

# Mech 1661

## *Chapter 1661 Artificial Scheme*

After his call with Commander Magdalena, Ves fell into an awful mood. He locked himself inside his stateroom and brooded over the possibility that Sigrund was targeting him for some reason.

As the most probable instigator of the sandman invasion, Sigrund had enough blood in his hands to drench the entire star sector!

The sandmen had already managed to overrun over a dozen states and were on track to smash some more by the time they exhausted their forces.

The sheer slaughter to both humans and sandmen made it very clear that Sigrund was nothing less than a monster without any immorality in his artificially-modified sandman core!

With such a great threat looming over his head, Ves should be very worried.

He wasn't. In truth, once Ves speculated that Sigrund was directly involved, he knew that his life would never be under threat.

This was because of the pact that he and Calabast had made with the sentient AI.

As long as he died or issued the right command, news of Sigrund's existence would definitely leak out. Ves had long made enough precautions, several of which did not rely on electronic systems at all.

So long as his words managed to reach the ears of the CFA, Sigrund would definitely become the object of their crazed pursuit!

From what he heard about the CFA, creating a sentient AI had always been one of their holy grails! Ves had no doubt that the CFA would commit much more than a single warfleet to track Sigrund down!

Therefore, Ves no longer considered the abnormal sandman fleet a threat. The most the sandman admirals in charge of the fleet could do was to play a very frustrating game of hide and seek by hiding themselves among the endless asteroids floating in space.

He didn't have to worry too much about the sandmen accumulating forces in the Cloudy Curtain System.

Since the behavior of the sandmen in the system alarmed the higher ups, the government would definitely dispatch a strong force to squash the inventive sandman admirals as fast as possible!

Everyone feared that the strange sandman admirals might reunite with their fellow sandmen and pass on their strange teachings.

However, Ves thought differently.

His face grew darker as he suddenly realized that the entire sandman invasion was nothing more than a scheme!

What was Sigrund thinking?! Why did he provoke the Big Two by launching an immense invasion that already killed trillions of humans?

While Ves did not have any proof, he intuitively assumed that Sigrund had gained total control over the entire sandman race.

With how much time he spent on a CFA battleship pretending to be her virtual officers, Sigrund should not be ignorant of proper tactics and strategy.

If he wanted to, he could have directed the sandman fleets in a way that ensured that they would have overrun every third-rate state in the Komodo Star Sector!

Yet instead of maximizing the combat effectiveness of the sandmen, Sigrund inexplicably made the sandman behave in a way that suggested that the sandmen only possessed a limited amount of intelligence.

Right now, practically every human regarded the sandmen as if they were profoundly stupid!

"Everyone is underestimating the sandmen!"

What was Sigrund trying to accomplish by painting his former race as a bunch of semi-sentient dimwits?

Why did he intentionally cripple the invasion effort and give every state in the third line of defense a chance to repel the enemy?

There was something very fishy going on. In fact, Ves always harbored these suspicions, but with all of the emergencies taking place, he never had the time to settle down and think through the situation.

Was Sigrund purposefully trying to mess around with Ves?

He shook his head. How could a single individual cause a grand sentient AI to devote his full processing power towards such a useless pursuit.

The sandman invasion likely served a completely different purpose, one that was probably unconnected to Ves or Calabast.

Sigrund's true enemy was the Common Fleet Alliance. These warship-mad spacers were obsessed with automation and AIs for some reason.

So long as this great threat loomed over Sigrund's head, the hybrid sandman would never be able to live in peace.

Forget about galactic domination or forming a new empire. As soon as a single human became aware of Sigrund's existence, his life was irrevocably over.

"Is that why he is trying to get rid of the sandmen?"

Sigrund clearly didn't care about his former race. The sandman invasion was not only a tragedy for the humans living close to the border with the frontier, but also risked wiping out every sandman!

The outrageous aggression of their race had already sealed their fate. While Ves hadn't heard anything about the CFA warfleet sent to wipe out the sandmen starting from their origin point, the galaxy would soon say goodbye to yet another alien race.

Only Sigrund would be able to get away!

Of course, now that the sandmen have seemingly gone extinct by that time, no human would invest any energy in seeking a few lost grains of sand.

Was this what Sigrund tried to accomplish?

Ves shook his head. "That's far too simple."

It was impossible for Ves to match the sheer processing power of a sentient AI created by the CFA.

Unable to match Sigrund's artificial wits, Ves eventually shrugged and put aside his guessing game.

It was enough for him to conclude that Sigrund shouldn't be after his life. Whatever else he was plotting should not affect him directly.

"Well, that isn't entirely correct."

The entire sandman invasion already affected his life in a profound way. While he had benefited quite a lot from the opportunities that opened up, his mood quickly soured at all of the humans who died.

It was just that Sigrund's actions hadn't crossed a line that would compel him to expose the sentient's existence.

This was because Ves would inevitably incur a huge price when Sigrund exposed him as a Holy Son.

"Is he deliberately tormenting me or what?"

Ves realized he could have ended the Sand War early and prevented a lot of death and destruction if he spoke out earlier.

As long as he disregarded his freedom, the MTA and CFA would have responded a lot stronger than they currently did at the moment!

Even the invasion of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy wouldn't be enough to keep their attention away from the Komodo Star Sector!

Unfortunately for everyone, Ves was not a selfless person. At the very least, the situation so far hadn't driven him to the point where he found his choice to remain silent to be unbearable.

As for the guilt that should have plagued his heart for allowing the sandmen to engulf countless humans, Ves did not feel responsible at all!

His heart was as light as a feather.

While Ves was not indifferent to the tragedy that had already occurred, he still considered himself to be a small and insignificant figure in the greater scheme of things.

Unless he became as powerful as a Master Mech Designer, he could forget about playing the great game.

Events that affected entire star sectors like the sandman invasion was not something that he could meddle in. At most, he could only stick to his job and design the mechs that helped humanity resist the aggressors.

As the Barracuda returned to the only habitable planet in the star system, Ves eventually regained his normal mood.

A welcome distraction was Gloriana's recovery. After one-and-a-half days of rest, she managed to regain consciousness.

"How are you, Gloriana?"

"I still feel somewhat weak." She said softly over the comm. "It's rather strange. I've never felt so tired despite all of the doctors stating that my body is in an optimal condition. I can't imagine how much strain you have to cope with every time you create something special."

Ves tapped the side of his head. "Everything can be trained, including our minds. It is not necessarily bad for you to come under strain. As long as you give yourself some time to recover, I'm sure you'll be able to cope a little better next time!"

"I trust you, Ves. Hopefully, I'll recover completely within the next couple of days. We still have some mech designs to complete. Right now, I don't think that I'm in a good condition to work on a project right now."

Ves guessed that Gloriana depleted a considerable amount of spiritual energy.

This was not good news. Unlike Ves who could rely on his Grand Dynamo to recover spiritual energy quickly, Gloriana did not have such a convenient means to replenish her expenditure.

"When I get back, I'll tell you what's likely wrong with you. For now, I think it's a good idea for you to get used to your temporary mental state. If you think you are up for it, I think it would be a good idea for you to continue on our projects rather than leave them aside."

"Why so, Ves?"

"Designing a mech while you are not necessarily in the right mood builds up resilience. As a true professional, you should be able to design a mech under every circumstance. Just because you are feeling mentally exhausted should not affect your knowledge base and your accumulated design experience. The only factors that have diminished ought to be your passion and your motivation. Is that right?"

She nodded weakly. "Everytime I think about designing a mech, I don't feel any joy. That's really weird. I've never been so unenthusiastic about designing mechs than today!"

Ves sighed. "This is the price you pay to help me create something exceptional. While I'm more than capable of paying this price, the same doesn't apply to you. This is a part of my specialty. I've been working on improving my capabilities in this area since the start of my design career!"

"I'm still peeved at my state. Do you have a way of fixing my exhaustion?"

Ves contemplated whether he could 'lend' his Grand Dynamo to Gloriana. Sadly, the Grand Dynamo formed in his mind had already been embedded by his spiritual energy.

There was no way that Ves could top Gloriana off with his own spiritual energy. It was like mixing two different kinds of fuel in the tank of a starship. Despite their similarities, their attributes and other properties differed too much to be able to use them interchangeably.

To be honest, Ves wasn't even confident he could help Gloriana recover faster in the first place.

Before he obtained the Grand Dynamo, Ves had to wait for many months before his natural regeneration replenished his spent spiritual energy.

However, Ves did not discount this possibility immediately. He was a lot more capable in spiritual manipulation than before.

Considering the amazing result they achieved when she exerted her spirituality, Ves could not allow her to be out for months at a time.

He had to develop a method that hastened her recovery!

"We're lucky that we almost completed the Adonis Colossus first." Ves smiled. "If you're really not up to it, I can wrap up this project by myself."

"I don't like this. I want to make sure the Adonis Colossus design is as perfect as possible! In fact, I already planned to return to our design lab today."

"Alright." Ves no longer worried too much about her condition. "Don't push yourself beyond your means. Some strain is good, but too much strain is very dangerous."

"Understood. By the way, how is the situation in space?"

"Strange." Ves grimaced, but he didn't say anything more. Due to the sensitivity of the matter, the government already classified anything related to the abnormal sandman fleet. "It's none of our business, though. The government is already on top of the situation. It might take some while for the defense force to return to orbit."

"Okay. By the way, Ves. There's something else you should know."

"What's that?"

"I just received a notification from my cousin Ranya. She's due to arrive within a month!"

#### *Chapter 1662 Low Period*

When the Barracuda returned to Cloudy Curtain, Ves immediately entered the Cloud Estate to check up on his girlfriend.

At the moment, she was sitting on a luxurious couch.

Gloriana greeted him with a tired smile while petting Clixie. "Ves. You're back."

"Miaow!"

"Hey Clixie." Ves briefly bent down to scratch the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat's head before placing his hand on Gloriana's head. "Let me check up on you for a moment."

Though his abrupt motion caused her guards to twitch, Ves did not pay any mind to anything else. Right now, only Gloriana mattered!

He inspected her with his spiritual senses. As he feared, her spiritual energy reserves had dropped by a significant quantity.

Fortunately, the worst hadn't occurred. She hadn't expended all of her spiritual energy. Unaccustomed to performing spiritual manipulation, she couldn't endure the strain of maintaining her earlier state for long.

Her mind withdrew before she expended too much of her spiritual energy.

However, she still wasted a significant amount. If her regeneration rate was the same as his before he obtained the Grand Dynamo, then she would probably require a month or two to regain her full strength.

Until then, it would be difficult for her to feel passionate and energetic when designing a mech.

This was the price she paid for using her ability in a more direct and spiritual way.

Nothing came for free.

The main concern that Ves held was if it had been worth it. Now that Gloriana expended herself, she wouldn't be able to provide as much assistance in finalizing the Adonis Colossus and Deliverer designs.

However, as long as she avoided incurring permanent damage, everything was okay. In two months, she'd be back to normal and ready to do her utmost in designing mechs.

Ves drew back his hand and sat down next to her. "You're in a mentally exhausted condition. This isn't something that medical examinations can detect, so don't be fooled if they all state that you're healthy."

"Please explain."

"To put it simply, you've exerted your domain in a way that consumes your strength. If you think of yourself as a god, then you have expended some of your energy to exercise your power. This consumption is very substantial. By my estimate, it will take around two months for you to return to normal."

"Two months?!" She grew alarmed. "My time is very precious! I can't afford to sit still for two months!"

"Calm down, Gloriana. Just because you are in a low mood doesn't mean you are forced to rest all day. As I've said before, this is a good time for you to exercise your mental resilience. So long as you can train yourself to design mechs while you are in your current state, you'll be able to design any mech under any circumstances!"

"You speak as if you have experience on the matter."

"Remember my visit to Centerpoint and my tour through the star sector? One of the underlying reasons why I took such an extensive trip was to recover from the same condition!"

"Ah. How long did it take for you to recover?"

"More than half a year. I got better, though."

She fell silent for a moment. "That is a very long time. I suppose we won't be able to exploit our newly-discovered synergy too often. At the very least, we need to be careful with the timing so that nothing else important is on the agenda."

