

## Mech 1681

### *Chapter 1681 Handover*

Each movement and action of the Adonis Colossus exuded a distinctive charm.

Ves had never seen anything like it. Only the Devil Tiger exhibited something similar, but the effect was only barely noticeable.

The Adonis Colossus was all about outward expression, so its extraordinary qualities were much more obvious.

This distinctive charm enhanced the mech's impression. It was extremely difficult to ignore the mech.

This effect was still notable when watching the mech through a live projection!

Just like all of his other mechs, viewing a projection of the Adonis Colossus inexplicably caused viewers to experience its glow!

The reason why Ves paid more attention to this aspect was that the high degree of alignment between the mech, mech pilot and design spirit amplified the glow!

As Ves closed his eyes and inspected the glow in detail, he found out that both its strength and its quality had risen.

"Interesting."

Compared to the relatively static glows of his Desolate Soldiers and other mechs, the Adonis Colossus exuded a spiritual presence that was much more alive.

"It radiates some of Vincent and Bravo's liveliness."

Of course, Bravo was still a newborn spiritual product. His first interactions with Vincent was barely enough for it to develop a distinct personality.

This meant that the Adonis Colossus was only at the start of its spiritual evolution. Its glow only reflected Vincent's liveliness so far.

So long as Bravo learned from Vincent and matured, it would eventually grow into a spiritual entity which was no less sophisticated than a living human being!

"The only downside is that it won't grow very much when paired with a single mech pilot." He realized.

Different from the Solemn Guardian, Bravo was only ever meant to interact with one mech pilot. This meant that it would only receive a miniscule amount of spiritual feedback.

Vincent alone was not enough to provide spiritual nourishment that could facilitate further growth!

However, by keeping Bravo exclusive to Vincent, the spiritual product would constantly align itself closer to its intended partner.

Through spiritual trinity, the shortcoming of lack of growth could be compensated by pursuing an alternate method of spiritual strengthening.

This latest insight prompted Ves to look at his mechs and design spirits in a different manner.

Design spirits dedicated to mass market mechs needed to maintain many different connections to accelerate their growth. They possessed their own personalities and pursued their own goals.

In contrast, design spirits created for custom mechs needed to find a different direction for growth. Instead of empowering themselves, it was much less resource-intensive to strengthen the spiritual trinity.

Achieving greater synergy and empowering the other two legs of the spiritual trinity was a way for the design spirit to overcome the lack of spiritual feedback.

While Bravo's growth was only in its initial stages, Ves already managed to deduce its future progression!

While this alternate method for growth sounded weaker, Ves did not dare to underestimate how far the combination could go! As long as Vincent, Bravo and the Adonis Colossus continued to grow in lockstep, the three might be able to become actual gods one day!

Ves smiled ruefully while he shook his head. "How can such a thing be possible?"

All of the power he witnessed only concerned the spiritual properties of the mech.

Sometimes, this was enough to impact the course of a war, as his Soldier product line had amply demonstrated.

However, Ves had to be careful not to place too much emphasis on this aspect.

As much as he became enamoured by adding life to mechs, they still needed to perform their core functions.

The specs and technical performance of his mechs determined the actual value of his mech.

In that regard, the Adonis Colossus was not lacking in most areas. Aside from its low mobility, its armor and firepower were completely in line with its generous budget.

After a bit of playing and mindless flying, Vincent stopped fooling around. While he felt tempted to indulge himself in the wonderful feelings emanating from his mech, he still needed to get to grips with the combat power of his mech.

"Since I'm about to fight the sandmen, I'll start testing the weapons of my mech!"

Ves activated his comm and connected to the bridge of the light carrier.

"Release the target dummies. Make sure that they are oriented towards deep space."

The light carrier released a number of cheap bots of varying sizes. From human-sized bots to bots that were half the size of mechs, all of them were made of steel or other mundane materials.

While they were exceptionally weak against the armaments of the Adonis Colossus, it wasn't necessary to gather more precise combat data.

Ves merely wanted to see if Vincent was able to take advantage of his mech's automated targeting system.

In consideration for Vincent's lack of piloting acumen, Ves and Gloriana made sure to program a lot of automated routines into the mech.

As long as Vincent gained more proficiency in his mech, he could always deactivate these assistive programs.

Right now, the mech pilot harbored no intention of switching them off. He hardly needed to exert any effort to aim his Sandbreaker rifle at a distant target dummy!

"How handy!" He gasped with a delighted smile. "I'll be able to dominate the battlefield more easily than ever!"

Both Ves and Gloriana sighed.

A mech pilot that relied too much on automated systems would never improve. Vincent had become too dependent on crutches, thereby preventing him from developing his own skills.

Of course, Vincent developed this habit out of necessity. His frequent switches to different mech types prevented him from specializing in a single kind of mech.

The Adonis Colossus continued to showcase its might. After testing the Sandbreaker rifle, Vincent fired a full salvo of missiles that impacted twenty targets at once.

While the explosions weren't impressive, that was just because Ves had only loaded the missile launcher with practice munition.

The actual missile loadout was a lot more expensive! Even if Ves didn't have to worry about running out of money, he didn't want to waste any on Vincent's account.

Against closer targets, the Adonis Colossus freed up an arm and fired a number of nails that absolutely demolished the target dummies.

While the accuracy of the nail drivers were rather low, the mech's targeting system accurately compensated for their limitations!

Finally, the mech put its rifle aside in order to wield its backup sword.

The Adonis Colossus wielded the thick broadsword in a two-handed grip. The weapon somehow made the mech more masculine. The warrior image the mech exuded made it look like it was a warrior from an ancient legend!

Unfortunately, the mech's melee combat performance was much less effective than its appearance suggested.

It couldn't be helped. The Adonis Colossus was designed as a ranged weapon platform. Ves and Gloriana hadn't been able to optimize the musculature and the secondary systems of the mech for melee combat.

Due to the lack of accommodation, the mech swung its sword with a lot less grace, power and speed than specialized melee mechs.

Gloriana let out a grunt in disgust. "It's like seeing a child play with sticks. Vincent hardly knows anything about swordsmanship."

"You can't blame him." Ves responded. "Vincent spent most of his limited training time on improving his proficiency with ranged weapons. He's not an exceptional talent nor does he enjoy the augmentations that we take for granted. For a pure, baseline human, he still managed to become an adequate mech pilot."

Vincent's strange insistence on keeping himself pure held him back from improving more rapidly.

This insistence was out of lockstep with his peers.

As long as mech pilots wanted to shed their mediocrity and reach greater heights, they needed to improve their physical and mental attributes.

They would eventually come to learn that most successful people in society managed to improve themselves by resorting to implants and genetic modification.

Only by becoming less human would they be able to reach greater heights!

"Well, Vincent isn't bad in that regard." Gloriana admitted.

After the Adonis Colossus ceased to randomly swing its sword around, it began to fly around and stretch its illusionary red cape across the stars.

The mech made for an enchanting sight.

Overall, the Adonis Colossus was a success. When Ves checked all of the telemetry, the mech did not exhibit any major problems. Aside from some minor misalignments that only required a couple of tweaks to correct, the mech was ready to be handed over!

"Alright, Vincent, please return to the carrier."

Once the Adonis Colossus returned to the hangar bay, the mech slowly deactivated. Its glow became dormant now that its connection to the mech pilot was gone.

Vincent emerged from the cockpit with a celebratory smile.

"Hahaha! What a fantastic mech! It is everything I've dreamed of! Getting you two to design my custom mech is the best decision I've ever made!"

"It is our pleasure to serve you." Ves restrained himself. "Let us proceed with the handover of the mech."

They moved to an office where Ves, Gloriana and Vincent signed a bunch of official documents. After they completed all of the paperwork, the mech was officially Vincent's property!

"Have fun and don't break the mech too soon!"

Vincent already forgot about Ves. He briefly bid goodbye to Gloriana before racing back to his mech!

"Don't bother transporting my Adonis to my ship! I'll bring it back myself!"

The mech soon came online, bathing the entire carrier with its manly glow. Vincent soon brought his mech away, leaving his followers and his media crew to head back to the carrier of the Ricklin Rollers via shuttle.

"They're finally gone." Gloriana sighed with relief. "I'm finally rid of their annoying stares."

"That's because you're too beautiful to resist." Ves grinned.

"Only for you." She giggled.

After they shared a kiss, they boarded another shuttle that brought them back to the surface.

They retired to the Cloud Estate in order to rest after several days of non-stop work.

After a pleasant night of sleep, both of them woke up and met up with each other during breakfast.

The meals prepared by Dr. Lupu and Gloriana's chefs instantly peppered them up. The high-energy food provided by Ves caused him to feel invigorated.

"What's next?" Gloriana asked after she sipped her tea.

"There's nothing else on the agenda except finishing the Deliverer design. I'm eager to complete it as fast as possible."

The Deliverer was not as complex as the Adonis Colossus. The most difficult aspect about its design was increasing the accuracy of its railgun handling.

This was not straightforward as the Executor rifle was very big and heavy. Not only that, it required a dedicated energy channel in order to feed its voracious energy needs.

Fortunately, Ves and Gloriana already solved most of the challenges concerning the design. They only had to fill up the gaps in the design in order to complete the first iteration of the marksman mech.

Even their design team would be able to complete the mech design by themselves.

"How many iterations do you want to make?" Gloriana pointedly asked. "With the way the Sand War is going, I don't think it's wise to delay the publication of the Deliverer design too much."

"I know." Ves frowned. He grappled with this difficult issue for a long time now. "If necessary, we can make do with only one round of prototype testing. I think we can finish the design within ten or so days if that's the case!"

Gloriana did not look pleased. She never liked to rush a mech design.

"Ten days is too short."

However, she also knew that time might be running out. The Adonis Colossus already wasted much of their time. The sandman invasion had already overrun a part of the Bright Republic.

So long as the sandman maintained their current momentum, it wasn't impossible for them to overwhelm another strategic star system!

"Ten days is all we have, I think."

#### *Chapter 1682 Special Feature*

The handover of the Adonis Colossus and the departure of Vincent Ricklin returned some calm to Cloudy Curtain.

While the Mech Corps was still scouring the local asteroid belt for hiding sandmen, Ves felt relieved now that Vincent was out of his life.

Whatever Vincent planned to do with the Adonis Colossus was not his business.

"I can't control Vincent." Ves quietly shook his head. "Now that he received my mech, it is up to him to make the most out of his new asset."

A part of him wanted to keep up with the news in order to track Vincent's performance.

Another part compelled him to wash his hands of the commission and pay no further attention to the Adonis Colossus.

He decided to follow the second approach. All signs pointed out that Vincent would mostly play a symbolic role in battle. It wasn't really worth it for Ves to follow Vincent's exploits.

"I'm not his fanboy!"

Instead of wasting his time on Vincent, Ves preferred to direct his attention to other priorities.

When they arrived at the design lab, Ves gathered all of the mech designers together.

"The Deliverer is not that far away from completion." He said. "Let's try and increase our pace."

With no other distraction, the mech designers began to commit all of their time to designing the Deliverer.

The marksman mech rapidly filled out in the next couple of days. Just as Ves predicted, they encountered no serious problems. They had already settled all of the major design

choices. The only thing they needed to do was fill up the gaps, which didn't require much brainpower.

This was very helpful to Gloriana, who was still suffering from a lack of creativity and imagination.

"It's no problem for me to solve these minor issues." She stated to Ves. "I'm already close to getting back to normal. The burden on my mind has become less and less after each prayer session."

"I see. Don't strain yourself, though. I can still do a lot on my own."

She shook her head. "Don't. I don't want to squander the potential of this mech design by reducing our synergy."

So long as she invested fully in her work, the Deliverer was on the right track.

As a marksman mech, its ability to handle the Executor rifle was everything. Even if Ves wanted the mech to rely on its glow to guide its aim, the mech still needed to be accurate enough to land a hit on its intended target.

This required a lot of specialized accommodation. While Ves possessed the necessary theories to adapt the mech to its weapon, Gloriana possessed a much better intuitive understanding in this regard.

