The demonstration continued to showcase the differences between the old and new generation of laser weapons.

In fact, Ves suspected that the technological leap he was witnessing shared a lot of similarities with the crystal builder technology he employed in the design of his Crystal Lord and its crystal-based laser rifle!

As Ves studied the performance of the latest generation laser rifle further, he soon concluded that the tech base was different. Even though the MTA standardized a different approach towards miniaturizing the components of a laser rifle, the results were similar!

In fact, the new tech standards that the MTA revealed in this laser rifle was probably more practical and efficient than relying on weird alien crystals to empower the mechanisms of a laser rifle!

"The Crystal Lord has definitely become obsolete." He muttered.

He didn't mind. The LMC had already phased out the Crystal Lord from its mech catalog.

The transition to a new mech generation always resulted in the devaluation of older mech designs. Ves couldn't do anything to stop the advance of better technology. He could only accept this outcome and adjust to the changes as best as possible.

If the circumstances permitted, Ves did not mind revisiting the Crystal Lord design to develop its Mark II iteration.

However, the Crystal Lord possessed too many inadequacies to a mech designer of his current height. It would probably be a better idea for him to start another landbound rifleman mech project from scratch!

### *Chapter 1620 Signature Technology*

The Mech Trade Association was one of the most powerful organizations in the galaxy!

Not only did it possess the raw military might to dictate its rules throughout human space, it also monopolized the right to govern everything related to mechs!

The transition to a new mech generation served as a means to regulate and standardize the progression of mech design. The enormous prestige and might of the MTA ensured that each and every mech designer abided by their arrangements.

In this way, mech development throughout human space adopted newer tech, application and standards swiftly and without any lag.



Even the star sectors at the periphery of human space such as the Komodo Star Sector could keep up with the latest developments!

Ves recognized that the MTA did not reveal all of these fancy new tech to the entire galaxy from the goodness of their hearts.

The MTA simply wanted to foster as much innovation as possible!

If an organization like the MTA did not propagate new standards, then the progress of mech design would splinter and diverge in every star sector! Cutting-edge researchers whose time and energy were limited might inadvertently waste their time in researching tech that had already been invented elsewhere!

To a fairly young organization that championed a fairly new weapon platform such as mechs, this kind of inefficiency couldn't be tolerated!

For this reason, the MTA kept tabs on all of the advancements made by mech designers throughout the galaxy and popularized the most suitable ones.

Grouping the introduction of new technologies and standards into 20 to 30 year-long periods caused every mech designer to take the transitions seriously!

Those who ignored the arrangements of the MTA would quickly be left in the dust by their competitors!

Ves, Gloriana, Ketis and the rest of their design team eagerly soaked in the new innovations that Councilor Veyron introduced.

The mighty councilor started off the showcase with showcasing the pivotal leaps in directed energy weapon technology for a reason.

Though lasers were considered low tech weapons, they were used throughout much of the galaxy. Their versatility, ease of use and scalability made them ubiquitous throughout the galactic rim and galactic heartland.

Laser weapons even saw widespread use in the galactic center due to their light speed properties, though most mech owners could afford something better.

In short, the advancement of laser weapon technology elevated the strength level of all of human space, with the less developed star sectors benefiting more than most!

"Directed energy weapons serve as an essential element in the arsenal of any force of mechs." Councilor Veyron smiled as she floated in deep space garbed in nothing but ceremonial robes. "With the introduction of these new technologies, the firepower, energy efficiency, capacity of laser weapons have become more potent than ever!"

Of course, Councilor Veyron couldn't spend all of her time on highlighting laser weapons. She had a whole laundry list of showcases to go through and even then she only scratched the surface of all of the new innovations the MTA released!

The laser-armed mechs made way for mechs wielding more advanced directed energy weapons.

This time, the mechs fired bright, energetic beams that Ves instantly recognized as positron beams!

"Many of the advancement in laser weapons have also benefited other related weapon technologies..."

"Plasma weapons..."

"Missile payloads..."

The councilor steadily introduced all kinds of updates of popular weapon systems. While she hadn't announced anything groundbreaking, the modest upgrades to existing tech still made enough of a difference to elevate the strengths of mechs to another level!

Though the MTA likely introduced updates to thousands of weapon systems, Veyron only mentioned a dozen of them before moving on to improvements in other aspects.

A grand first-class multipurpose mech flew into view. Ves and Gloriana immediately knew that the next innovation likely concerned high technology that was far beyond their reach.

Despite that, both of them looked on with hunger and eagerness! In addition to admiring the latest new tech, they also believed that they would one day be able to utilize this new tech!

Councilor Veyron's eyes lit up as she gazed at the mech. "The next innovation I'm about to introduce is the tech that will truly define this generation. This signature technology, which we have researched for centuries, has finally reached a level of maturity that we feel is ready to be shared to humanity!"

Everyone leaned forward, including Ves. Councilor Veyron was not a person who spoke nonsense!

"Since the beginning of this age, mechs have always been considered as a weapon platform with many limitations. Mechs are smaller and weaker than even the smallest warships. However, through centuries of research and development, our scientists and mech designers have slowly narrowed the gap between mechs and warships."

Ves slightly shook his head in disagreement. While it was true that countless smart minds achieved enormous advancements in technologies related to mechs, many of them could also be applied to other weapon platforms such as warships!

In addition, the CFA also poured a lot of resources and manpower in developing their own new tech! The only difference between the two rivalling organizations was that the CFA mostly kept their ship-related innovations to themselves!

He believed that a contemporary warship was multiple times more powerful than the Starlight Megalodon which crashed on the surface of Aeon Corona VII!

