

Mech 1621

Chapter 1621 Phasewater

"Despite its size, the addition of phasewater allows the minidrive to exhibit wondrous capabilities. As long as the mech possesses enough energy reserves, it is not impossible for a mech to travel across an entire star sector by its own capabilities!"

Such a bold statement belied the fact that hardly anyone could afford the fifty grams of phasewater needed to construct a minidrive module!

How could the MTA be bold enough to announce a so-called 'era of the independent mech' when there was only enough phasewater in the galaxy to build a couple of hundred FTL-capable mech with this tech?

As long as the minidrive depended on an obscene quantity of phasewater, most mech designers could forget about designing FTL-capable mechs in this generation!

Gloriana looked confused. "The MTA isn't this ambitious when it comes to unveiling their signature technologies. While the minidrive is an impressive invention, it will take hundreds of years for it to become practical!"

Whenever a significant new invention emerged, the earliest iterations were usually crude, inefficient and prohibitively expensive.

Only a small number of scientists developed the technology. Even if they were some of the most brilliant specialists in their fields, their manpower and energy were ultimately limited.

Once they published their results, everyone capable would be able to access the new technology. A lot of new research projects would probably commence throughout the entirety of human space!

With so many more researchers delving into the technology the MTA unveiled, various refinements and improvements would quickly follow!

Even if only one out of a million scientists achieved some results due to a fluke, that still represented actual progress!

A single success might not be so significant, but with the sheer amount of researchers studying the same subject, the rate of improvement could be quite substantial!

However, some technologies were easier to advance than others!

With the minidrive tech, many scientists were probably feeling a lot of pain by their inability to procure 50 grams of phasewater needed to perform actual tests!

This would slow down the advancement of minidrive technology tremendously.

At some point, some ingenious researcher would find a way to reduce the amount of phasewater needed to make a minidrive functional.

From 49 grams, 45 grams, 40 grams and so on, the minidrive would become more efficient in terms of cost and material requirements.

In addition, now that humanity discovered such a wonderful use of phasewater, many people would be scouring the galaxy for this extremely rare exotic! Each of them wanted to take advantage of the sky-rocketing prices that ensued after this announcement!

Once so many prospectors and treasure hunters began to search for phasewater, supply would inevitably increase, thereby decreasing the scarcity of this material over time.

Furthermore, many researchers unsatisfied with the lack of access to phasewater would constantly be searching for substitute materials.

Many exotics shared similar properties and effects. This allowed clever material scientists to find a way to substitute the role of an expensive exotic with something cheaper.

In fact, many inventions introduced in earlier generations became more practical and widespread in the poorer parts of the galaxy after material scientists figured out a way to achieve the same effect by blending several cheap exotics together.

It was a much better deal to use large quantities of widely-available low-grade exotics than a smaller quantity of high-grade exotics!

One example of this kind of progress was the ultracompact batteries that Ves had created on his own. Combining sulomnium, beta-otricine and Flesha's Tears was nothing more than a way to create a knockoff of a high-grade exotic!

Some material scientists even believe that many high-grade exotics were compound substances of lower grade materials!

With how amazing the minidrive technology appeared to be, Ves definitely believed that someone would eventually make a breakthrough that removed its dependency on phasewater.

The question was how long it would take. Phasewater seemed to be an incredibly high-grade exotic with strong dimensional properties. Such a strange and powerful effect couldn't be replicated easily.

Nonetheless, Councilor Veyron cheerfully fawned over the minidrive technology as if it would soon spread throughout human space!

"Minidrives have many applications! It is not only useful for mechs, but also for other craft such as shuttles, escape pods and more! With a minidrive in your possession, you can effortlessly travel to any star system within range without relying on a lumbering ship!"

"Who has enough phasewater to waste on other applications?" Gloriana puzzlingly wondered.

Fortunately, Councilor Veyron soon finished elaborating on the minidrive.

"That sums up the highlights of our new minidrive technology. You can obtain more detailed explanations at our virtual portal. Now, let us move on to the next innovations..."

Various mechs flew in and out of view to demonstrate various new capabilities. The innovations that the MTA chose to highlight during this important announcement represented significant advances in mech technology despite their lack of flair compared to the introduction of the minidrive.

The various improvements that Ves took note of ranged from more refined neural interfaces to more efficient power reactors.

Each of these performance improvements came about through several means. In the case of neural interfaces, they performed better mostly due to improvements in design and technical application.

In the case of power reactors, the MTA listed out a variety of newly-discovered exotics that could substitute the role of currently-used exotics. In other words, the improvement purely came about due to the usage of improved materials.

Still, no matter how the improvements came about, the mechs designed according to the new methods became significantly more powerful!

Councilor Veyron swiftly introduced many different improvements. All of them were enough to inspire Ves and Gloriana!

The mechs they wanted to design would certainly become a lot more impressive!

Of course, both of them needed to license a new set of components to be able to do so. While it was possible to rely on leaked and pirated documents to piece together a new generation of mech, no one would be allowed to sell them on the open market.

Every commercial mech model had to be approved by the MTA! As a 'trade association', the organization could not neglect their vital duty in regulating the sale and trade of mechs.

While the MTA generally didn't bother with private transactions and commissions, any mech designer who wanted to sell more than a couple of mechs on the open market needed to play by their rules!

For this reason, only a small number of mech designers started off strong at the start of a new mech generation.

Too many mech designers couldn't afford the licenses required to make use of readily-available components!

They had to wait until various mech designers and component developers digested the new technologies. After a few months of years, they would publish their new component designs, but by then the mech designers who started later already fell behind!

After two hours of showcasing a dazzling number of improvements, Councilor Veyron finally wrapped up her announcement.

"There are many new advancements that our Association made available to you. I am proud of what the mech community has accomplished over the last decades. Not only have we unveiled a viable means of adding FTL capability to mechs, we have also introduced a comprehensive wave of enhancements that collectively increases the potency of humanity's mechs to a new height!"

Her arm stretched to the impressive star scape in the background. "Normally, our message ends here, but we have another announcement to make."

The logos of two different organizations appeared by her side.

To the left was the familiar logo of the MTA.

To the right was the logo of the CFA!

Most people who began to grow sleepy or numb to all of the technological advancements introduced by Veyron began to wake themselves up at the new sight.

Anything that was important enough to unite the Big Two must be something enormous!

Ves recalled Calabast's warning that the MTA planned to make an additional announcement. Now, it turned out that his partner was right!

"The Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance have safeguarded human civilization for over 400 years." She stated seriously. "For four centuries, our race has

rested and recovered from the devastation of the preceding stage. Our initial mission after the formation of our organization was to protect our race from further decline! Now, we declare that we have succeeded in this objective!"

A new image appeared behind the powerful councilor. A three-dimensional plot of the galaxy emerged into view. Various lines and colors delineated this map, highlighting the space occupied by humanity and other alien civilizations.

Everyone was familiar with this map. Even if they couldn't draw it very precisely from memory, most people could still sketch the relative locations and proportions of the territories occupied by the major races in the galaxy.

Obviously, humanity occupied the largest territory!

Anticipation built up in everyone as they began to form their own ideas about the nature of this announcement.

Councilor Veyron smiled. "Do not fear. The MTA and CFA are both here to stay. We will continue to protect and regulate human space as we have always done. The only difference from now is that we believe that humanity has recovered to a point where we can reignite our passion for conquest!"

She held out her hand and clenched it into a fist!

"Make no mistake! We humans must always fight! We can never settle for peace, because there are always enemies waiting to pounce on us when we have become weak!"

Though her words were aggressive, most people felt proud of their words!

Each human took pride in their racial heritage! Even though the human race was anything but exceptional, every alien race that clashed against them had faltered despite their many advantages!

The belief that the human race was the best race in the galaxy was deeply rooted in everyone's bones. Since humanity was capable of conquering the entire galaxy, not a lot of people advocated for peace and tolerance.

This was because the alien empires that used to dominate the galaxy were really horrible! Every race looked out for themselves, and cooperation was very few and far in between.

"Now that we have repaired and sharpened our weapons for over four-hundred years, it is finally time to reveal our strength to the aliens that think that we have grown weak!"

The map of the galaxy shifted at this point. Instead of showing some symbols that signified an invasion into known alien space, something else happened!

A much-smaller cluster of stars that hung a small distance away from the galaxy appeared into view!

A bold red arrow pointed from the center of the galaxy to the edge of this new and smaller galaxy!

"Starting from this day, the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance will pioneer an invasion into the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy!"

"WHAT?!" Ves couldn't help but shout.

Gloriana looked just as shocked!

In fact, every single human except for those in the know reacted with surprise!

No one had ever imagined that the Big Two would ignore the other alien empires bordering human civilization in favor of invading a random dwarf galaxy!

After a lengthy pause to give everyone time to process this shocking revelation, Councilor Veyron quickly stated the main reason why the Big Two targeted this distant cluster of stars!

"Our decision to invade the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy that orbits our Milky Way Galaxy is highly related to our earlier announcement. Perhaps many of you think that the minidrive is too impractical to be popularized because of the scarcity of its key material. This problem has weighed on us as well until we have discovered an important finding!"

Everyone who watched the broadcast hung onto her words.

"Phasewater is very prevalent in Red Ocean! This critical exotic is at least a million times more prevalent compared to our native galaxy!"

Another shock swept throughout human space! This revelation changed everyone's thoughts on minidrive technology!

If phasewater was much easier to obtain in Red Ocean, then that was enough to make the Big Two excited!

Chapter 1622 Red Ocean

The earlier revelations paled in comparison with the latest announcement!

Councilor Veyron not only introduced a bunch of new technologies, but also announced an entirely new direction for humanity!

The course of human civilization that had settled for over four-hundred years was about to shift in a bold new direction!

The Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy was a satellite galaxy to the Milky Way Galaxy.

Just like planets orbited around a star, Red Ocean orbited around the Milky Way like a little brother circling around a big sister!

The sizes of the two galaxies were incomparable. The Milky Way's diameter stretched up to 200,000 light-years, which was stupendously huge!

In comparison, Red Ocean was a lot smaller. It stretched just 25,000 light years from end to end, making it eight times smaller than the Milky Way.

This still represented a huge amount of space, enough to establish several first-rate superstates if they managed to conquer huge swathes of territory!

Red Ocean encompassed enough space to fit a huge amount of star sectors!

Ves instantly formed a lot of questions in his mind.

According to the projected map, Red Ocean orbited 350,000 light years from the Milky Way! How could anyone traverse such a distance in their lifetimes?

Secondly, had humanity already established a foothold in this dwarf galaxy?

Many people long figured out that the MTA and CFA became less active in public. Unfortunately, no one managed to figure out what the Big Two were up to.

Only now did all of them realize that the Big Two had always been preparing for the invasion of a satellite galaxy!

Councilor Veyron elaborated on the importance of this bold new invasion.

"Though the expensive is enormous, we have a very good reason to target this distant dwarf galaxy. Phasewater is a strategic exotic with many possible applications. The minidrives are just one of many wondrous applications. We are certain that as long as phasewater becomes more available, humanity will find even more uses of this potent material!"

This idea already came to mind to many people. If phasewater was only useful in making miniaturized FTL drives, then the CFA wouldn't have agreed to this invasion.

Minidrives benefited the MTA a lot more than the CFA!

The latter always directed their research projects towards greater might. Their huge warships offered plenty of space for powerful FTL drives that offered immense range and speed.

On the other hand, the MTA placed a much higher priority on making technology more practical. The development of the minidrive was a typical MTA project as it succeeded in making FTL drives small enough to be mounted on mechs.

Certainly, newer problems emerged such as raising the cost, energy and material requirements of using this technology.

However, as long as the MTA managed to solve the size problem, it wasn't as difficult to address other shortcomings!

In any case, Ves guessed that phasewater was probably a critical material in many dimensional applications!

So much so that the CFA did not hesitate to get onboard the MTA's plan to conquer a very distant dwarf galaxy!