Her proficiency in this area was always better than his own. No matter how much knowledge he accumulated with the help of the system, his actual utilization was still rather rudimentary.

Compared to Ves who possessed no special advantages in physical mech design, Gloriana's design philosophy was highly geared towards this kind of design work.

With Gloriana taking the lead, she managed to reduce the spread and improve the accuracy of the Deliverer by thirty percent!

Since the Deliverer was already designed to be accurate from the start, accomplishing this level of improvement was very impressive!

It only took her a few days of focused adjustments to achieve this result!

Her successes lit a fire under his butt. He could not let Gloriana steal the limelight!

He possessed his own strengths!

It was just that his specialty was largely invisible. In order to empower the Deliverer with some special features, Ves applied some of the lessons he learned from designing the Devil Tiger by giving his design spirit some control over its own limbs.

Since Ves decided to incorporate these kinds of gimmicks in his mechs in the future, he decided to formalize the special features into a new structure.

The moment he formed this structure, Ves felt as if he introduced a very impactful innovation in the field of mech design.

For a moment, he had the illusion that he was heralding an entirely new way of empowering mechs!

By granting some control of the mechs to their design spirits, it was possible for the latter to exert some of their strengths!

These special features could be strong or weak. It depended on the nature of the design spirit in question.

In this case, Ves paired the Deliverer mech with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

While the spiritual fragment was fairly powerful, it could only bow its head in front of older monsters such as Qilanxo and Nyxie.

However, different from those powerful spiritual entities, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment appeared to excel in prophecy and prediction.

While Ves hadn't managed to verify its powers, the performance of the Transcendent Messengers already showcased their uncanny ability to dodge enemy fire.

Ves therefore decided to explore these strengths and adjust his mech design to explicitly accommodate these extraordinary interactions!

For now, Ves only possessed a handful of design spirits. However, he imagined that he would be able to accumulate hundreds of design spirits, each of which possessed their own strengths and abilities.

The more design spirits he collected, the more special features he could incorporate in his mech designs!

It would probably take decades for Ves to grow his collection to this point. The main issue related to expanding his connection was that he constantly needed to find more spiritual fragments and entities.

This was also why Ves continued to insist on setting up an exobeast reserve. It was far too cumbersome for Ves to track down exobeasts with spirituality or spiritual potential.

Ves decided to share his latest innovation to Gloriana.

"It sounds like magic." She whispered.

"It's not magic." Ves objected. "It's a special feature! Call it a special feature!"

"Why?"

"Because not everyone likes magic. Calling it a special feature is much more harmless to many cultures. It's a neutral description that technically describes what I am imparting to my mech designs."

His girlfriend crossed her arms. "Uh huh. It's basically magic or a divine ability by another name. Do you expect to fool anyone with this misdirection?"

"It's not a misdirection, Gloriana! At most, I'm merely omitting some information. The point is that the special features of my mechs can't be hidden. Since the market will be bound to figure out what is up with my mechs, I might as well make them known so that my customers won't be fumbling around."

Ves was taking a gamble here. Seeing as how his glows hadn't attracted too much attention, he was ready to reveal another application of his specialty.

While he was sure he would be greeted with a lot of skepticism at the start, so long as the Deliverer met his expectations, he was sure that everyone would embrace his special features!

"Your mech comes with two special features, right?"

He nodded. "I'm sure you've already noticed my latest additions. I've already explained the first special feature of the Deliverer, which I call Guided Aim. I've only given it a name and added it to my library of special features."

By letting Ylvaine's spiritual fragment guide the aim of the Deliverer, Ves hoped it was enough to wipe out the sandman admirals.

"What is the second special feature?"

"Prescient Movement. It's basically giving my design spirit some control over the limbs and propulsion system of my Deliverer. Depending on the depth of the connection, the design spirit will be able to force the mech to move in response to an imminent attack!"

The scariest part about this special feature was that it could make the Deliverer dodge in advance!

Due to its extreme focus on firepower, its mobility was abysmal. By the time the mech pilot noticed an incoming attack, it was already too late to dodge!

Therefore, granting the Deliverer the power to evade an attack addressed this critical weakness.

Ves had no idea if the sandman admirals would ever learn to focus their firepower on strategically-important targets. If that ever happened, his Deliverer mechs would certainly turn into death traps!

To prevent this potentially disastrous occurrence, Ves had to raise the self-preservation ability of his mech.

By relying on this cheat-like special feature, Ves could avoid compromising the offensive focus of his mech.

"This is a good special feature as long as it works!" Gloriana agreed. "The key is whether it works at all. From what you're telling me, the mech pilot has no control over the activation of this ability. It's solely up to the whims of the proto-god to activate these special features."

"That's a downside, yes. While the lack of control is not exactly ideal, I don't think it's a bad idea. The only way for mech pilots to benefit from the special features is to increase their bond with their mechs and their design spirits."

"Ah. So that is why you made your signature look so responsive to the connection between the mech and mech pilot! You wanted to give your customers an indication to how close they are to their mechs!"

Ves had already accounted for all of this. He wanted to herald a new and improved style of mech design in the new generation.

While he wasn't entirely sure how the market would react to his new style, he hoped that at least some customers would embrace his innovations.

"Maybe you can give your customers a choice." Gloriana suggested. "You can design one mech that possesses these special features and develop a minor variant that lacks these additions."

That was an interesting suggestion.

"I have a better idea. Instead of splitting up my products into two different categories, I might as well keep it as one and add a switch to a mech that controls how much control a mech pilot is willing to share."

He immediately applied this new idea to the Deliverer. He tweaked the internal architecture of the mech to add some hardware switches that possessed the ability to cut off the design spirit from direct control.

Naturally, incorporating these switches was always a risk. As long as the mech sustained severe damage, some of these switches might be forcibly tripped without the mech pilot's consent.

Of course, when a mech suffered from internal damage, it was already in bad shape.

As a result of adding these switches to his current and future mech designs, Ves granted his customers the ability to choose how much they trusted in their mechs.

All of this still required a lot of testing, though. Ves wasn't sure if the Guided Aim and Prescient Movement abilities worked as expected.

If the Deliverer failed to channel these special features, he would have wasted all of the time he invested into its design!

"It won't fail!" He furiously whispered.

He had come into frequent contact with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment during the design process of the Deliverer. The certainty and conviction it conveyed constantly kept his hopes alive.

After a week or so of design work, the design team finally managed to complete the first iteration of the Deliverer.

Its design was functionally complete. While Ves was able to get a good handle on its technical performance by subjecting it to virtual tests, it was impossible to express their special features!

Gloriana did not like this development.

"This is a very significant disadvantage, Ves. The only way to verify your so-called special features is to perform live tests!"

"We'll just have to reserve more time for prototype testing." He shrugged. "It's only a moderate inconvenience. The glows of my mechs are already incompatible with simulations. It's not really surprising that existing models are unable to work with my specialty."

"Is it possible to remedy this problem? Maybe you can create a new model from scratch!"

Ves always wanted to do this, but his understanding of spirituality and all of the stuff associated with it was still at a rudimentary level.

"It's too soon. I don't have a single clue how to virtualize my innovations. Let's just settle with live tests for now."

The LMC soon fabricated the first prototype with two special features.

Ves had already invited some Ylvainan mech pilots to test the prototype!

### *Chapter 1683 Transcending Growth*

The Sand War seemed to approach a critical point. A continuous outpouring of sandman fleets descended upon Bentheim, battering the defenders so much that they could barely rest before they had to fend off another incursion!

While the Bright Republic prepared for the onslaught for months, when the sandmen finally hit its port system, the ferocity of the sandmen caught every military planner off-guard!

"The Battle for Bentheim will make or break the Bright Republic!"

"No amount of sand will engulf our light!"

"Our four-hundred years of heritage will not end on our watch!"

The propaganda efforts went full swing. The people must have confidence! No matter how many star systems fell, the Bright Republic must survive!

Even at Cloudy Curtain, Ves and the others felt the effects of the war. Martial law had belatedly come into effect, forcing every citizen to stop idling. They either had to work and contribute to the state or stay at home like obedient lambs.

The sudden drawdown of social life turned Freslin into an empty hub where only aircars and shuttles made noise.

The hustle and bustle of people on the streets made way for enforcer bots that patrolled the empty city.

Though the Mech Nursery was situated well outside Freslin, Ves could still sense the gloom by observing his downbeat employees.

Due to the temporary halt of production at the Mech Nursery, a lot fewer people showed up at work. The reduced operations elsewhere had left much of his subordinates at his headquarters idle.

There simply wasn't much work to do. Ves even contemplated laying people off, as the LMC recently hired a lot of people to manage the spike in sales and production.

"Demand has dropped and our production costs have risen." Gavin reported to Ves. "More and more third-party manufacturers have ended their contracts or reduced their production. At our current estimate, this month's sales won't surpass 50,000 mechs, much of which consists of foreign states in the fourth and fifth lines of defense."

That was still a huge figure compared to the sales the LMC achieved before the Sand War. Nonetheless, it was a major drop compared to the month before.

At this point, Ves still wasn't accustomed to bulk sales. He stopped paying attention to the exact sums he earned after monthly sales surpassed 1,000 mechs.

It didn't matter too much in this crumbling and deteriorating economy. Inflation was so high that the real value of the LMC's cash reserves dropped by half after a month!

And that was just the start if the sandmen continued to nibble away at the territories of the Bright Republic!

Ves had risen up from his desk and moved over to the windows while petting Lucky. He looked out at the empty campus grounds of the Mech Nursery. The display mechs and patrol mechs still radiated the glow of duty. It was a pity that there were too few people around to affect their moods.

"We should reduce our headcount." He decided. "The Desolate Soldier sold extremely well due to various favorable circumstances. However, I'm not sure I can replicate its success anytime soon."

Gavin walked up to him and frowned. "You can easily transform the market yet again if you release a mech as accessible and revolutionary as the Desolate Soldier."

"I don't dare to do so." Ves shook his head. "While I've enjoyed a lot of success so far, my power isn't enough to sustain this level of success. It's only due to desperation that the mech industry has tolerated my Soldier product line."

"You're afraid of the competition?"

"In short, yes."

"I didn't expect to hear that from you, boss."

"I'm a Journeyman. Selling a decent amount of mechs is a given, but when my mechs are hotter than the mechs of a Senior, people will start to have ideas. I don't want to become the victim of my own success, so it's best if we take a step back and consolidate our strength."

Gavin didn't understand why Ves wanted to retreat. In his eyes, the LMC could easily leverage its recent successes and continue to build up momentum.

However, Ves saw the situation in a different light. The mech markets weren't as free and unrestricted as he thought. His interactions with the Tovar mech designers already made it clear that the mech market was already carved up by established interest groups.

While a reasonable degree of competition still took place, major disruptions were very rare.

The only instance where a mech company dared to disrupt the established order was if they had the strength and backing to enjoy the fruits of its labor.

If an uppity mech company ever shot up for some reason, the competition would definitely come to suppress it right away.

This was what the Ansel mech designers already did to the LMC.

It wasn't cheating. The Ansel alumni network was deeply entrenched in the Bright Republic's mech community. Ansel could leverage its deep influence to further its own success or hinder the growth of competitors.

According to the Tovars, this was a game where Ves and the LMC weren't qualified to participate in. Ves was too young and the LMC lacked the network of connections to establish a foothold at the upper end of the hierarchy.

Ves sighed. "I used to dream about reaching this level of success. Many mech designers will become ecstatic if they manage to sell more than a million mechs within a year. Even I didn't expect to accomplish one of my dreams so soon."

"You sound disappointed."

"I'm not. I just feel as if my previous dreams were juvenile. Now that I have reached a level of skill where I can earn money as long as I put some effort in my work, I'm no longer content with chasing after some of my old goals."

"Because you've already adjusted your sights higher."

"Right. Do you think being a Journeyman is impressive? It's not, Benny. Perhaps to average people, becoming a Journeyman is a distant fantasy, while becoming a Senior is already a myth. While I might be a little conceited, I don't think these accomplishments are noteworthy. In the wider galaxy, only Masters are worthy of attention."