He felt gratified that Gloriana didn't give up on the new techniques after knowing the price.

To be honest, Ves really hoped they could perform Artificial Conception again and improve its efficiency. Gloriana's semi-autonomous way of controlling her spiritual projection was very crude and wasteful.

"You don't necessarily have to force yourself to design mechs during this low period. You can also do other productive activities, such as studying more knowledge."

She nodded. "That's what I already had in mind. I don't have much of a problem with sharpening my knowledge. It's just that I don't feel the same spark anymore every time I want to work on our current projects. I have never felt this way in my life! Not once!"

He knew that she developed an early passion for mechs. Since she started to design her first mech, she never lost her passion in her profession. It was one of the reasons why she was able to progress so fast.

Rarely did anyone advance to Journeyman without loving their craft.

"You won't notice any difference when it comes to performing mechanical or routine tasks. It's only when you need to exercise your creativity and imagination that you will feel sluggish and empty."

He passed on his personal understanding and experiences of falling in a low state. Gloriana listened attentively and took his advice seriously.



She only had one more question.

"Is there no way to recover faster?"

Ves hesitated. "There are. In fact, I'm a lot better in this regard now. However, my solution is not really applicable to you. I'm a lot different from you, Gloriana."

He wasn't entirely truthful. If he granted her guest access to the System, she might be able to draw her own Grand Dynamo Elixir from the lottery. In fact, Ves could draw this elixir by himself and pass it onto her, saving him a million DP.

However, Ves was deeply reluctant to reveal the System to her at this time. While he came to trust her increasingly more, their relationship still had some ways to go. It wasn't necessary to pull her into the troublesome vortex surrounding the System at this time.

Once he passed some more advice, he left her alone to take another nap. Since her mind was not very robust, she was actually a bit worse off than him when he initially drained himself.

Due to all of the new developments, Ves decided to leave aside his projects and catch up on some matters.

He traveled to his office at the LMC's headquarters and called in Dr. Lupo.

"Doctor, are you familiar with Gloriana's current state?"

"Yes. I was part of the initial examinations." The exobiologist stated. "Sadly, I'm just as in the dark as her own doctors. All I can do is to adjust her diet and see if that helps. I have several ideas to address her deficient mental acuity."

Personally, Ves did not have much hope that eating different foods could help, but it didn't hurt to try.

"Don't waste too much time on that. Gloriana will be able to recover on her own in time. There are much more important matters. Gloriana just told me that her cousin Ranya will be arriving at Cloudy Curtain within a month!"

Dr. Lupo knew the significance of this news. "Will she perform the implant surgery upon arrival?"

"I'm not sure. It depends on her own arrangements and how long she intends to stay here. In case she can only stay here for a limited time, you need to be ready to assist and supervise the implant surgery."

"I... I've developed some competences in this field, but I wouldn't call myself a qualified implant surgeon." Lupo haltingly replied. "While I am familiar with the necessary theory, I don't have much practical experience beyond practicing in virtual simulations."

"How successful are you in the simulations?"

"Not good. My performance is barely passable when performing a standard cranial implant insertion, but I don't have the necessary experience to handle unanticipated complications."

That was worse than he expected of his subordinate. He fed Dr. Lupo with enough Intelligence Candies to boost his intelligence attribute to 2.0! Did the exobiologist spend all of his time on his pet projects rather than his main tasks?

Seeing how Ves became discontented with him, Dr. Lupo quickly raised his hands in innocence.

"I already made a judgement that I'm not able to match Miss Ranya's competence in implant surgery. Instead, I've put a lot of effort into familiarizing the specific programming and other properties surrounding your Archimedes Rubal implant. While it's extremely advanced, it's over three-hundred years out of date. There is a lot of leaked and declassified information about this specific bioimplant on the galactic net. I've even managed to retrieve a lot of updated firmware and unofficial software mods."

"That sounds a bit dubious."

"I'm aware that some if not most of the material I've found is malicious. Don't worry, Mr. Larkinson. I've used all of the information I've gathered as reference material to improve my comprehension of the Archimedes Rubal implant. After several months of focused study, I can't say that I've become an expert on cranial bioimplants, but I have definitely gained a thorough understanding of the workings of this specific implant model!"

"How good is your understanding?"

"Good enough to be able to update and tweak the bioimplant on your orders. While I wouldn't trust any of the software mods that I've collected, I can program something conservative that nevertheless improves some crucial aspects."

Lupo looked hopeful at Ves, as if waiting for permission to tinker with the programming of the Archimedes Rubal.

Ves huffed at his subordinate. As if he would let any single person have free rein over something he planned to insert in his head

"Wait until Ranya arrives and familiarizes herself with the Archimedes Rubal." He instructed in a firm tone. "Anything involving this implant must be done with constant checks and verification. I won't tolerate any doubt or dubious actions, understood?"

"Understood.."

Though Lupo looked a little deflated, he soon recovered. His true passion lay elsewhere, so he didn't care too much about the Archimedes Rubal. It was just a shiny toy to the exobiologist.

Ves proceeded to ask Lupo's progress on his other assignments. The exobiologist hadn't made much progress in understanding Ves' complicated physique due to lack of time, and he only made a minor breakthrough with regards to uncovering the secrets behind geril spice.

"While I haven't been able to detect anything extraordinary about this spice, I am reasonably confident I have been able to isolate the most exceptional component." Lupo stated. "If my assumptions are correct, the active effect that you are seeking is locked inside this specific substance!"

"What does that mean?"

"It's possible to artificially reproduce this substance, though only at great cost. Whether the imitation I've made carries the unknown effect you desire is another matter."

Ves gestured to Nita, who was quietly guarding him from the far side of the office.

"Coordinate with my bodyguard here for that. She is the only one in my crew who can detect the difference."

Lupo glanced at the tall bodyguard. "Very well."

"Is there anything else you can do with this substance?"

"Even if I can't reproduce it, I can still use it as an additive to your meals. You'll be able to receive the same benefits from geril spice without encountering its pungent odor."

While Ves was skeptical whether that would work, that was good news. Geril spice was way too distinctive and would definitely arouse some suspicion to those who were aware of its properties.

Ves hadn't encountered anyone else with an extraordinary nose after his visit to the Sentinel Kingdom.

That didn't mean he let down his guard. He was just fortunate that his life didn't intersect with any agents affiliated with the Five Scrolls Compact.

He could not guarantee that he could avoid another encounter, so it was better to be safe than sorry.

"How much progress have you made on gaining permission to set up an exobeast reserve?"

"Oh, I haven't spent much time on this issue, but the administrators I've hired already managed to get it done. Your Larkinson Exobiology Institute is ready to set up an exobeast reserve a fair distance away from Freslin. I've held off on procuring exobeasts though. Under these wartime circumstances, it's not entirely appropriate to conduct these activities. Additionally, shipping of non-essential goods is heavily restricted."

Ves nodded. "You made the right call, though you should inform me beforehand."

There was not much point in setting up an exobeast reserve when he might have to abandon it later if the Bright Republic succumbed to the sandmen. What Dr. Lupo managed to accomplish in this limited amount of time was already enough. Hiring a capable biotech expert was one of the better decisions he had made recently.

#### *Chapter 1663 Relocation*

A few days went by as the situation in space became more tense.

The citizens of the Bright Republic did not hear the announcement they expected. Everyone expected to hear that the defense fleet defeated the invading sandman fleet a few days after they sortied.

Instead, no news came at all. The government and all of the media outlets kept mum, leaving every local in the dark.

No news wasn't necessarily good news. Many Brighters began to grow worried that something might have gotten wrong.

If the government hadn't stated that the defense force was fully intact, the locals would have panicked and thought the end was near!

As it was, the locals became a little split. Their daily lives continued without any interruption, prompting most people to push the matter in the back of their minds.

Naturally, many others still remained concerned, so much so that they preemptively tried to evacuate to Bentheim. Because the government commandeered too many ships, it was too difficult to secure traditional transit.

The most they could do was to pay for passage aboard one of the many transport vessels shipping materials from Bentheim to Cloudy Curtain and back. Though the ride was uncomfortable, it was better than nothing!

None of this impacted Ves too much. He only made a brief company-wide announcement to cool the nerves of his employees. Whether they believed him or not was not his concern.

Just as Ves expected, because nothing apparently happened, the acuteness of the emergency eventually faded.

However, he still monitored the situation in space through various channels. While Commander Magdalena was not allowed to contact him directly, he had access to some reports.

The central government was alarmed. The abnormal behavior of the sandman admirals that intruded Cloudy Curtain had become such a fearsome occurrence that the Mech Corps directly dispatched an entire mech regiment to suppress the fleet!

Over two-thousand spaceborn mechs and accompanying ships of the 4th Light Hounds of the 3rd Bentheim Division reached the Cloudy Curtain System in secret!

The mech companies of the Light Hounds immediately fanned out to scour the asteroid belt for the sandman elements that had shaken off detection by hiding in the middle of the asteroid belt!

If the deviant sandmen admirals put their full effort into hiding their presence, then the Light Hounds might be stuck here for a couple weeks.

Fortunately, the higher ups acted decisively and dispatched the Light Hounds with haste, so the sandmen couldn't have split up very far. Though it was easy for the aliens to camouflage their presence in the asteroid belt, they couldn't move too fast without breaking their cover.

If the roving patrols neared the hiding positions of the sandmen, then the latter wouldn't be able to move at all without tripping some alarms!

In order to hasten the search, every mech that participated in the search effort received an emergency software update that optimized the scanners to detect the presence of sandmen.

Though the Mech Corps previously paid little attention to Cloudy Curtain, now that it became a focal point in the war, the resources they brought to bear was very considerable!

"Is it true that the sandmen are targeting you in order to sabotage the glows of your mechs?" Gavin asked in a worried tone.

"Relax. I won't go down so easily. Even if the sandmen find some way to threaten this planet, we can instantly board the Barracuda to escape their clutches."

This was the privilege of owning a starship!

"I don't believe that this is a coincidence! The sandmen are definitely after your life!"

Ves grew exasperated at Gavin's worries.

Because of his gatekeeper role, Gavin had access to some of the intelligence that Ves received. Reading all of the material made the assistant very scared of his own life.

Death by sandmen had become the biggest fright of every citizen exposed to the Sand War!

"Just flee to Bentheim on a transport ship if you can't keep your composure."

His assistant looked sheepish. "Sorry, boss. I lost control. It's just that there is such a big threat looming over our heads. What if a second sandman fleet joins the first?"

"We'll evacuate once Cloudy Curtain can't be defended anymore. No sooner. Besides, do you really think that Bentheim is any safer? There are at least three or four sandman fleets invading the port system every day!"

The sandmen managed to expand the breach from Sydney Superior and threaten much of the interior of the Bright Republic. The Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps were spreading their forces to their limit in order to prop up all of the vulnerable star systems.

Bentheim's attraction to the sandmen served as a mixed blessing under these circumstances.

On one hand, Bentheim attracted an unreasonable amount of sandman fleets. The quantity of invaders had reached such a severe point that a considerable amount of traffic that flowed through Bentheim had dropped!

No one wanted to bump into the sandmen as soon as they transitioned into the port system!

Of course, this led to a severe disruption in the supply chains that Bentheim subsided upon to keep its vast economy running. Trade dropped by a third and industrial production dropped by a lesser degree.

The entire state mobilized into action. The military did its best to suppress the invading sandmen and to maintain secure shipping routes. The other branches of the government provided more support to essential companies and did their best to keep trade flowing as much as possible.

Unfortunately, all of these actions and disruptions increased the monthly inflation rate even more. Ves literally saw the LMC's cash pile diminishing in value with each passing day!

Gavin understood the deteriorating economic circumstances better than Ves. "It's really bad right now. As of yesterday, it is no longer profitable for us to maintain production at the Mech Nursery. The shipping rates have skyrocketed, making even short runs between Bentheim and Cloudy Curtain prohibitively expensive."

"Is it because of insurance?" Ves asked.

