

Mech 1691

Chapter 1691 Hero's Entry

Bentheim!

The Sand War reached its most intense stage at Bentheim!

The battles at the frontlines had turned into a sideshow compared to the great collision between two civilizations in a single port system!

Bentheim was like a black hole that sucked in numerous sandman fleets and human reinforcements on a continuous basis. Its mere existence seemed to warp the surrounding regions, depriving them of most sandmen that would have ordinarily attacked the lesser star systems.

Whether this was a good or bad development for the Bright Republic remained to be seen.

While many vulnerable citizens temporarily escaped the threat of annihilation, the Bentheim system turned into one of the most terrible warzones in the Sand War!

Dozens of sandman fleets poured into the star system every day. While most of them were individually weak, collectively they pressured the defenders to the brink of despair.

"There are too many sandmen!"

"The attacks never end!"

"Sand! Sand! Sand! I never want to see a single grain of sand in my life ever again!"

Almost all of the Bentheim mech divisions had been recalled to bolster the critical port system's defenses.

The planet itself had turned into a hive of war production. Mechs, starfighters and supplies constantly poured out of its many factories. The supply of valuable goods and war materiel not only sustained the defense of Bentheim, but many other vulnerable star systems!

As long as Bentheim stayed in human hands, it continued to supply the entire state!

For this reason, the Bright Republic invested everything possible to strengthen its defenses.

Transport ships towed many defensive platforms in the orbits of planets and moons. The government coerced or incentivized all kinds of gangs and underground forces to defend their homes.

No one ever deciphered the full might of Bentheim's underground community. The smuggling organizations, black market associations, dark mercenary corps that hid in some of the deepest cracks of Bentheim never revealed their presence in the open.

Until now.

No matter how averse they were to fighting alongside the authorities, they couldn't let the sandmen overrun their turf and destroy all of their accumulations.

The most clever underground organizations had already evacuated well in advance. Those who were slower to leave simply couldn't anymore due to how tightly the authorities controlled the local space.

Not a single ship was able to escape Bentheim without the consent of a government institution!

Not even stealth ships managed to get away due to the near-constant scanning taking place in Bentheim's orbit! Many of the defensive platforms orbiting above the planet frequently swept their surroundings for any anomalies.

No matter how much energy the platforms expended in their scans, the government simply didn't care about the costs.

Not when the survival of the entire Bright Republic was at stake!

A dozen or so clashes took place in the outer system. The Mech Corps, Starfighter Corps, Planetary Guard and assisting forces did their best to prevent the sandmen from advancing further.

The casualties were significant. The attrition warfare the sandman seemed so eager to impose on their opposition grinded against the morale of the mech pilots and starfighter pilots who bore the brunt of the fighting.

The glows of the Desolate Soldiers and Prideful Soldiers could do so much to stave off the deterioration of their fighting spirit.

Inspiring one's patriotism and duty could only do so much against the onset of hopelessness!

After recognizing this problem, the government tried many possible remedies.

One solution that seemed effective was to promote the heroes leading the resistance against the sandmen.

Many expert pilots and military commanders made a name for themselves in recent weeks!

Venerable Ghanso Larkinson, who survived the fall of Sydney Superior, held nothing but vengeance in his heart!

"Never again!" He exhorted every warrior. "We must never allow Sydney Superior to happen again! Fight until every moving grain of sand is destroyed!"

Other Larkinsons distinguished themselves as well. Under the stimulation of constant battles, Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson and Porellia Larkinson were becoming more and more remarkable every day.

Their will to defend the Bright Republic and protect the people became stronger and stronger as more and more people placed their hopes on the shoulders of the young expert candidates.

"My predecessors bled and died for our Republic! I will not let their sacrifice go to waste!"

"I must advance as soon as possible! We need more expert pilots to stem the tide!"

The initiative to promote the heroes in their ranks successfully inspired the rank-and-file to persist.

Hope was like a candle that threatened to be snuffed out at any moment.

However, through the constant displays of heroism, the individual soldiers suffering all the hardships had someone to look up to when they needed it the most!

Expert pilots were by far the most popular role models.

While everyone admired expert pilots, they were also jealous at their luck and fortune.

Many people were born as norms. They never had a chance to become the favored people of this Age due to their lacking genetic aptitude.

Those who not only became mech pilots but also took a step further and advanced to expert pilots were considered to be double lucky!

This made expert pilots rather detached from the common folk.

They were heroes. They were noble. They also stood on a far greater height than the rest of humanity. They weren't called demigods for nothing.

While they still inspired a lot of hope, they were far too lacking in the human touch.

The problem wasn't a lack of empathy or sympathy. Expert pilots were still human in their roots, and they hadn't lost their human emotions as they advanced.

It was just that each of them possessed a quality that unconsciously caused people to look up at them. They were far from the common man or woman who someone could have a beer with, for example.

Recently, an ambitious mech pilot stepped into this void in a bombastic manner.

"Pff! What is this flashy display mech doing here?!"

"What the hell?! What is up with that belt?! Why does it look so..?"

"Ricklin's Rollers? Never heard of them! Where do they come from?"

"Wait! I recognize the name! It's Vincent's new outfit! The bastard is back!"

"Terrorist!"

"The BLM killed my parents!"

"He owes me a mech!"

The entry of Ricklin's Rollers provoked a lot of chatter, both good and bad. Their former allegiance to the Bentheim Liberation Movement was no secret.

While it wasn't strange to see former BLM cells taking up arms against the sandmen, the Rollers attracted a lot more attention than usual.

Most of their mechs were rather ordinary. They consisted mostly of Proudful Soldiers, whose unified aura gave the Rollers an aggressive and eager air. Yet these sights were hardly unique due to the many underground organizations that adopted this popular mech model.

It was the mech flying at the head of their formation that ignited a lot of controversy!

"What an impressively large mech!"

"It's slow though. How much armor is tacked onto its frame?! Is the mech pilot afraid to die or what?!"

"It's like an ancient statue floating in space. Just look at the abs of that mech!"

"You know, didn't Vincent used to pilot a similar mech in the past? If I recall, that mech came with a..."

"Codpiece! What an abomination! Is he trying to overcompensate or something?!"

Soon, a lot of people found out that the V-shaped 'belt' of the Adonis Colossus served no practical purpose. A number of mech designers inspected it very carefully and came to the universal conclusion that it was completely superfluous!

In other words, it was a codpiece!

"Look at this record! It says the designer of the previous codpiece mech is the same designer of this new machine!"

"Ves Larkinson! What perverted mech designer! As expected of someone called the Devil Tongue!"

"How could the designer of the best-selling Desolate Soldier stoop to designing such a vulgar mech?!"

"Not only that, but look at the other lead designer! A woman also took part in its design!"

"Hexers are crazy!"

Despite the controversy he provoked, Vincent Ricklin ate it all up! As soon as he piloted his mech, he felt supremely confident in himself.

Nothing would stop him from debuting his heroism in battle!