"What is the point of all of this, boss?"

"I'm just trying to make you understand my vision. I no longer feel the drive to pursue growth above all else. My own development must come first. For this reason, I started designing mechs like our upcoming Deliverer."

To a marketer like Gavin, the Deliverer was one of his worst nightmares. It was a niche, premium mech model with a very small target audience. Even if Ves managed to elevate its performance to unheard levels, the Deliverer would never sell in significant numbers outside the Ylvaine Protectorate!

"Does that mean you're going to design more weird mechs like the Deliverer?"

Ves nodded. "It's not out of the question. Of course, just because I don't care that much about growth doesn't mean I'll neglect it entirely. Don't worry about my next products. I'll probably come up with a mech that is aimed at the general market."

It wasn't a good idea for him to become known as an 'Ylvainan' mech designer. He only decided upon developing the Deliverer because the market needed it despite all of its restrictive properties.

He continued to share some of his future plans to Gavin. The direction he wanted to take in his career would see him veer away from pursuing growth through quantity but instead focus more on excelling through quality.

"To be honest, I feel like you're wasting your potential." His assistant honestly said. He had remained troubled throughout this conversation. "I know you well enough that you've already made up your mind. I don't know why mech designers like you make these kinds of decisions, but we'll do our best to support you, boss."

"That's a given." Ves chuckled while placing Lucky on his shoulder. "I'd fire you all if you don't do what I say."

He was the one raking in all of the money, after all.

"What about your grand expedition? I seriously doubt whether you can gather enough capital to fund your expeditionary fleet."

"It's useless to focus on money when I won't be able to earn enough merits at my current stage." Ves retorted. "I have to progress my design philosophy faster and develop more unique features in order to appeal to the Rim Guardians. So long as I can design mechs that no one else can match, I will have the grounds to become a galactic pioneer."

No amount of success in the Bright Republic or the Komodo Star Sector interested him anymore!

Ves was bored with his home. He longed to go on an adventure and experience something new. He wanted to rid himself of the suffocating hierarchy that had solidified in the Milky Way Galaxy.

In his heart, he looked at the Red Ocean as a golden opportunity to develop his own power base that was free from existing entanglements.

Therefore, Ves saw his current activities as nothing more than a means to gain entry to the new dwarf galaxy.

As for money? If he reached the point where he was able to earn millions of MTA merits, he could easily earn an abundant amount of money.

"Don't forget that I plan to become a second-class mech designer." He reminded his assistant. "I've been spending some time familiarizing myself with the customs and standards of second-class mechs. At my current level of progress, I'll probably be able to design my first second-class mech in a year or so. That's quite fast, you know."

The more he learned about second-class mechs, the more he became enamoured by their expanded versatility and options.

Third-class mechs were very rudimentary in comparison. While they possessed their own distinctive charm, Ves understood why it was very hard for third-class mech designers to advance.

Naturally, that didn't mean that Ves saw no hope if he continued to design mechs for third-rate states.

He had the confidence to succeed where others failed.

If he intended to stay in the Milky Way, then it was fine for him to continue to excel in designing third-class mechs.

Yet he found himself changing his old plans as soon as he set his sights on the Red Ocean.

How could the MTA and the Rim Guardians be impressed by third-class mechs?

No matter what kind of miracle he designed, as long as a single MTA mech could easily crush it like a bug, Ves would never be able to earn a lot of merits.

Only by transitioning to designing a higher class of mechs would Ves be able to earn a lot of merits.

Once he explained all of this, Gavin finally understood.

"I see.. You're really serious about starting anew at the Red Ocean. Every decision you've made recently is to help you redeem a beyonder ticket."

The Red Ocean constantly beckoned to Ves like a siren. His blood boiled and his bones shook whenever he thought of the opportunities he could find there. The Big Two did not set a high price of entry without a good reason!

"I plan to set off for the Red Ocean within a decade." Ves spoke. "I can't afford to stall my departure any longer. The opportunities that I'm looking forward to will doubtlessly be snatched by other galactic pioneers if I come too late."

Compared to his hopes and dreams for the Red Ocean, his success in the Komodo Star Sector didn't interest him anymore. His reputation and his earning potential were merely means to an end.

He would do anything to become a galactic pioneer! He would even cheer for the sandmen to sweep over the entire Bright Republic if that somehow made it easier for him to reach this goal!

Besides, he was not the only one who was hoping to gain entry to the Red Ocean. Ves wasn't sure whether his competition impacted his chances, but he knew he had to focus on becoming a more capable mech designer rather than a more successful mech designer.

#### *Chapter 1684 Overspecialization*

After a few more intensive design sessions, Ves and Gloriana managed to complete the first iteration of the Deliverer design.

They knew that this accomplishment was much different from previous ones.

Ves already possessed a high degree of confidence in the soundness of the first iterations of the Adonis Colossus and the Desolate Soldiers.

No matter what kind of flaws, deviations and unexpected interactions the other mechs carried, Ves knew for sure that they weren't anything major.

Ves had acquired a lot of knowledge and knew exactly how most elements of his mechs interacted with each other. It was only when the scope became too big that Ves didn't dare to make any certain predictions.

Even so, as long as each component was sound, the physical prototype would not perform too differently from the virtual prototypes.

This time was different. Subjecting the first iteration of the Deliverer to numerous virtual tests revealed only a part of its potential.

Right now, the entire design team gathered together to observe one of the billions of simulated tests.

The virtual Deliverer flew backwards in space while facing down ten approaching sandman drones.

Due to the importance of designing mechs against the sandmen, a lot of companies already modeled the tactics and behavior of their race.

The drones in the simulation behaved closely if they showed up in reality.

The fight started off poorly. At extreme range, the Deliverer carefully aimed its massive gauss rifle and fired a shot.

It missed by more than fifty meters due to the incredible range and time lag.

The sandmen didn't fire yet. While their laser weapons were much more accurate at longer ranges, each drone possessed a limited amount of energy. It was too much of a waste if they emptied their reserves at a distance.

For this reason, the Deliverer had a window of opportunity where it could reduce the number of sandman drones unopposed.

Only distance was its enemy. The Executor rifle was slow to cycle under ordinary circumstances. To maximize its muzzle velocity, the weapon had to cycle a lot of energy and endure some great forces.

While it was possible for the mech to overload the Executor rifle and increase its firing rate beyond its safe parameters, the cost of doing so was severe.

Overloading the weapon reduced its structural integrity due to subjecting it to frequent stress. Increasing the firing rate also built up a lot of heat, which took time to siphon away.

All of this damage also reduced the accuracy and precision of the weapon.

However, the virtual Deliverer evidently figured out that it wouldn't be able to survive if it kept firing its weapon at safe levels.

The mech therefore deactivated the gauss rifle's safety limits and fired it faster, heedless of the price it must pay after the battle.

The chance of hitting a target had dropped due to subjecting the weapon to increased stress.

However, firing the weapon twice as fast gave the mech a lot more chances to score a lucky hit!

Eventually, the mech managed to hit a sandman drone, causing it to explode in a cloud of sand!

Nine more targets remained.

The rifle barked out silent shot after silent shot. The lack of air in space made it impossible for any air to propagate. The heat emanating from the rifle constantly increased as too little time had passed to shunt all of it away.

The mech drew out a lot of power from its energy cells, thereby putting its internal architecture under severe strain.

A lot of performance parameters started to drop as a consequence. However, it was worth it to pay this price in exchange for doubling the firing rate.

One more sandman drone collapsed before the enemy finally began to hit back.

Eight laser beams struck out in succession!

Seven of them managed to land on the Deliverer!

This was a very high hit rate at this distance! The mech instantly incurred a lot of damage to its armor! If not for the mech's size and mass, the lasers would have been able to inflict more damage!

What was worse was that one of the laser beams managed to strike the Executor rifle. The weapon was simply too big!

Fortunately, the Executor rifle was robust enough to function even after a part of its body had been vaporized.

The sandman drones quickly fired again, though. This time, all eight laser beams hit the Deliverer without fail!

Three laser beams struck the Executor rifle, causing it to finally fail as some of the coils sustained too much damage!

Along with the other damage suffered by the mech, it became clear that it was no longer battle effective. All it could do was to turn around and increase its flight speed in an attempt to escape.

Sadly, the mobility of the Deliverer was abysmal. The mech couldn't outrun the swift and agile sandman drones at all!

The simulation ended.

"Thoughts?" Ves asked.

"The performance of the Deliverer.. is not up to industry standard." Miles reluctantly stated the truth. "Other marksman mech models subjected to the same conditions generally fare better. Their rifles aren't as powerful, but they're smaller and less vulnerable against enemy fire. The mechs are also more mobile, allowing them to dodge and confuse the enemy's targeting system. In independent combat, the Deliverer is too unsuitable."

Cherie Tovar manipulated an interface and projected previous simulation results. "The mech doesn't perform as well in group combat either. The only instance where the Deliverer performs decently is if it enjoys the cover of a bunker or a space knight. Without this level of protection, the mech is a sitting duck."

"Sitting duck describes this mech well." Pachtold Tovar agreed. "While I get that this is supposed to be a glass cannon, but its defense and mobility is so inadequate that it's incapable of operating by itself."

"To be fair, the mech isn't supposed to be deployed alone. It's very clear that the Deliverer is meant to be deployed as a force multiplier." Vela Tovar noted. As a ranged mech specialist, she possessed the best understanding of the Deliverer. "The mech is capable of fulfilling the job it's supposed to do. It's just that the mech community has a certain expectation towards marksman mechs. They're too used to the idea that they should be able to fend for themselves."

Third-class mechs usually specialize a lot. However, that did not mean they sacrificed everything to perform their primary roles.

Battles were messy and circumstances weren't always ideal. A mech had to possess a certain amount of versatility and self-sufficiency in order to sell well in the Bright Republic and elsewhere.

The Desolate Soldier was a lot more appealing for that reason. While it was just a budget rifleman mech without any exceptional strengths, it didn't possess any pronounced weaknesses either.

Aside from being garbage in melee combat, the Desolate Soldier performed adequately in group or individual combat. Even if its performance wasn't stellar, the mech was so cheap that it wasn't a significant loss if one of them was taken out.

The Deliverer on the other hand was a premium mech that cost three times as much as a Desolate Soldier.

The standards were higher when it came to more expensive mechs. Otherwise, why should customers even purchase them in the first place?

From this perspective, the Deliverer's extremely limited applications made it much less appealing.

When customers paid this much money for a mech, they wanted to get some bang for their buck. Even though the Deliverer was strong in some circumstances, it was incredibly weak and vulnerable in other circumstances.

The chance of wasting their money was too big if they went for an overly-specialized mech.

Ves was already familiar with this reasoning as it was the main reason why the Aurora Titan failed to achieve critical success.

While the LMC and NORA Consolidated still sold a decent amount of Aurora Titans per month, it was merely enough to call it a cult classic.

Miles addressed the elephant in the room. "We all know that the Deliverer is supposed to offer more than what the simulations have shown. After all of the wonders Mr. Larkinson managed to realize, I won't discount the 'special features' until I see the mech in action."

A wave of uncertainty and dissatisfaction went through the other mech designers. As Brighters, his design team found it very difficult to accept the possibility that the mech they helped design possessed superpowers.

It didn't fit their current understanding of reality. How could science possibly enable such magic?

If they worked for any other mech designer, they might have quit on the spot!

"Not even I know for certain whether the upcoming physical tests can showcase its special features." Ves admitted.

That caused Gloriana to frown. "I thought you were certain that your mech can deliver on its promises."

"That is different from stating that the prototype will perform up to satisfaction." Ves retorted. "Due to the deteriorating war situation, the Kronon Dynasty has only lent three Ylvainan marksman specialists to me. Each of them are highly trained and possess different backgrounds, but there is a chance that none of them are compatible with my mech."

That would be a depressing outcome and a serious setback. This was not the Ylvaine Protectorate. Due to its long-standing isolation, very few Ylvainans spread to other states.

At the very least, the chance of finding an Ylvainan mech pilot who specialized in marksmanship was very low outside of the Protectorate!