"The shipping companies are risking their assets every time they ship materials to Cloudy Curtain or ship finished products back to Bentheim. While the military is doing its best to keep the shipping lanes free from the sandmen, that is not a perfect guarantee."

Ves hesitated for a moment. He really did not like to halt production at the Mech Nursery. It was the principal production facility of his mech company and a temporary shutdown would have severe consequences.

Ves did not care too much about the disruption to the production plans or the delay in fulfilling orders.

What he really cared about was keeping his mech technicians and factory workers sharp.

Giving them a few days off didn't affect their readiness. However, if they began to sit idle for several months, they wouldn't be as productive if they returned to work.

Yet keeping up production when he lost more money than he earned per sale was not a good outcome either.

He had to make a choice between two unpalatable options.

To be honest, Ves did not mind paying a modest price to keep his best and most loyal workers sharp. However, the economy was just starting to deteriorate. With the sandmen far from running out of steam, the situation would definitely grow worse over time.

"Instruct Raymond to shut down production if necessary." Ves eventually spoke. "Even if we have to keep our manufacturing personnel idle for the remainder of the Sand War, it won't take too much effort to regain what we've lost after the crisis has passed."

Gavin made a note on his data pad. "Will do. I have a suggestion. Why not offer to transport our workers and their families to Bentheim? We've recently invested in a handful of manufacturing complexes there to put our windfall to good use, remember?



While we are already in the process of hiring workers, it's a lot better if we can reassign experienced and dedicated personnel from the Mech Nursery."

That.. sounded like a good idea to Ves. He didn't make an immediate decision, though.

"Pass this suggestion up to Raymond and the senior management. This is a very major move and I don't want the LMC to make any haphazard moves. I'm not sure how many workers are willing to relocate to Bentheim in the first place."

"There's something else that is related to this issue. We've recently received some official notices from the government."

While Gavin passed on the notices to Ves, he briefly summarized their contents.

"All of the messages are pretty much saying the same thing. The government is concerned at your continued stay in Cloudy Curtain. The Ministry of Defense is the most fervent branch in requesting you to leave this star system."

"Because they think the sandmen are targeting me specifically?" Ves frowned.

"I don't know why you're so nonchalant about this threat! If the sandmen are truly aware of your significance, then you're in big trouble! Holing up at Bentheim or Rittersberg is much better since the Mech Corps maintains a heavy presence in those star systems!"

"Cloudy Curtain is my home."

"If you truly care about your home planet, you should have left months ago. Your presence here is endangering everyone else if the sandmen are really out to get you. Besides, even if you don't believe that, the government surely does."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Will the government force me to evacuate to a better defended star system?"

"Yes." Gavin bluntly replied. "The people in charge have only sent some politely-worded requests so far because they don't want to offend you. However, they'll definitely push you harder if you remain stubborn."

This was not what Ves wanted to hear. His mood darkened as he agreed with his assistant.

There was no evidence that the sandmen weren't out to get him. Aside from Calabast, practically everyone else who was aware of the situation probably believed that Ves was under threat.

However, that did not mean that Ves was ready to surrender to the government's demands.



One of the biggest reasons why he was determined to remain at Cloudy Curtain was that it was easy for him to run away.

If for some reason the sandmen really launched a surprise attack or the government turned against him, Ves wanted to have a clear path of escape.

The defense forces stationed at Cloudy Curtain weren't numerous enough to envelop the entire planet. It was not that hard for the swift and nimble Barracuda to avoid pursuit and circumvent blockades.

It was an entirely different matter if Ves moved to Bentheim. There was so much shipping and traffic there that every vessel had to abide by the instructions of traffic control.

Patrols and enforcement were much more strict at Bentheim. There was no way a single ship could slip through the thick defensive net around the planet!

Ves always harbored some paranoia towards his home state. Even though he currently maintained friendly relations with the Tovars and the government, who knew they wanted to stab his back one day.

Though he knew it was unreasonable to suspect the government to turn on a prominent and decorated citizen, Ves was no normal Brighter.

For this reason, Ves did not prepare to evacuate to Bentheim under any circumstances.

Because of Cloudy Curtain's relatively low strategic importance, there was no way the Mech Corps could station a large force here on a continuous basis.

As long as Sigrund stopped pranking Ves by sending more abnormal sandman fleets to Cloudy Curtain, the Light Hounds should eventually return to the Bentheim System.

The fighting there had become very intense, after all! Bentheim needed all the help it could get to prevent the arriving sandmen from reaching critical mass!

Gavin looked disappointed, though. "I don't know if the government will allow you to have your way. If I were you, I would start buying some accommodations on Bentheim. A lot of rich people have departed over the last months. The real value of mansions and other extravagant real estate has plummeted!"

Too bad Ves wasn't interested.

*Chapter 1664 Queen Gloriana*

When Ves returned to the Cloud Estate, he met up with Gloriana who was resting in the back gardens of their mansion and informed her of the latest developments.

"For what it's worth, I agree with you." Gloriana tickled Clixie's belly. "Bentheim isn't only bad for you, but also for me. If the Bright Republic has any ideas about me, it won't be easy to take me into custody as long as I stay here under the protection of my Glory Battalion."

Ves immediately recognized the problem. "Your escorts only consist of one spaceborn mech company, one landbound mech company and one elite guard infantry company. While I'm sure your protectors are strong enough to win while heavily outnumbered, it's hard to say who will win if the Mech Corps dispatches a mech regiment or two to intercept our flight."

"If those mech regiments deploy their expert pilots, then the threat they pose become much greater." Gloriana added. "With thousands of mechs acting in support of a couple of expert mechs, it isn't possible for my Glory Battalion to escape!"

While second-class mechs possessed a crushing advantage against third-class mechs, they weren't invincible. As long as the weaker but vastly more numerous force was willing to make some sacrifices, it was possible to overwhelm a second-class mech force through sheer weight of numbers.

In essence, it was similar to how the sandmen managed to grind down their opposition! By placing little to no value in the lives of individual sandmen, the aggressors managed to achieve huge results!

Of course, the price the sandmen paid was correspondingly huge as well, but that did not make people feel any better.

In any case, Both Ves and Gloriana were of the same mind regarding this issue. They both wanted to avoid relocating to heavily-protected star systems to avoid placing themselves at the mercy of the state.

Now that he thought about it, Ves shouldn't be surprised that Gloriana did not entirely feel at ease. As a foreigner and a Hexer, she was completely alone and isolated in the Bright Republic, which had always leaned towards the Friday Coalition.

"I don't think I can resist the demand to relocate to Bentheim or some other heavily-protected star system on my own." Ves admitted.

She looked at him with an odd expression. "Aren't you well-connected by now? The Tovar Family should be able to provide you with a lot of cover."

Ves shook his head. "While I still have to contact the Tovars, the fact that they didn't say anything to me so far means that this issue might be a bit troublesome."

He received a lot of official notices from various different branches of the government. That meant that a single faction would find it very difficult to resist a united opposition.

While Ves believed that the officials requesting him to relocate to Bentheim didn't intend anything malicious towards him, he couldn't discount the minute possibility that this was part of a plot.

"So how do you intend to resolve this problem?"

"I have you, right?" Ves grinned. "Unless the Bright Republic wants to attract the hatred of the Hexadric Hegemony, they can't force you to do anything."

Her eyes lit up. She wasn't ignorant of her exalted status among third-class citizens. "You're right! I can use my own influence to keep up here!"

They discussed the details. Gloriana only had to make some noise to negate any further attempts at getting them to relocate to Bentheim.

Perhaps the entire reason why the government sent requests to him was because they wanted to hoodwink him into traveling to Bentheim on a voluntary basis. This way, they wouldn't trigger Gloriana's opposition.

However, now that Ves dragged her into the mud, there was no way for the Bright Republic to continue to insist. Even if Ves ostensibly played a very pivotal role in sustaining the charm of the Soldier product line, no sane official wanted to step on the toes of a Hexer!

It helped a lot that Hexers carried a very dreadful relationship in the Komodo Star Sector. Though they ordinarily kept to themselves during peacetime, they often reacted unreasonably aggressive when provoked.

After the Hexers made many examples after idiots provoked the proud and confident women, everyone learned not to mess with them under any circumstances!

Only the Fridaymen dared to match them blow for blow, which was evidenced by their brave performance in the Komodo War.

"The war back home is not going as well as we thought." Gloriana admitted to Ves after they finished their earlier discussion. "Several of our assumptions haven't panned out. The Vermeer Group and the Carnegie Group should have been in tatters by now, but instead the Gauge Dynasty and the Konsu Clan have been the first to commit reinforcements to the front. With the prompt support of the two most powerful partners, it's hard for my fellow Hexers to advance any further."

"The Friday Coalition has been preparing for a confrontation for a long time." Ves looked at her sternly.

"They should have been more divided! Most of the partners are led by males!" She objected.

What kind of a stupid argument was that?

"I thought you Hexers were smarter than that. Underestimating your enemy is a cardinal sin."

"You don't understand, Ves! Many of us were sure that we possessed an advantage! We worked so hard to manipulate the egos of these leaders behind the scenes!"

Ves chuckled. "Seems like those covert actions haven't managed to tilt the balance in your favor."

She sighed. "You're right. At the moment, the Fridaymen are matching us blow to blow. There are even signs that the Fridaymen are mounting a counteroffensive."

She didn't sound too worried. If the Fridaymen could muster up an attack, the Hexers would surely be able to meet them. While the former turned out to be stronger than she expected, it was impossible for the disparity to be too big.

For now, both sides were fairly even, which meant that attrition warfare continued to reign along the front.

This uncertainty made Gloriana fret. Combined with her mental exhaustion, she no longer felt as optimistic about her side.

Ves placed his palm on her hand. "This is the nature of war, Gloriana. Loss is a very real possibility. Even if we win, the price you've paid is inevitably big."

"I'm not used to contemplating losses." She grimaced. "The Hegemony rarely fails, Ves. We won the initial scramble for territory when the Komodo Star Sector opened up. If our remaining opposition hadn't banded together and formed the Coalition, we would have captured all of the core territories at the beginning! One of the reasons why we launched the war this time is to finish what we started."

"Do you Hexers even realize that you can only throw your weight around in this star sector? If you happen to have any ideas about the Vicious Mountain Star Sector, you Hexers will definitely learn a painful lesson!"

"Hah! Those primitive brutes from Vicious Mountain are next!" Gloriana sneered.

Ves could hardly believe what she said! The Hexers were already having a tough time against the Fridaymen, but they were already plotting to take down the states of a more developed star sector!

"Er.. okay."

"Don't use that tone on me, Ves. We're ambitious, not stupid! Our state will probably have to digest our gains for a century or so before we are ready to consider other matters. In fact, I'm not even sure that conquering Vicious Mountain is still on the agenda."

"Because of Red Ocean, right?"

She nodded. "The Komodo and Vicious Mountain Star Sectors are both barren star sectors in the rim. We can't help it. Our predecessors who founded the Hegemony weren't welcome in other star sectors."

Ves had no trouble believing that. Their weird beliefs and their disdain towards men probably rubbed every sane person the wrong way!

"Human civilization in the Milky Way Galaxy has long been settled." Ves remarked. "There is hardly any unclaimed space in the valuable interior to found a new state. Anyone with the ambition to found a new state can only pick up the crumbs."

"This is why the Red Ocean is so compelling to us. I've been in touch with my fellow friends and acquaintances on Commbook and several of them are very interested in pioneering new ground. The Red Ocean is irresistibly attractive to them because all of the rich and bountiful star sectors are ripe for the picking as long as we get to them first!"

"You sound like you want to join in on the fun." Ves sardonically remarked.

Her eyes turned dreamy for a moment. "Just think about it. Why not be your own king and rule over your own state? You don't have to answer to anyone except the Big Two. Not that it matters since the MTA and CFA have better things to do than boss around a single state. So long as we capture some star systems and fend off our challengers, we can call ourselves sovereigns!"

"That sounds stupid." Ves flatly replied.

He bonked her head with his knuckles, causing her to cry out in indignation!

"What was that for, Ves?!"

"We're mech designers, Gloriana. Why should we be messing around with politics and keep ourselves entangled with matters of state? Our greatest concern should be selling mechs and progressing our design philosophies!"