"We are aware of your questions." Councilor Veyron smiled. "In truth, we have already become aware of phasewater's wondrous properties and applications for several generations. When we found that phasewater is far too scarce in our native galaxy, we have cast our gazes elsewhere. Of all of the satellite galaxies that the Milky Way has captured, we have decided to invade the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy over fifty years ago!"

The map of the Milky Way Galaxy faded out. Instead, the star map Red Ocean grew larger, revealing a relatively modest patch of space that the Big Two managed to settle!

Footage began to play next to the councilor. Impressive star systems occupied and fortified by the Big Two came into view.

This was everyone's first glimpse of the space inside Red Ocean!

The distant star scape was much more dim compared to humanity's native galaxy. As the footage panned around, a distant glowing oval attracted everyone's attention.

That was the Milky Way!

Dorothea Veyron grinned. "What you are seeing right now are live feeds of the star systems that we've managed to tame in our fifty-year conquest!"

Ves and everyone couldn't help but gasp.

The Big Two sure hid this secret well! Not a single word about their invasion of a dwarf galaxy had leaked into the public!

"Make no mistake. Red Ocean is not devoid of intelligent life." The councilor turned grave. "We have already fought against many different alien empires, some of which are old friends of ours who have fled to this dwarf galaxy in the belief that they can recover their strength here in secret!"

Many people, primed by Veyron's earlier speech, already expected something like this. Where there were stars, there was life.

"The Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance has fought very hard to carve out a foothold into this dwarf galaxy. Many native alien civilizations have learned how terrible we are from the aliens that we have defeated once more. This is a hostile galaxy. We cannot expect to face the same situation as we did during the Age of Conquest. The aliens have set aside their mutual differences in order to unite against our race."

The councilor grinned. "Unfortunately, we have accumulated our strength for four-hundred years. While it is difficult for us to transfer most of our forces to this dwarf galaxy, we have spent the last decades to expand our foothold and develop a newer and better means of crossing the void between the galaxies!"

The footage switched to an enormous gate floating in orbit of a lifeless planet!

The circular gate was humongous! Ves could tell because there were several CFA capital ships patrolling in the vicinity.

The huge gate outright dwarfed the battleships!

"What you are seeing now is a beyonder gate. It is one of our most powerful means of transferring our people from one galaxy to another! Upon activating gates on both ends, we are able to transfer any object or any living being from one galaxy to another in an instant!"

This was another stunning new invention! While the Big Two developed various means of traveling faster than light, Ves had never heard of the development of a huge gate that could transport something hundreds of thousands of light-years away!

What impressed Ves and everyone else even more was that it all happened in an instant, as if the two gates folded space itself!

It didn't take a genius to guess that phasewater was pivotal to the functioning of the beyonder gates.

Unlike the tiny minidrives, the beyonder gates likely used a lot more phasewater!

Perhaps a metric ton of this substance was not enough to make a beyonder gate work!

Yet the Big Two managed to construct at least a pair of these enormous gates!

If phasewater truly enabled the creation of something as amazing as the beyonder gate, then what else could humans do with this exotic?

Many people began to let their imaginations run wild. Their eyes reddened and their breaths grew hotter as they imagined building starships that could cross the galaxies, mechs that could jump from the galactic center to the galactic rim or teleporters that could transport a human from one planet straight to another planet!

Phasewater instantly turned from a niche curiosity into a must-have material to many scientists and business magnates! Whether they wanted to make a name for themselves by inventing a pivotal new tech or become the richest person in human space by selling lots of innovative new products, many people already started to clamor to enter this exciting new dwarf galaxy!

"The Milky Way is already settled. Unless we wage war against the neighboring alien empires, there is hardly any room for development. Red Ocean is an opportunity for us to pioneer new territory!"

??We must set foot in Red Ocean at all costs! The future of human development will definitely center around phasewater! We must harvest as much phasewater as possible!"

"Since the Age of Stars, humanity has expanded into space. Now that we have become the hegemon of the galaxy, there is hardly anything that excites us anymore. This announcement changes everything! The invention of the beyonder gate and the invasion of Red Ocean has opened an entirely new road for our race!"

For millennia, humanity never thought they would be able to escape the Milky Way Galaxy. Everyone thought that humanity would first resume its conquest of the rest of the galaxy before turning their attention elsewhere.

Yet now that the Big Two decided to invade a satellite galaxy, many people began to develop a hunger for adventure!

Including Ves!

"This.. is a great opportunity for us!" He whispered to his girlfriend.

"Are you thinking about starting your grand expedition in Red Ocean?" Gloriana frowned. "It sounds dangerous! Didn't you hear Councilor Veyron mention that the Big Two fought hard to gain a foothold in this dwarf galaxy? Our mechs and unarmed starships won't stand a chance against aliens who aren't bound by our rules!"

Ves briefly frowned but soon relaxed. "I think there's a reason why the Big Two decided to drop this bomb. I can't imagine any leader from the CFA or MTA failing to predict that many humans would want to be part of this exciting new development!"

His prediction turned out to be true. After Councilor Veyron showed off the beyonder gate that could convey entire fleets from one galaxy to another, she began to reveal the Big Two's intentions towards anyone interested in exploiting Red Ocean's bounty!

"With the construction of the beyonder gates, we have secured our initial gains in Red Ocean." She spoke. "The beyond gates allow us to transfer vastly more forces into this dwarf galaxy, allowing us to wage war against the local alien empires at a much greater scale than before! Soon, our warfleets will double the territorial acquisitions we've made in the last fifty years in a matter of months! And this is just the start of our explosive expansion!"

The star map of Red Ocean came back into view. The map only highlighted a small number of star sectors at first.

Then, the number of glowing star sectors doubled.

The time lapse continued as several years went by. The territories conquered by the Big Two continued to expand at a frightening rate!

Though the expansion was not very detailed or reliable, it nonetheless gave every human an idea of how much confidence the Big Two possessed into expanding their presence in this alien galaxy!

Councilor Veyron sighed. "Our territorial conquests are about to accelerate at a rapid pace. Our primary concern is to defend humanity and expand our strength. While we have settled several important star systems and plan to settle many more, we are not interested in colonizing so much space. We are concerned with greater responsibilities!"

"Here it comes." Ves rubbed his hands in anticipation.

"For this reason, the Mech Trade Association and the Common Fleet Alliance has decided to allow the rest of humanity to join us in our conquest of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy!"

"Yes!"

"We allow passage to every organized group or fleet that wishes to develop our civilization's presence in this new and virgin galaxy." The councilor announced with a welcoming smile. "No matter if you are a Terran or a citizen from the galactic rim, we will offer many different opportunities for you to colonize a planet, found a new state or prospect for phasewater!"

Gloriana looked skeptical "Is it that easy?"

"However, we do not offer this opportunity for free. For the time being, we will only allow passage through the beyonder gates to groups that can pay the price. You may obtain passage by paying the full monetary cost of activating the beyond gates or by redeeming merits from our respective organizations."

"Doesn't that mean the Terrans and Rubarthans will have first dibs?"

"I will tell you the truth. It is not easy to pay for passage. However, we do not wish to limit passage to those who reside in first-rate states. We offer more generous terms to reputable groups based in less developed regions as long as they abide to an additional agreement. So long as you meet our approval, a new future awaits!"

Chapter 1623 Beyonder Ticke

By the time Councilor Dorothea Veyron finished her second announcement, almost every human in the galaxy was left shocked, stunned or excited!

Most members of the MTA and CFA reacted just as surprised! The Big Two always kept this secret tight until the right moment to unveil it had arrived!

From one end to the other end of human space, everyone became interested in this wondrous substance called phasewater and the dwarf galaxy that supposedly offered it in abundance!

Conversation about these topics broke out everywhere! Even mech designers temporarily forgot about all of the innovations introduced in the latest generation aside from the minidrive!

Many of them always dreamt of designing an FTL-capable mech! If humanity was locked in the Milky Way Galaxy, then most of them would never be able to fulfill this dream.

Yet it was different if they managed to achieve passage to the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy!

In the early stages of humanity's conquest of Red Ocean, phasewater was probably ripe for the picking! As long as prospectors reached a star system unclaimed by existing powers, they could quickly harvest some phasewater before a colonization fleet or larger force arrived to claim it as their own!

This provided many opportunities for average mech designers to gain the privilege of building and selling FTL-capable mechs!

Designing and profiting from such fantastic machines not only provided endless riches, but also invigorated the progression of any mech designer!

No matter what, a mech with FTL capabilities would always be vastly more powerful and sophisticated than a mech that was dependent on a mothership to move around!

The design seeds of Ves and Gloriana seethed with excitement as they envisioned designing and building such fantastic mechs!

"We should take a look at the MTA's portal to see what it takes to obtain passage through the beyonder gate!"

A seemingly endless amount of humans simultaneously accessed the galactic net and visited the portals of the CFA and MTA!

If the Comm Consortium hadn't made some rapid adjustments to spread the load, the galactic net would have been crushed by the sheer amount of humans flooding its network!

As Ves visited a series of pages set up specifically to handle inquiries about the latest announcement, his eyes immediately ballooned when he viewed the price.

"At full price, a group needed to pay 1 trillion mech credits to secure passage for a single ship!"

The price was the same for any vessel up to a capital ship, so it didn't matter if someone wanted to travel to the Red Ocean in a tiny corvette or a massive ark ship!

Obviously, Ves figured that the Big Two did not wish to waste their energy in conveying smaller ships. The bigger, the better!

This humongous price made both Ves and Gloriana sick!

This was a ridiculous amount of money! Ves recalled that the typical monthly salary for a CFA captain amounted to just 100 mech credits a month!

Who could pay such an enormous amount of money? Only the wealthiest individuals and organizations of the first-rate states could afford to pay this money upfront!

As for anyone else, forget about it! Even Ves believed he wouldn't be able to accumulate so much money in a hundred years!

By the time he scrounged up so many mech credits, the conquest of the Red Ocean would have been well underway by then! He would have missed all of the easy opportunities to harvest phasewater and design lots of FTL-capable mechs!

While Ves still remained in shock, Gloriana recovered first and read further.

"The full price for a so-called 'individual beyonder ticket' is only directed to the top organizations of human space! We don't have to consider this option! There are other options available!"

He read further and saw that a different beyonder ticket could also be obtained by redeeming MTA merits or exchanging it for something exceptional!

"It costs 1 trillion MTA merits to obtain a fleet beyonder ticket." Ves relaxed a bit.
"However, this ticket is valid for an entire fleet of up to 20 ships!"

Was 1 trillion MTA merits a lot? Certainly!

However, it was a lot more generous than paying with mech credits. The ticket encompassed multiple ships, which was clearly a better deal!

The only issue was that MTA merits could not be exchanged with money! It could only be earned by completing their missions, earning their favor, making contributions or submitting valuable mech-related methods or techniques!

The MTA obviously encouraged mech designers to cough up their deepest and most valuable trade secrets!

As long mech designers submitted innovative new theories, methods and techniques, they could earn a decent amount of merits.

Still, 1 trillion merits was still far out of reach to most individual mech designers! Not even a Master would be able to accumulate so many contributions!

Fortunately, the MTA made several accommodations to make the exchange more bearable.

"Multiple people can pool their merits together." Gloriana pointed out. "Although the limit is set at ten people at a time, at the very least we don't have to bear the burden by ourselves!"

This accommodation basically encouraged cooperation between multiple powerful people, thereby forcing them to share power or make other arrangements.

"The MTA also offers cheaper fleet beyonder tickets!"

A second-class fleet beyonder ticket cost only 100 million merits, while a third-class fleet beyonder ticket corresponded to a measly 10 million merits!

The downside of these lower ticket grades was that the fleet and all of its crew and passengers had to fit the same class or lower.

For example, if Ves and Gloriana wanted to reach the Red Ocean, they had to redeem enough merits to obtain a second-class fleet beyonder ticket. This was because of the presence of ships and citizens originating from a second-rates state.

Naturally, the MTA also published a slew of terms and conditions that closed any conceivable loophole.

For example, if Ves decided to form a fleet that consisted entirely of ships built in the Bright Republic and crewed them with Brighters, he still had to pay for a second-class fleet beyonder ticket if he wanted to bring Gloriana along!