"Do you expect that to happen, Ves?"

"Probably not. I did request the Kronons to send some of their more devout marksman mechs to me. As long as they aren't faking it, the test pilots should be able to elicit at least some reaction from the prototype."

If that didn't happen for some reason, then Ves still had a last resort. He could always summon Ylvaine's spiritual fragment and beat it up until it agreed to lend its power to the test pilots.

Naturally, Ves preferred to keep a friendly relationship with his design spirit. It was enough for him to harbor a willingness to resort to harder measures.

With the fragment's apparent ability to predict the future, it should probably choose to accommodate Ves' intentions out of its own accord.

They continued to discuss the state of the Deliverer design for a couple of hours. After a lot of explanation and questioning, they were ready to fabricate the prototype.

Considering the mech's high degree of reliance on the X-Factor, Ves did not allow regular mech technicians to fabricate it this time.

"You should all be proficient in fabricating mechs." He spoke to the Tovars. "Go to the workshop and fabricate the prototype. I've already stocked several batches of materials in the inventories."

"Are you sure?" Miles skeptically asked. "We're not Ylvainans and we don't have any experience in making Ylvainan mechs."

Ves shook his head. "A mech is a mech. Calling them Brighter mechs, Vesian mechs or Ylvainan mechs is nothing but a way to specify their origin or target audience. Mech designers like us shouldn't be too picky. If you keep limiting yourself to Brighter-style mechs, you won't be able to expand your success outside of our borders."

"Besides, we all pitched in to the design." Gloriana added. "You all deserve some credit for your contributions, however minor they might be. Are you really disgusted with fabricating your own work?"

None of the Tovars could offer a good retort to her. It was just that they had always been rather begrudging when it came to designing this mech.

At least the Adonis Colossus was a pure Brighter mech designed specifically to accommodate a Brighter mech pilot. Even with its silly emphasis on masculinity, the Tovar mech designers were still proud of what they accomplished.

They weren't as happy with the Deliverer. Yet due to the continued teachings of Ves and Gloriana, they came to tolerate this weird design.

"We'll try our best." Miles weakly promised. "Please don't blame us if we fail."

### *Chapter 1685 Three Kronons*

Despite their lack of confidence, the five Tovar mech designers managed to do a decent job at fabricating the prototype.

The Deliverer mech they managed to produce appeared just as ornate and holy as Ves intended. Its spiritual foundation exuded a sense of certainty and holiness. He had already invested Ylvaine's spiritual fragment as its design spirit.

Ves became intrigued by the reaction of others towards the prototype.

The Tovars, who carefully fabricated the mech over three days, had mixed feelings over the mech.

On one hand, they were proud of their craftsmanship and content with how well the prototype turned out to be. The mech possessed only a small amount of flaws that they managed to correct afterwards.

Miles Tovar had been the biggest contributor. As a former independent mech designer and one who possessed a lot of practical experience, he immediately took charge and ordered his cousins around.

On the other hand, the Tovars were abhorred that they built an openly religious mech.

None of them were religious. To Brighters, faith was a primitive and outdated artifact of the past that just wouldn't die for some reason.

Ves actually agreed, but his perspective and knowledge was wider. He had become exposed to some of the deeper truths of reality, so he wasn't troubled by working on Ylvainan mechs.

Gloriana wasn't troubled either. She already believed in a religion that shared many overlaps with the Ylvainan Faith.

Though the contradictions between different faiths often resulted in some very acrimonious disagreements, Gloriana wasn't the type of person to care about the differences.

She exhibited a lot of grace and tolerance towards the Deliverer. Of course, part of it was because of Ves. How could she withhold her support for her boyfriend?

If Ves believed in something, Gloriana believed in it as well. The only caveat was that she often interpreted something through her own lens.

Ves figured out that this was Gloriana's way of coping with difficult contradictions.

Therefore, Gloriana tended to view the Ylvainan Faith as a flawed offshoot of hexism.

"This mech would have been a lot better if it revolved around hexism." She pouted a bit. "While I admit that Prophet Ylvaine is a good fortune teller, our Hexers also birthed powerful talents!"

If the Ylvainan test pilots were present, they would have become scandalized by her words!

Ves slapped her side. "Watch what you are saying! Don't ruin this project for me. Try to do your best to show due respect for the Ylvainans and their faith. If you can't do that, then stay quiet or head back to the Cloud Estate."

"..I'm sorry."

Once he verified that the prototype was ready to be tested, he ordered some subordinates to send it off to one of the testing grounds.

"Let's go meet with the Ylvainans." He spoke and left the workshop.

Once he brought Gloriana upstairs to his office, Leland came up to meet him to discuss the guests.

"You've been stirring quite a lot of confusion, Ves." The spy sardonically smiled. "Staying low is not your thing, it seems."

Ves could only shrug in response. "I can't help it. The Ylvainans are taking me way too seriously."

"You should see the news from the Ylvaine Protectorate. It's full of praises for your Holy Soldier. More and more Ylvainans have converted to the cult of the Bright Martyr."

"Don't joke around!"

"Okay, I was exaggerating a bit. That doesn't mean my point is invalid. You've managed to attract a disturbing amount of respect for a foreign state."

"What does the government have to do with my fans?"

"For better or worse, you are able to influence our foreign policy." Leland grimly stated. "I don't know how you've done it, but your Holy Soldiers have managed to raise the morale of the Ylvainans to stratospheric levels!"

"This was because of the Holy Soldier's faint connection to Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. While the Holy Soldiers weren't as potent as the Transcendent Messengers in this area, they still offered many Ylvainans a lot of spiritual comfort.

Something like spiritual comfort was extremely precious in these trying times. It was reminiscent of how stubbornly the Ylvainan exiles clung to their lives and faith during their flight to the galactic rim.

"What do you want me to do, then? While my influence among the lower ranks of the Protectorate is considerable, the higher ups won't allow the so-called 'Bright Martyr' to take over."

"That view of yours is outdated, by the way."

"It is?" Ves puzzlingly frowned.

"Have you spent any time observing the reaction of the Ylvainans to your mech?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, you should. Every Holy Soldier is a relic to the Ylvainans. To the higher ups, the Holy Soldiers have unquestionably saved the Protectorate so far. This kind of appreciation along with all of the trends taking place has started to gnaw at the leadership of the state."

All of this sounded plausible. As long as the Ylvainans began to buy into his myth, they would surely treat him like a real Martyred Follower!

"It sounds as if I can just go there and pick up a crown to place over my head."

Leland chuckled. "If only. Just because they are beginning to acknowledge you as the Bright Martyr doesn't mean you have absolute say in how the state is run. Only Prophet Ylvaine has enjoyed this privilege. Since you don't have the title of prophet, then you should stop entertaining these delusions."

"Is there anything else I should take note of concerning the Ylvainans?"

"Plenty. What the Bright Republic currently needs is a strong Ylvaine Protectorate that can fend for itself. So long as the Protectorate remains standing, our flank will remain secure."

"I think the Ylvainans already have that covered. Is that all you have to say?"

"It's not that the government has thought of taking advantage of your high status within the Protectorate. It's just that exerting too much influence will inevitably invite some backlash. A state can never be taken over by a single person. That said, you can still gain some advantages if you carefully leverage your status. You just have to avoid being greedy."

Ves found it rather suspicious that Leland placed so much emphasis on this relationship, especially during these times.

"What's the deal, here? I'm getting mixed messages here. On one hand, you're trying to say that I have a lot of influence. On the other hand, you state that my influence is limited."

"Forget it." Leland shook his head. "Let's address something else. I believe you are encountering some friction with certain groups within the government."

Ves scowled. "Yeah. Some people want me to move to Bentheim for my own 'protection'! Hah! As if Bentheim is safe! Only a single sandman fleet invaded the Cloudy Curtain System so far. As for the Bentheim System? I've long stopped counting!"

"Most of those who recommend you to relocate to a more secure site are only looking out for the state. Losing you will severely impact the Bright Republic."

"I've heard all of that before. Is there a point to this, Leland?"

"Let's just say we've handled the situation."

By we, Leland meant Flashlight, probaby.

"It's that simple?"

"Of course not." The spy ruefully smiled. "It is more accurate to say that we have suppressed calls. It helps that the Light Hounds have been fairly successful in hunting down the sandman admirals that are hiding in the asteroid belt. No other sandman fleet has invaded Cloudy Curtain, so the risk level of this star system is very low."

"Bentheim will fall before Cloudy Curtain does."

"That's true. In any case, I can promise you that the government won't insist on relocation any longer. To be honest, most of these proposals come from well-meaning officials, so it didn't require much effort on our part to get them to back down."

"What about those who are more opposed?"

"They can't be silenced, but be assured that they won't be able to influence this matter either."

Leland gave enough assurances that Flashlight would keep protecting the LMC in the dark.

After a bit more talking, Leland left the office, leaving Ves with a bunch of topics to think about.

"I can go over them later. First, I have to meet with the test pilots!"

He ordered Gavin to allow a trio of disciplined Kronon mech pilots to enter his office.

The three marched up to the desk in lockstep and offered Ves a very precise salute!

"Honorable Bright Martyr! We are at your disposal!"

Ves gestured for them to sit down. Two extra chairs emerged from the floor to accommodate them all. "Please introduce yourselves."

The left-most mech pilot started first.

"I am Sergeant Jezebel Kronon." The only woman spoke. She looked to be in her thirties and exuded the toughness expected of a blooded elite. "I have been fighting against the sandmen for months with the Holy Soldier you've provided to our people."

Ves lit up at that. "I thought you were a marksman specialist? How come you piloted a cheap Holy Soldier?"

A sense of fanaticism entered her eyes. "The moment I laid my eyes on the Holy Soldier, I never wanted to pilot anything else! While its performance is not comparable to a proper military marksman mech, it is still a great machine in the right hands! Against simple, inflexible opponents like the sandmen, it's enough to land some blows!"

"I.. see."

"Our people have started to pray daily inside and outside of the mech. While most people can only pray in front of a Holy Soldier, it is a great privilege for mech pilots like myself to come into touch with our mechs!"

"My mechs aren't designed to be altars.."

"They are much better than the boring altars we have prayed to all our lives! If it was up to me, every Ylvainan church or cathedral ought to enshrine a Holy Soldier to allow everyone to witness the splendor of your machines!"

The more Jezebel Kronon gushed, the more Ves started to become nervous.

Though he was no stranger to fans, the female Kronon was disturbingly enthralled with the Holy Soldier!

"If only I can stay with my Holy Soldier forever." She sighed. "It's okay, though. As soon as the Curins paid a visit to me and offered me to test one of your future products, I dropped everything!"

After Jezebel paused, Ves immediately turned to the man sitting next to her to stop her running mouth.

"Sergeant Edward Klesser. It is an honor to meet you. I will endeavor to assist you for the remainder of my stay here."

"You're not a Kronon."

"Not every mech pilot wants to dedicate their entire lives to fighting." Klesser responded. "I was a reservist before the Sand War broke out. Now, the Kronons have called up every able mech pilot."

"Do you resent that?"

"Absolutely no! Defending our people and faith is an important responsibility! In our long history, our faith has endured many threats and challenges! I cannot stand by when our state is at risk of annihilation!"

Apparently, Edward was an idealist. He possessed the typical Curin-like mindset of a grounded citizen. The only difference was that he did not hesitate to answer the call of duty when his services were required.

The man reminded him of a Larkinson in some ways.

Ves turned to the final Kronon.

"My name is Lieutenant Dominic Kronon. I'm a trueblood Kronon and the leader of our small delegation. I have received orders to stand by your side unless you dismiss us. If necessary, we are willing to serve you and fight on your behalf during the Sand War and beyond!"

"What? Our contact didn't say anything about this, lieutenant!"

"These are our orders, Bright Martyr." The lieutenant withdrew a data pad from her uniform coat and placed it on the desk.

Ves picked it up and began to skim through the orders.

It turned out that Dominic wasn't exaggerating. As long as Ves wanted to, he could treat the Kronons as his own subordinates!

He wasn't sure whether he should be pleased with this gift.