"I don't see any contradictions between the two. Why can't we found a state and devote a portion of its tax revenue in furthering our research and activities?"

"Because you'll be mixing business with politics. Do you intend to run a megacorporation or something? The amount of political and business entanglements you'll end up with will be too much for you to bear!"

She crossed her arms. "Then let's go for another governance model, then! I always fancied myself as a queen!"

"Absolutely not! Feudal states are too dysfunctional! Just look at the Vesia Kingdom if you want to see how awful they can become!"

"That's because the royal family was too weak to keep its vassals in line. Look at the Sentinel Kingdom instead. Isn't it run by a strong and stable monarchy who managed to grow the state into the most powerful third-rate state in the star sector?"

His lips twitched at this mention. "You've never visited the Sentinel Kingdom. You don't know what it's really like. The Nyxian Gap exerts a much greater influence on Sentinel than you think."

"Then.. what form of state do you actually prefer? A republic like your home state? It sounds boring, though. Calling myself madame president is a lot more boring than calling myself a queen."

Ves bonked her on the head yet again.

"You shouldn't entertain these unrealistic fantasies. Founding a state in the Red Ocean is absolutely not simple, especially when there are countless ambitious groups trying to do the same. We'll have to fend off competitors who originated from many different influences from galactic heartland and galactic center of the Milky Way Galaxy. Their foundation will doubtless be a lot deeper than ours."

"You spoilsport." Gloriana glowered at her insensitive lover. "I thought you were brave and ambitious. Why are you such a coward all of a sudden?"

"I'm only brave when it benefits me to be brave. Do you think that the leaders of second-rate states are the actual movers and shakers of our society? I can guarantee you that the CFA and MTA all treat them as monkeys!"

"What's your point, Ves?"

"If you want to be a true monarch, then work hard to become a Star Designer instead! Only then will you be able to obtain enough power to influence the direction of human civilization! In order to reach this exalted height, we need to devote our full effort in our careers. Any major distraction can be fatal to our ambitions to reach the pinnacle of mech design!"

His words finally managed to penetrate her consciousness. She couldn't offer an effective retort against his argument at this time, especially when her mind wasn't as sharp as before.

"I still want to be called Queen Gloriana of House Wodin-Larkinson." She sulked.

#### *Chapter 1665 Dishonor*

Captain Melinda Larkinson gritted her teeth as the empty void of space lit up by a multitude of lasers.

Since no mech was stupid enough to employ lasers against the sandmen, only the enemy utilized this method of attack!

When she took in the overall battle situation, her heart chilled.

Two huge spherical monoliths dauntlessly pressed forward.

If that was it, then the defense force could have bombarded their huge surface areas with impunity.

The problem was that a huge swarm of sandman drones surrounded the monoliths!

An estimated twelve to fifteen sandman admirals led this huge fleet, causing the higher ups to dispatch at least several mech regiments and auxiliary forces to meet this incoming threat!

While the power of so many mechs and starfighters was terrible, the sandmen did not go down without a fight!

Explosive shells and kinetic rounds slammed against the monoliths on a continuous basis.

Compared to the swift and agile sandman drones, the monoliths were so big that it was impossible for a mech to miss their shots!

However, half-a-dozen rods sticking out of the monoliths accumulated energy regardless of how much damage the monolith sustained. Even if a couple of salvos of concentrated fire managed to break one of the rods, the other rods finished their accumulation and discharged a very powerful laser beam that was equivalent in power to warship armament!

No standard mech could ever output so much energy in such a devastating laser beam!

The worst part about the laser beams was that the monoliths didn't waste their awesome firepower on the mechs.



Instead, they targeted the carriers flying in the rear!

Due to the need to resupply exhausted mechs and take in ejected cockpits, the ships couldn't be too far away from the battle.

Each heavy laser beam struck a deep groove in the surfaces of the heavily-armored combat carriers.

While the integrity of the carriers weren't affected, it was not very easy to repair the battle damage!

Due to the scarcity of exotics, the Bright Republic simply couldn't afford to waste so many resources on repairing combat carriers. The best the Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps could do was fill up the gaps with cheaper and more inferior armor plating.

In such a costly situation, the carriers should have withdrawn further away.

However, due to the accuracy of the lasers against large objects, the distance needed to dodge the heavy laser beams was too unreasonable! A distance of hundreds of thousands of kilometers meant that mechs and starfighters would have to exhaust a lot of energy or waste a lot of time by coasting on a ballistic trajectory in order to intercept the sandman fleet.

In addition, the monoliths did not possess a single mode of attack. If the sandman admirals detected that no ship was in range, the monoliths would immediately retract the large rods and form thousands smaller ones instead to target the small craft!

In such a situation, the casualties among mechs and starfighters would surely grow exponentially worse!

Therefore, the generals in charge of the war theater made the difficult decision to use the combat carriers as bait. Even though repeated exposure to heavy laser strikes would surely consume the combat carriers, they were just ships!

Unless armed with shipboard weapons, the carriers could not stop the sandmen by themselves!

At this moment, ships were valuable, but effective combat units were even more valuable!

As long as the Bright Republic still fielded mechs, it still had hope of winning the war!

As an officer of the Planetary Guard, Melinda knew all of this. She had no choice but to accept this situation despite knowing how big of a price the Bright Republic would have to pay afterwards.



Her modified Desolate Soldier continued to fire its Sandbreaker rifle at one of the monoliths, which rapidly lost a lot of mass due to all of the damage it endured.

However, most of the damage only affected the exterior shells of the monoliths. So long as the center of the huge amalgamations remained untouched, it took far too much effort to destroy the monolith!

That was because all of the sandman admirals hid in the core portion!

"AHH!"

The second-generation starfighters that screened the mechs couldn't handle so much overwhelming firepower! Despite their heavier armor, the sheer amount of sandman drones rapidly ate away at these slower-moving small craft!

This was the downside of targeting the monoliths first. The amount of sandman drones hadn't diminished at all, which meant that their effective combat strength against mechs and starfighters still remained intact!

The strategy adopted by the defense force was very clear. The generals would rather sacrifice the combat carriers and the starfighters in order to preserve as much mechs as possible.

Melinda's heart bled as she saw hundreds of starfighters and their pilots succumbing against the sandman drones in just a single minute!

Fortunately, the designers of the second-generation starfighters managed to improve the ejection system of these fighter models.

Their thicker armor gave the starfighters a longer buffer to eject. The decision to eject had largely been automated. So long as the starfighter detected that it was reaching its limit, it would automatically eject its pilot without any further delay!

As for letting the starfighter pilots decide themselves whether they should eject, that option had been removed in the second generation starfighters.

Too many starfighter pilots would not hesitate to eject immediately as long as their craft suffered a single scratch!

For this reason, the decision to eject had been taken away from their hands, which deeply disconcerted Melinda.

To her, it was one thing to answer the call of duty. It was another thing to be forced into duty!

"Is this really the Bright Republic I know and love?" She whispered to herself.

Though she understood the merits of these decisions, morally she found the desperation exhibited by her home state to be more and more abhorrent.

A part of her would rather see the Bright Republic fall than to let it continue its existence through dishonorable means!

That was what her Larkinson blood and heritage compelled her to think!

She firmly shook her head. "What am I thinking?! There are trillions of innocent lives at stake!"

The Bright Republic may have made a devil's bargain, but it was for a good cause. Hundreds of occupied star systems were in danger of being engulfed if the fighting forces weren't able to block the sandman advance!

When so many innocent lives were at stake, Melinda couldn't bring herself to blame the higher ups for their callous commands.

As Melinda grappled with her morality, Raella was having the time of her life!

"Come on, you bastards! You call yourselves Blood Claws?! Hit harder! Fire faster! Don't think of retreating until your ammunition stores run dry!"

"Yes, Blood Champion!"

Inwardly, she sneered. As one of the premier underground organizations on Bentheim, the Blood Claws never hired incompetents.

Yet those who applied to work for gangs were never the cream of the crop. The fact that she rose up the ranks so quickly was because she was one of the few who received excellent systematic training.

Compared to real Larkinsons, the rank-and-file of the Blood Claws were nothing more than thugs who happened to be a bit better than usual.

If not because her standing in the organization relied on how many subordinates she brought back alive, she would have let them fend for themselves.

As it was, she needed to babysit them every once in a while.

Fortunately, ever since the Blood Claws began to field the Proudful Soldiers en masse, it became a lot easier to compel them to fight!

Different from the solemn, duty-minded glows of the Desolate Soldiers, the Proudful Soldiers instead inspired courage and aggression.

Oh, there were definitely some similarities between the two. However, she vastly preferred the Proudful Soldiers because of the way it got her blood pumping.

Not only her, but every other mech pilot became eager for blood!

"Kill! Kill! Kill!"

"Hah! This monolith is a sitting duck!"

Though the Blood Claw detachment only contributed a marginal amount of firepower, the intense battle stoked the confidence of every mech pilot under Raella's command!

"Look out!"

Before they knew it, a series of shining projectiles slammed in the cavity that had been dug by countless hits. The extraordinary rounds penetrated even deeper until they exploded in radiant fury!

"The monolith is dead!"

"Hooray!"

Every mech pilot cheered at the fall of the monolith, whether they were mercenaries, soldiers or irregulars.

They knew that the expert pilots had finally made their moves!

Only a few didn't join the cheers. Raella's eyes darkened a bit.

"Some people are born lucky."

While she was already fortunate to possess the right genetic aptitude to pilot mechs, she saw no hope of going further.

No matter how hard she trained, she never experienced any of the signs that foretold that she was close to reaching an expert candidate.

This was one of her hidden regrets. Her fellow cousins like Ghanso and Porellia had become the stars of their generation. They were destined to become the mainstays of the Larkinson Family.

As for an outcast like Raella, she would only be able to live a relatively mundane existence barring anything exceptional taking place.

She knew that mech pilots tended to reach the next stage when stimulated in battle. The more desperate, the greater they drew out their potential!

One of the reasons why she didn't object to fighting the sandmen despite piloting a flimsy Prideful Soldier was because she needed to face the danger head-on! Not even the most challenging mech duels she fought made her feel that death was as close as facing the sandmen!

Instead of feeling fear, her boiling Larkinson blood only made her more daring in the face of a mortal threat!

"Come!" She exuberantly roared! "I'll kill you all before you manage to kill me! This is my promise!"

Though she had missed participating in the most recent Bright-Vesia War, the Sand War had come at a good time for her! She could fight to her heart's content, and be rewarded for her courage!

The second monolith fell soon afterwards. Though the starfighter screen had diminished enormously, most mechs were still intact despite expending more than half of their ammunition reserves. Some mechs had even shot their magazines dry!

Nevertheless, there was enough ammunition left to diminish the sandman swarm! Even as the alien drones started to pick off numerous mechs, their rapidly-declining numbers constantly lessened the rate of casualties among the defenders.

Among the forces wiping out the sandman drones, the Blood Claws under the command of Raella distinguished themselves by exhibiting more bravery than many mercenaries!

One of the big reasons for that was the constant encouragement provided by the glows of their Prideful Soldiers!

Though her unit started to suffer some casualties, Raella completely forgot about her orders to safeguard the lives of her subordinates.

Killing the sandmen came with its own rewards! The Bright Republic awarded rich bounties for every confirmed kill! Otherwise, the private outfits would never fight as vigorously as now!

"Hahahaha! Is that all you got, you pieces of sand?! This isn't enough!"

As Raella became more consumed in slaughtering the sandmen, she began to align herself more with the Prideful Soldier's glow. Her inner pride and her fighting spirit made her more receptive to its glow, resulting in a subtle, unknown interaction.

Though she wasn't the only one to echo with the glow of her mech, she happened to enjoy the strongest feedback from her mech for some reason!

Many light-years away, on a desolate moon-sized rock floating in the Nyxian Gap, a very exceptional-looking tiger mech jerked for a brief moment.

Inside the cockpit, Ryncol Larkinson blanked out for a bit.

"What was that?" He whispered.