Flying at the head of a mech company of Proudful Soldiers, the Adonis Colossus seemed to siphon off a huge portion of their glows. The masculinity exuded by the custom mech took on an aggressive and battle-hungry shine.

No matter what everyone thought about the Adonis Colossus, the sandmen soon confronted the force it was a part of. Battle commenced and both sides began to fire thousands of lasers and projectiles!

A large sandman swarm surrounding a dodecahedron-shaped monolith advanced indomitably towards the inner system. The smaller swarm fired countless rapid-fire laser beams at the mechs and starfighters while the larger monolith fired more powerful lasers at the distant ships at a relentless firing rate!

Unlike the more primitive monoliths, this more sophisticated one erected a firing rod on each of its sides!

Each time one of the rods discharged a heavy laser, the monolith changed its orientation, allowing another pre-charged firing rod to fire another heavy laser strike at a vulnerable carrier!

The constant rotation not only allowed the monolith to fire as soon as it changed its orientation, but also spread out the damage to the outer layers of its mass!

It would take an incredible amount of firepower to go through all of the upper layers. The most central portion which presumably held the sandman admirals controlling the monolith remained absolutely safe!

The ten-sided monolith therefore inflicted a huge amount of damage to the carriers over time, forcing the expert mechs to go into action early in order to accelerate the collapse of this abnormal configuration!

In the meantime, a single hybrid mech flew out of formation and almost reached the diminishing starfighter screen!

"This looks like a job for Ricklin's Rollers! Missiles, launch!"

The Adonis Colossus opened the battle by firing its entire first salvo of missiles! The small but very powerful and very expensive missiles streaked across the battlefield and impacted the surface of the monolith with considerable fury!

Hardly any mech pilot noticed the detonations, let alone track the source of the missiles.

The damage inflicted on the monolith was considerable, but far from matching all of the other projectiles that slammed onto its surface.

The actual effect of this missile launch was minimal in the greater scheme of things!

Not that Vincent actually admitted it. "Haha! Take that, sandmen! I hit you right in the face, you manless freaks!"

His Adonis Colossus began to fire its Sandbreaker rifle next. Some of the shots missed the huge monolith in the distance as Vincent forcibly deactivated the assisted targeting system that came with the mech.

A true hero didn't need to rely on automation to win!

Eventually, the sandmen noticed the Adonis Colossus flying close to the starfighters at the vanguard.

The large mech possessed such a large sensor signature that a number of sandman drones automatically diverted their fire in its direction!

"Ouch! Hey! Bad sandman!"

Vincent vengefully diverted his aim from the easy-to-hit monolith to the incredibly swift and agile sandman drones!

None of his shots hit a single target! Each of his Sandbreaker rounds flew through the swarm and continued on its journey out of the star system and into interstellar space!

The sandmen didn't have that problem. The large Adonis Colossus began to attract more than fifty laser attacks within the span of a few seconds!

"Hey! I'm sorry! No more, please!"

In his panic, Vincent barely remembered the defensive system the mech incorporated. He hastily activated the mental command, but his mind was so jittery that his mech couldn't interpret it correctly!

"Damnit! There's got to be a button somewhere!"

Perhaps anticipating that Vincent would have trouble operating his mech in battle, Ves mindfully incorporated a very large red button in the left console of the cockpit interface.

As soon as Vincent slammed his fist onto the button, a large amount of fluid poured out of the ports of the mech. The fluid soon hardened into a solid crystal-like shield in front of the Adonis Colossus.

Vincent activated the function just in time! Though the Adonis Colossus featured high-quality armor, its surface was already starting to melt and crack due to the huge amount of damage it absorbed.

Fortunately, the consumable Lasponge shield blocked a lot of laser strikes, giving Vincent enough time to gather his wits and fly back to his fellow Rollers!

"I'll get you next time, sandmen! Only men deserve to win this war!"

Chapter 1692 The Fourth Aspec

"What a disgrace!"

Gloriana's face turned ugly as she viewed a popular local broadcast during their breakfast period. The narrator lampooned the recent participation of the Adonis Colossus in the Battle of Bentheim.

From its mech pilot's lack of battle awareness to his penchant of relying on the Lasponge system to bail himself out of a difficult situation, the eye-catching mech was catching attention for all the wrong reasons.

What was worse was that the mech pilot in question seemed oblivious to how much ridicule he attracted!

Not only did he livestream all of his battles, the media eagerly played along and used his mech and his antics as comic relief!

It was completely unlike the heroic rise that Ves and Gloriana anticipated! Even though they knew that Vincent was not exactly competent, it was out of their expectations for him to fumble so badly!

"Not every mech pilot lives up to their potential. We are merely responsible for providing a product. It???s up to the customer to decide on how to make use of them. For all we know, our customers might enjoy using our mechs as target practice." Ves stoically remarked as he took another bite of his slow-cooked beef pie.

That did not sit well with Gloriana! She abhorred inefficiency and waste, and that was exactly what Vincent Ricklin was doing!

"This idiot! If he intended to misuse our mech to this degree, I would have never taken part in its design process!"

"Miaow!"

Clixie angrily hissed at the projection. She detested anyone her owner hated!

"Calm down, Gloriana. I expected that something like this might happen, though not to this extent. The way we designed the mech certainly hasn't encouraged him to fight more seriously. The mech mainly draws out his vanity and desire to show off. He's definitely succeeding in that from all of the attention he has drawn."

She followed his advice and took some time to regain her composure.

"Why do pilots like Vincent exist?"

"Hm?"

She gestured at the projection of the Adonis Colossus. "The Hegemony would never tolerate incompetence to this degree! How could he even graduate as a mech pilot in the first place?"

"The Bright Republic needs as many mech pilots as possible. With all of the wars we've been through, manpower is a constant concern for our state. While we have plenty of premier mech academies who hold their cadets to high standards, many more are simply concerned with pumping out as many people who can at least make a mech move without tripping on its feet." Ves plainly answered.

"That sounds alien to me." Gloriana frowned. "It's different in the Hegemony. Our mech academies are very demanding. The instructors would never allow mech cadets to graduate if they are inclined to waste or misuse a mech!"

"This is because second-rate states hold their mech pilots to a stricter standard. Your state is able to invest a lot more resources into the training of its mech pilots. With the budgets of your mech academies, it's a lot easier to ensure the quality of each of their graduates. In addition, their admission standards are higher. From what I've heard, they don't even accept potentates with E or D-grade genetic aptitudes."

"That's because they're not capable of making use of all of the functions of our mechs. We don't bother with designing frontline mechs that caters specifically to unskilled or untalented mech pilots."

This reflected their different circumstances. A third-rate state generally tended to pursue quantity over quality. Two cheap mechs was almost always stronger than one expensive mech.

With the limited money and resources at their disposal, a third-rate state almost always chose to field as many mechs as it could afford. They made much more use of their manpower, not even neglecting the mech pilots who were only able to make use of simplified mechs!