The presence of just a single second-class citizen in a third-class fleet completely made it ineligible to redeem the cheapest ticket!

In that case, Ves might as well aim for a second-class fleet beyonder ticket to begin with. He knew that the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy was probably extremely dangerous.

Not only did he have to worry about unrestricted alien fleets that did not have any scruples about fielding mighty warships, he also had to worry about human competition!

In the Milky Way Galaxy, much of human space was regulated! Though piracy existed on a moderate scale, this cancer only survived in the dark.

In contrast, the initial invasion of the Red Ocean would doubtlessly turn much of its space into an enormous frontier! With hardly any law and order in effect, every group and fleet had to fend for themselves!

Under such difficult conditions, third-class fleets could only eke out an existence in the most remote and least-profitable parts of space.

Just like in the Milky Way, the division of power was very unfair!

While a second-class fleet was not able to intrude into the most lucrative regions of the Red Ocean, at the very least Ves did not have to worry about getting bullied by everyone!

"The difference in price between a first-class fleet beyonder ticket and a second-class fleet beyonder ticket is very huge." Ves observed. "It's very hard for ten mech designers or notable individuals to pool so many merits together!"

"In other words, the MTA and CFA probably don't want too many first-class citizens to settle the Red Ocean."

Both of them figured out that the Big Two specifically intended to handicap the first-rate states and especially the first-rate superstates!

The Terrans and the Rubarthans were already extremely powerful! If they managed to conquer large swathes of the Red Ocean, then they would be able to harvest a scary amount of phasewater and threaten the Big Two's grip over human space!

Instead, the CFA and MTA much favored giving most of the territories of the Red Ocean up to a large number of weaker interest groups. Flooding the Red Ocean with so many different groups inevitably led to the splintering of territories, thereby preventing any newly-founded state from becoming powerful enough to challenge the Big Two!

As a consequence, most citizens from the less developed parts of the galaxy rejoiced at this generosity!

Gloriana pointed at an important term. "There's an additional caveat, though. A fleet beyonder ticket also comes with an obligation. We have to accept a variety of conditions."

Basically, everyone who redeemed a fleet beyonder ticket with merits accepted a debt to the MTA. Those with debts would have to pay them off by completing special missions or submitting a large quantity of phasewater!

As long as someone was still in debt, they could never obtain passage back to the Milky Way! In addition, those in debt would not be able to take advantage of the many goods and services offered by the MTA at their fortified star systems!

"Basically, the MTA wants anyone who enters the Red Ocean to excavate a considerable amount of phasewater to them! What a vicious deal!"

Of course, most people would be willing to accept this condition! With how abundant phasewater appeared to be, it shouldn't take an excessive amount of effort to gather enough phasewater to get rid of the debt.

A second-class fleet beyonder ticket came with a debt that could be paid off by submitting 100 kilograms of phasewater to the MTA.

With the earliest generation of minidrives, this was enough phasewater to build 20,000 FTL-capable mechs!

That was two entire mech divisions, enough to scour any typical star system of a second-rate state!

"This is such a ridiculous debt!"

Of course, it was a thousand times worse for a first-class fleet beyonder ticket!

The only way to obtain passage to the Red Ocean without any restrictive conditions was by paying the upfront price of 1 trillion mech credits for an individual beyonder ticket!

Ves gradually figured out the greater purpose behind this price discrimination.

"The individual beyonder ticket is just a concession to the Terrans and the Rubarthans who don't want to owe anything to the Big Two. The CFA and MTA much prefer to bring people to the Red Ocean who are weaker and more beholden to them. The ultimate goal is to establish the same kind of human order that exists in the Milky Way!"

In other words, the Big Two wanted to establish lots of squabbling, divided little states with no unified voice!

Only in such circumstances would the MTA and CFA maintain complete control over the Red Ocean.

They were like nobles who exploited the lower classes by keeping them deprived of wealth and power.

Ves and Gloriana did not concern themselves with the power plays between the Big Two and the first-rate superstates. At this point, they were too small and weak to come into consideration of the big boys at the top.

All they cared about was that it was a lot easier for second-class and third-class citizens to obtain passage to the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy!

Naturally, the biggest question that followed in most people's minds was how they could earn enough merits to redeem a beyonder ticket.

Accumulating a handful of merits was doable for most mech designers, but Ves needed to gather many millions of merits!

Worse, Ves needed to earn this many merits as early as possible!

"If we reach the Red Ocean too late, we'll be several steps behind the first movers!" Ves warned. "Ideally, we should obtain a beyonder ticket by the time our expeditionary fleet is ready to depart!"

If they failed to earn enough merits, then they had to continue making contributions as their fleet made their way to the closest star sector with a beyonder gate.

The longer they lingered in their native galaxy, the less favorable their conditions by the time they finally reached the new galaxy!

This was unacceptable to Ves, who deeply believed that this might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to embark on a great adventure and discover the secrets behind phasewater!

Chapter 1624 Galactic Pioneer

The prohibitive cost of a beyonder ticket shook most people back to reality.

The truth was that the vast majority of humans would never be able to pay enough credits or merits to redeem a beyonder ticket!

The best hope that most ordinary people possessed was to join a crew of a fleet owned by someone who possessed enough merits.

How easy was it to join such a crew? Such distinguished individuals already possessed their own power base! Even if they lacked enough personnel, they would only hire the best!

With how many people wanted to join the excitement, they probably didn't even have to pay a salary! People would pay to obtain passage!

Though it seemed that those who exchanged fleet beyonder tickets had to pay a huge price, the truth was that they also gained a lot of benefits in return.

Every notable individual who redeemed at least 10 percent of the price of a beyonder ticket gained the status of galactic pioneer!

Each and every galactic pioneer gained a lot of rights and privileges from the Big Two!

The most important one was that as long as galactic pioneers traveled in frontier space, they gained the right to run their fleets as sovereign rulers!

In addition, they didn't lose all of their sovereign powers when they entered a territory claimed by other groups.

Of course, this special condition only applied in the Red Ocean, and only for a few centuries.

However, this was enough to make any prospective galactic pioneer excited!

Similar to the division between a space peasant and a galactic citizen, the Big Two wanted to impose another division between those who contributed to them and those who merely leeches from their betters.

Basically, only galactic pioneers earned the right to transact and interact with the MTA! Those who tagged along could only rely on lesser groups and organizations.

In a frontier space where law and order was very rare, this was a very big handicap!

"In the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy, the only people with a say are galactic pioneers!" Ves stated after he processed the rules. "Everyone else is a space settler!"

That was basically a very nice description for a space peasant!

The only difference here was that even the most esteemed galactic citizen would be stuck with the status of a space settler as long as they didn't pay a hefty amount of merits!

The Big Two didn't care about someone's lineage or past achievements. They only cared about concrete benefits!

Everyone who wanted to gain the vaunted status of galactic pioneer needed to bleed themselves dry!

Gloriana looked disappointed. "It's very unfavorable for us to hitch a ride on another expeditionary fleet. I don't want to be a space settler! We'd be no better than serfs in the Red Ocean!"

Inwardly, Ves sighed in relief. He was afraid that Gloriana wanted to become a passenger of an expeditionary fleet organized by the Hexadric Hegemony!

The thought of becoming dependent on Hexers sent a chill through his spine!

He had to maintain his independence at all costs!

Becoming a galactic pioneer was by far the best way to gain control over his own destiny!

There was no Bright Republic in the Red Ocean. There was no Hexadric Hegemony in the Red Ocean.

He was very sure that the two states might pool their efforts together to organize at least one expeditionary fleet to found some new colonies.

Yet what did that have to do with Ves? As long as he could earn the necessary amount of merits on his own, it was much better for him to get rid of his existing entanglements and go his own way!

As Ves discussed his wishes with Gloriana, he discovered that she shared the same idea.

While she didn't necessarily mind hanging out with Hexers, she detested the lower status of a space settler!

As long as becoming a galactic pioneer was within reach, Gloriana wanted to do everything possible to earn this distinguished status!

Sometimes, Ves appreciated that Gloriana was such a high achiever.

The question was whether it was doable for the two of them to earn the required merits. Gloriana's second-class status and his own ambitions meant that redeeming a second-class fleet beyonder ticket was the most appropriate choice.

Every human interested in becoming a galactic pioneer began to look up the pages which described the many ways of earning merits from the CFA or MTA.

Ves did not bother looking up the ways to earn merits from the CFA.

As a mech designer, he had no choice but to work with the MTA!

Though Ves already knew several ways of earning merits, now that he took his time to go through the list, he spotted many more interesting ways for people to contribute to the MTA.

The organization even opened up many more options for people who weren't involved in the mech community to earn a lot of merits!

"Anything that benefits the MTA is a way to earn merits." Ves summed up. "I think that the MTA is about to gain a lot of riches and benefits in the next hundred years!"

The price of beyonder tickets were so high that no one could help it. They had to make as many contributions as possible to join the great phasewater rush!

As long as the galactic pioneers got in early enough, it was very much conceivable that they could quickly recoup their initial investment! Any phasewater they obtained after they paid their debts was pure profit in their pockets!

In that regard, the prices the MTA charged were very fair.

"It's too hard to accumulate millions of merits. They can't be transferred. You can only spend them directly at the MTA."

Merit represented contribution. It differed from a currency like the MTA credit in that a group of people couldn't pool their merits together.

If this rule didn't exist, then a million people could have easily figured out some way to earn a single merit from the MTA before transferring them all to a single person who didn't even lift a single finger!

That was far too cheap!

Basically, the MTA wasn't interested in granting the status of a galactic pioneer to useless spoiled brats who threw a lot of money around. They only recognized people who were capable and brilliant enough to contribute substantially to the organization!

Ves recognized that this was an indirect way to favor passage to the most ardent supporters of the MTA. This gave the MTA a lot more influence over the Red Ocean!

The limitations surrounding merits also prevented too many groups from flooding the Red Ocean.

As huge as a galaxy appeared to be, the Red Ocean was just a smaller satellite of the Milky Way.

The former was just 1.56 percent as big as the latter!

If every Tom, Dick and Harry obtained passage to the Red Ocean, too much chaos and infighting would ensue, which distracted from the larger conflict against the aliens!

As Journeymen, the prospects of earning enough merits to afford a second-class fleet beyond ticket seemed incredibly distant.

However, Gloriana was not someone who gave up easily, while Ves believed that he was different!

Both of them did not shy away from this challenge!

They studied the list carefully.

"Contributing to the fight against aliens is a good way to earn merits!" Ves discovered.

However, Gloriana quickly shook her head. "Before you get excited, you should look up the reward levels. The Sand War is a low-level conflict in the eyes of the Big Two. Even if we contributed significantly to the war effort by selling lots of Soldier mechs, we haven't actually earned a lot of merits."

Ves and Gloriana both browsed their personal accounts at the MTA.

He had never paid attention to it before since he didn't want to get too entangled in the MTA's affairs. Even so, he already earned numerous merits through various actions.

For example, advancing to Journeyman and pissing off the CFA already earned him some merits!

The latter especially surprised him! Although the MTA only credited him 1,000 merits for raiding a CFA battleship, he found it exceptionally funny that such antics actually counted!

"Hahaha!" He laughed. "The MTA really encourages people to antagonize the CFA!"

Gloriana shrugged. "The two don't exactly like each other. They are only working together because they don't have much choice in the matter."

What Ves found despairing was that even his contributions in the Sand War amounted to 10,000 merits. Gloriana earned a bit less merits because she was only a contributing designer in their recent design projects.

Surprisingly, Gloriana actually accumulated a bit more merits in total because of past minor contributions to the MTA.

"I earned them when I was spending a few years on Centerpoint." She explained. "The MTA offers many assignments there, but most don't offer too many merits in reward. It's not worthwhile for us to go back."

When they looked back at the list of ways to earn merit, something else stood out to Ves. "We can also earn merits from building masterwork mechs!"

The MTA appreciated excellence in mech design. They granted a fixed reward of merits to anyone who built a masterwork mech.

What truly interested Ves and Gloriana was that the MTA multiplied this reward by a hundred as long as it received a pristine masterwork mech!