The strange sensation had come and gone in an instant. After several minutes of pausing, he shrugged off the incident and resumed sneaking his Devil Tiger up to a hidden pirate base.

#### *Chapter 1666 Willful Contradictions*

The intensifying battles raging throughout the Bentheim System couldn't be hidden at all.

Even if the military blocked every news portal from publishing articles and footage of the battles, anyone with a decent telescope could observe the battles without much effort.

They just enjoyed a delayed show due to the time it took for the light of the battle to reach the surface of Bentheim.

The only thing the government could do was to take control of the narrative by taking the initiative.

The controlled media publications each made for a rousing sight. Seeing so many mechs and starfighters acting in unison to crush the sandman fleets in order to protect the Bright Republic stabilized everyone's morale.

Though most average citizens were fooled, those who enjoyed a higher station knew better. As Ves watched yet another sanitized news broadcast, he couldn't help but snort.

"What a clever angle. The starfighters that are getting demolished by droves just happen to be outside of the frame."

He knew that while the introduction of the second generation starfighters reduced the rate of casualties, the increased aggression of the sandmen largely offset these gains!

In the end, the second generation starfighters lasted just as long in battle as the first generation starfighters.

The only real improvement the later models provided was that they carried over a lot of improvements to the ejection system. As long as the starfighter pilot managed to eject their cockpits in time, they still had a chance of fighting another day.

The Bright Republic didn't care about the consumption of starfighters. As long as they won the battle, a huge salvaging fleet would always arrive at the floating battle site and salvage as many broken frames and parts as possible.

The recycling rate of lost machines reached as high as seventy percent!

As for their pilots, though the Starfighter Corps didn't necessarily care too much about their lives, it couldn't afford to be seen as callous. If the second generation starfighter models didn't add some extra precautions, it would have been impossible to keep the starfighter pilots mollified!

As Ves caught up with the morning news, Raymond entered his office and walked up to his desk. "The government isn't very happy with you, Ves. The officials I've been in touch with have expressed a lot of misgivings about your recent decisions. They can't guarantee your safety if you insist on remaining in this star system."

Ves waved his hand towards the projected battle footage. "I don't think Bentheim is any safer."

"You don't necessarily have to go there. It's acceptable to the government if you reside on another well-protected planet. If you ask me, staying at Rittersberg is pretty nice. As the capital of our state, its security is just as good as Bentheim!"

"My answer remains the same." Ves looked up to Raymond and sensed that the old man was uncomfortable. "Why are you agreeing with the government in the first place?"

Raymond blinked in confusion. "We are Brighters. We are the servants of the state."

"Ah. I see what is going on now. Please take a seat."

When the Larkinson elder sat down, Ves shut off the broadcast and steepled his fingers on his desk.

"Tell me, Raymond, where do your loyalties lie?"

"You, of course. Formally, I work for the LMC, but since you are effectively in control of the company, I essentially work for you. Since you are the key to the Larkinson Family's increasing prosperity, I have always looked after your interests first."

Whether that was true or not, Ves wasn't sure.

Ever since Raymond assumed his leadership position, Ves discovered that this Larkinson elder was rather glib.

"I already refused the government's entreaties. Why do you insist on changing my mind? The reason why I fired your predecessor in the first place was because he forgot who he should answer to! Have you forgotten this lesson?"

The severity of the situation finally dawned on Raymond. "My apologies, Ves! It's not my intention to betray you! It's just that I fail to understand why you refuse to head for safety. Cloudy Curtain is far too vulnerable against a determined sandman incursion. The Light Hounds that are currently scouring the local asteroid belt for hiding sandmen won't be here forever. Once they're gone, we can only rely on a couple of hundreds mechs and first generation starfighters to protect your life!"

Ves shook his head. "You're overstating the threat. Aside from a single anomaly, the sandmen fail to pose a threat to me. If worse comes to worst, I'll just hop in the Barracuda and depart with haste."

"Your corvette doesn't fit many people. What about your family and your workers? Don't forget that hundreds of relatives of ours have moved here in order to pursue new opportunities. As the principal reason why they are here, you're responsible for their safety!"

"If they want to scurry back to Rittersberg or Bentheim, be my guest." Ves defiantly crossed his arms. "The LMC has recently expanded its branch office and built some more manufacturing complexes in Bentheim, right? I don't object to sending some Larkinsons there in order to hold the fort."

"Thank you for that, Ves." Raymond subsided a bit. He had received a lot of requests to move out of Cloudy Curtain. "I'll take care of this matter in person. However, you're much more important than those ordinary Larkinsons. Why must you be so stubborn? Is the government really that bad?"

Ves sighed. Raymond was a typical Larkinson who always looked up to the state. It was not a surprise that he put a lot of trust in the government.

"Raymond, let me make one thing clear. Just because I'm a Brighter doesn't mean that I should trust the government unconditionally. I'd be dead or much worse off if that was the case! When you play the game at this level, you need to remain vigilant. I shouldn't remind you that the government is not a single, unified entity, but a collection of interests who exert a varying amount of influence on its branches."

The COO frowned. "I understand what you are getting at, but you are taking your suspicions too far. The Bright Republic is not a banana republic! The law reigns supreme here. No one is allowed to abuse official authority for their own gains!"

This time, Ves boldly laughed. "My personal experiences say otherwise! I won't explain them to you, since I'm not allowed to bring some of it to light, but trust me. I have enemies in the Bright Republic. Powerful enemies. They won't hesitate to remove me

from the picture in order to protect their own interests. Since my foundation is far more shallow than theirs, it doesn't make any sense for me to relocate to their home ground. Cloudy Curtain may be much less developed than Bentheim, but it has always been my stomping ground!"

Through the influence of the LMC and the Larkinson Family, Ves enjoyed a supreme amount of influence at his home planet. The amount of soft power in his hands allowed him to get away with anything and prevent outsiders from hijacking the local administration.

The same could not be said if he moved to the extremely complicated political and economic landscape of Bentheim.

After explaining some of his concerns, Ves finally managed to make Raymond understand his reasoning.

"I.. I'm not sure what to think of this, Ves. To be honest, I never regarded the government as an adversary."

"That's because running the Larkinson Trust Fund for all those years hasn't exposed you to this level of contradictions yet. Now that you are in charge of running the LMC, you need to be a lot more cautious about these matters."

It would probably take some time for Raymond to adjust his mindset. After all, the Larkinson Family always placed a very strong emphasis on serving the Republic. Whether they were norms or potentates, every Larkinson must respect the state.

Only the most crooked Larkinsons like Ves managed to break this suffocating compulsion.

If Ves was in charge of the Larkinson Family, he would have changed its orientation to serving their own interests.

In his eyes, since the standing of the Larkinsons hadn't improved after centuries of loyal service, it did not make any sense to work yourself to the bone in order to please the Republic!

"The Larkinsons have already sacrificed too much for the Republic." He couldn't help but say. "The state doesn't need our assistance."

"That's.. a bold opinion, Ves. I'm not sure it will be popular with the rest of the family. Our entire identity revolves around service. The rewards we have gained aren't as meager as you think. We have managed to build up a supremely honorable reputation. Each Larkinson can expect to enjoy generous treatment due to the sacrifices made by our family."



"I understand that, but is that the extent of our ambitions?" Ves retorted. "Honor isn't something that can make you rich. I can't make myself live longer by relying solely on a stellar reputation."

His opinions directly clashed against the values that Raymond had taken for granted for his entire life. If not for the importance of Ves to the family, the elder would have already objected to what he heard!

"You're not making this easy for us. Many Larkinsons won't support you as much anymore if they hear your stance."

Ves confidently smiled. "Let them think whatever they want. I never insisted on their support to begin with. I need people by my side who support me wholeheartedly."

"Loyalty to you isn't necessarily contradictory to loyalty to the state, Ves. You are demanding too much from your subordinates. Real people don't behave the way you want them to. Many Brighters are proud of their state. It forms a core part of their identity."

"I know that, Raymond. I don't begrudge them for holding multiple loyalties. The only thing I'm asking for is that those who want to work for me must put my interests above the interests of everyone else. If they don't have the will or guts to resist the demands of the government when it harms my interests, then they should just go!"

The discovery of so many spies and double-dealing informers impacted Ves quite a lot.

Though his stance on the matter was quite unreasonable to many people, Ves simply didn't care about their objections.

He wanted to form an organization that he could trust. How could he do that when his subordinates were susceptible to other influences?

Even if the state could depend on its laws and its official authority to get its way, Ves wouldn't hesitate to resist if his interests were harmed!

His opinions impacted Raymond quite a lot. Though the new COO already had a taste of it, Ves had made his stance very clear today!

"I'll take your words under consideration." Raymond said. "I will do my best to abide by your instructions. I'll pay more attention to our interactions with the government in the future."

"I expect nothing less."

"There will be trouble, though. The voices calling you to head to Bentheim are mostly well-meaning. For you to reject their good intentions can be seen as a slight."

"I know that, but that doesn't change my mind, you know."

"It's just that I can't predict what they will decide next."

As Raymond left the office, Ves did not show any concern at all. So long as Gloriana served as his shield, the state couldn't force him to do anything against his will.

After taking care of his morning business, he descended to the design lab and convened his entire design team.

With the departure of Ketis and the temporary absence of Gloriana, only the five Tovar mech designers remained.

The lab felt a lot more emptier now that the two lively women were gone.

Ves shook his head and focused on his current priorities. "The first iteration of the Adonis Colossus is almost ready for testing. Let's make sure to complete it by the end of the day!"

#### *Chapter 1667 Executor Rifle*

No matter how many fires burned in the Bright Republic, work never ceased.

Ves detested getting tangled in the recent problems that popped up. He would much rather lock himself up in his design lab and engage in his true passion, which was designing mechs!

Though Gloriana was still capable of contributing to the projects, she still wanted to take some time off to adjust to her mentally exhausted state.

That made his time at the design lab a lot more drab and lifeless. Ves had become so accustomed to collaborating with his girlfriend that her abrupt absence made him feel as if he was missing a limb.

In his recent period interactions with Raymond, the Larkinson elder behaved a lot more reticent in his presence.

Ves sensed that Raymond was quite conflicted by what he heard.

Nonetheless, Ves knew that the elder was already inclined towards him. It was just that Raymond never took into account that the contradictions between his superior and the state could reach such a serious level.

Even now, Raymond still didn't understand why Ves adopted such a serious stance.

This was also why Ves paid less attention to other affairs and put his full effort into completing his projects.

Though the Deliverer was still a few weeks away from completion, he managed to complete the first iteration of the Adonis Colossus design without any further delay.

While Gloriana hadn't visited the design lab recently, Ves made sure to keep her in the loop. Though she hadn't offered a lot of suggestions, she still pointed out some minor issues that Ves had overlooked.

Despite her low period, she was still a competent mech designer.

Ves also showed off their latest progress by paying a visit to Vincent, who decided to wait for his new mech in Freslin instead of returning to Bentheim.

When Vincent observed his mech, he made a very pleased sound.

"Hahahaha! What a great-looking mech!" He laughed. "With this mech, no sandman will be able to stand against me! The women will love me! Just look at this classy codpiece!"

Ves suppressed the urge to grimace. "Do you have any objections to our design?"

"Uh, now that I think about it, does this mech come with your characteristic glow?"

"Yes. The Adonis Colossus comes with a unique glow that is exclusive to your mech. This is our guarantee."

This was one of the ways in which Ves and Gloriana decided to stand out in the market. The spiritual components that made his mechs so remarkable must be turned into one of their main selling points.

For custom mechs, this was even more important, especially if the glow was one-of-a-kind!

Though Ves personally thought it was extravagant for him to give Vincent this service, it would lay the foundation for future commissions.

As long as this feature became their trademark, Ves and Gloriana could charge a much higher premium for their services!

Vincent nodded in satisfaction. Even though Ves hadn't infused the design with Bravo yet, the mech already carried a distinctly notable spiritual foundation.

While it was not enough for an average mech pilot like Vincent to sense its presence, he nonetheless felt a lot more intimate towards the design. Any minor demands he

ordinarily wanted to express died in his throat as the Adonis Colossus possessed an indescribable charm in his eyes.