In contrast, a second-rate state always took advantage of its abundant resources and capital. Not only that, but the quality of their manpower was also a lot higher due to the excellent training environment.

For this reason, second-rate states pursued the elite route, and aimed to make every mech and mech pilot count.

While this was very costly, the greatest benefit of this was that the second-rate states preserved their manpower, which was arguably their scarcest resource.

All of those low-aptitude potentates didn't sit on their thumbs, though. The Friday Coalition and Hexadric Hegemony ordinarily enrolled them into part-time training programs to allow them to gain basic proficiency in the piloting profession.

If some day war broke out and the state suffered a lot of casualties, then these reserves of low-quality mech pilots would eventually be activated.

There were a lot of D and E-grade aptitude mech pilots as well as those who did badly in training. In times of desperation, they could do a lot to reverse a defeat.

It was just that second-class mechs were too expensive to activate them casually.

One of the reasons why no one believed the Komodo War would end anytime soon was that both sides involved were still holding this option in reserve.

In any case, Gloriana had only ever interacted with highly trained and highly competent mech pilots in her life. Even among Hexers, she often designed mechs for some of the best standard mech pilots in her state!

"Designing a mech for someone who isn't as dedicated to the piloting profession has been a very novel experience for me." Gloriana sarcastically stated as if she blamed Ves for this unfortunate experience. "Sometimes, I wonder why I'm even staying in the Bright Republic."

"This is my home. It's where I grew up. My design style is steeped in Brighter tradition. Sure, not every mech pilot is up to standard, but trying to design mechs for them is an interesting challenge."

Unfortunately, Gloriana didn't see it that way. She looked at him with disgust before turning aside her head.

It wasn't until they finished breakfast and moved to the Mech Nursery that her resentment faded.

"I can't wait for you to start designing second-class mechs. Your talents are wasted on third-class mechs. The Bright Republic and the Ylvaine Protectorate don't deserve your mechs."

Ves shook his head. "I disagree. Each class of mechs have their own charm. Third-class mechs are much more cost-efficient than any second-class mech."

"No offense, Ves, but third-class mechs are too limited to develop any mech pilot's talents to their fullest. Second-class mechs are much more richer. Unlike the rigid and limited specialties adopted by the Bright Republic's mech industry, the Hegemony's mech industry is much more varied."

She spontaneously started to lecture about the main reasons why second-class mechs were so much better.

"The increased budgets allow for the use of resonating exotics or high technology in standard mech design. As you know, resonating exotics can be combined and applied in ways that result in the activation of powerful phenomena. It's similar to what you intend to do with the Deliverer, but without the corresponding materials."

"I'm already aware of that, Gloriana."

"I don't think you're fully aware of the implications of what this added option brings. Practically all of the third-class mech models on the market are extremely dull compared to second-class mechs with embedded resonating abilities."

"Oh?"

"Take a typical mech squad for example. Why do you think it's customary for eight to twelve mechs to work together? It's not an arbitrary number. At least eight mechs working together can form a self-contained unit that is significantly stronger than two groups of four mechs."

"What are you on about?"

"From what I've observed of third-class mech designers, they mainly focus on the offense, defense and mobility of their products. In the framework of mech design that you adopt, the value of your products depends on how well you combine these three priorities into a worthwhile product."

"I thought that was universal in mech design." Ves stated. "Every mech possesses a different configuration. Some mech designers want to balance the three aspects, while others prefer to focus on one in particular."

Ves always believed in introducing distinctive strengths in his mech design.

Even if he introduced corresponding weaknesses due to his design choices, it was still acceptable. It was up to the customer to employ the mech in situations where it could leverage its strengths while minimizing its weaknesses.

However, Gloriana raised four fingers in front of her face. "You're missing a fourth aspect. Utility."

"Utility?"

"It's the reason why most third-class mech designers fail to adapt to second-class mech designs. You don't understand the importance of utility in higher class mech designs. Some of the crude augmentations that are prevalent in third-class mechs actually fall under this category. Let me show you some examples."

She activated her comm and browsed a site before showing off some footage of mechs in action.

There was a mech that transformed into a stationary sensor tower. Its arrays began to sweep the surrounding areas with such power that the sensor mech quickly detected an enemy squad approaching under stealth!

Another example showcased a mech that wielded a very strange projector that reminded Ves of a fluid projector used by Planetary Guard mechs.

Instead of spraying special slime that immobilized mechs, it instead sprayed some kind of bubbly foam onto damaged mechs that put out fires and filled the gaps and tears in their armor!

Yet another clip showed off a mech that carried a large battery backpack. The reason for carrying all of this extra power became evident as its arms transformed into special arrays that instantly formed a bubble shield around the entire mech squad!

While the bubble shield did not block any physical projectiles, it was extremely effective stopping heat and energy damage!

Laser beams and positron beams stopped going through, giving the mechs sheltering in the bubble a considerable amount of breathing room!

A fourth example displayed a spaceborn mech that flew in the center of a formation of mechs. Just like other mechs, it was completely unarmed. Instead, its unusual shape began to glow as a lot of resonating exotics became active.

As soon as the mech finished charging, it instantly enveloped an entire mech company with a peculiar light!

The instant the light touched the other mechs, they began to accelerate at least three times faster, causing them to reach their destination faster!

All of these examples opened Ves' mind. While he was aware that these capabilities existed, he always considered them to be auxiliary functions.

However, if Gloriana was right, then these abilities actually consisted of one of the core functions of a second-class mech!

"Cheaper second-class mechs don't incorporate these kinds of abilities. They're the equivalent of frontline mechs in a second-rate state. Up until now, you've mainly been exposed to these lesser mechs because I wanted to introduce more advanced mechs at a later date." Gloriana explained.

"So these mechs all distinguish themselves by offering utility, is that right?"

"Partially. I'm sure you've noticed that there is a lot of overlap. The mech that projects an energy shield for example is providing utility by enhancing the defensive capabilities of its mech squad. The mech that speeds up the entire mech company is providing utility by enhancing their mobility. I think the sensor mech is a typical example of a mech that offers pure utility. Its presence doesn't directly enhance the firepower, defense or mobility of the other mechs, but information itself is extremely valuable."

"I see."

Ves began to see Gloriana's point. When second-class mechs begin to incorporate resonating exotics or advanced applications of high technology, they become capable of affecting the battle in a more sophisticated manner.

The examples that Gloriana showed off only touched the surface of how these mechs affected the battlefield!

Gloriana summed up her point.

"In third-class mechs, these functions are seen as gimmicks. In second-class mechs, they're considered utility."

"Third-class mechs can't incorporate any resonating exotics of high technology, so the utility they can provide is very limited. It's completely different for higher classes of mechs!"

Chapter 1693 Wrong Fi

As a mech designer, Ves was already aware of the concept of utility.

However, third-class mech designers viewed utility in a much more limited fashion than second-class mech designers.

The limited resources and technology at his disposal forced Ves to neglect utility in favor of focusing on the other three aspects of his products.