What the MTA exactly planned to do with a masterwork mech, no one knew. All Ves cared about was that it was extremely profitable to build masterwork mechs for the MTA!

Unfortunately, the reward varied according to the class and individual power of the masterwork mech. Submitting a third-class masterwork mech yielded around 10,000 merits, while a second-class masterwork mech was worth around a million merits!

Ves would have to build 100 masterwork mechs to earn enough merits to redeem an appropriate beyonder ticket!

"That's too much! We can't possibly build so many in a span of a decade!"

There weren't any other easy ways for them to earn merits besides that. Fortunately, 1 million merits per second-class masterwork mech was just a guideline. They could easily earn several times more merits if they designed a higher-performing second-class mech.

The most profitable masterwork mechs they could submit was therefore an expert mech or higher!

They only had to design a handful of them in order to earn 100 million merits!

Of course, Ves immediately dismissed this silly notion. He wasn't even qualified to participate in the development of an expert mech at his current state.

Nonetheless, Ves and Gloriana both saw hope for the future. As long as they expended a lot of effort in improving their chances of creating a masterwork mech, then they might be able to earn the status of galactic pioneer by themselves!

"It's not easy to make so many contributions to the MTA, but I believe we can do it!" Gloriana boldly stated.

"I agree. Let's try to do as best as we can in the following decade or so. We might be in a completely different situation by then!"

Ves knew that this was not enough. The MTA set the bar high because they wanted the best. There were so many people in the galaxy that they had to impose harsh conditions in order to limit the amount of galactic pioneers.

Nonetheless, Ves believed that he had much better chances than most. His various advantages along with his rapid rate of improvement ensured that he would be in a much better position than most Journeymen and Seniors!

Perhaps one of the most important ways he could improve his circumstances was by deepening his relations with the Rim Guardians.

Though the Rim Guardian Fraternity was only a faction within the MTA, it probably offered many ways to assist the people they favored.

Ves already figured out that only strangers and outsiders had to pay the most in order to obtain a beyonder ticket!

He'd be stupid if he didn't find some way to get in the good graces of some of the members of the MTA!

Chapter 1625 Activity Zones

After several hours had gone by since the MTA's announcement, humanity still seethed with excitement.

No one could stay calm at the prospect of invading an entirely new galaxy!

To many humans, they believed that their civilization had rested long enough. Their race was more than ready to resume their conquest of the stars!

Unfortunately, when people began to inquire about the beyonder ticket, they immediately became discouraged at the very strict conditions required to become a galactic pioneer.

Only the most capable and ambitious contributors of the MTA were eligible to lead a fleet into the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy!

Those who tried their luck at the CFA found out that it was just as harsh!

Yet the high cost of beyonder tickets excited many people even more. Each of them knew that a greater price corresponded to a greater reward!

Many people got caught up in the hype surrounding phasewater! This amazing high-grade exotic that was seemingly ripe for the picking in the other galaxy must be something exceptional!

It didn't take much guessing to suspect that the Big Two definitely had many important uses for phasewater. Countless material scientists already started drooling at the thought of obtaining a sample and delving into its secrets!

The great phasewater rush was destined to become the latest obsession of the human race!

After four-hundred years of dormancy, the great human civilization was ready to expand its territories once more!

That evening, Ves and Gloriana returned to the Cloud Estate where they calmly gathered information.

A lot of MTA watchers and journalists already published various articles about the bold new changes.

To all but the oldest humans, no one had ever taken part in a war of conquest against alien civilizations!

A fervor to relive the glory days of the Age of Conquest ignited in the hearts of many humans!

"Adventuring in the Red Ocean is very risky." Gloriana expressed her concerns. "According to what the Big Two have revealed about the Red Ocean, the vast majority of its space is lawless territory. Anyone can attack someone for any reason!"

"It's not that bad." Ves commented. "It's just like the frontier before the sandman made a mess of things. As long as you have enough strength and know where you can go, it's not too dangerous."

"We also have to worry about the aliens, who are likely more inclined to field warships. Unless our mechs are top-of-the-line, we don't stand a chance against most warships!"

"The chances of encountering them is low, Gloriana. The CFA and MTA are mostly focusing on sweeping alien space and neutralizing any major threat in their way. Galactic pioneers are supposed to follow behind their advance and clean up the mess that's left behind. Perhaps some sporadic alien warships have slipped the net, but they've probably been left alone because they're not a major threat."

One of the biggest complaints about participating in the invasion was that the prohibition against warships and other taboos were still in place!

However, the Big Two did not entertain any suggestions on lifting these limitations. In their eyes, the responsibility to protect human civilization rested solely on their shoulders. Only they deserved to wield the mightiest weapons of their race!

For this reason, plundering and colonizing the Red Ocean was far from safe! Every galactic pioneer and space settler had to accept the risks of encountering intact alien fleets or bumping into unknown hazards!

If a galactic pioneer wanted to be safer, then they either had to stick close to the territory under the control of the Big Two, or wait at least a few decades to wait for the new territories to be tamed.

However, by then most of the more adventurous and daring galactic pioneers would have claimed all of the most attractive territories by then! Every easy source of phasewater within reach would have been claimed as well!

Risk was accompanied by reward! This rule held true even during the great phasewater rush!

"I think that most of the biggest risks will be cleared up if we depart around a decade later." Ves estimated. "Ten or twenty years is not enough for pioneers to settle every single star system within humanity's expanding territories. It's especially more lucrative to follow right on the heels of the CFA and MTA's warfleets as they continually pummel the aliens as they expand their reach in the Red Ocean."

Gloriana frowned. "It's still too dangerous. We're mech designers, Ves. We don't necessarily need to harvest as much phasewater as possible. There's also little point for us to colonize some planets. What is most important for us is to progress our design philosophies and advance to Master and beyond."

"Money isn't entirely useless, Gloriana. The more phasewater we collect, the more we can afford the tools we need to assist in our advancement. Designing more powerful and more capable mechs will definitely stimulate our design philosophies more than designing regular mechs."

"I don't know. There's a risk that we'll bump into a first-class fleet and offend someone we can't afford to displease."

"That risk exists, but the chances that they are mucking about in second-class space and third-class space is not very large. At the very least, the MTA and CFA won't allow such bullying to take place."

The Big Two were quite unfriendly towards the people and organizations of the first-rate states. If an individual state grew strong enough, how could the Big Two stay in charge?

For this reason, the Big Two imposed many subtle rules.

Just like in the Milky Way, the distribution of exotics was very uneven. The center of the Red Ocean featured richer and more abundant exotics, while the periphery offered fewer riches.

Even in the periphery, there were some parts of space which was nearly completely barren with exotics and other parts where they were fairly prevalent.

According to the Big Two, the distribution of phasewater matched the distribution of other exotics.

For this reason, as the Big Two swept through the Red Ocean, they performed quick surveys of every star system and categorized them into activity zones.

An upper zone corresponded to first-class pioneers. These regions offered the richest deposits of phasewater and other high-grade exotics.

A middle zone corresponded to second-class pioneers.

A lower zone corresponded to third-class pioneers.

As long as each class of pioneer stuck to the appropriate activity zone, they only had to worry about fighting their rivals.

If a first-class galactic pioneer tried to throw their weight around in a middle or lower zone, they would violate the Big Two's rules!

If a pioneer was caught breaking the rules, they lost their status as pioneers and would be hunted by the MTA!

The same applied if a second-class pioneer attempted to abuse a third-class pioneer in a lower zone.

Of course, if a third-class pioneer crossed into an upper zone, they assumed their own risks. The Big Two would not lift a finger if they bumped into a scary first-class fleet. They could only blame their greed!

Though these rules appeared to profit first-class pioneers the most since they possessed a natural claim to the bounty of an upper zone, the opposite was true.

This was because there didn't seem to be many upper zones. As the invasion of the Red Ocean reached the center of the dwarf galaxy, upper zones might become more prevalent, but even then the competition to claim these territories would definitely be bloody!

By confining the activities of first-class pioneers to the upper zones, the Big Two essentially wanted to bleed and weaken their strength and numbers in the Red Ocean!

Of course, most first-class states objected to this discriminatory ruling, but the beyonder gates were fully under the control of the Big Two! They couldn't possibly send too much forces into the Red Ocean to resist the CFA and MTA's stranglehold on conquered territory!

By far, most galactic pioneers were already in their pocket!

Ves found out something else. "One strange caveat here is that the protection regarding activity zones only apply to galactic pioneers and people under their protection. This means that we don't necessarily have to respect the rights of space settlers or other people."

That meant that a second-class pioneer could attack the Terrans or the Rubarthans and not suffer from any punishments by the Big Two as long as their targets weren't pioneers or their subordinates!

This elevated the status of galactic pioneers even further, turning it into an essential status if someone wanted to operate in the Red Ocean.

Once Gloriana understood the implications of these rules, she sighed in relief. "While the protection isn't perfect, it's probably enough to deter most incidents. Of course, we also have to make sure we don't do anything to third-class fleets when we fly through lower zones."

Unless an inferior group directly provoked a superior group, the latter had to do their best to avoid any hostile actions.

Ves shrugged. "A second-class pioneer wouldn't be interested in the paltry amount of wealth and assets owned by a third-class pioneer."

All of these elaborate rules signified that the Big Two accounted for many different situations. Their bias against first-rate states benefited Ves and Gloriana enormously.

"It's kind of strange how obvious the Big Two is attempting to hinder the growth and development of first-rate states with these rules." Gloriana frowned. "Don't you have the feeling that this is all a scheme that is targeted at the first-rate states and the superstates in particular?"

"I think there are certainly contradictions between the Big Two and the first-rate superstates. However, a conflict between the two sides does not benefit humanity at all. Both sides are careful in staying cordial with each other. The way the Big Two define their rules and set their prices only hinders the first-rate superstates by a moderate degree. The Terrans and Rubarthans are still capable of claiming the most lucrative territories in the upper zones."

Ves suspected that the Big Two already made a deal with the first-rate superstates. The former wanted to constrain the expansion of the latter.

The CFA and MTA couldn't push the first-rate superstates too much. The Terrans and Rubarthans were so advanced that they might be able to build beyond gates themselves!

As long as the growth of the first-rate states did not dominate the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy, the balance of power would not tilt against the Big Two. This was good enough.

"I wonder who else wants to head to the Red Ocean." Ves wondered.

Ves and Gloriana already made up their mind to travel there as galactic pioneers.

As for others, they needed to be capable of earning enough merits, which was not a given.

Of course, most people in the Bright Republic didn't really think about it too much. The Sand War still raged on as ever!

The same applied to the Fridaymen and Hexers.

Ves thought that the two bitter rivals would have sought to pause the war in order to preserve their strength and wealth, but Gloriana disagreed!

"I think the war will intensify due to this announcement." She spoke. "I've gotten in touch with some of my friends and family and discussed the new situation. The Komodo War won't die down. Instead, it looks like it will become more heated!"

"Why the hell does anyone want to fight over some stupid territory in the Komodo Star Sector when there is a lot of middle zones in the Red Ocean that they could profit from instead?"

Gloriana sheepishly smiled. "Both sides want to plunder the wealth of their enemies. It's difficult to earn a lot of merits, but it's easier once you grasp an entire star sector! As long as you obtain more wealth and territory, you can make a lot more contributions to the MTA. It will also be easier to partner up or obtain the services of someone who is capable of earning a lot of merits."

Everything revolved around merits!

Chapter 1626 Freeloader

Much of human space became enraptured by the opportunities opened by the invasion of the Red Ocean.

Some dreamt of starting a new empire away from all of the established powers of the Milky Way.

With the presence of the old and entrenched first-rate states constrained in the new galaxy, this was a golden opportunity for any galactic pioneer to found a state that could one day match their might!

Others became obsessed with the limitless potential of phasewater. The myriad of applications it enabled sent many scientists, engineers, shipwrights and mech designers into a rapture!

Using phasewater to build minidrives and beyonder gates only scratched the surface of this high-grade exotic. Many ambitious researchers already plotted taking advantage of phasewater's dimensional properties to invent even more fantastic devices...