Of course, due to the CFA's distance to society, most people didn't know anything better. If there was one thing Ves appreciated about the MTA, it was that the latter organization was a lot more engaged with the rest of humanity.

"Humanity has wielded warships for millenia." Councilor Veyron continued. "They are our greatest and most terrible weapons. Yet they are huge, resource-intensive and cumbersome. While warships will always play an essential role in safeguarding our civilization, the MTA believes the future of humanity rests with mechs!"

Councilor Veyron was building up to something. Each time the MTA announced a new mech generation, their spokespersons always hyped up a pivotal new technology that defined the period!

However, different from previous times, the councilor spoke much more bombastically about mechs than usual. She even despised warships, as if the signature technology she was about to introduce would really do what she said and narrow the gap!

"In four centuries, humanity has seen mechs grow from modest curiosities into increasingly more versatile and powerful war machines! The advent of expert pilots and even more impressive mech pilots has fully unlocked our hidden potential! Now, I have the pleasure to introduce a change that will change the landscape of mechs forever! Gaze upon this mech and welcome the start of the era of the independent mech!"

Upon those words, the first-class mech floating behind her flew forward while slowly fading from existence.

Seconds later, the mech disappeared from view.

Almost everyone who watched the galaxy-wide broadcast trembled at the sight.

This was because everyone who traveled on a starship or watched one exit a star system recognized this visual phenomenon!

The projected view soon switched to another site to reveal the same mech that disappeared earlier! It had reappeared next to a beacon anchored in space!

The most critical difference about this new site was that the starscape in the background shifted substantially!

Moving just a few light-seconds forward wouldn't have induced such a considerable change in perspective!

The mech apparently traversed an unimaginably huge distance within a matter of seconds!

Not even the fastest conventional flight system could allow a mech to traverse such a huge distance so quickly!

Ves and Gloriana both performed some sloppy mental calculations and came up with an answer that shook their entire mentality towards mechs! They each turned to each other to confirm their frightening conclusion!

"That mech transitioned into FTL!"

"It's a mech capable of traveling faster than light!"

"Not only that, but the FTL drive has been miniaturized to the point where the mech doesn't have to sacrifice too much capacity to accommodate this system!"

Ves happened to have some personal experience with first-class mechs, so he knew how little space a fully-functional component occupied. From what he could tell of the design of the mech that traveled through FTL, it boasted a very respectable amount of offensive and defensive capabilities.

Now, the addition of a miniaturized FTL drive propelled its mobility to an astronomical height!

Just the implication of a mech company that could travel to other star systems without relying on a carrier was immense!

With the public introduction of this signature technology into the galactic mech community, mechs with this module no longer needed to rely on motherships to convey them across the stars!

They could travel to their destinations by themselves!

Councilor Veyron did not exaggerate. This was the first independent mech that many people in the galaxy witnessed!

In fact, some people believed that certain organizations had already succeeded in miniaturizing FTL drives to the point where they could be mounted on mechs. The only

reason why they hadn't spread this tech was because it was too expensive and impractical to implement on a wider scale!

Yet now, the tech had evidently progressed to the point where the tech became feasible enough to be adopted by other powers!

Councilor Veyron appeared into view moments later as if she teleported next to the mech. This powerful woman gazed up at the mech as if it was an epoch-shaking treasure!

"This mech has just demonstrated the capability of traveling faster than light. The Mech Trade Association is proud to share the gains we have made in miniaturizing and optimizing one of the smallest FTL drive we have developed to date!"

The projection began to depict some technical schematics that highlighted some of the key portions of the FTL drive incorporated in the mech.

Of course, anyone who wasn't versed in standard FTL technology could forget about comprehending the schematic in detail.

Ves received some tutoring in the field from Chief Engineer Dakkon of the Flagrant Vandals. Despite that, the FTL drive schematics presented by Councilor Veyron was incomparably more complex than the more rudimentary drives that were common in the galactic rim!

He only possessed a very shallow understanding of FTL drives, which was completely insufficient for him to comprehend the profoundness of this miniaturized FTL drive!

Fortunately, the MTA knew that most people wouldn't understand a thing either. After babbling some technical specs, Councilor Veyron dumbed down her explanation.

"The miniaturized FTL drive or minidrive incorporated in this mech differs from standard, full-sized FTL drives in many ways. While there are many differences, the key material that has made the minidrive more practical is a high-grade liquid exotic that is known as phasewater."

A small infographic appeared that listed out the key properties of phasewater.

Ves instantly lost most of his excitement. While phasewater exhibited incredible dimensional properties, the exotic was incredibly scarce!

Not only that, it was incredibly expensive! Demand for it was huge but the supply was non-existent! Phasewater wasn't even available in large amounts in the galactic center!

"As you can see, the minidrive we have developed is highly dependent on phasewater. For now, a functioning minidrive that is capable of granting FTL capability to mechs must incorporate at least 50 grams of phasewater."

"Fifty grams!"

While this didn't sound like much, according to a quick search on the galactic net, a single microgram already cost more than an entire first-class mech corps!

"Even the Terrans and the Rubarthans will bleed at such an excessive price!" Gloriana exclaimed in shock.

Ves was just as shocked. "At these prices, it only makes sense to add minidrives to ace mechs and god mechs!"

And not every state could afford to spend such extravagant amounts. Only the Big Two and the first-rate superstates could afford to splurge on this new invention!

How was it possible for the MTA to believe this tech was mature enough to be introduced to the galactic mech community?!

This tech was way too expensive!