Offense, defense and mobility.

When stripped of all of their complexity, every mech had to offer a winning combination of these three aspects.

Of course, a good mech was not simply a package that scored high on all three aspects. A mech design was much more complicated than that, though many laymen still referred to aggregate numbers such as the mech performance index to get a quick evaluation of a mech.

What made a mech truly great was how well they fulfilled their roles. Having good offense, defense or mobility was often one of the main requirements for many roles, but they were not the only ones that existed.

Gloriana's lecture revealed how the addition of utility completely transformed the landscape of high-end mechs.

A very clear separation existed between cheaper mechs which lacked utility and more expensive mechs which used them as their main selling points.

"Utility allows mechs to manipulate the battlefield in far greater measures." Gloriana explained and called up a list from the galactic net. "Just look at the effects the MTA has registered. Many phenomena, whether they came about through resonating exotics or high technology, have already been categorized and standardized. In fact, the public ones are the most mundane ones. Every mech designer or mech company has developed their own inhouse solutions that aren't as easy to copy."

"Because they're related to their design philosophies, right?"

"Correct." She nodded before sighing. "Some design philosophies are very geared towards excelling in these areas. Mech designers who specialize in forming acceleration fields or damage redirectors can always count on selling lots of mechs as long as their foundational skills are decent enough."

Ves noted something from her wistful tone.

"Your Class I design philosophy doesn't give you much of an advantage with regards to utility."

"Yes!" She admitted. "I work best with the tangible and known aspects of a mech. My research fields encompass their standard properties, which means I'm good at optimizing and maximizing the fundamental parameters of a mech. Advanced utility has always been one of my more lackluster fields. I always had to collaborate or seek assistance from other mech designers if I wanted to add some advanced functionality to my custom mechs."

Gloriana's description of her own specialty suddenly enlightened Ves. He saw the opposite in himself!

"My specialty is pretty much all about utility!" He uttered in realization. "From my glows to my upcoming special features, they all fit in this category! I've never displayed any particular passion towards offense, defense or mobility. They are merely means to an end for me. What I am truly passionate about is adding different strengths and qualities to my mechs that fall outside of those basic areas!"

"Do you realize it now?" She smiled and patted his shoulder. "This is why we fit so well together. I can take care of the aspects you've neglected while you can focus on increasing the utility you can impart to your mech designs. Each of us has something the other wants the most. So long as we can maximize all four aspects, our mech designs are bound to become popular even in the highly-competed Hegemony mech market!"

Utility was pretty much a neglected priority to most third-class mech designers. It wasn't a coincidence that the mech community largely referred to utility applications as gimmicks.

Even in his previous mech designs, the utility they provided was not very spectacular. Even the Aurora Titan, which came with a very useful polarizing module, had to sacrifice almost everything to fit it into the mech.

Mechs which excelled in utility could only be treated as niche mech designs in the Bright Republic and other third-rate states.

As for second-rate states, they became so much more powerful and accessible that customers had begun to expect them to be implemented as core features. A quality second-class mech was not complete unless they incorporated a powerful ability!

After Gloriana explained the importance of utility, Ves gained a broader perspective of his own place in the mech industry.

Whereas most of his peers in the Bright Republic still focused on standing out by excelling in one of the three core aspects, Ves had already taken a different road, one that was more prevalent in second-class mech design.

Perhaps the main reason why an anomaly like him existed was because he depended on 'tech' and 'resources' that were inaccessible to everyone else but himself!

The unique expertise he formed and the ease in which he created or adapted design spirits meant that he was able to add utility to his mechs without paying a prohibitive price!

"You've realized that as well, haven't you?" Gloriana grinned and leaned closer to him. "While I'm aware that you need to expend some time, energy and other costs to apply your specialty to your mechs, you can obviously afford to do it in budget mech projects. Not only that, your specialty doesn't increase the material burden or technological sophistication of your mechs, which gives you an immense competitive advantage! Whereas other mech designers have to add expensive tech and materials, you can make do with adding intangible components to your designs!"

She was right. What Ves was doing was not as unique as he thought. The true value of his specialty was that he could impart utility to his mechs by spending resources that were not as scarce!

"Doesn't this give me an even greater advantage in designing third-class mechs?" He promoted her. "Hardly any third-class mech designer can do what I do. If I step up to designing second-class mechs, wouldn't I be clashing against all kinds of abilities?"

"You still enjoy an advantage here, Ves! We can still incorporate the standard abilities that are publicly known or available for licensing into our designs. If we just leave it there, our mechs are merely average and not as impressive as those who offer unique abilities. It's when we add your specialty that our mechs become special!"

"I get it!" Ves shot up. "We can double the utility of our products if we add standard abilities as well as my special features into their designs. In fact, we can achieve an even greater degree of utility if I can somehow achieve synergies between the two! The potential is great!"

Of course, so far Ves had not developed his special features very highly. The design spirit of the Adonis Colossus didn't offer anything special aside from its glow. While it was a very fantastic glow, it only amplified performance in an indirect manner.

He understood now why Gloriana claimed that his specialty was more valuable with more sophisticated mechs.

The utility he could impart onto third-class mechs were inevitably limited because they had to work in isolation.

In contrast, the utility he could provide to second-class mechs would always be stronger as long as he found a way to achieve synergy.

He had experienced the advantages of synergy several times in his life. He knew how much potential it held!

They eventually turned their attention back to the Deliverer. As one of their upcoming mechs, the Deliverer was a mech that doubtlessly centered around utility.

Though Ves hadn't been able to achieve any synergy with regards to its special features, the mech should already be able to stand on its own.

As Ves and Gloriana entered the workshop, they beheld the finished prototype of the mech.

Gloriana had supervised the fabrication process, so the mech did not contain any major defects. The Tovar mech designers had already received an earful from her about their fumbles.

Ves only made a brief inspection of the mech. He paid particular attention to its X-Factor.

If the X-Factor wasn't coherent enough, the mech would not be able to channel its design spirit as well. This would doubtlessly affect the strength or fluency of its spiritual abilities.

As expected, neither Gloriana nor the Tovars mech designers fully bought into the vision of the mech.

Alternatively, they didn't maintain a high degree of focus while they were fabricating the prototype, which led to a lot of scattering.

This was not a difficult problem for Ves to solve as long as he was willing to expend some spiritual energy.

He concentrated his mind and began to imprint his original vision onto the mech. Through various means, he smoothed out the incongruous factors and corrected a lot of flaws.

It was as if he was finishing a half-made product.

"There. The mech is much better now." He smiled.

Though Gloriana and the Tovars didn't see any changes, they somehow felt that the prototype had changed somehow. Its glow was much more clear and pure. This gave it the illusion that it had grown stronger.

Once he completed this correction, he only performed a cursory inspection of the remainder of the mech.

He provided some feedback to his design team.

"Technically, the prototype is decent. However, your minds were obviously askew while you were fabricating it. Your hearts need to be in the right place to make a good mech."