Most people weren't as ambitious, though. The advent of FTL-capable mechs and beyonder gates signified that the demand of phasewater would always be high!

To profiteers, high demand always correlated to high prices!

Though phasewater was purportedly more abundant in the Red Ocean, this was only relative to its scarcity in the Milky Way. It was still absolutely rare in the new galaxy.

As long as a pioneer found a deposit of phasewater, they could potentially become richer than first-rate business magnates!

The insane wealth that seemed to be ripe for the picking attracted many ambitious people throughout the galaxy!

Unfortunately, the requirements to obtain a beyonder ticket and become a galactic pioneer was simply too harsh.

Even if up to ten people could pool their merits together to redeem a fleet beyonder ticket, it was hardly possible for anyone to earn more than a million merits in their lifetime, let alone a hundred!

The prohibitive amount of contributions required to earn merits crushed the dreams of many hopeful people.

Those who already enjoyed a comfortable amount of success in the old order saw little appeal in sacrificing so much wealth and resources to embark on a risky venture.

In the end, only a small number of people who already possessed the capital to explore and colonize the Red Ocean redeemed beyonder tickets.

Many of their compatriots refrained from making any moves.

In the Komodo Star Sector, the invasion of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy hardly affected the existing trends.

The sandmen cared nothing about humanity's movements. States such as the Ylvaine Protectorate, Bright Republic and Vesia Kingdom were far too hard-pressed to care about developments that were far beyond their reach!

In the center of the star sector, the Fridaymen and Hexers still fought as vigorously against each other as ever. Just as Gloriana predicted, the two sides became more determined than ever to overrun the other side!

For these reasons, the hype surrounding phasewater and the Red Ocean quickly faded among the people of the Komodo Star Sector.

They had to deal with the existing problems first before looking ahead to the future!

Ves and Gloriana both knew that trying to accumulate 100 million merits within a decade was not very realistic. They did not give up, though, and became determined to earn as many merits as possible.

As Ves woke up the next day, he petted Lucky who was resting on his chest.

"What am I, your personal throne or something?"

"Meow."

"Why are you here, anyway?"

Lucky pushed out a lustrous pink heart-shaped gem with his paw. Ves curiously picked it up and studied it with his System vision.

[Maiden's Affection]

The desire of an ancient maiden is locked within this gem. Increases the attraction of a mech by 40 percent to females.

"What the hell?!"

Ves wanted to puke out blood when he read its description. What a useless attribute! Even if the Maiden's Affection boosted an aspect by a whopping 40 percent, why did it increase something as useless as attraction to females?!

"You damn cat!" He angrily grabbed Lucky's body and lifted him in front of his face!
"What has Gloriana been feeding you these days?! Can't you exert more control over your own crap?!"

"Meow!"

Lucky instantly turned intangible and drilled through the bed and floor!

Though Ves could have stopped his cat, he didn't bother. He only wanted to show his displeasure so that Lucky would work harder in forming useful gems.

As for the Maiden's Affection, he eyed it for a moment before shrugging. "Any gem is useful."

Ever since Gloriana came to live with him, she frequently spoiled his cat.

However, Lucky's improved diet did not seem to increase Lucky's gem production very much! Ves had no idea where all of the exotics went, but his cat only seemed to produce a gem whenever he liked.

"Greedy bastard." Ves grumbled.

He had no choice but to cherish the few gems he received. Ever since he successfully upgraded the only copy of the Devil Tiger into a masterwork mech, Ves regarded them as strategic resources.

Each potent gem represented an opportunity to cheat his way into building another masterwork mech!

"Sadly, it's not that easy to build another masterwork mech." He sighed.

Though he hadn't fabricated a lot of mechs lately, he intuitively felt that fabricating regular mechs didn't cut it. A masterwork not only demanded flawless construction, but also deep meaning.

Ves and Gloriana might be able to control the former, but not the latter.

It was not as simple as inducing strong emotions in themselves. If that were so, they could simply drug themselves with stimulants to push their moods to extremes!

"There are many secrets behind masterwork mechs." Ves muttered as he yawned and rose from his bed.

The silky fresh bedsheets slithered from his augmented body. Gloriana's influence had even spread into the sanctum of his bedroom, causing his bed and the interior to fit a grand and palatial theme.

Waking up with so much luxury in his presence made him feel like a king.

Ves did not care too much about these vain and excessive luxuries. He knew he had to keep a firm and disciplined mind in order for him to push himself into working hard.

No matter what kind of success he enjoyed right now, it was far from enough! He needed to become much more powerful to fulfill all of his goals in life!

"Right now, I'm nowhere close to fulfilling any of my grand ambitions."

In his eyes, becoming a Journeyman was no big deal. He lacked the capital to be arrogant. The less time he wasted on useless luxuries, the better!

Once Ves dressed and freshened himself up, he descended to the dining room where Gloriana was already in the process of feeding Lucky an exotic.

"Hihihi! You're so cute!"

"Meow!"

Lucky blissfully crunched the mineral with his teeth and rubbed his body against his hand.

Ves frowned. "Don't spoil him too much. He's profiting way too much in relation to the benefit we get in return."

"Pets aren't workers, Ves. They're companions! They deserve to be spoiled!"

Lucky swung his tail at Ves. "Meow!"

Ves gave up and sat down at the dining table in order to eat his breakfast.

The combination of excellent ingredients and sublime cooking made every meal a delight to him. Due to his metabolism, the chefs had taken to cooking large and hearty meals.

Croissants, sausages, sandwiches and more disappeared down his throat at a pace that discomfited Gloriana.

As opposed to Ves, Gloriana's diet consisted of fruit parfaits and light toast.

Nonetheless, Gloriana had no choice but to tolerate the disharmony in their meals due to their distinctly different dietary requirements.

Ves possessed a much stronger body due to his Jutland organ and other body augmentations, but it took a lot of energy and nutrition to sustain his health.

While Dr. Lupo hadn't managed to decipher the most important secrets behind Ves' physique, figuring out something as basic as this was not too difficult.

Fortunately, Ves could still survive if he was forced to reduce his calorie intake. One of Lupo's minor discoveries was that Ves would simply draw his energy from other sources if he couldn't get it through digesting food.

The only problem was that the alternate source of energy came from the Jutland organ. Both of them were very apprehensive towards this alien organ, so to be safe, Lupo decided that it was best if Ves became less dependent on this abnormal organ that had enveloped his heart!

Once the pair finished their breakfast, they traveled to the Mech Nursery where they both headed down to the design lab.

Ketis and the Tovar mech designers had already arrived beforehand and greeted the two Journeymen with respect.

Ves clapped his hand. "Alright, now that we have a day to process yesterday's announcements, it's time to get back to work. None of us are able to afford passage to the Red Ocean, so let's just forget about all of that big stuff and get back to the Sand War."

"The latest mech generation is here!" Ketis chirped with excitement. "Are we going to design a new generation mech right away?"

"Very likely, though I'm still awaiting the necessary licences." Ves turned to Miles Tovar. "I made a deal with Professor Ventag and the Tovars a while ago concerning the licenses. Have you been informed of this arrangement?"

He knew that Miles was in regular contact with the Tovars. Though Miles didn't speak with Senator Tovar directly, he regularly reported to Alistair Cordwraith.

Miles nodded. "The MTA has just made the licenses available today. The BV Alliance set up by the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom is still in the process of applying for the group licenses. With how efficient the MTA moves, we believe it won't take long for the BV Alliance to secure the group licenses. Once that happens, the holding company will immediately hand out sublicenses to any eligible Brighter and Vesian mech designer. You are definitely on that list."

That was a relief to Ves. Though the LMC was not short on money these days, it still cost a very hefty amount of money to license the new generation components released by the MTA. The heartless organization always jacked up the license fees because mech designers had no alternative at the start of every mech generation!

Therefore, Ves did not mind making use of the sublicenses provided by the BV Alliance despite putting himself at its mercy. If his relationship with the Bright Republic ever went sour, the BV Alliance could easily revoke his sublicenses, thereby making any mechs he designed using the licensed components illegal!

The only way to resolve such an issue was to license the same components again.

To Ves, that was not a big deal. The new generation component designs offered by the MTA were only relevant for a year or two at most. After that, many component developers would have published their own designs by then at far more affordable price levels!

"The key right now is to make the best use of our time." He spoke. "The only issue is that I have already accepted a commission to design a custom mech beforehand."

Miles frowned at that. "Every new mech generation triggers a soft reset of the mech market. Every mech designed before the transition has turned into a lastgen mech. If I was still an independent, I would pounce on this opportunity to design a mass-market mech in order to capture as much market share as possible! This kind of opportunity happens only once every thirty years!"

"I know that, Miles, but promises are promises. The commission is vitally important and will definitely affect the future of the Bright Republic. We can't afford to neglect it in favor of enriching ourselves. We'll just have to work on the commission alongside our commercial mech design project. While that will inevitably delay the completion of both projects, it's still in an acceptable range."

"What's our time frame?"

"I want to complete both designs within two months."

"Two months?! If that includes the prototype testing phase, that means our time will be very tight! Don't forget that we have to adjust to new and upgraded tech and components!"

"I believe we can do it!" Ves stated with confidence. "No matter how many changes the new mech generation has introduced, a mech engine is still a mech engine and a power reactor is still a power reactor! As long as we know what we are doing, the new changes won't affect our productivity too much!"

In truth, it took quite a lot of time and exploration for mech designers to get used to the new mech generation. Ves hadn't even studied the new generation components in detail.

Whether he and his design team could really complete two new generation mech designs within two months remained to be seen!

Chapter 1627 Battlefield Mismatch

While Ves hadn't studied the new generation components in detail, he already skimmed over the details. Together with Councilor Veyron's introductions, this was enough for him to gain an overall impression of what he could do with the new generation technology.

"As you all know, one of the main highlights of the new generation in the case of third-class mechs is the substantial improvement in laser weapons."

Everyone at the design lab nodded.

"Sadly, it's not feasible to design a laser-armed mech at the moment. It's also pointless to design a melee mech unless we want to cater to a distant market."

In the current state of the Sand War, every mech designer from a state under attack had to contribute to the war effort. If they couldn't design a viable mech, then they should at least assist other mech designers into doing so! Ves would ruin his reputation if he ignored this obligation!

The higher his reputation, the more he had to according to a fixed pattern of behavior.

While Ves missed the freedom he enjoyed earlier, he gained more than he lost from building up his reputation. Every notable figure had no choice but to accept the price that came with becoming more renowned!

"What mech do you intend to design next?" Miles Tovar asked.

"A marksman mech."

The answer surprised everyone except Gloriana. To be fair, there weren't many viable mech types to choose from. The Sand War outright negated the combat effectiveness of so many types of mechs that everyone was starting to get sick with designing rifleman mechs!

"Will a marksman mech even catch on in the market?"

"I've studied the mech market and I believe that demand for a precision mech is increasing. The most prevalent rifleman mechs on the market are armed with ballistic weapons." Ves explained. "Even the vaunted new Sandbreaker weapon system is a ballistic rifle. The only thing that is special about it is that it is based around specialized rounds that are significantly more effective against the sandmen."

Everyone nodded.

"Think about it. What are the strengths and weaknesses of ballistic rifles?"

Since Ves turned this into a teaching moment, Gloriana stayed silent.

Before Miles could speak up, his cousin Vela Tovar answered first.

"I've assisted in several ranged mech design projects before." She said. "Ballistic weapons are by far the cheapest and simplest weapon that ranged mechs can wield. They're low tech, low maintenance and very easy to mass produce. Their ability to fire any round that matches its caliber and specifications mean that they're also very versatile. The development of Sandbreaker rounds is a good example of how the same tech can be expressed in different ways."

Ves smiled at the answer. Though he admittedly paid much more attention to Miles, that did not mean that the other Tovar mech designers were useless.

While he still figured that only Miles had the potential to become a Journeyman, he made sure not to neglect the rest.