### *Chapter 1686 Polishing Troops*

The three Kronon mech pilots each possessed different backgrounds. While they had a lot in common, Ves was glad that the three weren't carbon copies of each other like the chosen of the Transcendent Messengers.

After quizzing the three Ylvainan mech pilots, Ves found that they were all skilled marksman mech pilots. While they weren't as good as top elites, he was very satisfied by their current level of skill.

His Deliverer did not impose ridiculously high demands. As long as a mech pilot was proficient with ranged weapons, the mech would still be able to exert most of its potential.

Ves still wanted to have some insurance, though. He deeply needed trained mech pilots who polished their marksmanship to a high level.

After all, the primary ability of the Deliverer he envisioned only nudged the mech pilot's aim in a certain direction. It was up to the mech pilot to follow up on this suggestion and aim at the designated target.

If the mech pilot's aim was as bad as Vincent's, then even if the Deliverer nudged a dozen times, the attacks would still miss the mark!

As Ves observed the three Kronons sitting respectfully in front of him, he couldn't help but imagine them as collectibles.

He was gathering quite a menagerie of capable subordinates. Over the years, he managed to pick up a pirate designer, a spy, a double-dealing assistant, a strategic partner, an obsessive girlfriend, a broken expert pilot, a fanboy, a bunch of Kinners and etcetera.

It was getting harder and harder for him to manage his increasing number of employees and followers. The addition of three Kronons to his crew was starting to give him a headache.

Fortunately, Ves did not have to deal with every problem himself. He developed enough of a hierarchy to settle the Kronons while they were following orders to remain in his company.

"Considering your nature and your skillsets, I will arrange the Avatars of Myth to receive the three of you as guests. Do you have any objections?"

"It is our pleasure to serve alongside your Avatars of Myth." Lieutenant Dominic Kronon stated. "We have heard of their valor on the frontlines."

"That's nice to hear. Try and get along with my Avatars. Please keep in mind that most of them are Brighters. I'll tell them to accommodate your religious customs as best as possible, but do remember that you are not in the Protectorate."

"We have already prepared ourselves, sir. You do not need to make any special arrangements."

Sergeant Jezebel Kronon looked like she wanted to object, but she quickly steeled her emotions.

The lieutenant's words reassured Ves. He thought that the Kronon Dynasty would have sent the three most fanatic mech pilots to him, but fortunately the envoys all seemed reasonable.

Ves realized that he was letting his prejudices get the better of him. The Ylvainans weren't as bad as he initially thought. Residing in the Ylvaine Protectorate taught him that the Ylvainans were just as human as Brighters.

"I have a request, sir." Lieutenant Dominic spoke.

"Go ahead."

"We would like to offer our services to you alongside your Avatars."

"You were only sent here to act as test pilots for one of my new designs."

"We know, but we wish to do more. We also have orders to assist you without any restrictions."

There was more to the envoys than Ves initially thought. The Kronons probably wanted to deepen their relationship to him or maintain a presence by his side to feed back information or something.

Ves did not mind these games. He was still rather upset at being driven out of the Ylvaine Protectorate during his stay there. If he improved his relationship with the Ylvainans, he could eventually leverage it to gain some advantages.

There was no harm in deepening his friendship with the Ylvainans, so he decided to work with the Kronons.

"I'll allow it. I'll treat you like my own subordinates while you are here. If you have any objections to my orders or arrangements, please let me know as soon as possible."

"We will endeavor to respect your orders, sir."

"Is there anything else?"

"We.." The lieutenant hesitated. "If you will allow us to fight under your banner, we would prefer it if you allocate us with Ylvainan mechs. We can pilot non-Ylvainan mechs if there is no other option, but we are accustomed to piloting Holy Soldiers."

This was a reasonable request.

"I'll take care of it, but not immediately." He decided. "Instead of Holy Soldiers, I've got something better in store for the three of you. All of you have been informed that you are sent here to test a product of mine, right?"

"They nodded."

"Well, once I complete my design, I'll just assign each of you with my new Deliverer mechs."

All three Kronons looked pleasantly surprised. From its name alone, they knew that it was a mech that appealed to Ylvainans.

"However, not everyone is worthy to pilot my new mech model." Ves warned and looked at them sternly. "While any mech pilot can make use of the Deliverer, only those who are truly devout and skilled can unlock its full potential. Do the three of you have what it takes to pilot the mech that will save our states?"

The three looked solemnly at Ves. None of them expressed any doubt in his words, which gratified him a bit. It took a lot less effort to hoodwink Ylvainans. They were similar to Gloriana in that regard.

He dismissed the Kronons and sent them off to the Avatar base to settle in. The Tovars were still in the process of fabricating the first prototype, and they were working slower than he expected.

"Amateurs." He cursed when he called up the footage and ran it at superspeed.

Unlike him and Gloriana, the Tovar mech designers obviously hadn't spent much time at all on the shop floor. Only Miles possessed enough practical experience. If not for his leadership and supervision, his four cousins would have botched the prototype.

While the frame of the mech was not that difficult to fabricate, the Tovars encountered a lot of difficulties when they attempted to make the Executor rifle.

The rifle was just far too high-specced. It was unlike anything the Tovars had ever worked with. They wasted plenty of materials in trying to produce its most difficult parts.

Ves was tempted to step in to show them how to produce it properly, but he refrained himself. The mech designers each possessed a strong foundation. Fumbling around like this was exactly what they needed to learn their shortcomings.

Once they found out what they lacked, they would definitely work on remedying their faults. That was what all good mech designers would do in their place.

After shutting off the projection, he moved on to other matters. Aside from handling the daily paperwork, he received an important notification.

"The Avatars and Sentinels assigned to the front are finally allowed to return?"

He was surprised. Considering how much the sandmen were pressing the Bright Republic, he would have thought the military wanted to keep his men around longer.

However, after seeing the latest casualty figures, Ves no longer expressed surprise.

The Living Sentinels only lost a portion of their manpower. While Commander Magdalena would probably lament their loss, to Ves they were merely names on a list.

He never met or got to know any of these mech pilots in person, so why should he feel sad for their deaths?

Even the couple of Larkinsons who perished in battle hardly affected him. The Larkinsons always answered the call of duty knowing what kind of fates awaited them. Too many Larkinsons died in wars all the time that the family learned to honor their sacrifices rather than get hung up on the losses.

Compared to the modest casualties of the Sentinels, over half of the Avatars failed to make it back. Unlike the Sentinels who had been supplied with Dawnbreakers and other excellent mechs, the Avatars were forced to make do with Desolate Soldiers.

Though Ves could easily replace their machines with something better, he deliberately withheld any excessive care towards the Avatars. How could he sharpen his most promising mech pilots into fearless elites if they didn't suffer some hardships?

Fortunately, the few individuals who he couldn't afford to lose managed to make it back alive. As Ves read their records, he couldn't help but become impressed.

Silent William racked up quite a lot of commendations. While his performance wasn't always eye-catching, he had become increasingly more skilled in piloting his Resentful Soldier.

As the only Avatar who piloted a custom mech, his performance always stood out compared to the others.

As for Melkor, while his battle performance wasn't as eye-catching, he had become increasingly more proficient in commanding his men in battle. The tactics he managed to execute with the Avatars slightly helped in improving their performance against the sandmen.

Of course, most tactics weren't very effective against the sandmen, but that wasn't important. So long as Melkor continued to polish his ability to command his troops, the Avatars would definitely be a force to be reckoned with against both alien and human opponents.

"Looks like this has been a very worthwhile excursion for my Avatars." He smiled.

With the return of the first detachment of Avatars and Sentinels, the second detachment needed to be prepared. Ves had made a commitment to the Bright Republic and he still intended to meet it despite the losses he suffered.

He called Magdalena, who immediately knew what he wanted to talk about.

"I have already selected and prepared our second batch, sir."

"How ready are they for the conflict?"

Commander Magdalena looked stern. "They are ready to do their duty. I have made sure of that."

"I'm not referring to their willingness."

"To be honest, I am not as confident in their readiness." She reluctantly said over the comm. "Our first detachment participated in the early stages of the war when the sandmen weren't as frightening as now. Commander Melkor and the rest slowly acclimatized to the war as the sandmen grew deadlier."

"You're afraid our second detachment won't fare as well because they'll be thrown right into the meat grinder."

She nodded. "I'm especially concerned with your Avatars. Their mechs can't keep up with the demands of the war anymore. While your Desolate Soldiers are fine products, they are too fragile in battle."

"I haven't changed my mind on this. My Avatars are different. They must meet any challenge!"

"They're just kids, sir! Fresh graduates like Joshua King or young mech pilots such as Casella and Imon Ingvar deserve better than to pilot a mech that is barely better than cannon fodder!"

She was right to be concerned. The first detachment of Avatars mostly consisted of the most trained and prepared mech pilots. Melkor thought it was better to bring the most prepared mech pilots first and give the younger and less experienced Avatars some extra time to train and prepare for their upcoming deployment.

However, neither Ves nor Melkor anticipated that the enemy grew so much in strength in the meantime.

Sending valuable Avatars which Ves placed a lot of hopes on in the future was irresponsibly dangerous.

It would pain him a lot to lose valuable mech pilots with strong spiritual potential like the three that Commander Magdalena already mentioned!

"I know the risks have changed. I still see no reason to change my mind, though. Whether they are young or old, every Avatar must be prepared to fight any foe. If they aren't prepared to participate in a war of this caliber, then they are useless to me as Avatars. I'm not running a mech academy here, commander. Every mech pilot I employ are adults. They have already made their own choices. At most, I'll give them one more opportunity to resign from the Avatars and transfer to the Living Sentinels. Is that okay?"

The compromise eased Magdalena's concerns. "That is.. acceptable."

"Don't complain to me if none of the Avatars accept this offer." He smirked.

#### *Chapter 1687 Solemn Ceremony*

The return of the first detachment of Avatars and Sentinels from the front was a much anticipated affair.

Surprisingly, Melkor already sent a message to Ves. The Avatar Commander requested a subdued rather than a bombastic ceremony.

The war wasn't over yet. Planets and star systems continued to fall while countless mech pilots and starfighter pilots sacrificed their lives every day.

In addition, the first batch of returning soldiers brought back the coffins of the fallen.

For that reason, Ves, Gloriana, and everyone else who worked for the Avatars or the LMC turned out to the landing zone of the Mech Nursery on a dreary morning.

In addition to his organization, Ves also invited the Larkinsons and the mech cadets attending their academy to take part in this event.

Every future mech pilot ought to become aware of what was in store for them. Each mech cadet had to accept the prospect of returning to their homes in a coffin one day.

If they perished far beyond friendly territory, then their coffins would never make it back home! Instead, their comrades would have no choice but to launch them into the nearest star!

The ever-present clouds over Cloudy Curtain appeared darker than usual today. A slight shower of rain poured down on the Mech Nursery, though none of the people present shied away from the rain.

The LMC already forecast the rain and installed a device that projected a wide-area rain cover over their heads. A weak energy screen blocked the rain and diverted it to the sides.

"They're coming."

A single carrier emerged in the far distance. Her hull already started to cool from the friction generated by her descent.

Slowly, the ship approached the Mech Nursery and landed her considerable bulk in the center of the landing zone.

Soon, her main hangar bay hatch opened up. A large ramp extended from the opening, revealing a procession of Avatars and Sentinels in golden and silver dress uniforms.

Two columns holding coffins draped with flags of the Bright Republic emerged, stepping onto the landing zone in complete silence.

The ritual slowly proceeded according to some of the customs of the Mech Corps. While the Avatars and Sentinels weren't soldiers, many of them used to serve in the military.

There was no need for them to fix what wasn't broken. The familiar customs soothed their troubled souls. No matter how much the mech pilots suffered at the hands of the sandmen, they had each fought for a noble cause. The lives they directly and indirectly saved as a result of their sacrifice had elevated each of them into heroes.

As a trumpeter blew a sad tune, Ves stood as stiff as possible in order to convey his respect to the fallen.

The survivors brought over forty coffins back from the front. Whether they actually contained any human remains, no one was sure.