"We.. started to become uncomfortable as we were piecing together this mech." Miles Tovar answered. "Its glow makes me feel as if I have to betray everything I am in order to convert to a faith!"

Ves looked at their faces and saw that this was a bigger issue than he anticipated. Even if the Tovars didn't like his Deliverer, he thought they would have at least been able to tolerate it while they produced a copy.

Now, he saw that Brighters truly didn't get along with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

He made a mental note to himself to assign the production of the Deliverers to Ylvainans.

This was not a big deal. The Deliverer was a purely Ylvainan mech design, so limiting its productions to the faithful was only natural.

If Ves wanted to fabricate a copy of the Deliverer at the Mech Nursery, then he could only do it himself if he wanted to do it right.

"Let's bring this mech to orbit. I want to test the special features of the mech as fast as possible! I want it done by today!"

Now that the prototype was finally ready, Ves couldn't wait any longer. He wanted to verify his latest theories immediately!

As his design team arranged the transportation of the prototype from the workshop all the way up to orbit, Ves informed the Ylvainan test pilots to be ready to do their jobs.

He was looking forward to their reaction to the Deliverer.

"You also need to invite some mundane mech pilots to act as a control group, remember?" Gloriana poked his side.

"Ah! I'll call ahead."

He briefly called Melkor and told him to select three random Avatars to join the transport ship heading into orbit soon.

The Deliverer may be an Ylvainan product, but Ves could not rule out that non-believers would pilot it as well. He had to make sure that Brighters and other people were able to make adequate use of the mech.

Sadly, his mech wasn't really much good when stripped of its glow and special features. Ves held little hope that his control group would be able to make efficient use of his mech.

In fact, Ves even believed that the Brighter test pilots might clash against the Deliverer's design spirit!

While Prophet Ylvaine had been known to be tolerant towards other beliefs, who knew how well it took to unbelievers blaspheming the mech he guarded!

If everything went right during the first testing session, Ves would be making history today.

Soon, he would know if he succeeded in designing the mech that could save the Bright Republic!

Chapter 1694 Anti-Synergy

"By the Great Prophet! This mech is greater than we have ever hoped!"

As soon as Ves unveiled the Deliverer to his Ylvainan envoys and guests, they immediately collapsed onto their knees and supplicated in front of the mech!

Their hysterical babbles and spontaneous displays of worship disturbed the others currently present in the hangar bay of the carrier used as the testing base.

From the Tovars to the mech technicians, all of them looked at the prostrating Ylvainans as if they were aliens!

It couldn't be helped. Open displays of worship had become so rare in the Bright Republic that it was as if a relic of the past had come back from the dead!

Ves whacked the Tovars on their heads. "What are you gawking at?! The galaxy is full of people of faith! Aren't you familiar with Gloriana!?"

"She normally doesn't express her beliefs." Miles Tovar excused himself.

"That's because she is being mindful to you all! These Ylvainans probably haven't left Protectorate space until now, so they aren't fully aware of our cultural norms. Don't be shocked if they act like this. As long as their actions are harmless, just take them into stride."

Despite his words, the Tovars still couldn't help but regard the Kronon marksman mechs with odd expressions.

Perhaps Ves used to be this way too. Fortunately, the time he spent in the Ylvaine Protectorate allowed him to get accustomed to these kinds of displays.

It was much worse in the Protectorate, that was for sure.

After a few minutes of fanatical worship, the Kronons finally remembered themselves and rose up to their feet.

"Our apologies, Bright Martyr. We.."

Ves waved his arm. "I understand. This mech is similar to the Transcendent Messenger in character. I already expected you to respond in this fashion."

Dominic, Edward and Jezebel all looked incredibly ecstatic. The fact that they were about to test the prototype was an incredible honor!

The reaction of Sergeant Jezebel Kronon was the most pronounced of all. She was practically slobbering over the mech! Her gaze locked onto the mech so strongly that she didn't even bother to pay attention to Bright Martyr!

Ves scratched his head. Was his mech really that great?

As a nonbeliever, Ves merely perceived the Deliverer's glow just like any other aura. While each flavor had their peculiarities, they all fell in the same category to him. If their strength was taken out of the equation, then no glow was more exceptional than others.

This was obviously different for the Kronons. As devout believers in the Ylvainan Faith, their entire attitudes underwent huge shifts the moment they came in touch with the mech!

In fact, they were so unsettled that Ves made a controversial decision.

"Let us begin the initial tests with Avatar mech pilots." He told everyone before turning to the Kronons. "The three of you are too excited right now. Don't forget the purpose of your stay here. I need sober and focused test pilots to demonstrate the strengths and abilities of my prototype."

The Kronons each looked remorseful. As disciplined soldiers, they recognized how bad it was for them to lose their composure.

Ves decided to console them a little. "You still have an opportunity to pilot my Deliverer, but not immediately. Remember that piloting my prototype is a privilege. I need to collect data, and if you aren't able to help me with that, you're not useful to me as test pilots."

After this incident, he moved on to a compartment converted to a makeshift control room.

Some Avatar mech pilot stepped into the mech and started to boot up the mech. Ves paid close attention to the reaction of this mech pilot and the telemetry of his neural connection.

Gloriana, who understood this data better than Ves, soon spotted some issues.

"There are problems with the neural connection."

"What?" Ves looked startled. He had already seen some strange deviations from the norm, but he didn't fully understand what they meant. "Is the mech pilot at risk?"

The Avatar mech pilot currently sitting in the cockpit was Yaric Nolan. He was one of the newer Avatars who was slated to join the second group about to deploy to the front.

The reason why he'd been chosen to test pilot the mech was because he specialized in piloting spaceborn rifleman mechs.

While he didn't pilot marksman mechs, he was proficient and trained in their use. This made him the closest thing to a dedicated marksman mech pilot among the Avatars.

"Not quite." Gloriana shook her head. "It's just that Mr. Nolan is psychologically holding himself back from deepening his immersion in the mech. The fit between the two is rather poor."

It didn't take much guessing to find out the reason why. Yoric Nolan was repelled by the Deliverer. Whether it was just his bias at work or his mind putting up its guard against the Deliverer's glow, the result was that the neural connection was a lot weaker than normal.

"How much weaker is the connection, exactly?"

"I'd say.. thirty percent."

Oof. a thirty percent drop in responsiveness, data transmission and other parameters was a very severe handicap!

It was the same as if a top athlete suddenly changed into the body of a normal human! Even though many of the functions were still the same, the severe drop in performance in so many areas completely rendered the athlete useless in his role!

After consulting with Gloriana and some of the testing personnel, Ves saw no further health issues. "Proceed with the test, but skip the ones involving more intensive motions. Instruct Mr. Nolan to take it easy and avoid any drastic movements."

The mech flew out of the hangar bay and slowly emerged into space. With the clouds of Cloudy Curtain as a backdrop, the Deliverer's first sortie seemed remarkably unexceptional.