"Vela is right. Ballistic rifles and ballistic rounds are not the most effective ranged weapon systems that we have at our disposal. It's just that it's the most economical we have on hand. This is a very valuable property in the Sand War because the sandmen come in such overwhelming numbers that our state will go bankrupt if we employ more expensive weapons!"

"There's many downsides to ballistic weapons, though." She continued. "Their low tech nature means that they become less efficient at higher budgets. The rifles themselves are still rather cheap, but the cost of producing more potent ammunition goes up enormously because it's necessary to lace them with low-grade exotics. Therefore, it's possible to produce rounds that can smash the sandmen apart, but the expenditure is so high that it's not sustainable!"

The economic and logistical considerations surrounding high-quality ballistic rounds meant that they only fared well when used during important battles. Unless the situation called for it, most mech forces tended to keep their expensive rounds in reserve.

Naturally, this only applied to well-funded outfits and military mech units.

Vela proceeded with the other weakness. "The muzzle velocities of ballistic rifles are also low due to the limitations of the tech. Ordinarily, this isn't that big of a downside in landbound combat, but in space the battles take place at much larger ranges. When it takes four or five seconds for a fired projectile to reach its destination, the target has plenty of time to dodge!"

"Early on in the Sand War, our defensive forces only encountered basic sandman fleets." Ves explained. "The lumbering motherships and escort vessels are so big and inflexible that accuracy was not a big priority back then. As long as the spread of fire was not too excessive, mech designers preferred to pay much more attention to the ammunition capacity and cost-effectiveness of the weapons they paired with their mech designs. I designed the Desolate Soldier along the same rationale."

"The problem is that the sandmen have evolved, while our mechs have stayed the same." Gloriana pointed out. "There is a mismatch between the two. Even the introduction of the Sandbreaker weapon system hasn't done much to solve this issue."

"The swarm configuration has become increasingly more prevalent." Ves stated. "It seems that the sandman admirals are all converging on the same solution. That is, the best way to fight a massed force of mechs and starfighters is to make their sandmen disperse into small and agile drones and pelt their enemies with weak but fast-firing lasers."

Everyone here had access to the unsanitized footage and results of the battles at the front. Each of them knew that each battle against a swarm of sandman drones ended up with a massacre on both sides!

"Due to the limitations of ballistic rifles, our Desolate Soldiers and other rifleman mechs have to close the distance in order to increase their hit rate. However, getting closer to the sandmen is not a good idea, because the hit rate of their lasers increases as well, thereby resulting in much greater casualties!"

What Ves just stated weighed heavily on everyone involved in the war. Would the Bright Republic be able to sustain the losses?

No one was sure.

"The existing mech models that are being employed against the sandmen are no longer optimal." He concluded. "Even the famed Dawnbreaker, with its notable resilience against heavy sandman lasers, have become less relevant! While their notable

defensive parameters still make them effective against the other sandman configurations, their Sandbreaker weapon systems still constrain them just as much as other mechs."

"Then... what is the solution?" Miles quietly asked.

Everyone stared at each other.

Ves sighed. "The truth is that there is no easy solution available. Otherwise, every Senior and Journeyman would have published a revolutionary new mech design by now. While the current mech models aren't very optimal against the sandmen, deploying them is better than the alternative."

"Then what is the point of designing another mech?"

"Just because there isn't an easy solution does not mean there is no solution." Ves shook his head. "After a lot of thinking and brainstorming, Gloriana and I have come up with a potential new mech concept that can alleviate the losses our side is suffering in the war."

Everyone paid close attention to Ves as he revealed his idea.

"We have decided to design a marksman mech as our first new generation product!"

Everyone reacted with a measure of surprise.

"Does that mean you'll arm them with kinetic rifles?" Vela guessed.

Ves shook his head. "Yes! In fact, our marksman mech will be armed with a powerful and accurate gauss rifle! Gauss rifles or coilguns differ from ballistic rifles in that their muzzle velocities are much higher! This extends their effective range and makes them particularly useful in space battles. Compared to railguns, gauss rifles are more complex but don't suffer from as much wear and tear, which makes them durable enough to last the Sand War!"

"All of that comes with a price." Vela warned. "Gauss rifles not only require strong materials, but also consume a lot of energy as well as ammunition! In terms of efficiency, ballistic rifles are much more economical!"

"I'm well aware of the drawbacks, Miss Tovar, but my marksmen mechs aren't meant to replace the Desolate Soldiers and Dawnbreakers. They're meant to compliment forces that have already deployed these medium-ranged rifleman mechs."

"Is it useful, though?" Miles questioned. "While I can see that you intend to design long-ranged mechs that can accurately engage the sandmen at much longer distances, it's

still very difficult to hit a sandman drone at such difficult conditions. If the mech pilot isn't specialized in marksmanship, then your mech is hardly useful."

"We know that, Miles. We plan to make our marksman mech a premium mech. It's not meant to be deployed in the same numbers as our Desolate Soldiers. We envision that only a small number of marksman specialists will pilot our mechs."

Everyone aside from Ves and Gloriana still didn't see much point in such a mech concept.

"Utilizing gauss rifles is not efficient!" Vela pointed out the problem associated with the mech concept. "Against small and agile sandman drones, the firepower of a gauss rifle discharge vastly exceeds the damage-absorbing capacity of a typical drone. Much of the firepower is wasted in that case! Against a standard or monolith configuration, each hit is able to inflict massive damage against the target, but the problem is that gauss rifles consume so much energy and ammunition that the marksman mech will shoot itself dry while the battle is only halfway done!"

In other words, cheap ballistic rifleman mechs offered much better value than expensive marksman mechs!

Ves grinned. "You're not wrong, Vela, but I haven't told you everything yet. Let me address your points. The reason why I've opted for a gauss rifle is to make use of its high muzzle velocity. I'm not necessarily prioritizing its damage potential. Against the swarm configuration, it's actually more useful if we shrink its caliber so that the mech can make its energy and ammunition reserves last longer!"

"It's still wasteful to employ this mech concept against the sandmen! There are so many drones flying around that it's better to flood the entire space with lots of rounds and hope that some of them hit!"

"As I've said, you're not wrong, but you are missing the ultimate point of my marksman mech. How do marksman mechs and sniper mechs typically operate in human conflicts?"

Miles answered the question first. "They're not typically part of the main battleline in space battles. Instead, they're held back until they find an opportunity to snipe an important mech. Typically, they're used to take out fragile ranged mechs or mechs piloted by officers. Even if they don't manage to destroy those mechs, just the ability to apply pressure on their targets is enough to tilt the battle in their favor."

"Every sandman fleet is led by at least one sandman admiral. Take out the admiral, and you turn a huge swathe of sandmen into leaderless entities! In each battle where a sandman admiral perishes early, the battle decisively tilts in our favor! Our mech concept is expressly meant to exploit this condition!"

Though it made a lot of sense, no one looked optimistic.

Ketis shook her head. "Sandman admirals are never easy to kill. Even in the swarm configuration, there are tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of drones flying around. The sandman admiral can hide among any drone in the rear of the formation!"

"Does the new generation offer some new advancements in sensor technology that we can use to pinpoint the sandman admiral?" Miles asked.

Ves chuckled and shook his head in regret. "Such a convenient solution doesn't exist as of yet. Otherwise, the entire mech community would have pounced on it already. Even if the MTA unveiled improved sensor technology, it doesn't really make a difference against the sandmen!"

"Then.. how will your marksman mech be able to snipe the sandman admiral without going through the entire swarm?"

Ves grinned and spread his arms. "Intuition."

Chapter 1628 Guided Aim

The entire design team looked dazed.

When Ves first revealed to them that he intended to design a marksman mech, they reacted with skepticism.

The current doctrine against the sandman basically amounted to deploying lots of mechs and starfighters to bombard the sandmen with as many rounds as possible!

Every defensive force relied on massed firepower and deploying lots of cannon fodder to resist the tide of sandman incursions.

Recently, the defensive forces added Dawnbreakers, Duskbreakers and Novabreakers to their mech rosters. The Dawnbreaker and Novabreaker were especially effective because they could endure a lot of hits while dishing out significant damage with their Sandbreaker rifles.

So far, no one managed to think of a more effective way to beat the sandmen. The Bright Republic and the other third-rate states being hammered by the sandmen were constrained by many limitations.

However, what was impossible for other mech designers was not necessarily impossible to Ves. he just needed to think outside the box and exploit his unique advantages.

While he already managed to convince Gloriana of the viability of his mech concept, that was only because his girlfriend had faith in his abilities.

Trying to convince his design team was much more difficult.

Though he could just skip his explanations and leave them ignorant, that would not do his project any good.

To ensure that the X-Factor of his mech remained as coherent as possible, every person involved had to share the same vision!

If each mech designer working on the project had a different idea on what the mech was supposed to be, then the spiritual foundation of the mech risked becoming too heterogeneous.

While Ves could resolve most issues resulting from a lack of direction and agreement, he would have to expend too much effort to straighten the spiritual foundation of his mech design.

It was much better to make his entire design team understand and adhere to his vision from the start!

Right now, everyone expressed confusion at the answer that Ves had given. Against the increasingly more prevalent swarm configuration, it was far too difficult to wipe them out without suffering massive casualties.

Since a sandman admiral played a critical commanding role to their fleets, a lot of people poured a lot of research into coming up with a way to identify their presence within a fleet!

As long as a sandman admiral became exposed, every mech and starfighter could flood its direction with a torrent of ballistic rounds!

The brightest minds and the most brilliant specialists of many states poured a lot of time and effort in this research, but so far they failed to achieve any results.

Ves was very well aware of the difficulties the researchers faced. While a sandman admiral typically possessed a body that consisted of higher-quality exotic, the problem was that their size ranged from a grain of sand to a small finger-sized pebble!

Even Sigrund's true body wasn't very big to begin with! The lesser sandman admirals that led the charge into human space had only recently come into existence, which meant that they were predominantly just as small as any other sandman!

The lower castes of sandmen weren't entirely uniform either. Their bodies consisted of all kinds of inorganic substances. A sandman fleet typically incorporated countless varieties of simple sand, various metals and low-grade exotics!

Each person that pointed a sensor at a sandman amalgamation only got a confusing mass of data in return!

It was practically impossible for humans or AIs to figure out which specific particle among trillions of particles led an entire fleet!

So how did Ves decide to solve this problem that confounded so many scientists and sensor specialists?

"Intuition." He repeated while tapping the side of his head. "We humans are special. Unlike machines and bots, we are creatures of both logic, emotion and instinct. Against a problem where conventional solutions aren't available, it's worth a try to resort to a more unconventional solution."

"I understand, but.. what is intuition?" Miles asked.

"Intuition is instinctive understanding." Ves patiently replied. "Think of it as a way to come up with the right answer or decision without relying on conscious thought or clear logic."

"Doesn't that make intuition no better than unfounded guesswork?"

"Essentially, yes."

The design team looked even more skeptical.

"So.. the premise of your next mech is to rely on luck and gut feeling to score a lucky hit on a sandman admiral?"

"Essentially, yes."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Larkinson, but I don't see how such a mech will succeed. There is no scientific basis for this mech!"

"That's just your limited understanding of reality talking." Ves responded with a grin. "The science you've learned at school only partially sheds a light on the mechanisms that govern the reality we live in. Take the glows of my mechs for example. Have any of you managed to come up with a grounded, scientific explanation of how they work?"

Everyone fell silent.

"From what I've seen, many mech designers haven't necessarily failed because they are dull and stupid. They can be quite the bookworms. The real issue is that they adhere so rigidly to their knowledge that they aren't willing to consider ideas that fall outside their current understanding! The boldest mech designers aren't afraid of going out on a limb. While they fail most of the time, they only have to succeed once to win big!"

"So you're basically gambling."

"You're partially correct." Ves admitted.

Miles Tovar really couldn't accept such a vague basis for a mech concept! "Have you gone mad?! How is it possible for a smart and brilliant mech designer such as you to rely on something as nebulous as intuition of all things to base your new mech design upon?"

Neither Ves nor Gloriana took any offense of his skepticism. Both of them smiled as if nothing was wrong!

"We have faith that our mech design will work." Ves replied.