Battles at the scale of mechs and alien constructs often resulted in a lot of damage. The forces unleashed by a Sandbreaker rifle was enough to explode an unprotected office building! Even the lightest lasers released by a sandman drone was enough to vaporize a human body from existence!

Considering that most mech pilots perished instantly from a direct laser strike, the retrieval parties often came back with nothing but some floating ashes.

Therefore, no one ever asked what the survivors placed in the coffin. Usually, the comrades of the fallen placed the clothes and some of the personal possessions of the deceased inside to take the place of the missing body.

The family members of the deceased looked at the coffins and started to cry and react under the darkened skies.

Seeing how much the families the dead have left behind were suffering made Ves feel a little guilty. It was easy to dismiss the dead when they were just names on a list, but being confronted by their coffins and their saddened family members hit his emotions a lot harder.

He still steeled his face and presented a stoic front. As a leader and one of the people responsible for sending them in battle, Ves could not show any remorse.

He stood by his choices.

The solemn ceremony slowly conveyed the honor and valor of the fallen to the audience. The rituals had an especially strong effect on the normally energetic and rambunctious mech cadets.

Thousands of young potentates showed up to honor the dead today. Each of them had grown up hearing heroic tales. Coming face to face with the price they might pay for their chance of glory instantly doused their optimism.

They needed this wakeup call. No mech pilot was invincible in battle. Even expert pilots were mortal enough to lose their lives when faced with insurmountable opposition.

After more than half an hour of silent rituals, the ceremony finally ended. As the surviving mech pilots eventually brought the coffin away, the Larkinson instructors slowly guided their pupils away.

The Avatars and Sentinels who remained home walked up to greet the veterans of the Sand War and guide them to their haunts.

Ves and Gloriana slowly turned around and departed while surrounded by their bodyguards.

Each of them held their cats in their grasp. Due to the serious occasion, they remained remarkably quiet and well-behaved. It probably wasn't easy for them to suppress their playfulness, but they knew when to listen to orders.

"Meow."

"I know. Leadership is a burden that constantly weighs me down." He replied. "I wasn't born to be a leader. I don't even really enjoy ordering people around. I only ever wanted to be a mech designer, you know."

"Meow meow." Lucky pressed his paw against his cheek.

"Yeah. You never know where life takes you. That's the charm of living."

Life was precious and valuable because it wasn't predictable. Perhaps some people were convinced that life could be modeled and calculated to a point where the future was already set in stone.

Ves did not buy into this belief. He viewed life as a chaotic form of existence that provided endless variety. It was exactly due to these properties that life must be cherished.

He shook his head. How did he end up thinking about life after witnessing a ceremony that welcomed back the dead?

Somehow, he felt as if a part of him had sublimated after this event. It was as if his understanding of life and death had shifted in a way that made him view reality in a different manner.

He looked around and saw many familiar faces. Gloriana, Clixie, Nitaa, Gavin, Crindon, Raymond and so on had all stood by his side as they welcomed back the first detachment.

All of them were alive, but for how long?

If nothing happened to Gloriana, she was bound to live the longest out of all of them. As a Hexer and a Journeyman, she would definitely be able to prolong her life by at least a century.

Clixie would also live younger than most people. Rubarthan Sentinel Cats lived up to two-hundred years due to their excellent genetic properties. As long as they were fed with high-quality food, it was no problem for them to reach the limits of their generous lifespan.

As for the rest, Ves couldn't really say. People like Gavin and Crindon were very helpful to him, but not to the point where he felt inclined to pay for an opportunity to extend their lives.

Unless his fortunes improved enormously in the future, it was unlikely that he could make all of his valued subordinates live longer.

Eventually, they would grow older, retire their jobs and die long before Ves was even close to aging!

This was the inherent unfairness of modern society. While it was amazing that humanity found a way to extend their lives, the treatments were so expensive that only a privileged few gained the opportunity to take advantage of them. As for everyone else, they would only be able to live for up to 130 years.

Was this how an old geezer like Senator Tovar viewed life? Ves was only a tenth as old as this old fossil, but already he was starting to adopt the same cerebral mindset!

He was too young to view reality with jaded eyes! He still had a full life ahead of himself!

"I haven't even married or raised any kids yet." He muttered.

"What was that?" Gloriana perked up next to him. "Did you say something about having kids?"

Ves awkwardly coughed. "It's nothing. I have to pay a visit to the Avatar base in order to check up with Melkor. Please go ahead without me. The Tovars are taking too long to fabricate the Deliverer. Be sure to give them a good push."

"Uh, alright, Ves."

Some time later, Ves entered the Avatar base which had already started to take in the damaged, war-ravaged mechs of the Avatars.

Ves took a moment to inspect the machines. Most of them consisted of Desolate Soldiers, and it became clear that none of them returned unscathed.

In his expert eye, he could see that even the most well-preserved mech exhibited a significant amount of wear and tear. The Avatars fielded the mech way too much. Sometimes, the mech technicians hadn't even been able to perform the most basic maintenance.

"How many battles have the Avatars been through?" He wondered.

The reports and mostly-sanitized footage he received in the comfort of his office did not fully reflect the desperation that Melkor and his subordinates had experienced.

Seeing the mechs that returned with missing limbs or blackened holes in their frames made it clear why so many Avatars died.

To a mech designer, the damage to mechs told a much richer story than after-action reports.

"The sandmen are a dreadful foe." He judged.

They fought as if they embodied attrition warfare. This was a difficult opponent to defeat for humans who were too used to fighting against other humans.

At the very least, their opponents possessed emotions. It was possible to make them afraid so that their morale dropped to a point where they were ready to halt a conflict.

This wasn't so for the sandmen. The sandman admirals exhibited no fear to speak of, and they apparently followed their orders to the letter despite facing certain death!

Ves felt a bit more respect for Melkor and the others who managed to return alive. That was not to say that he belittled the dead. It was just that living mech pilots were much more useful to him than those who weren't able to contribute to his security or prosperity.

He viewed the returning Avatars as treasures. They formed the core of his Avatars of Myth!

After he finished inspecting the mechs, he moved into the headquarters and entered Melkor's office.

The two Larkinson cousins faced each other in the flesh for the first time in months.

Ves immediately paused as he sensed a different Melkor.

The cousin he sent off to war was gone.

The one who returned carried himself in the demeanor of a seasoned Larkinson veteran. Ves even had the illusion that he was facing a smaller and less mature version of Magdalena Larkinson!

"You've changed." He said bluntly.

"No thanks to you." Melkor replied. He didn't hide the resentment in his tone. "Do you know how much your restrictions have put us in danger?"

"I know." Ves lightly said. "I bear all the responsibility for your losses, but don't pretend that my Avatars died unjustly. I've given them several opportunities to withdraw. They didn't. They accepted the risks. Now, they died in the service of humanity and our state."

"I really want to punch your face now. Have you always been so callous when it comes to the lives of your own men?"

Ves smirked. "Go ahead. I'll warn you that I'm not as fragile as you think I am."

Of course, Melkor didn't punch his face, even if Ves practically invited it. The mech commander had matured over the course of his wartime experiences. In particular, he learned to deal with difficult superiors.

#### *Chapter 1688 Blooded Leader*

After Ves and Melkor greeted each other under tense conditions, they settled down in the latter's office.

Melkor took the time to sweep over his old office.

His visor made it difficult for Ves to figure out what he was paying attention to. Was he looking at his academy diplomas mounted on the wall? Was he reminiscing about his youth by watching the projected images of his parents?

Melkor behaved as if he had returned from a hundred-year expedition instead of a few months of action!

"It's difficult for me to get accustomed to peace." He said. "I'm still used to tensing up for the alarm sounds that warn of imminent combat. I've fought off so many sandman fleets that they've even started to haunt me in my sleep!"

"It sounds like you can use some time to retreat to the Cloud Estate."

"I know. I plan to surround myself with family. I have one request, though."

"Say it. You're one of my closest confidants."

"That's news to me." Melkor threw a jaded at Ves, though the effect was largely lost due to his visor. "You pretty much threw us against the sandmen."

"Let's not retread this argument." Ves sighed. "Get on to it. What is your request?"

"Much of my men have returned broken or traumatized. I don't think any single Avatar or Sentinel has managed to keep their sanity. I'd like to invite them to the Cloud Estate to give them the care and love they need to heal their psyches."

Ves idly waved his hand. "I'll allow it for the Avatars, but not for the Sentinels."

Melkor looked upset. "Why? Even though the Sentinels are dedicated to protecting the LMC, they are just as worthy as my Avatars."

"It's exactly because they work for the LMC that they're not worth investing in. I don't want to crowd the Cloud Estate and disturb the Larkinsons who still reside there. It's enough to allow the Avatars to rest and recuperate with the help of our Larkinson methods."

"What about the Sentinels, then? Are you just going to shove them aside because they're not as useful to you in the future?"

"Don't misunderstand me, Melkor. Risk must be paired with reward. I'm being much more generous to your returning Avatars because they deserve it after all they have done. As for the Sentinels, they had it easier, so they are not as deserving. This is how I operate."

"So they'll be left to fend for themselves?"

"The Sentinels can take care of themselves. Besides, who says they will be left alone? I recently founded a new charity that is dedicated to treating the mental and physicals of war veterans. I already called Director Clinton to offer his services to your Avatars and Sentinels."

Since his Ves Larkinson Foundation for Wounded Veterans specialized in these matters, he might as well make use of it instead of turning to an outside institution.

"I see. I heard about Clinton's good work. I trust him to know what is best for my men."

It seemed that Melkor thought highly of Clinton Larkinson. Ves wasn't too familiar with the old director, so he hadn't anticipated this reaction.

"Good! You can discuss the details with Magdalena and Clinton."

Lucky climbed out of Ves' lap and padded over to Melkor. The Avatar Commander hardly took any notice of the mechanical cat.

"Go away. I'm not in the mood to play right now."

"Meow."

"Yes, please tell your cat to stop sniffing my uniform."

"Meow."

Ves briefly concentrated his mind and sent a spiritual nudge to Lucky. The cat instantly jumped as if someone stepped on his tail!

"Meow!"

"You deserve it! Now get back!"

While Ves reined in his pet, Melkor watched on with a level of detachment.

"Maybe I was being too harsh on Lucky. Sorry, Ves. I'm not used to letting uncontrolled elements approach me. Who knows if it's a sandman who crept up on my ship."

"Did the sandmen really sneak into ships to assassinate people?"

"You'd be surprised at what they are capable of doing. Just because the sandmen admirals call the shots doesn't mean the lower castes are unthinking. We needed to be really careful in tracking the debris from broken sandmen because a part of them always manage to live. The most annoying survivors are those who managed to cling to a mech as it returns to its ship. I haven't witnessed it in person, but I've heard of these instances taking place in other star systems."

Melkor proceeded to tell random anecdotes to Ves. He had experienced or heard a lot of interesting stories which didn't show up in public or in the reports he had access to. Each tale illustrated the many dangers and frustrations the soldiers at the front had to deal with in their endless fight against the implacable aliens.

Ves noted that Melkor's need to share his stories was a form of catharsis for him. This didn't seem surprising. The returning commander had no one else to share his closest thoughts with when he was deployed to the front.

Melkor had to put up a strong and confident exterior in order to inspire his subordinates. He couldn't share anything with his allies because they were mostly strangers who happened to be assigned to the same defense force.

As for confiding with the officers of the Mech Corps assigned to lead the defense forces, there was a very clear separation between the two. Larkinson or not, Melkor was just the head of a private mech force.

"So what now?" The matured commander asked. "The war isn't over. None of us can relax until the sandmen stop flooding into our state."

"Commander Magdalena and I have already made arrangements. For now, you should prepare to take over the Sentinel Commander's role when she leads the second detachment to the front. We need a competent and experienced leader to direct the remaining Avatars and Sentinels in the event the sandmen show up in Cloudy Curtain again. Are you up to the task?"

"I can do it." Melkor immediately replied. "It is no problem for me to step in her boots. You can count on me to maintain discipline."