It was as if he was looking at himself in the mirror!

His client's behavior didn't escape Ves' attention. He deliberately aimed to charm Vincent from the start in order to prevent him from voicing annoying demands such as increasing the size of the codpiece.

Right now, the protective piece that Ves had unavoidably coated with a dazzling golden color could still moonlight as an extra-large belt or something. This plausible deniability was very important to him in preserving his reputation in the mech community!

"Make sure to deliver this mech as fast as possible." Vincent demanded after he regained his senses. He dramatically waved his arms! "The Bright Republic is in serious danger! Bentheim is under constant siege! As a valiant mech pilot, I must do what I can to protect my home! The sooner I obtain this mech, the sooner I can save the Republic!"

Ves did his best not to roll his eyes. One of the reasons why he carefully controlled his conduct was because of the media crew recording this meeting.

Most clients would never want to expose the designs of their mech commissions. Showing off the schematics of his upcoming mech would give his enemies a deep understanding of its shortcomings.

However, it appeared that Vincent missed this lesson or did not feel the need to hide his strength.

At the very least, Vincent shouldn't suffer from any repercussions as long as he fought against the sandmen. The aliens never took any notice in identifying and exploiting the weaknesses of mechs. Perhaps to them, every mech was just a flying block of metal that they needed to destroy in order to advance towards their goals.

Ves departed as quickly as possible after Vincent approved of the current design.

Even if subsequent iterations of the design incorporated some tweaks, he did not expect any major changes.

"The Adonis Colossus design is essentially finished." He concluded.

That lifted a weight off his shoulders. While it was his first design of the new generation, Ves did not take much pride in designing it. His distaste towards Vincent had never abated. He merely wanted to abide by his principles and complete the commission without any fuss.

"Now, I can turn to something much more fun." He smiled.

When he returned to the design lab, he arranged his design team to carry out the last phases of the design process of the Adonis Colossus.

Since the Tovars already became accustomed to these duties, Ves did not have to supervise their work as much anymore.

This gave Ves enough grounds to turn his attention to his current passion project. He sat down behind a terminal and pulled up the design files for the Deliverer.

"What a beauty."

While the Deliverer design still exhibited a lot of missing parts, the general shape and purpose of the mech already became clear.

The relatively sturdy frame provided a lot of mass to stabilize the aim of the marksman mech.

Ves added quite a bit of auxiliary components that facilitated the primary role of the mech. Various sensor and targeting systems allowed the mech pilot to snipe distant targets even without the assistance of the Deliverer's glow.

"Too bad it will only reach its potential in the hands of an Ylvainan." He sighed.

All of the extra gizmos provided a substantial amount of support to any mech pilot. However, the iconography and other decorative elements made it clear that the Deliverer was not a neutral design.

As Ves immersed himself deeper into his work, he paid particular attention to its primary armament.

The Executor was a gauss rifle that offered the highest muzzle velocity out of all of the options available to him. While it fired smaller projectiles than other modules, its higher muzzle velocity imparted a lot more energy to them, causing them to inflict just as much damage as larger but slower-moving projectiles.

Not only was the Executor a lot more accurate at longer ranges, Ves could also fit more rounds inside the internal storage spaces of the Deliverer.

"It's too bad this rifle is a huge energy hog."

The reason why a third-rate state like the Bright Republic mostly relied on ballistic rifles to inflict physical damage was because they were much less fussy.

Gauss rifles hit hard and fast, that was true. However, they also demanded a lot more. Not only were they more complex, they also relied on strong exotics to endure all of the forces it generated.

A single shot from the Executor was powerful enough to crack the armor of any standard mech! Even premium mechs such as the Blackbeak weren't able to resist repeated attacks!

Though many gauss rifles inflicted more damage per shot, that was not what the Deliverer required.

As long as the Executor possessed enough power to take out a sandman drone, that was enough. Ves did not mind if the excess power of these shots went to waste, as he didn't know if the sandmen would toughen up their sandman drones in the future.

Though the Executor was very difficult to work with, they still shared many common points with ballistic rifles. This gave him the confidence to modify the Executor's design in order to fit his needs.

Though he made plenty of errors, Ves managed to increase the aspects he wanted by making some clever and expensive tradeoffs.

"What matters the most isn't necessarily power or muzzle velocity." Ves muttered. "It's accuracy. The rifle must hit exactly where a trained marksman mech pilot intends to hit!"

The skills imparted by the System made it very clear that increasing a mech's accuracy became exponentially more difficult the higher it became.

It didn't take too much effort to make a ranged mech be able to fire a stationary target a few kilometers away with 100 percent accuracy.

Yet what if the distance was 100 kilometers? This was the upper bound that Ves expected his Deliverer to be effective in assassinating sandman admirals.

Realistically, ensuring adequate accuracy at 50 kilometers was already a significant challenge.

While this demand was easier to fulfill because there were less variables acting on the projectile, a gauss rifle was never perfectly accurate.

In order to improve accuracy beyond the point where most mech designers would have been satisfied already, Ves performed multiple adjustments on the Executor and the frame of his design.

Ves altered the front shoulder and other nearby parts to allow for the Deliverer to brace its stock as seamlessly as possible.

He strengthened the rifle body and upgraded some of the lesser materials in order to increase the rifle's reliability after lengthy use.

The huge gauss rifle became a more potent-looking weapon after Ves finished his adjustments. The rifle was so huge and massive that it offered a lot of opportunities to tweak its properties.

"Once my Deliverers debut on the battlefield, they'll surely make a lasting impression!

However, before he could achieve this result, he had to make sure the Deliverer meshed well with its design spirit.

Due to the Deliverer's high dependence on Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, Ves frequently connected to it in order to increase its familiarity with the design and its properties.

Sometimes, the spiritual fragment communicated some objections or some alternatives to Ves.

He never followed the fragment's suggestions right away. He always considered their merits first before making his own decision.

"As far as I know, your source doesn't know a thing about mechs. I have my own ideas about my work!"

Before, Ves would have accepted the suggestion of his design spirits, but now that he became more capable, he no longer needed to appease so much to them. If his design spirits disagreed, then they would just have to swallow their objections.

The power dynamic between Ves and his design spirits was very interesting. So far, their relationships were mostly mutually beneficial.

The design spirits subsided from the spiritual feedback of his products, while the design spirits lent their strength in return.

Of all the design spirits he utilized, Ves always felt he could go further with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. It was the most cooperative design spirit out of what he had, and its undeniable human origin made it a lot more capable of advanced cooperation than his young and artificial spiritual products.

As Ves continued to tweak the design of the Executor rifle, a bright idea suddenly came to his mind. He wanted to do something similar to what he did to the Devil Tiger, but not as obvious.

He instantly sent a query to Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

"What if I give you a bit more control over the mech? If you want, I can allow you to do more than nudge the aim of the mech pilot."

The spiritual fragment already transmitted its assent!

## *Chapter 1668 Karaton Dwigh*

The Common Fleet Alliance emerged in the twilight of the Age of Conquest.

The events surrounding its initial formation weren't entirely clear. In a time where warfleets reigned supreme by virtue of their destructive potential, hardly any admiral restrained themselves.

The reckless genetic modification and human augmentation turned many ambitious humans into greedy monsters.

The higher their positions, the worse these negative traits became.

Those who wished to climb higher needed to become more capable than their peers, and the easiest way to distinguish themselves was to upgrade their abilities.

In such a time where selfishness became ubiquitous, no one could have imagined that a number of admirals returned to sanity.

Not only did the admirals and their closest supporters stop their descent into degeneration, they also managed to get in touch with each other.

The nations they used to serve possessed complex or hostile relations with each other. The warfleets should have fought or avoided each other. For two or more unaffiliated warfleets to converge in a single star system was unimaginable at the time!

Yet converge they did.

In a legendary act of nobility, the admirals forswore their prior allegiances and private ambitions and banded together to form a new and unprecedented alliance.

The Common Fleet Alliance was born.

Though its name sounded boring, it encapsulated the main principles of the new organization.

It was called this way because it bound multiple warfleets and other powers to a single, common cause. The alliance would never dedicate itself to serving a single star empire no matter how great they may be at the time!

Not even the Terrans and Rubarthans impressed the Fleeters, as they came to be called

This was because the cause they fought for transcended the interests of the Greater Terran United Confederation and the New Rubarth Empire.



While these two star empires dominated human civilization during the Age of Conquest, they had not been able to stop the genocides and mass destruction taking place throughout human space.

In fact, their leaders enthusiastically took part in these acts of madness!

In the eyes of the Common Fleet Alliance, the Terrans and Rubarthans completely failed to discharge their responsibilities as the foremost powers of the human race.

A new power must come onto the stage and take over the role the self-consumed Terrans and Rubarthans abandoned.

Thus, the Common Fleet Alliance swept over human space.

During that time, every warfleet was a sovereign empire on the move. Very rarely did admirals agree to pool their strengths together. They were far too suspicious and constantly posed a threat to their 'allies' due to their limitless ambitions!

Even admirals who nominally served the same star nations might open fire against each other's fleets in an attempt to gain complete dominion!

Therefore, the main trend at the time was for warfleets to avoid each other. In any case, there were plenty of planets and star systems for them to plunder. The raiding admirals had no need to risk their most precious war assets!

Under these circumstances, the Common Fleet Alliance thrived. The enlightened admirals did not hesitate to group several warfleets together and take advantage of their superior numbers to destroy or force the surrender of many isolated warfleets.

Through these early successes, the CFA managed to build up an unstoppable momentum and swept over every other resisting nation or warfleet!

Eventually, the Age of Conquest ended and the Age of Mechs commenced.

In order to avoid the ravages that had taken place in the past, the CFA and MTA decided that human civilization had to be run in a different way.

No longer should star nations war against themselves to the point of annihilating each other.

No longer should anyone in control of the mightiest weapons of humanity be allowed to go on a power trip.

No longer must humanity be divided to the point where their external alien enemies saw hope of launching a counterattack!

The Big Two, taking advantage of their supreme power over human space, enacted a new order.

Humanity no longer divided themselves by star nations. The Big Two coerced great entities such as the Terran Confederation to vacate a portion of their sovereignty and devolve into states.

While states were still allowed to run their internal affairs as they saw fit, they were no longer able to discharge some responsibilities.

For example, the newly-formed states were not expected to defend humanity against alien threats after being robbed of their warfleets.

However, the states couldn't be left defenseless either. The CFA therefore stepped up to the plate and pledged to defend human civilization against every external enemy!

The idea sounded noble. By letting a powerful but ostensibly neutral naval organization take charge of defending humanity, no state would be able to abuse their power for destructive ends ever again.

Without warships, it was impossible for the first-rate superstates to wipe out the entire human race with their diminished strength!

Of course, plenty of concerns welled up about the new alliance that concentrated much of humanity's war-making potential.

How could the abuses of the past be prevented?

How could the CFA prevent ambitious naval officers from taking advantage of their positions of powers to pursue their own interests to the detriment of everyone else?

Various means emerged to constrain the CFA.

First, the MTA rose in power to match the CFA and keep them in check. While the MTA and CFA shared the same goal of guarding humanity, their many contradictions ensured that they would always have to act with scruples.

If any of the Big Two ever went out of control, the many states of human civilization would place their full support behind the trans-galactic organization that still stood on their side!

With such a potent threat looming over their heads, neither the CFA nor MTA dared to behave in a way that attracted the common hatred of states.

Second, the CFA extensively reformed and unified its naval culture.

Whereas the MTA emerged as a new organization that was completely free of the shackles of the past, the CFA partially bore the sins of their predecessors.

Every founding admiral and their subordinates had a lot of blood on their hands.

This guilt hung over the heads of the Fleeters and stigmatized them from the rest of humanity who developed an intense fear towards anything related to warships.

Whether deliberate or not, the CFA withdrew from the spotlight and began to isolate itself from the rest of human society.

The CFA must wash away the sins of its predecessors by guarding the human race. This was the guiding mission that sustained the organization to this day.

To staff its warships, the CFA increasingly turned to the true spaceborn clans that lived a nomadic life in space.