Every Tovar looked dazed. Even Ketis reacted with doubt and confusion.

Most Brighters were secularists, and the Tovars were no different! They disdained superstition and didn't really believe in the concept of intuition!

The way they looked at Ves suggested that they weren't sure whether Ves was still a Brighter!

"So we're just going to waste two months worth of time and effort on designing a mech that we aren't sure will succeed in the role it is supposed to fulfill?"

Ves laughed. "I'm not that gullible, guys! I did some research before I came up with this mech concept. Perhaps this explanation is good enough for my girlfriend, but I don't take every assumption at face value. Let me show you something."

He began to manipulate an interface. Soon, the projector lit up and displayed some statistics.

"It was a bit difficult to obtain these figures, but I managed to find a way to obtain some data from the Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate."

"What are we supposed to look at, Mr. Larkinson?"

The tables displayed a lot of battle-related data. Ves pointed his finger at a specific row.

"Look at the average time that has passed before a combatant manages to kill a sandman admiral."

Ketis and the Tovars each leaned forward.

"According to the graph, the Ylvainans are a bit luckier. They're 16 seconds faster on average."

"Correct!" Ves grinned. "Don't underestimate this 16 second difference! This is empirical proof that the Ylvainans are a bit more capable of intuitively predicting the hiding spots of sandman admirals within their fleets!"

Miles frowned deeper. "16 seconds doesn't sound like a statistically-significant difference. A battle typically lasts for at least half an hour. The Ylvainans also field different mechs and adopt slightly different tactics and strategies against the sandmen. Ylvainan and Brighter mech pilots are also different in their training. There are many possible reasons behind this tiny discrepancy."

"This is also only a single comparison." Vela Tovar added. "Maybe if we have the Vesians or the Reinaldans are even faster in killing the sandman admirals. We just don't know because we don't have access to their data."

"Everything you've mentioned is plausible." Ves charitably replied. "However, I'm still convinced that the difference is a sign that intuition makes a real difference!"

"What makes the Ylvainans better, then?"

"It's because they rely on their faith."

"..."

None of the people present were Ylvainans. Only Gloriana was religious, leaving the rest just as skeptical as before. Nothing Ves had said managed to resolve their doubts on his mech concept!

Ves knew that his idea would be a very hard sell to a bunch of secularists.

"Look, the Holy Soldier is a variant I've designed that specifically inspires faith in Ylvainans. I think that this has stimulated the judgement and intuition of their mech pilots to such a degree that they have become measurably more successful in pinpointing the sandman admirals."

Though Ves kept explaining his views, he failed to convince his design team that he was right.

He was helpless in this regard.

Unlike his subordinates, Ves knew what he was talking about. He did not entirely rely on the paltry empirical evidence he managed to gather to make up his mind about the viability of his mech concept.

Right now, a problem existed where humans were unable to discover the coordinates of the sandman admiral.

Even with his new mech design, Ves wasn't entirely confident that intuition would lead to immediate success.

Therefore, Ves wanted to design a marksman mech that possessed enough capacity to fire a bunch of shots in any direction the mech pilot intuitively felt good about.

Ordinarily, the chance of scoring a lucky hit on a sandman admiral was miniscule! It wasn't worth it for most forces to deploy a bunch of marksman mechs to kill a sandman admiral through relying on pure trial and error.

However, Ves believed that he had a means to increase the chances of killing a sandman admiral without relying on technological solutions!

The key here lay in the Ylvainans.

Only Ves knew that he infused the Holy Soldier design with a mote of spirituality taken from Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

His original intention was to grant the Holy Soldier a small but noticeable sacred component in its glow.

Ves succeeded in that. The Holy Soldier became an extremely popular mech model in the Ylvaine Protectorate. Almost every Kronon mech pilot expressed deep satisfaction and devotion to the Holy Soldiers because they believed it brought them closer to their faith!

However, Ves had not forgotten about the prophet's ability to predict the future.

Though Ves had long doubted whether the prophet really possessed this ability, he had to admit that the mech pilots of the Holy Soldier but especially the Transcendent Messenger appeared to be remarkably canny in their performance!

The previous Ylvainan raids on the military star systems of the Star Faith Collective showcased the weird ability for the Transcendent Messengers to dodge enemy fire!

The performance of Taon Melin was especially noticeable! His Zeal did not get hit once! Even when the hero mech confronted enemy expert mechs, Taon Melin managed to predict and dodge their shots with ease!

Either Taon Melin had advanced to expert pilot, which was definitely not true, or he somehow gained the ability to anticipate the future!

Though Ves found it hard to accept the latter, he could not rule out the idea that Prophet Ylvaine was extraordinary in this aspect.

By extension, his spiritual fragment should have inherited the same ability!

"The central basis of the Ylvainan Faith is their faith in the predictions of the future. The Ylvainans place prophets in high regard. I believe that centering my marksman mech design around intuition and predicting the future is the best way to assassinate sandman admirals before they do too much damage!"

Miles Tovar looked dismayed. "Doesn't that make this mech design exclusive to Ylvainan mech pilots?"

"Essentially, yes." Ves confirmed. "This mech won't work as well if the mech pilot is not a believer of the Ylvainan Faith!"

This was because Ves planned to make Ylvaine's spiritual fragment as the principal design spirit of his marksman mech!

Ves essentially bet that Ylvaine's spiritual fragment would guide the aim of the mech pilot!

Chapter 1629 Extreme Offense

His design team still couldn't wrap their heads around the mech concept that Ves proposed.

A storm of troubled emotions flashed over their faces. Like every Brighter, Miles and the other Tovars looked down on religion.

To participate in the development of a mech that explicitly leaned on vague and unscientific concepts such as faith and intuition stood against anything they had ever designed before!

Ves saw that he needed to guide them a little bit further. If they remained too opposed against his ideas, they would pose a hindrance to his design project.

"You don't necessarily have to support my proposal." He said quietly. "However, you should at least remember who you are. You are mech designers. You are professionals. Regardless of what you think, it is always a good idea to learn how to keep an open mind and to work outside your comfort zone. If you are too narrow-minded, you aren't ready to tackle the challenges you face when you progress your design philosophy."

That lessened their resistance by a bit. Every person who studied mech design learned this lesson. It was a bit unfortunate that most people tended to forget it when they practiced their craft.

Naturally, there were also people who believed that mech designers ought to stick to their own beliefs.

In truth, they had a point. A mech designer who wavered too much would never be able to form a design philosophy that truly fit their own beliefs.

A balance had to be achieved. Mech designers needed to be principled enough to stand up to their core beliefs. Simultaneously, they also had to remain flexible enough to tolerate different beliefs.

What mattered in the end was the outcome. A mech was a success as long as it performed well and fulfilled its intended role. Whether a mech designer took the left path or the right path to get to the destination did not matter very much.

"Let's begin with drafting the design." Ves clapped, deciding that it was best to move on. ??While Gloriana and I will draft our design, I want the rest of you to go over the new generation component designs that we can license and study which ones are suitable. We'll discuss your selection later."

"What parameters should we prioritize?" Ketis asked.

"The weapon is the most important aspect of any marksman mech. Start selecting the weapon first. By my recollection, the new generation hasn't introduced any significant advancements in gauss rifle designs, so feel free to take a look at lastgen models. Remember to consider a medium gauss rifle. Too much power is too wasteful, but too little power reduces the impact of my marksman mech. Try to find a middle ground."

"What about other aspects?"

"Since a marksman mech is designed to operate in the rear of any formation, don't focus too much on defense. Mobility isn't a big priority either. As long as it can keep up with a formation, it's enough. Every aspect of the mech must facilitate the firepower of the mech."

Ketis frowned. "Won't that make the mech as vulnerable as a starfighter?"

"Mechs such as the Dawnbreaker already fill the assault role. With so many mechs and starfighters attracting enemy fire in the vanguard, the chances that the sandmen will target a marksman mech is minimal. The sandmen have never exhibited any selective targeting patterns. They just shoot at whatever is more convenient."

"For now."

Ves acknowledged the point. "While it's true that the sandman might change, I won't compromise on firepower this time. If my marksman mechs require protection, it's much better to deploy some knight mechs instead of tacking on armor to a frame that is unsuited for defense."

"You are proposing a very unbalanced mech." Miles scratched his head. "While glass cannons aren't unheard of, it's rare to see them in premium mechs. No one likes to field a mech that costs as much as three regular mechs but is only as durable as half of one! It only takes one accident to ruin such an expensive purchase!"

"Hahaha!" Ves chuckled. "Ordinarily, you have a valid point. However, you are neglecting something very important. You should never judge a mech by its own merits. You also have to take its intended users in mind! If you know the Ylvainans like I do, they are willing to fight and die for their beliefs! I know for certain that if our work matches my vision, plenty of elite Kronon mech pilots will embrace our new product!"

Ves considered his choices very carefully before he made up his mind. For his first mech design of the new generation, he deliberately decided to go for a whacky mech concept that relied on intuition and external intervention to guide the aim of the mech pilots.

Designing a mass-market budget mech like the Desolate Soldier had done much to propel him to the forefront of the mech community.

However, the Sand War already raged for some time. Between these months, many mech designers already published a huge variety of mech designs, many of which fulfilled the same roles.

In such a crowded marketplace, Ves did not see much value in publishing a mech which offered similar performance to the machines that his competitors already put on sale.

Ves wanted to make a statement.

His first new mech design of the latest generation ought to provide value that no other mech designer could provide.

Regardless of how many mechs the LMC sold or how much revenue it earned, the company could continue to stand out from the market.

As long as he became known as a mech designer that could offer something unique, he would never have to worry about becoming irrelevant.

What might become a trend today could easily be forgotten tomorrow. What Ves wanted to do was to consolidate his position and to form a solid foundation for his future work.

Though Ves was certain that his narrow mech concept would mystify many people, as long as it worked out, he would definitely succeed in cultivating an odd and mysterious impression!

His Soldier product line already attracted way too much attention. If the MTA hadn't been so preoccupied with the invasion of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy, their mech designers might have paid more attention to his work!

Fortunately, phasewater attracted most of their attention, giving Ves enough room to progress his odd design philosophy in peace.

As Ves and Gloriana sat together, they started drawing lines on a projected interface.

It only took a few minutes for them to form their initial sketch. The roughly-drawn image depicted a hefty medium marksman mech wielding an oversized gauss rifle.

The entire frame was designed to complement the offensive ability of the mech. Ordinary ranged mechs tended to be slim and sleek in order to facilitate their ability to dodge and juke enemy fire.

Ves had designed his Desolate Soldier design along this concept.

However, his marksman mech wasn't designed to fight the enemy head-on. Trying to accentuate mobility detracted from other aspects of his current project.

This time, Ves wanted to make as few compromises as possible. Just like how his Aurora Titan pursued defense to an extreme, he wanted to make his marksman mech the most offense-oriented mech he could design!

If mobility was no longer a priority, Ves would rather increase the size of the frame. While that made his marksman mech look a bit bulky, there were several advantages to this design direction.

First, making his marksman mech fatter turned it into a more stable firing platform. A gauss rifle was incredibly powerful. Its inbuilt inertial dampeners only weakened its recoil to a degree.

"Newton's Third Law of Motion. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." Ves justified his design choice to Gloriana. "Gauss rifles impart a lot of force on projectiles, but each time they do so, the rifle and mech both have to endure the same force."

Increasing the mass of the mech wielding the rifle made it easier for the combination to cope with the recoil.

Ordinarily, mech designers mainly added mass to rifleman mechs in the form of armor plating.

This was what the Ansel mech designers pursued when they designed the Dawnbreaker and its variants. The Dawnbreaker's considerable defensive prowess not only made it suitable to confront the laser-obsessed sandmen, it also made it easier for the mech to cope with the recoil of its Sandbreaker rifle.

For this reason, the Sandbreaker performed worse when wielded by slimmer mechs such as the Desolate Soldier.

What made his marksman mech different from the Dawnbreaker was that it did not feature stronger armor. Instead, Ves mainly used the extra bulk to increase its capacity and endurance!

The Dawnbreaker was like a coconut that featured a solid shell and a soft interior.