Ves believed him. The authority he exuded could not be faked. Someone much less than Ves would instinctively follow Melkor's instructions without expressing any doubt. This was the most valuable ability that Melkor acquired from his tour.

Before Melkor deployed to the front, he had always seemed a bit fresh and green to lead the most elite mech force under Ves' command.

Now, Ves had no reason to doubt Melkor's qualifications. According to the reports, the Avatar Commander managed to lead the Avatars and Sentinels well enough to earn their trust and respect.

Such a leader was worthy to take on the mantle of Avatar Commander.

Failed leaders such as Lady Miralix from the Sentinel Kingdom or Casella Ingvar from the Kingdom of the Three Flowers served as cautionary tales for what could go wrong.

It was very hard to be in charge of people. Each of them had their own thoughts and wants. An organization was supposed to fit them into a structure, but a strong leader was needed to truly bring them together.

While Melkor showed a bit of attitude, that was not a bad thing. Ves never asked for a yes-man to lead his Avatars. As mech pilots who were supposed to embody myths and legends, they should have the capital to be arrogant!

Of course, Ves would never be as charitable if he didn't have the confidence to suppress his jaded subordinate.

"How is the war going from your perspective?" He asked.

"I thought you had access to all sorts of intelligence."

"I do. It's just that most of them are prepared by all sorts of people. I want to hear what you think of the war, as someone who fought and lived through the battles."

"It's a calamity. You don't understand how many lives are resting on our shoulders. Each time defenders like us fail to stop the sandmen, another planet is lost. The Bright Republic has too many planets to evacuate their populations. Only the brightest and

most important individuals have been taken to safety. As for those who aren't valued enough.. you can imagine their fates."

Ves heard a lot of hidden resentment in Melkor's voice. He probably hated the fact that the Bright Republic hadn't allocated a lot of ships to evacuate more citizens.

"Do you think we can win?"

"Hahaha!" Melkor burst out in laughter. "Win?! We've won thousands of battles, but we are still losing ground! Defeat a single sandman fleet, and another one arrives the next day. Defeat that fleet, and a third fleet arrives! There is no end to the sandmen!"

"A CFA warfleet recently demolished the sandman empire." Ves pointed out.

"What does it matter?! I have seen how endless they are! Every soldier deployed to the front has never enjoyed a moment of rest because they are too numerous!"

"Have you lost hope?"

"I..." Melkor suddenly froze. "I guess I have. I don't see an end to the sandmen. I know their numbers are finite, but.. will we still be around by the time the sandman invasion has lost steam?"

That was the question that everyone wanted to answer. No one knew how many sandman fleets were on their way to batter human space. Analysts have made all kinds of predictions, but there was simply too little data to make a solid guess.

Though Melkor put up a strong front, Ves recognized how fragile he had become. The burden of leadership bore down onto his shoulders until his bones started to crack.

If the pressure increased by even a little bit, Melkor was liable to break entirely!

Once Ves recognized this danger, he immediately became concerned.

He initially agreed to send Melkor to the front in order to cultivate a strong leader. Now that his cousin had returned, he got what he wanted, but not without some damage.

If Ves wanted to get his money's worth, he needed to give Melkor the opportunity to heal his wounds.

"Don't push yourself too hard now that you're back." He advised. "You're not the only person in charge here. There are a lot of Avatars and Sentinels who can take over some of your duties while you recuperate."

"I know. I'm a Larkinson, remember? I recognize my own condition. I'm not stable enough to lead my men in my current state."

"Good."

Ves felt reassured. He didn't want to have another Carlos on his hands.

"One more thing, Ves. Have we proven ourselves?"

"Yes." Ves immediately replied. "You and your Avatars have done enough to prove your courage and commitment. As far as I'm concerned, you and the Avatars you've brought back have become the core members of my organization."

A huge sense of relief escaped from Melkor's body. He was really afraid that Ves would impose additional demands!

"Rest assured that you and all of your proven men don't have to pilot low-specced budget mechs anymore. Commander Magdalena has already procured a batch of Dawnbreakers for your blooded Avatars. They deserve to pilot mechs that match their elite status!"

The Avatar Commander perked up. "Do you really mean that?!"

"We have enough Dawnbreakers in stock to pair every Avatar with a premium mech!"

Ves did not take offense by Melkor's obvious preference for the Dawnbreakers. Their powerful specs and their notable defense turned them into one of the most popular mechs among the mech pilots deployed to the front!

Few mech models preserved the lives of mech pilots as well as the Dawnbreaker!

The Desolate Soldier designed by Ves was simply too lacking in comparison. Despite their valuable glows, mech pilots vastly valued their lives over feeling good about themselves!

Melkor's reaction reminded Ves that he should not overvalue his unique strengths. As long as the performance difference was wide enough, mech pilots were better off using powerful mechs than living mechs!

### *Chapter 1689 Silent Inspection*

The return of the first group and the imminent departure of the second group of Avatars and Sentinels led to a lot of activity.

Mechs moved in and out of workshops while the returning soldiers received the care and attention they needed.

The Cloud Estate temporarily hosted the stressed and war-stricken veterans who had to get used to normality after months of non-stop fighting.

Ves frequently moved around to meet with various people.

He discussed the disposition of the returning soldiers with Commander Melkor.

He talked to Commander Magdalena about stockpiling more supplies.

He granted a larger budget to the Foundation in order to give Director Clinton the facilities and manpower needed to treat the wounded.

Of course, he also met with each individual Avatar in person. He did this not only to show his appreciation, but also observe how they changed.

In general, he was very satisfied with the quality of Avatar soldiers. Forged in battle, each of them had shed their frivolity and groundless bravado. The only ones who were able to survive the meat grinder of the front lines were those whose willpower were akin to compress alloy.

Each veteran Avatar reminded Ves of the old Swordmaidens. Just like him, the Swordmaidens subjected their prospective sisters to a brutal survival test.

The graduating Swordmaidens were dropped onto an untamed planet. There, they had to survive the alien wilderness, track down a deadly exobeast and slay it in single combat with nothing but a sword!

Suffice to say, not a lot of Swordmaidens emerged out of this harsh ritual.

Yet those who did always turned out to be elites that Commander Lydia could rely upon to form the core of her organization.

When Ves met with every blooded Avatars, he could hardly keep his joy contained! None of them were exactly pleased with the hardships and near-deaths they faced during their deployments. Their feelings towards the man responsible for subjecting them to torture weren't exactly positive.

Regardless, Ves did not worry about any betrayal or defection. He understood that all of his Avatars had toiled too much to quit at this point. With the help of sunk cost fallacy, Ves employed his Devil Tongue to the fullest in order to remind them of the rewards they had in store.

"Each of you will enjoy an exalted status within my organization. As my elite Avatars, you are entitled to pilot some of the best standard mechs I design. Not only that, I will invest considerable resources in order to retrain you into second-class mech pilots. A bright future awaits. Languishing in a poor third-rate state is not in the cards for you as long as you renew your commitment."

Even if his message wasn't always well-received, Ves did not worry about anyone going rogue. The Avatars were surrounded by his subordinates. They didn't have anyone by their side who could persuade them to quit or worse.

Perhaps the only individual that Ves couldn't solve was William Urbesh.

As soon as the man stepped into his office, William marched forward with an unnaturally stiff gait before facing Ves in complete silence.

Ves awkwardly gestured to the chair, motioning for his latest visitor to sit.

"Hello."

"..."

"Okay. You go by Silent William these days, right?"

"..."

"How was your first real combat deployment? Have you received enough stimulation? My purpose for attaching you to the Avatars is to facilitate your advancement to expert candidate. After all, real combat is the best way to bring out a mech pilot's potential. How much progress have you made?"

Silent William continued to stare at Ves with steely eyes as his mouth remained shut. No matter how many times Ves prompted him, the Urbesh clansman did not utter any word!

Ves realized that it was pointless to get William to say anything. He doubted whether the disconcertingly silent mech pilot was truly mute.

Yet no matter how much of the original William was left, Ves still had a mission to fulfill.

"You know you won't be able to get rid of me until you advance to expert candidate, right?" He spoke. "I'll throw you to the sandmen again and again until you finally make a breakthrough!"

Ves did not have any good options aside from pushing William to the brink. Even if the chance of death was ever-present, he was more than willing to make this gamble!

It helped that Silent William's performance was exemplary for a normal mech pilot. William always possessed an excellent piloting foundation due to the intensive training he went through. The Rim Guardians also threw him in some of their excellent training programs in an attempt to break his psychological aversion to combat.

William never had the opportunity to show off his abundant accumulation due to his previous mental blocks. Only after Ves got rid of them did the foreign mech pilot finally demonstrate why the Urbesh Clan used to be a respected power from the Garlen Empire!

Ves scratched his head. Talking to William was like talking to a wall. The lack of meaningful responses threw him off-kilter.

"You know what, screw this." He muttered and turned around. "Nitaa, go knock William out."

"Yes, sir."

His bodyguard didn't question his strange order and immediately moved into action. She drew a electrifier pistol from one of her holsters and immediately blasted William with a stun ray.

BZZT!

No matter what abomination William had turned into, his flesh was still human. He lost consciousness in an instant.

Ves calmly activated some security measures that locked and isolated his office. Jammers came online, causing Lucky to be disturbed from his nap.

He picked up his pet and tossed him in the air. His cat hastily stabilized his trajectory.

"Meow!"

"Stop lazying around and help me inspect William."

"Meow meow."

After making his displeasure known, Lucky eventually did what he was told and floated down on William's chest. He sniffed all over the mech pilot slumped onto his seat.

"Meow."

"You sure?"

"Meow meow meow!"

"Okay."

William carried no weapons, bugs or anything dangerous. His body only contained a couple of implants that were harmless in this situation.

Once Lucky finished his inspection, Nitaa stepped forward and inspected William's body.

"He's clear."

Considering William's strangeness, Ves did not think it was excessive to check him twice.

Only after he was absolutely sure that William posed no threat to him did he approach the unconscious mech pilot's body.

He hardly sensed anything abnormal when William was out cold. If anyone told Ves that William possessed at least a partial alien influence in his mind, he would never believe such a wild claim.

Both Ves, Lucky and Nitaa stared down at the slumped figure with an unreasonable amount of caution.

"So. There is nothing on him that poses a threat?"

"As far as I'm aware of, he's defenseless." Nitaa spoke.

"Okay."

Ves tentatively stepped closer until he was able to place his palm on top of William's head.

Since William was determined to maintain his silent act, there was no way Ves could glean any details from the mech pilot.

So he decided to go straight to the source.

Voices lied, but spirituality never deceived.

As soon as Ves concentrated his mind and extended his spirituality, he could feel the strength hidden deep inside the Urbesh clansman.

The consequences of performing spiritual surgery on William's head were as clear as day to him. A strange balance had emerged in the mech pilot's mind and spiritual potential.

A weaker portion consisted of William's pure humanity. A hefty dose of cowardice still resided here, counterbalancing the aggressive and chaotic attributes of the stronger portion.

Ves truly had no idea who was in charge. It could be that neither William nor an offshoot of Nyxie was in charge of William's mind and body.

Perhaps the current William was a new entity that inherited the traits of both.

"He's like my spiritual product." Ves suddenly realized.

He widened his eyes. The notion sounded ridiculous, but Ves could not dismiss this crazy possibility.

Had he really displaced the old William by inadvertently turning his spiritual potential into a spiritual product?

"This can't be true!"

In the end, he knew too little about the interaction between spirituality and someone's personality. Affecting one inevitably affected the other, but how interconnected were they really?

After a bit of thought, he dismissed the crazy theory he came up with. He didn't feel as if he mixed William and Nyxie into a third entity. The spiritual attributes that belonged to his old self and the ancient alien spiritual entity maintained a very clear separation.

The situation looked similar to two neighboring hostile states locked in a stalemate.

The original William may be on the backfoot, but he was fighting on home ground. His mind and spiritual potential originally belonged to him, so it possessed a considerable defensive advantage.

As for Nyxie, his unwelcome intrusion into William's spiritual potential couldn't be dislodged either. The alien was too strong in the spiritual department, and even if Ves only introduced him into William's mind through contamination, his spiritual quality was far too high.