The mech started to undergo basic motion tests. It raised its arms, kicked its legs, flew in every direction, spun around on its axis, aimed its gauss rifle from one side to the other side and so on.

These tests not only verified the integrity of the mech and its assembly, but also allowed the mech pilot to slowly familiarize himself with his machine.

Gloriana hummed as she continued to observe the pilot-based telemetry.

"It's rather peculiar. Normally, mech pilots slowly increase their immersion and deepen their connections with their mechs after settling into the cockpit. Nolan's connection is actually decreasing!"

"What?!"

Ves had never heard of this instance happening! The only times such a travesty ought to happen was if the mech was heavily damaged or if the neural interface was malfunctioning!

He immediately manipulated the terminal in front of him and called up the current condition of the mech, which was all green. He then shifted to the condition of the neural interface, which was completely green as well.

In order to be sure, he activated an internal diagnostic that thoroughly swept the neural interface for any damage or corruption.

Nothing was amiss.

After ruling out any errors on this front, Ves could only conclude that Nolan was extremely incompatible with the Deliverer's design spirit.

In truth, it already made sense to Ves. The X-Factor was a double-edged blade. It could enhance the mech pilot's effective performance if he fit well with the X-Factor of the mech.

In the same way, the mech pilot's effective performance could also tank if his personality was a poor fit with the X-Factor of the mech!

This was an instance of anti-synergy, where the outcome was less than the sum of its parts.

Of course, he couldn't say as much to the testing personnel and observers, but that didn't matter. All of them were under the mistaken impression that the prototype was heavily flawed or that its design was an abject failure.

Only Ves and Gloriana knew better. They shared a sheepish look with each other.

"I've never tested the Transcendent Messenger or Holy Soldier with non-Ylvainan mech pilots." Ves realized. "The idea never really came up to me before. They were always aimed at Ylvainan mech pilots, so I didn't bother trying to figure out if they were effective in the hands of Brighters or people of different faiths."

Evidently, pairing mechs with incompatible mech pilots was a very bad idea. Though the mech pilot did not seem to incur any damage, the drop in battle effectiveness was so severe that Yoric Nolan piloted his mech as if he possessed an E-grade genetic aptitude!

Gloriana became increasingly more irked at the jerky and awful movements of the prototype.

"I can't take this any longer. Why don't we end this session and switch to another mech pilot?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "We should see this session through, if only so that we can understand the consequences of incompatibility more."

"Urgh! Suit yourself, but you better do it without me! I can't stand this ugly sight!"

Gloriana left the control room in frustration, leaving Ves alone to supervise the remainder of the session.

He didn't mind. Nolan's deteriorating performance made him want to bash his head against the bulkhead. His Deliverer may not be the most graceful mech he designed, but he never meant for it to resemble a fat clown!

Suffice to say, despite Nolan's specialization, the Deliverer performed exceptionally poorly in the basic marksmanship tests.

The carrier released a number of cheap target bots in space, which flew out straight downwards of the orbital plane.

Naturally, there was no way they would allow the Deliverer to shoot in the direction of Cloudy Curtain or any other planet or star system for that matter. Who knew if a gauss rifle round would hit a transport ship that was on her way to deliver a batch of materials to the Mech Nursery tomorrow?

To Nolan's credit, the Deliverer did not have much issue in hitting stationary targets at close to medium range.

Due to their small size, it became incredibly hard to hit them at long range.

It was only when the target bots started to move that Nolan's accuracy went downhill. The Deliverer completely failed to exhibit its Guided Aim ability as the mech achieved an incredibly poor hit rate of 9 percent!

By the time the Deliverer expended its half-filled ammunition stores, almost everyone involved in the test regarded either the mech or its mech pilot as a failure!

"I'm sorry, Mr. Larkinson." Nolan apologized directly to Ves over the comm. "I tried my best, but this mech is just..!"

"You don't have to excuse yourself. Your performance was within my expectations." Ves said. "The Deliverer is an explicitly Ylvainan mech. It shouldn't be any surprise for your strength to drop while you're piloting it. I'm sure you will get right back to normal as soon as you pilot a Desolate Soldier or Dawnbreaker. In fact, when you return, why not hop into a spare Desolate Soldier and see whether your piloting fluency has restored?"

Ves initially wanted to move on to testing the mech with another test pilot, but he had to pay some extra consideration to his Avatars. As one of his future elites, he couldn't let Nolan wallow in his failure today, especially since it wasn't his fault.

Once he offered Nolan a way to restore his confidence, the second testing session proceeded soon after.

The second Avatar to step into the cockpit exhibited a nearly-identical drop in connection strength and battle performance.

It was as if the mech had become rusty and damaged all of a sudden. It was so dramatic that Ves suspected that the attitude of the mech pilot towards the mech was not the only factor.

Was Ylvaine's spiritual fragment actively trying to repel the non-believers from piloting the mechs under its purview?

It made a lot of sense to Ves. After all, the design spirit had only ever come in touch with believers after becoming the design spirits of the Transcendent Messenger and Holy Soldiers.

After the second testing session was a bust, the third session with a non-Ylvainan mech pilot commenced soon after.

Different from last time, the telemetry showed a very different circumstance this time!

Even though Gloriana wasn't here, Ves understood the changes enough to determine that the connection quality was a lot higher! It was as if a devout Ylvainan was in the cockpit instead of a faithless Brighter!

"Who is the third test pilot?!"

One of the testing personnel provided an immediate answer.

"Joshua King!"

Chapter 1695 Respecting A Mech

One of the greatest ambitions a potentate from Cloudy Curtain could have was to become a member of the Avatars of Myth.

The amount of boys and girls who dreamt of becoming an Avatar surpassed those who wanted to join the Mech Corps!

Perhaps the reputation of the Avatars hadn't reached a resounding level elsewhere, but in Cloudy Curtain they were the premier mech troop of their planet!

The Mech Corps was too far away for most locals. Even when the Light Hounds and the Equinox Stingers sent mechs to defend their little corner of space, they mostly flew around in deep space.

In contrast, the Avatars mechs occasionally showed up in public whenever they escorted Ves around or went on their practice sessions.

While the Avatars did not deliberately pursue fame, they already attracted due to their high status within Ves' orbit.

While the Living Sentinels were more numerous and visible, their nature as glorified guards for the LMC meant their prestige simply didn't match that of the more elite force.

Joshua was proud to be an Avatar. He had trained long and hard in order to come into Ves Larkinson's eye. Becoming his man and piloting his mechs was his greatest ambition, and now that he got his foot in the door, he fulfilled one of his most cherished dreams!

Each day, he woke up and wore his golden uniform with pride. While he had mainly been subjected to tedious combat drills ever since he became an Avatar, he never complained or slacked off no matter how much pressure the Larkinson instructors piled up on his shoulders!

This was because of two reasons.

First, he wanted to distinguish himself among the Avatars. Joining this elite outfit was just the start.

What he truly wanted was to become Ves Larkinson's champion!