Unlike the humans who grew up in one of the many states, the spaceborn were much more adapted to become Fleeters.

The true spaceborn were not only born spacers, but also possessed a much higher perspective. The petty conflicts that consumed the attention of the states for centuries were nothing but playground spats to the true spaceborn.

Only the most noble spacers were qualified to become Fleeters.

While there were plenty of complaints from the states that the CFA was becoming increasingly detached from human society, the Fleeters didn't care.

Let the MTA babysit the squabbling humans.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Zonrad Reze comfortably sat behind his desk in his stateroom aboard the Karaton Dwight, a majestic Villard-class battleship.

As the flagship of the 3rd Archangel Frontier Battle Group, the Karaton Dwight was one of the most powerful warships assigned to the Komodo Star Sector and surroundings.

Ship design hadn't changed much over the years. Though the underlying technologies had changed or improved, a flag captain from the Age of Conquest would still be able to command a modern battleship without too much adjustment.

Of course, with the superhuman cognitive abilities of any senior officer, such a rapid adaptation was to be expected.

The officers of the Common Fleet Alliance were just as capable if not more than the impulsive naval officers of the past.

However, the difference was that their genes still remained human. The CFA's state-of-the-art genetic optimization treatments largely eschewed direct alien gene transplantation in order to avoid undesirable side effects.

Though the officers of the CFA no longer went mad on a massive scale, the extreme degree of competitiveness in the ranks still remained.

This was the reason why Zonrad was furrowing his brows while he held a conversation with a fellow member of the Novilon Clan through a physical projection.

"I'm nearing forty-six years old." He spoke in a dignified accent unique to his clan. "While I expected my promotion opportunities to be few and far in between, I'm nearing the end of my rope."

A more mature man sat on the opposite side of the desk. Though he was only present as a physical projection, the demeanor he exuded was vastly more substantial.

"You have no one but yourself to blame, Zonrad. I warned you that the command trajectory is the most difficult to promote yourself. How many years has it been since you have been commissioned?"

"More than two decades."

"And where has that brought you? I'm only five years older than you but I'm already a lieutenant commander!"

Zonrad sneered. "You're just a logistics officer who is good with managing supplies. You've never been stationed on a warship. Do you think I can make my clan proud by taking charge of a small supply depot in the Komodo Star Sector?"

Lieutenant Commander Victor Manta took no offense at Zonrad's tone.

"Look down on me all you want, but my future is bright, especially since I'm eligible to receive further optimization treatments. As long as you live long enough, you will slowly have more opportunities to rise up the ranks!"

Though Zonrad could easily live up to 150 years or so, it would be hard to extend his life any further without assistance from the CFA or his clan.

However, neither of them were in the habit of wasting expensive treatments on inconsequential officers.

Zonrad knew this. He also knew that his capabilities were only so-so compared to his fellow officers aboard the Karaton Dwight.

He raised his finger in a distinctive gesture, causing their comm call to pause.

"Monodwell, please display my current status."

The powerful super AI in charge of running most of the systems of Karaton Dwight responded instantly.

[Status]

Lieutenant Junior Grade Zonrad Reze

Novilon Spaceborn Clan

45 years old

...

Assignment

Komodo Naval Fleet

3rd Archangel Frontier Battle Group

Villard-class battleship Karaton Dwight

Auxiliary Gunnery Department

...

Decision Making: 1.3

Memory: 2.1

Perception: 1.6

Problem Solving: 1.4

...

Evaluation: A low potential officer who has been assigned to the Karaton Dwight through connections rather than on his own merits.

Zonrad's face soured. "Monodwell. I've trained so hard to raise my problem solving and decision-making skills. I've even switched my implant to a smart decision aid! Why are my scores still so low!?"

[A fair and independent assessment has been made of your abilities, Lieutenant Reze. Your performance in tests and simulations do not reflect your actual competence. If you

have any objections to your assessment, please submit the required CFA merits to request the mediation of an independent human officer.

Please keep in mind that you will be subject to severe punishment if your objections are groundless.]

The junior officer cursed under his breath. Though he believed that he was much more capable due to his storied lineage, he did not have the courage to incur any demerits should he waste the time of a superior officer.

Such actions ruined the careers of many of his fellow CFA officers!

Though Zonrad wanted to argue with Monodwell some more, he reluctantly swallowed his frustrations.

As an inhuman, impartial super AI, Monodwell never sided with any human! Not even the admiral in charge of the Archangel Group had the power to override some of Monodwell's decisions!

#### *Chapter 1669 Independent Evaluation System*

The Common Fleet Alliance adopted the Independent Evaluation System around two-hundred years ago.

Before this time, every naval fleet, group or individual warship interpreted the evaluation standards differently.

Perhaps one naval captain prized learning ability over motor coordination.

Bookish Fleeters gained merits more easily than those who were able to manipulate instruments better.

Perhaps one admiral wanted his subordinates to be more cautious and conservative in their decision making.

In that case, those who were brave and more willing to take risks did not have a good time in this admiral's fleet!

Over time, the differences between different naval units became more pronounced for that reason. While diversity was not necessarily a bad thing, the Common Fleet Alliance abhorred uncontrolled deviations.

The CFA always placed a very high emphasis on standardization!

With the inherent mobility of most CFA assets, many officers and vessels frequently shuffled around the galaxy.

Perhaps an officer would spend thirty years in the galactic center, only to be reassigned to the galactic heartland for the next forty years.

Under these circumstances, a CFA warship stationed at one side of the galaxy should be able to seamlessly integrate in a warfleet patrolling the other side of the galaxy!

This became increasingly more difficult as different naval fleets began to adopt increasingly-strange standards and subcultures.

Due to the vastness of the galaxy, it was very hard to maintain a single identity across the entire organization. Some fracturing and splintering was inevitable.

That did not mean the CFA wanted this trend to continue. Otherwise, the CFA might become outwardly strong but inwardly weak, just like the divided states it protected!

This was why the smartest minds and the most senior admirals came together to enact the Independent Evaluation System around two-hundred years ago.

The IES aimed to address two distinct problems.

First, it aimed to address the increasing divergence of recruitment and promotion criteria. Researchers and officers spent decades to perfect a single, universal set of evaluation standards.

While promotion opportunities still depended on the judgement of superior officers, the evaluation given by the super intelligences that ran the IES possessed a lot of weight!

If the human officers tasked with recommending someone for promotion disregarded the IES too often, then their impartiality would come into question!

In that case, their own evaluations would sink, thereby impacting their own promotion opportunities!

This was the second problem the IES aimed to solve. The rampant nepotism displayed by officers throughout the CFA stifled the opportunities of countless promising officers.

Bootlickers, sycophants and those born in high positions within their clans gained opportunities they didn't necessarily deserve.

The talents who possessed a lot of promise undeservedly languished at the bottom of the totem pole for their entire careers.

This widespread pattern of behavior was self-defeating, and most of the leaders of the CFA knew it. Many of these distinguished figures had lived through the formation of the CFA and did not wish to see their organization degenerate into a paper tiger!



It was one thing if the CFA grew lazy along with all of its other rivals and enemies. It was another thing to grow lazy while the MTA became increasingly more vigorous due to its high ambitions!

The MTA still had a lot to prove! This young organization never slacked off and never allowed its Mechers to accept incompetence!

Seeing that the MTA ran their warfleets better than the CFA, all of the distinguished naval admirals were ashamed!

The introduction of the IES managed to reverse the CFA's downward trend. Every Fleeter became convinced by the impartiality of the IES, and promotion opportunities were given to the capable instead of those who only excelled in ingratiating themselves to their superior officers.

That gaze Zonrad very little to work with. As a distinguished member of the Novilon Spaceborn Clan, he should have enjoyed the appreciation of his superiors.

Admiral Adolphus Teyrach, who commanded the Archangel Battle Group, was a trueblood elder of the Novilon Clan!

Even if the great admiral had no reason to pay attention to a trivial lieutenant like Zonrad, he thought that the members of the Novilon Clan should have received more advantages!

This was why he exerted all of his connections and favors in order to obtain a position on the Karaton Dwight!

Every battleship was a treasure of human civilization! To be stationed aboard a battleship was a supreme honor. Even a minor position conveyed a lot of honor!

Yet to those who hungered after something more, remaining stuck as a mere lieutenant junior grade after several decades of continued service was a tragedy!

How could Zonrad Reze lift his head high when he met with his fellow clansmen?

Even his fellow clansman Victor began to show some distance. Zonrad and Victor used to be as thick as thieves, yet after the latter was promoted to lieutenant commander, their relationship shifted.

When Zonrad dismissed his Status page, he gestured with his fingers to resume the comm call.

"Sorry about that, Victor. I wanted to see if my Status had changed."

The lieutenant commander scowled. "It's because of actions like this that you haven't managed to climb up. If I wasn't your old buddy, I would have ripped into you without mercy! In fact, I don't even need to! Monodwell is probably revising its judgement of you as we speak!"

"Monodwell shouldn't care about my conduct when I'm off-duty." Conrad flicked his hand in dismissal. "Anyway, can you do anything to help me gain an opportunity to prove myself?"

"Only you can help yourself at this point. No amount of influence from our clan and your personal connections can help."

"Please, Victor!" Zonrad became desperate! "You're in charge of a base, right? Can't you request me to transfer under your command? I'm willing to switch my trajectory and serve under you if that's what it takes to become a senior officer!"

Aside from the higher status and increased longevity that senior officers enjoyed, Zonrad wanted more!

He wanted to become like Admiral Adolphus Teyrach who led an entire battle group!

The admiral not only commanded a powerful battleship, but also numerous escorts whose firepower and other functions shouldn't be underestimated!

With his enhanced cognitive abilities and proven judgement, Victor easily read what Zonrad was thinking.

"I told you that you were a fool to think that you can follow in Admiral Teyrach's footsteps!"

"As long as Novilon blood flows through my veins, I am destined to become great!" Zonrad retorted.

The pride in his bones welled up to enhance his stature!

Too bad Victor already saw through Zonrad's vain exterior.

"I've supported you for so many years. I've even granted some minor favors to you that were in my power to give, but you've squandered them all. At this point, I would rather devote my attention to a promising newblood than a trueblood who hasn't managed to stand out for so long!"

The comm call ended without another word, causing Zonrad to be perplexed.

"Victor? Where did you go!? Don't you dare end our call like that!"

He quickly reined in his temper. Though Zonrad disliked what he heard from his friend, he couldn't entirely discount them. Monodwell was watching and listening in on everything. That was the reality of serving in the CFA.

The moment a Fleeter wore the dark blue uniform of the service, they became a cog in a machine. Though they were still humans, they had to dedicate their lives for the betterment of the Alliance.

Zonrad glowered and flitted his hands over the interface of his desk terminal. He called up some of the internal CFA notices on the recently-unveiled invasion of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy.

Junior officers like Zonrad were just in the dark as the rest of the galaxy about the invasion. He only learned about it a few days before the MTA announced the news!

"Red Ocean.." Zonrad greedily huffed. "The Milky Way is too quiet! Only the Red Ocean can propel my career!"

No matter how poorly Monodwell judged his performance, as long as he showed his bravery at the frontlines at the Red Ocean, he would surely be able to prove his valor in combat!

At the very least, Zonrad would be able to make something of himself after earning a lot of merits!

Instead, Zonrad was stuck in the Archangel Battle Group, which mainly patrolled the borders of the Komodo Star Sector.

Although the Archangel Battle Group was on a mission, there was hardly any honor in squashing a weak race like the sandmen.

For several months, the Archangel Battle Group had split up into smaller units in order to sweep across the star systems occupied by the sandman race.

Not a single sandman managed to pose a threat to the mighty warships of the CFA.

A small destroyer possessed enough firepower to scour all life on the surface of a planet.

A heavy cruiser already possessed the potential to crack a planet into pieces!

It was too wasteful to let a lumbering battleship like the Karaton Dwight participate in the extermination of the sandmen.

That essentially meant that an officer of the Auxiliary Gunnery Department hadn't gained a single opportunity to exercise his ability in action!

However, another opportunity knocked at his door.

A few days later, an alarm rang throughout the Karaton Dwight.