In comparison, his marksman mech was like a shopping bag. It featured a thin exterior but lots of goods inside.

The key was what Ves and Gloriana planned to stuff inside their mech.

"Gauss rifles consume both ammunition and energy. They're very cumbersome in that regard," Gloriana noted. "Unless our marksman mech can guarantee that it can take out a sandman admiral in a single shot, we have to make sure it gets as many opportunities as possible to complete its mission."

Ves pointed at some internal sections of their draft. "We have to devote most of the added capacity towards accommodating ammunition and energy cells. We have to be very deliberate about where to store the ammunition. As our marksman mechs continues to deplete its rounds, the mass distribution of our mech will change."

Every ballistic mech faced this problem. Ordinarily, a mech designer tweaked the programming of the mech to compensate for the changes, but this was only a stopgap solution. It was best to make the placement of ammunition as even as possible to make the piloting experience as consistent as possible.

They could determine how much capacity they had to devote to ammunition and energy cells later.

Since Ves did not intend his marksman mech to move very actively or dogfight against the sandmen in battle, its flight system shouldn't consume as much energy as other ranged mechs.

However, a gauss rifle expended a significant amount of energy per shot, so Ves could not afford to reduce the amount of energy cells his mech carried.

One design choice they both hesitated upon was whether it would be better for the marksman mech to store its ammunition internally or externally.

"It's faster and easier for our mech to resupply if its ammunition containers are mounted externally on the mech." Gloriana suggested.

Ves shook his head. "If our marksman mech has shot so many times but failed to take out a sandman admiral by then, it's a failure. Even if the mech pilot isn't skilled enough or if the battle is too chaotic to land a solid hit, my mech shouldn't have to return to a mothership in order to refill its spent ammunition and energy reserves."

Keeping everything internal might make his mech more cumbersome, but Ves did not mind this outcome.

They decided to store everything internal to make their mech as consistent as possible. Making their mech look cooler by draping belts of ammunition across its shoulder was a look that mainly took place in action dramas.

After several hours of drafting and refinement, their marksman mech slowly took shape. Ves spent a considerable amount of time in shaping the exterior of their mech to be more in line with the Ylvainan Faith.

As he played around with the appearance of the mech, the vision that he formed in his mind became more detailed and defined.

Ves designed a machine that embodied a hunter who administered punishment on Ylvaine's behalf!

The mech was meant to neutralize any potent threat against the Ylvainan Faith and its adherents!

With a configuration that maximized the firepower, accuracy and capacity of the mech at all cost, the draft already exuded a hint of lethality!

Chapter 1630 Ylvainan Specialty

After a day of drafting and preparation work, the mech designers of the LMC made a lot of progress.

With the help of the assistant mech designers, Ves quickly selected the most appropriate new generation components to pair with his marksman mech.

Since Ves intended to design a premium mech, he benefited from a generous budget.

Armor was by far the most expensive component of most mechs. What made his marksman mech different was that Ves did not intend to allocate the bulk of his budget on improving its toughness.

In fact, he chose to do the opposite! Ves settled for a cheap, lastgen armor system that offered poor protection but was very easy to work with. Not only that, but he only applied the minimum amount of armor necessary to hold the mech together and prevent it from deforming if subjected to gravity!

Perhaps normal mech pilots would never entrust their lives on such flimsy protection. His marksman mech was as fragile as a light mech but without the corresponding degree of mobility!

However, Ves had faith that the Ylvainan mech pilots he targeted would not be deterred!

In order to devote as much of the mech to offense as possible, Ves also opted to mount his mech with a very basic flight system.

His marksman mech's flight system was smaller and stubbier than the flight systems of other ranged mechs. This made his mech sluggish to the point that it was unsuitable to confront an enemy directly.

The advantage of using a small and weak flight system was that it didn't occupy much space. It was also cheap and consumed a lot less energy.

Gloriana expressed some misgivings about this design choice. "The lack of mobility won't matter much against the sandmen, but it will make our mech a sitting duck against other opponents. Human enemies aren't as stupid as the sandmen. They know when they should prioritize distant but acute threats such as marksman mechs."

"It's fine if our mech design doesn't have much longevity once the Sand War is over." Ves sighed. "I'm not entirely satisfied with the new generation components the MTA has released. Right now, I want to maximize the combat effectiveness of our marksman mech against the sandman. If I try to make my mech effective against enemy mechs as well, we risk making too many compromises. That will weaken its effectiveness against both sandmen and mechs."

Ves knew that the mech concept that underpinned his this project was not completely reliable. He did not wish to tack on too many roles to his marksman mech. Putting too many expectations on it would only weaken its main purpose, which was to snipe sandman admirals down.

Another factor that he needed to take into account was whether Ylvaine's spiritual fragment would offer its assistance.

He decided to make sure he gained the fragment's consent before proceeding further.

He briefly closed his eyes and concentrated on his Transcendent Messenger design. He slowly made contact with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

Before he could communicate his inquiry, the fragment transmitted positivity to him. It had already assented to his plans!

He snorted. "I hate it when you do that."

Ves already expected this answer. Even though Ves intended to make his marksman mech work by exploiting its design spirit, his work did not damage the interests of the Ylvainan people!

In fact, his work would benefit them hugely!

The sandman race threatened every state in the Komodo Star Sector. If the current trend of the war persisted, then the Ylvaine Protectorate might get overrun!

Even if the Ylvaine Protectorate managed to hold their ground, the Bright Republic and other nearby states may fall instead! Once that happened, the sandmen could quickly turn around and flank the Protectorate, thereby causing it to fall in the end!

The Ylvainans had to prevent both outcomes as much as possible!

From what Ves understood of the Great Prophet when he was alive, Ylvaine considered himself to be the shepherd and the protector of his followers.

He would not remain still if the Ylvainan people needed his help.

Therefore, Ves already assumed that Ylvaine's spiritual fragment would approve of his marksman mech design.

He did not take the spiritual fragment's approval for granted. While Ylvaine was known to be generous to those who didn't share his beliefs, Ves did not wish to make any excessive demands.

Who knew what would happen if a Brighter piloted a mech under the purview of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment! The clash between a secularist and a living remnant of an ardent religious figure would definitely be spicy!

"Compatibility between a mech and a mech pilot is a huge concern." Gloriana identified. "Since this mech performs best in the hands of an Ylvainan mech pilot, I agree with your decision to make it an exclusive Ylvainan design."

To facilitate her understanding of his mech, Ves already informed her about Ylvaine's spiritual fragment beforehand.

Naturally, she regarded it as a proto-god.

Aside from this difference in perspective, both of them were aligned on this project. Ves always appreciated Gloriana's willingness to accept and believe in his design choices, no matter how weird they sounded.

Ves had to do his best to vindicate Gloriana's unquestioning trust in his design abilities. He could not afford to fail in this project!

The rifle model they selected out of the available choices was the most remarkable part about their draft design.

After making a lot of comparisons, Ves settled for a new generation model called the Executor.

While the improvements of a new generation gauss rifle was not very substantial compared to a lastgen model, he did not wish to compromise the offensive power of his mech!

The Executor was so big that the marksman mech still looked a bit too small to wield such a massive weapon.

Ordinarily, a weapon of this size was already qualified to be called a cannon if not for its lackluster caliber.

The main reason why the gauss rifle was so large and unwieldy was not because it fired large projectiles.

The developers of the Executor instead focused mainly on maximizing its muzzle velocity.

The gauss rifle spat out rounds much faster than other models. This put an enormous stress on its body, which meant that it needed a lot of strengthening and recoil compensation.

It also happened to make the rifle very big and fragile. It only took a couple of light hits to disable the weapon!

To be fair, most ranged mechs suffered from the same vulnerability. It was just that his marksman mech could not rely on mobility to avoid incoming damage.

"This mech looks like it's ready to snipe some sandman admirals." Gloriana tentatively approved of the draft. "Its lack of defense and mobility is rather concerning, but I think it will pair well as long as it enjoys the protection of a knight mech."

Ves smiled. "This isn't a mech that is designed to defeat its opponents alone. It's a mech that expands the options of what a mech force can do. As long as our mech can rely on the protection and cover of other mechs, it can showcase its full might!"

The situation of his marksman mech reminded him of the Aurora Titan. Even though the mech wasn't useful for anything except repelling enemy attacks, it turned out to be okay in the end. Plenty of customers found a good use of the mech.

In fact, his marksman mech would pair exceptionally well with an Aurora Titan!

One mech focused on extreme offense. The other mech focused on extreme defense. Putting them together resulted in something akin to a mobile defensive platform!

Of course, the main downside was that this defensive platform was only mobile in a relative sense! The mobility of the Aurora Titan was truly abysmal, making it impossible to avoid any strong attacks or keep up with fast-moving formations!

Fortunately, mobility warfare had never been much of a priority in the Sand War. Most fights devolved into primitive slugfest where one side attempted to outlast the other side!

Since his marksman mech was optimized to fight the sandmen, Ves did not expect it to remain very relevant once the sandman threat had passed.

However, Ves had a faint suspicion that the Ylvainans might surprise him! For this reason, he did not completely dare to rule out the possibility that his mechs might be employed against human opponents one day.

"Have you thought over the political implications of this mech design?" Gloriana suddenly asked.

"Hm?"

"Think of what you are planning to design. Is this mech supposed to benefit the Ylvainans, or everyone else who are resisting the sandmen?"

Ves helplessly smiled. "The latter, of course. If I had a choice, I would have tailored my design to Brighters. Unfortunately, you've already seen the reaction of the Tovars. They don't want anything to do with the Ylvainan Faith, let alone put their trust into something as vague as intuition."

"Let's suppose this idea works. Let's assume that when the Ylvainans start deploying our marksman mechs en masse, they manage to finish their battles a lot sooner than before because they have become good at sniping sandman admirals. Do you think the other states will sit still?"

"Ah." Ves scratched his hair. "I can already anticipate their first reaction. They'll buy a bunch of our new mechs and attempt to accomplish the same feats with their own mech pilots. They'll fail. Our marksman mechs are only effective in the hands of an Ylvainan expert pilot who specializes in ranged mechs!"

"Then the other states will have no choice but to beg the Ylvainans to dispatch some of their mech pilots to defend their own territories!"

Ves could see now that this would have vast diplomatic implications. An ideological conflict could not be ruled out either!

"If the Bright Republic has to depend on a mech that only works because its mech pilot is a devout believer, hardly any Brighter will feel at ease!"

"What's worse is that you're the designer, Ves."

He couldn't help but chuckle. Now that he thought about it, the situation sounded quite absurd!

"Well, I don't have any other choice." He shrugged. "The Ylvainans are the only ones on hand who can enable this kind of mech. Even if the Bright Republic has a problem with this idea, they can't argue with the results. If our mechs perform as expected, then every other state will be begging the Ylvainans for assistance!"

"The Ylvainan government can use this opportunity to trade for some concessions. Our marksman mech is destined to empower the Protectorate!"

Hearing that made Ves a little worried. Not everyone would appreciate his support for the Ylvainans. Certainly, developing such a mech would definitely make his status as a Brighter more awkward.

"It's just a single mech design." He eventually brushed aside his concerns. "If I need to reassert my loyalty to the Bright Republic, I'll just design another mech that accomplishes this result!"

"The commission that you've accepted is the perfect opportunity to do so, Ves. Didn't the government ask you to design a mech that is meant to please the former separatists from Bentheim? Designing a single custom mech won't necessarily change the outcome of the Sand War, but it is still a great opportunity to boost your reputation and influence public opinion!"

"Just like my Transcendent Messengers."

"Exactly!"

Now that he thought about it, Gloriana had a good point. Perhaps there was a bit more merit to designing a custom mech for Vincent Ricklin than he thought. Due to the nature of the commission, a lot of people would certainly pay attention to the custom mech he designed!

Of course, Ves did not place much hope in affecting the Bright Republic as much as he did when he designed the Transcendent Messengers.

"Vincent Ricklin is due to arrive tomorrow." He said. "Let's hope he doesn't make any impractical demands for his custom mech."