Only then would he be privileged enough to pilot a custom mech that he could call his own!

This was why he was not content with being treated as a rookie Avatar. Ever since the veteran Avatars under the command of Commander Melkor returned from the front, Joshua immediately saw the difference between him and the survivors.

"I need to prove myself as well!"

To do that, he needed to survive whatever gauntlet was in store for him, hence the need to polish his skills even further!

Second, training was a great pleasure, because he often piloted actual LMC mechs!

While the Avatars frequently held simulation training, the Larkinson instructors highly prized live training with real mechs.

Only by piloting an actual machine of alloy and grit would rookies like Joshua be able to embody them in battle!

Due to his varied skills and talent, Joshua quickly caught the attention of the instructors.

They started to treat him like a Larkinson and intensified his training regime.

Even a trueblood Larkinson mech pilot would have complained at the intensive load, but Joshua accepted it without any complaint.

This was because every live training session was a joyous occasion to him! He was addicted to LMC mechs!

Over the months since he joined the Avatars, he fulfilled another dream. His varied training allowed him to pilot several different mech models that he had only touched in simulations and virtual reality games!

The physical mechs were so much more majestic in real life!

"I feel truly connected to my mech!"

He piloted various great staple mechs of the LMC such as the Blackbeak and the Crystal Lord. Each new mech he piloted granted him a different experience that was so much fuller than piloting their virtual equivalents!

Naturally, due to the sandman crisis, Joshua mainly participated in drills with his personal Desolate Soldier.

Yes. The Avatars assigned him a mech that he could truly call his own!

Joshua often lingered after practice and brushed his hand over the smooth and cold surface of his mech. While he did not own the mech in his name, he knew it was very likely going to be his partner when he eventually deployed to the front as part of the second group.

The constant drills, primarily in space, deepened his proficiency in piloting the Desolate Soldier.

Before he joined the Avatars, he often polished his skills by piloting the virtual LMC mechs until he unearthed almost every little quirk they possessed. After some adjustment, Joshua easily managed to transfer his previously-acquired skills to the Desolate Soldier!

His prior training with the Crystal Lord had polished his marksmanship. While it took some time for him to adjust to using ballistic rifles in space, he eventually managed to raise his accuracy scores!

Spending hundreds of hours on trying to work around the limitations of the Aurora Titan gave him a decent intuitive grasp on spaceborn combat and maneuvering.

While the Desolate Soldier was much faster than a super-medium space knight, Joshua easily comprehended its controls!

As a result, Joshua soon mastered the basic and advanced operation of the Desolate Soldier. While there was still room to improve, he needed to perform a lot of rote practice or undergo frequent combat to go further.

While Joshua was not opposed to deepening his mastery of the Desolate Soldier step-by-step, he felt there was more to the mech than met the eye.

"A living mech is never a simple machine!"

This was what he believed. Joshua had studied the LMC's motto and founding principles to a much greater extent than his colleagues.

Unlike them, he believed in the LMC's mission. He believed that living mechs existed. He should know, as he piloted them every day!

The glows were more than odd psychoactive influencing fields to him. Regardless of the science and engineering behind them, to Joshua they represented the living souls of the LMC mechs!

No other mech he came in touch with offered anything like it. The handful of mech models the Avatars acquired from other mech companies did not feel as lively as an LMC mech.

Not even the great Dawnbreaker surpassed the humble Desolate Soldier in his eyes!

Sadly, he was almost alone in his appreciation of LMC mechs.

It was not as if the other Avatars were opposed to his passionate views on LMC mechs. They piloted LMC mechs for a living, after all. They were simply reluctant to buy into his more extreme opinions.

To them, a mech was a mech regardless of their brand.

"Heh, I'll show you all how we should truly appreciate an LMC mech!" He grinned.

When the call came to test pilot one of Ves Larkinson's new designs, Joshua immediately volunteered!

Even when he was told that it would be an Ylvainan mech design, he didn't care!

Whereas many other Avatars shied away from piloting a faith-themed mech, Joshua only became more fiery!

This was because he always regretted not being able to pilot a Transcendent Messenger!

In fact, Joshua hated the fact he couldn't pilot any custom mech designed by Ves! The Resentful Soldier and the Adonis Colossus constantly haunted his dreams!

"Piloting this new Ylvainan mech is the next best thing to piloting a Transcendent Messenger!" He reasoned when he accepted this task.

When he boarded the carrier that ascended into space, he finally learned about the new mech that Ves Larkinson had been working on these past few months.

"The Deliverer! A spaceborn marksman mech designed to assassinate high-value sandman targets!"

While Joshua wasn't sure what exactly constituted a 'high-value sandman target', he immediately understood why it was an Ylvainan mech when he had the time to inspect the prototype.

"It's just like the Holy Soldier, but so much more." He whispered.

The Deliverer exuded the same glow as the variant, but in a much stronger and purer fashion!

Despite creeping out his two comrades, Joshua did not exhibit any aversion towards it. To him, each glow was alive, and each of them deserved appreciation.

"The key to mastering an LMC mech is to gain its approval."

This was the insight he gained after spending thousands of hours piloting virtual LMC mechs in his academy days.

Therefore, he maintained absolute respect towards the Deliverer throughout the long wait.

While he was eager to hop into its cockpit right away, he did not dare to do so until he properly grasped how to gain the prototype's respect.

He allowed his comrades to test pilot the mech first while he mentally adjusted himself to pilot this unreleased mech.

Eventually, he figured out a reasonable approach.

"I should show my respect to the Ylvainan Faith."

He never piloted a physical Holy Soldier as the LMC did not have it in stock on Cloudy Curtain. However, he had the opportunity to pilot the virtual version.

After several frustrating practice sessions, he finally managed to get rid of his unease by reading up on the Ylvainan Faith and expressing his sympathy towards its tenets.

"I don't have to convert to the faith. It's enough to keep an open mind!"

According to his studies, the Ylvainans treated every human as a fellow brother and sister. Regardless of their beliefs, humans and aliens of all stripes were all eligible to ascend to godhood when the promised time arrived!

By accepting this assumption or at least keep an open mind about it, Joshua believed he found the key to gain the acceptance of an Ylvainan mech!

"What worked for the Holy Soldier will surely work for the Deliverer!"

When it was his turn to pilot the mech, he reined in his eagerness and approached the mech cautiously.

"Please accept my presence and put me under your care." He bowed in front of the mech.

The closer he got, the more he experienced its exceptionally pure radiance.

Though he initially felt uncomfortable, he constantly tried to convey his respect towards the religion and the mech.

"Please allow me to channel your will!"

His sense of unease did not resolve in an instant. It was a lot harder to earn the Deliverer's appreciation compared to the Holy Soldier!

When he stepped into the cockpit and interfaced with the mech, his unease multiplied!

The neural connection put him in direct contact with the mech! The pressure on him intensified as he had the illusion that he was being judged!

"I will not be found wanting!"