"Man your stations!"

Everyone knew what was about to happen. Zonrad and the other Fleeters calmly but briskly moved to their stations and readied themselves for battle.

Even though the sandmen never exhibited any meaningful resistance, no one was allowed to slack off aboard the Karaton Dwight!

A few hours went by. Though Zonrad ordinarily became distracted at this time, he didn't dare to loosen up today.

He marched along the banks of terminals manned by the gunners under his command.

His unit was only responsible for a small number of secondary positron beam turrets situated on the starboard side of the Karaton Dwight.

That was still enough power to wipe out an entire metropolis with a single press of a button!

Of course, Monodwell would never allow someone to fire a battleship armament without instructions from above.

Every modern CFA warship was run by both humans and AIs. The latter had become increasingly more interconnected in the systems of a warship.

In fact, the bigger the class, the greater the degree of automation. A huge battleship that spanned for many kilometers could never be run by humans alone! AI assistance was a necessity in order to keep its performance optimal!

This was why humans like Lieutenant Zonrad Reze were still necessary. The control of weapons was one of the more sensitive responsibilities.

How someone with questionable judgement like Zonrad managed to become in charge of a couple of positron beam turrets was a mystery.

While Zonrad tried to make himself appear as attentive as possible, in space the Karaton Dwight and a dozen escorts of varying sizes and ship classes lay in wait.

A few minutes later, something finally changed.

A portion of space began to shimmer and flicker. Space itself started to bend and tear as a portal emerged out of nothing!

This portal started off small, but began to balloon in size! The circular portal kept widening until its mouth was enough to engulf the Karaton Dwight with plenty of room left to spare!

A number of probes that lay in position began to move through the portal first. After a few minutes, the probes returned and transmitted the actual situation on the other side.

No ambush lay in wait.

After verifying this, the ships moved forward. The escort ships took the lead and entered the portal first. The larger ships followed afterwards, with the Karaton Dwight entering last!

At the other side of the portal, the mighty battleship announced its presence to the entire star system upon emergence!

A powerful superluminous scan pulsed from the battleship! A lot of sensory data poured into the battleship, causing it to form a very detailed picture of their new location!

Among the various satellites and other objects in space, one planet orbited prominently around an energetic giant.

According to expert analysis, this was the origin of the sandman race!

The legendary sandman emperor ostensibly ruled his empire from this planet!

When Zonrad observed a real-time depiction of the sandy brown planet that was surrounded by entire deserts of sand, a bloodthirsty grin formed on his face.

"It's about time we crush the heart of this weak and imbecilic race!"

*Chapter 1670 Signature Look*

While the Archangel Battle Group intruded into the heart of the sandman empire, Ves busied himself by supervising the optimization of the Adonis Colossus and making his Deliverer design more complete.

He missed Gloriana during these times. While he exhorted her to return to work, she refused to show up before she managed to readjust herself to her new state.

She did not allow herself to show any weakness in front of Ves and the design team!

Ves could only throw up his hands at this response. He didn't care if his girlfriend looked a little bit less impeccable than usual.

"Women." He muttered. "At least the sandmen are direct."

He coped with her absence as best as possible and devoted most of his time on working on the most tedious and time-consuming details. If Gloriana came back, she wouldn't need to make any drastic corrections.

While Ves completed his tweaks to the Executor rifle, Miles Tovar came up to him with a couple of things to say.

"Has Senator Tovar finally given me an answer?"

"The situation is rather complicated," Miles answered. "There are certain factions within the Republic that are paying a lot of attention to you. The Ramza Family, the Ministry of Economic Development and the Ansel alumni network are just some of the influences that are staring at you in a less-than-generous light."

Ves did not look impressed. "Isn't this what Flashlight and you Tovars are supposed to keep in check?"

"You're not wrong if that is the extent of the influences paying attention to you. The problem is that the Mech Corps and many other influences have also started to take notice of your existence! Ever since you shook up the Sand War with your Soldier product line, you've become more than just a young Journeyman."

"What does that mean?"

"We aren't sure. There are a lot of maneuvers going on behind the scenes. The possibility that the government might compel you to move to Bentheim, Rittersberg or New Foundation for your own protection can't be ruled out at this point."

"What?!" Ves became indignant. "What about Gloriana? Aren't they afraid of messing with my girlfriend?!"

"While it's true that the government isn't willing to confront Miss Gloriana, they don't have to. As long as they can grab you and move you to a safer location, Gloriana can only make some feeble protests. She doesn't have any actual power in the Bright Republic, you know. She's only a guest."

It sounded as if his stubborn decision to remain in Cloudy Curtain was not as settled as he thought. At the very least, he couldn't rely on his existing connections to resist the opposition.

Perhaps in the eyes of Senator Tovar, it might be for the best if Ves moved to Bentheim.

Both Bentheim and Ves became indispensable in the Bright Republic's resistance against the sandmen.

If one of them fell, the other became inconsequential. The Bright Republic wouldn't be able to last if it lost its main economic and industrial center. It wouldn't be able to fare well either if the Desolate Soldiers and its variants lost their glows!

While Ves cared a lot about the Bright Republic, he cared more about his own life and freedom. He did not wish to go down with the ship in the event the sandmen managed to overrun the Bentheim System.

"What can be done to resolve this issue?"

Miles shrugged. "I'm just a mech designer. Don't think I'm as politically astute as Senator Tovar. I'm just conveying his messages to you on his behalf. For now, my family is still dealing with this situation. I'll inform you if there are any new developments."

Ves twitched when he heard that.

"Okay." He sighed and calmed himself. There was no use turning his ire on his subordinate. "Let's turn back to work. Tell me what you think of the Deliverer."

It was a lot better to talk about mechs with mech designers. Miles instantly became engrossed by the Deliverer's extreme mech concept.

"To be honest, I was initially skeptical about whether you can pull off such an unbalanced mech design. While it remains to be seen whether the main feature of this mech can even work, I'm already impressed at how well you've managed to make its strength more pronounced."

The technical mastery demonstrated by Ves and Gloriana was far beyond the capabilities of an Apprentice. Even if Miles was older, his lack of depth made it difficult for him to keep up with all of the ingenious solutions implemented into the design.

To be honest, exposing an Apprentice to so many advanced applications without allowing him time to understand the underlying theory was not a good thing.

Nonetheless, this was a test in itself. As long as the Tovar mech designers developed the mental fortitude to resist contamination, there might still be hope in the future.

"What about the shortcomings? Do you have anything to say about the lack of mobility and defense???? Ves pressed.

"I.. am admittedly not a fan of these design choices. I fail to see how the Ylvainans will put their trust in a mech that excels in sniping distant targets but are very vulnerable to counter-sniping. At the very least, any decent laser rifleman mech will easily be able to take out the Deliverer by virtue of its weapon type!



Laser weapons always possessed a very substantial range advantage in vacuum environments. Without air and the curvature of a planet limiting the range of laser fire, it was not unrealistic to snipe something across an unimaginable distance!

If not for the imperfect targeting methods and the minute dispersion that exacerbated at longer ranges, laser weapons would have reigned supreme in spaceborn battles!

"It's fine." Ves replied. "I added an evasive precaution to my Deliverer design. The prediction ability that is supposed to guide the aim of my mech can also nudge the mech pilot into dodging a potentially fatal shot!"

"Uhh..."

"I know you're skeptical. I don't intend to convince you that this solution is viable. Let's just wait until we finish the first iteration and build our first prototype."

"Don't you need an Ylvainan marksman mech pilot to bring out the potential of the Deliverer?"

"I've already called ahead and requested a suitable pilot from the Kronons." Ves grinned.

With his current relations with the Ylvaine Protectorate, the Kronons were eager to accommodate his wishes.

They even promised to send more than one marksman mech pilot!

Though Miles still expressed some skepticism, he never dragged his feet when it came to assisting Ves in designing the mech.

He even offered Ves a useful suggestion.

"You should think about implementing a signature look to your mech designs."

"A signature look?" Ves fell in thought. "You're right. Maybe it's time for me to establish a permanent brand for my style of mechs."

A signature look was one of the ways for mech designers to differentiate their products from the competition.

It was a way of communicating to the public that this mech came with certain strengths or guaranteed a certain level of quality.

Sometimes, a signature look was paired with a distinctive name or label.

No matter if someone had no clue about the name of the mech designer or the name of the mech model, that person would instantly associate a mech to an entire range of mechs!

Signature looks did not have to be very elaborate. For example, one mech designer made a habit of affixing a distinctive white stripe along the exterior of the left side of the mech.

Everyone in the mech community immediately knew who designed the mech with the white stripe! No matter how much the mech models diverged, as long as they possessed this highly recognizable stripe, consumers would instantly associate the quality of the mech with the quality of the prior models bearing this stripe!

Another signature look was to shape the head of the mech in a distinct fashion. Because the heads of mechs were often of marginal utility, they mainly served to reinforce a common brand identity.

An example of this was adding a pair of white wings to the sides of the heads of every mech. No matter if the wings fit with the aesthetics of the mech, every mech insider instantly recognized the Senior who turned this quirk into a signature look!

"I've thought about it for some time." Ves spoke. "For a long time, I've considered the glows of my mechs to be a good stand-in for a signature look."

Miles shook his head. "While I admit that the glows are compelling, they don't really work through projections and other depictions. The function of a signature look is to connect your mechs together in a single basket in a way that is clear to bystanders. Right now, your mechs lack this common thread."

"I've implemented a particle generator in all of my mechs."

"They're applied in a different fashion for each mech design. Your Blackbeak radiates vapor from its shoulder pauldron, while your Crystal Lord releases vapor from its head. Your Soldier mechs on the other hand releases a straight vapor trail from their heart position. While your implementation is very artistic, they're not really connected. Besides, the particle generators won't be able to show their distinctiveness when your mechs are dormant."

Miles had a point. When a mech was inactive, the particle generators weren't enhancing their appearances. The mechs looked a lot duller when that was the case.

What Ves really needed was a distinctive visual trait that he could apply to all of his mechs and turn it into an iconic visual cue that people would always associate with him and the LMC.

This was especially useful when it came to adding mechs to various catalogs! Whenever someone wanted to shop for a mech in a store or a virtual portal, just a single glimpse of a signature look was enough to stir the customer!

Ves took some time to consider his signature look. He did not wish to sideline his glows and his particle generators.

He implemented both of them in his mechs from the start. To divest his signature look from both of these traits was unimaginable to him! He could never forget his roots!

As Ves turned to the Deliverer design projected from his terminal, he began to puzzle on what he could add that set this mech apart and increased its association to his brand.

Eventually, an idea came up in his mind.

He manipulated the interface and affixed a prominent gem-like orb in the center of the head of his Deliverer mech.

Due to the Deliverer's existing religious iconography, the addition of a shiny 'third eye' instantly made the mech appear more holy!

"This.. is very distinctive." Miles noted. "I don't think any mech designers in the Bright Republic or nearby states have adopted a third eye as their signature look. It's just..."

"This isn't the extent of my signature look." Ves interrupted him as he added something to the configuration of the addition.

Soon, the third eye began to pulse and glow with light. Because Ves largely intended to paint the mech with white coating, the gem he opted for was clear.

Now, a bright white light radiated from the crystal eye. Not only that, but a small amount of glowing vapor surrounded the eye, amplifying its mystical quality!

"This will be my signature look!" Ves decided without any further hesitation! "The glow of the crystal corresponds to the strength of the connection between my mech and its pilot. The stronger their bond, the brighter the glow! Of course, my customers can always deactivate this feature or shield the third eye from view at any time."

Miles didn't fully understand what Ves was talking about. "I don't know, Mr. Larkinson. I'm not sure you are sending the right message by adopting this as your signature look. It's not something a Brighter would choose."

The glowing third eye surrounded by creepy white mist looked anything but sober!

Just as Ves was about to argue about the distinctive look further, one of the other Tovars in the design lab yelped in alarm.

"Sir! You should see this! There's footage of the CFA's decisive strike on the home planet of the sandmen on the galactic net!"

Both Ves and Miles immediately dropped their current conversation and browsed the galactic net as fast as possible!