The more Ves explored William's mind, the more he figured Silent William out. He had truly become a fusion of two separate influences. He possessed the old William's humanity and Nyxie's alien cruelty and strength at the same time!

Such a combination did not appear very stable to Ves. Many of William's attributes were highly opposed to Nyxie's attributes and vice versa.

However, the two spiritual influences somehow managed to end up in a tenuous balance.

This was because neither side possessed the strength to overpower the other and take over William's mind and body for themselves!

As long as this balance wasn't disrupted, Ves expected the new William to be able to take advantage of both influences.

Nyxie provided the strength and daring to pursue greater power.

The old William reined Nyxie in and inserted some very necessary human norms to the new William.

All of this sounded great, but the condition of William's mind and spiritual potential grew too slowly. After months of continuous high-intensity battles, Silent William barely developed his spiritual potential.

The strongest indicator for this lack of progress was that Silent William hadn't come close to developing a force of will. His mind was chaotic and full of conflicting and contradictory thoughts.

The lack of a unifying ideal prevented William from elevating it into a spiritually-empowered conviction.

"Do I have to perform another bout of surgery?" He mused.

He already operated on his test subject once. He might as well do it again in order to finish the job.

Yet when he thought how messy William became after his first round of surgery, Ves quickly shook his head.

He was playing with forces he didn't fully understand. He lacked the theoretical foundation to manipulate William's mind with purpose.

In the end, he decided on a more direct approach.

"Wake him up, Nitaa."

"On it."

As soon as Nitaa injected some sort of stimulant in William's bloodstream, the man immediately woke up and tried to get his bearings back.

Despite getting knocked out, Silent William did not exhibit any strong reaction. He merely stared at Ves with his disconcerting eyes.

Ves tried his best not to feel spooked.

"Hello again, William."

"..."

"Since you aren't one for small talk, I'll just get straight to the point. As a Larkinson, I'm very familiar on how to nurture an expert candidate. After inspecting you, I think I know the reason why you haven't made any progress on this front."

"..."

"The answer is very simple, really. Your mind is too mixed and unfocused. Every expert pilot I've met has dedicated themselves to a single principle or ideal. Some fight because they want to vanquish evil. Others fight to protect their home state. Many simply want to become the strongest warrior in the galaxy. No matter what they chose to dedicate their lives to, you don't appear to have a goal."

Silent William finally showed a reaction. A hint of confusion glinted in his eyes.

#### *Chapter 1690 Circling Shadows*

After a one-sided lecture, Ves dismissed Silent William as if he was just a regular mech pilot.

Whether Silent William believed in him or not, Ves would make sure that his guest would develop a conviction sooner or later.

As William stepped outside of the office distanced himself from Ves, his facial expressions twitched and jerked in an uncontrollable manner. His entire mind and spirituality fluctuated considerably.

Eventually, his inner turmoil ended, and William quickly restored his impassive expression before resuming his journey back to the Avatar base.

As for Ves, he contemplated William's unusual spiritual state even further. He had never seen anything like it. The thought of being responsible for such an odd and unnatural condition made him feel as if he was playing god.

"Gods are nothing but masters of creation and designers of life." He whispered.

"Meow."

"Haha!" He chuckled. "Too bad I can't conjure up exotics from nothing to feed your insatiable appetite. Besides, isn't Gloriana spoiling you rotten already?"

"Meow."

Lucky still hadn't forgotten about being tossed into the air. He landed on Ves' head and ruffled some hair.

"Hey! Don't mess with my hair! Gloriana will hate me when she sees any sloppiness!"

Ves grabbed Lucky's bone-metallic body and tossed the cat aside yet again. He then activated a command on his terminal that caused a beauty bot to emerge from the side and float to his head in order to fix his hairstyle.

Ever since Gloriana got into his life, he couldn't show up as uncaring for his appearance as before. He had gotten used to activating bots to fix up his looks.

Once his hair became impeccable again, he turned to Nitaa. "You've been following me around for a while now. You know many of my decisions and witnessed many things I have hid from others. Aside from Lucky, you probably know me best. I'm curious to hear your thoughts."

The tall woman frowned. "I'm just your guard, sir. It is not my place to offer advice or question your decisions."

"Well, you're one of my only confidantes." He smiled sardonically at her. "It's funny, isn't it? I'm surrounded by people and I'm constantly recruiting more. Yet I still don't dare to trust them completely."

"I believe Miss Gloriana is worthy of your trust. She has always always reciprocated the trust you have extended to her. I suggest you confide in her if you require someone to share your burdens."

Ves lowered his head as he contemplated this idea again. "Not yet. Although we are close, I'm still not sure whether we'll be together in a permanent capacity. There are too many uncertainties for me to feel relieved with extending my trust towards her. Do you understand?"

"I do not entirely agree." Nitaa. "I have seen you accomplish many things and shape many wonders. I am privileged to pledge my service to a great man such as you. However, you are still human no matter how different you are inside. Every human needs companionship."

He frowned. "I admit that you have a point, but.. I can't guarantee my own security at this point. A great enemy is on the way to our star sector, and many existing organizations would love nothing more than to capture me and cough up my secrets if they become aware of what I really am. I'm surrounded by threats that are too great for me to resist by myself. I can only survive by hiding among the people who are beneath their notice."

He always resorted to hiding himself to protect himself. He was so paranoid about it that he only recently decided to loosen up and expose some of his peculiar abilities.

Acknowledging and naming the auras of his mechs as glows was a way to accelerate his progression and business success. If not for the lack of time and great need to develop himself, he would have never risked this much exposure.

Fortunately, his worst fears hadn't come true. The MTA was way too busy with the invasion of the Red Ocean to bother with investigating a peculiar Class IX design philosophy. Even the Komodo branch of the MTA which was far away from any beyonder gate was oddly quiet.

The lack of reaction encouraged Ves to take the next step and introduce the concept of special features to his mechs.

These special features, while esoteric, were very similar to the abilities built into higher-quality mechs.

Many second-class mechs possessed an enhanced gimmick or two that used fake resonance to inspire all kinds of strange abilities.

The only difference between the two was that other mech designers had to resort to adding expensive resonating exotics to their mechs while Ves could make do by borrowing the power of a design spirit.

While the latter was definitely not as reliable, it didn't really cost anything for Ves to add them to his mechs aside from the effort of creating or obtaining the design spirit.

Perhaps the biggest advantage was that the special features derived from design spirits didn't increase the production cost of his mechs.

If Ves wanted to add some resonating abilities to his mechs, then he probably would have been forced to multiply the production cost by at least a hundred times!

This illustrated the enormous expense required to build a mech with a resonating ability. Many third-rate states therefore limit these applications to expert mechs only, because expert pilots were able to arouse true resonance, which was much more powerful than what ordinary mech pilots could manage.

"There has been a lot of strangeness recently, sir." Nita suddenly spoke up. "I've been keeping in touch with Crindon, who has been tracking all of the unfriendly intrusions that have taken place in the last month."

"What's the problem?"

"More and more unknown individuals have attempted to infiltrate the Mech Nursery or Cloud Estate. We even started finding them on some of our ships or cargo transports."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Have they succeeded?"

"For now. The quality of these infiltrators is inconsistent. As far as we know, no one has ever succeeded in sneaking onto our premises."

"This doesn't help much against spies and informers within our own ranks."

"We have tightened recruitment in order to make sure that we are not inviting any trouble."

"It sounds to me like we have the problem handled." Ves stated.

"We must look beyond the immediate. Someone is expending a lot of men in the hopes of infiltrating our premises. We don't know their goals or who they work for. Despite the many failures and deaths, people are still trying to trespass onto your property."

Though all of this admittedly sounded concerning, Ves had faith in his security arrangements. With hundreds of mechs and a lot of guards patrolling the premises, someone would have to be crazy to think they could get in undetected.

Not only were the Avatars and Sentinels on-guard, Ves could also rely on some other helpers such as Nitaa and Lucky for protection.

Of course, he wasn't easy to take down himself. Even if he was garbage in combat, his excellent gear forcibly elevated his personal strength.

Yet even as he wanted to dismiss Nitaa's concerns, his inner paranoia made him pause.

While he had ample grounds to feel confident in himself, it was not within his nature to dismiss a credible threat.

"If you believe that something must be done, then go ahead and coordinate with Crindon and the Living Sentinels." He instructed. "I'm too busy with other priorities to attend to this matter in person."

"I will take care of this issue on your behalf, sir." Nitaa bowed.

"Good. Don't hesitate to speak up if you have any other concerns. I trust your judgement."

After his brief talk with Nitaa, he left his office and descended all the way down to the lab and workshop floor.

There, he met with Gloriana and the Tovar mech designers as they stood in front of a finished mech.

"So this is our prototype." Ves uttered. "It feels Ylvainan, alright. Good job."

"We.. didn't expect to fabricate a mech like this." Miles Tovar admitted. He appeared conflicted. "The closer we got to finishing it, the more we started to feel as if ignorance was gnawing at our minds. This mech is too insidious!"

It didn't surprise Ves to hear this. The Deliverer prototype standing dormant before him exuded a weak but undeniable glow from its core.

A sense of sacredness emanated from the mech. Any Ylvainan within the range of his glow would inevitably rouse their faiths.

The strength of the prototype's glow was just as strong as the auras of the Transcendent Messengers!

The two were different from the Holy Soldier. Whereas the latter only possessed a mote of Ylvaine's spirituality, the Transcendent Messenger and Deliverer both contained the complete fragment!

Ves had already managed to induce Ylvaine's spiritual fragment to occupy the Deliverer design.

How it could do that while simultaneously occupying the Transcendent Messenger design wasn't clear. Ves had long figured out that some of the rules of reality didn't apply to spirituality.

Whatever the case, the Deliverer managed to embody Prophet Ylvaine in a way that would surely send the Protectorate in a frenzy!

While the Transcendent Messenger possessed an identical glow, there were only six of them in existence.

Well, technically there were seven copies in existence, but Ves already discounted the stolen prototype.

The point was that unlike the Holy Soldiers, the Deliverers conveyed the full might of Ylvaine's fragment.

In a standard mech, this was extremely scary. The Ylvaine Protectorate could purchase as many Deliverers as the LMC produced and spread them all over in order to meet the spiritual needs of its citizens.

Even if the LMC stopped selling them, the government would just purchase the license and continue their production.

So Ves was very sure that the Deliverer would cause a lot of waves in the religious state.

"I can't care about that now. Not when we need its strength."

The design was too important for him to suppress. He truly had faith in its ability to snipe the sandman admirals.

"What do you think about your first time fabricating an Ylvainan mech?"

Miles Tovar grimaced. "As I've said, it's unsettling. This is not a mech that should be built by Brighter hands."

The bias against religion was too strong within Miles and the other Tovar mech designers. They were highly-educated Brighters born in one of the most powerful families of the Bright Republic. There was no way that any of them would ever look at religion in a good light.

Though Ves was disappointed, he did not bother himself too much on this issue. He made an attempt to widen the minds of his students and failed. It was no big deal. He had plenty of other lessons in store.

"You won't look down on this mech once it saves the Bright Republic."

None of the Tovars took this boast seriously. Even if they respected Ves, they still didn't buy into the Deliverer's special features. It sounded too strange. Having built the prototype from the ground up, they detected no materials or components which could accomplish anything notable.

In their eyes, the Deliverer was just a spaceborn marksman mech with an Ylvainan coat.

"You don't need to believe." Ves told them. "You just have to cooperate. We can't test the prototype like we test our other mechs."

"What must we do, sir?"

"For one, we need to test our mech with a variety of mech pilots. I've already invited some Ylvainan marksman mech pilots to act as our primary test pilots. In order to find out if the Deliverer works for non-believers as well, I'll be assigning some Brighter mech pilots to act as a control group."

He began to lay out a modified testing plan. He wasn't really interested in the Deliverer's ordinary performance parameters. He wanted his subordinates to rush through the ordinary tests. Only the Deliverer's extraordinary aspects deserved his attention!