He opened himself up to his mech without resorting to any of the usual safeguards that mech pilots learned in the academy.

This was incredibly dangerous, especially with a newly-developed mech! As long as the mech glitched for some reason, his head could easily be harmed!

However, Joshua did not consider these matters at the moment. He knew that he needed to gain the mech's trust and acceptance, and what better way to do so than to open up his entire mind?

A strange sensation swept through his being. While he was not sure what was going on, he knew that he could hide nothing from the Deliverer!

"If you are truly alive, then please accept my sincerity!"

Eventually, the penetrating sensation subsided, and a comfortable equilibrium emerged. A smile emerged on his face when he realized what had happened!

"You've accepted me! Thank you so much! I will do everything to live up to your promise!"

While his integration with the Deliverer was not as great as with his other mechs, he at least maintained a comfortable degree of closeness with the machine!

"It's as if I'm a guest in someone else's home!"

Joshua knew that it would be hard to gain greater acceptance from the mech as long as he did not convert in the faith.

"Should I convert?"

The more he learned about the Ylvainan Faith, the more he grew comfortable with its beliefs. While they were rather weird, they didn't cross his lines.

It was just that Brighters were taught from young to regard religion with skepticism.

Joshua sheepishly smiled as he flew the Deliverer into space. "How did Mr. Larkinson design a mech like you in the first place? Isn't he a Brighter as well? Since he can work with Ylvainan mechs, so can I! I'll definitely find a way to master you, just you wait!"

Chapter 1696 Test of Faith

How could Joshua King possibly mesh so well with the Deliverer?

It didn't make any sense!

His two fellow Avatars failed to bring out even a fraction of the Deliverer's potential! Their instinctive aversion towards the mech and the Deliverer's rejection towards nonbelievers resulted in a great degree of incompatibility.

Ves assumed that only Ylvainans would be able to make full use of the Deliverer.

He only threw in some Brighters at the mech in order to gather more data and verify some of his assumptions.

He never expected to encounter an anomaly!

What kind of freak was he for accomplishing the impossible? The neural telemetry the mech transmitted to the carrier was so smooth that Ves would have thought that Joshua was an Ylvainan!

Did he convert to the faith or something?

Ves decided to get his answers directly from the source. He opened up a direct communication channel to the prototype.

"Joshua, your performance so far has astounded us. Can you tell me how you managed to increase your compatibility with the Deliverer?"

"Mr. Larkinson! It's an honor for me to speak to you again! As a fan of your mechs, I've developed a common method to bind with them more closely. In accordance with your company's principles, each of your mechs are alive and deserve to be treated as such! Once I understood this point, I always approach every mech you've designed with nothing but the utmost respect and sincerity! Treat a living mech right, and they'll repay the favor!"

This.. was exactly what Ves wanted to convey to mech pilots. He had spent so long in trying to impress the meaning of living mechs to the public, yet everyone still regarded his mechs as tools.

Joshua's mindset towards his mechs was like music to his ears. Ves couldn't help but raise his appreciation towards the young Avatar.

This mech pilot was different! Joshua understood the true essence of his mechs!

Only a few other mech pilots that Ves had encountered came close. Certainly, mech pilots such as Jannzi Larkinson developed an extremely intimate bond with her Shield of Samar, but this dedication only applied to a single mech design.

Joshua was obviously different. This was definitely his first time piloting a Deliverer. No other Deliverer mech existed considering that the design was still incomplete until very recently!

For the native Cloudy Curtainer to develop an immediate rapport with a distinctly Ylvainan mech defied his expectations!

Ves began to pepper Joshua with questions.

"How would you describe your current bond with the prototype?"

"It's like I'm being welcomed in Prophet Ylvaine's house as a guest, sir."

"Do you feel you are getting closer to the mech?"

"No, sir. I think this is as close as I can get. I'm not an Ylvainan, sadly."

"Do you feel the urge to become one?"

"I.. not truly. Not at this point. I'm developing a greater appreciation towards the faith the longer I pilot this mech, though."

The questions went on and on, either verifying or disproving the assumptions that Ves had formed.

Once he exhausted Joshua's ability to explain his situation, Ves ended the questioning and allowed the testing session to resume.

Gloriana, who heard about what happened, returned to the control room a short moment ago. She wordlessly approached the terminal and inspected the readings related to the mech pilot closely.

"This is.. odd." She admitted. "Mr. King here is genuinely comfortable with piloting the Deliverer. This is in stark contrast to the previous two test pilots."

"It's not so odd when you hear Joshua's approach." Ves smiled. "He's the first mech pilot I've met who wholeheartedly treats my products as living entities."

"If I recall, he's an early fan of yours, right? I'm sure that more mech pilots will follow in his footsteps. He's just the first to comprehend your mechs to this degree."

The testing session proceeded as normal once the immediate excitement had passed. The testing personnel diligently observed and recorded the prototype's parameters as it began to perform acrobatics.

What interested everyone the most was when the Deliverer finally started to fire at the target bots.

"Well, the Deliverer is finally working properly in the hands of a proper mech pilots." Gloriana noted with pleasure.

Unlike the previous disgraceful performances that aroused her disgust, Joshua's proficient piloting made the Deliverer look harmonious in action!

The mech's accuracy against stationary targets at close and medium range was excellent. Ves recognized that Joshua's slow and deliberate firing rate was reminiscent of the Old Soul, the virtual training mech that he once designed for students to improve their marksmanship.

Still, the Deliverer shouldn't be firing so slowly in actual battles against the sandmen. Time was of the essence and the mech should have plenty of ammunition and energy to spare.

"Please speed up your firing rate, Joshua." He instructed. "Imagine facing a sandman fleet in battle. If you aren't able to snipe the sandman admiral hiding among the drones, an entire planet will perish!"

"I-I understand, sir!"

The Deliverer soon increased its vigor in Joshua's hands. The massive Executor rifle barked out powerful rounds with such force that its flight systems had to spike in order to negate its considerable recoil.

The hit rate deteriorated as Joshua no longer enjoyed enough time to line up his aim. It dropped even further when the target bots started moving and dodging.

This was as much of a test of the Deliverer as the mech pilot's individual accuracy. This was also why Ves wanted to record the performance of the prototype with several mech pilots. In this way, he could compensate for their individual marksmanship and develop a general overview of his mech.

Gloriana continued to look pleased. "Joshua is doing quite decently. He's doing a bit worse than if he's piloting the Desolate Soldier. He's only doing a bit better when the range grows longer, but that is a given considering his current weapon."

The Desolate Soldier actually possessed an advantage at close-to-medium range. A ballistic rifle like the Sandbreaker rifle was extremely simple and fairly easy to handle. It was also a lot lighter and easier to adjust.

At longer ranges, the Deliverer's Executor rifle actually gained an advantage. As a higher-tech gauss rifle, its muzzle velocity was incomparably better. This gave the targets less time to move and dodge incoming fire.

As the Deliverer started to run out of ammunition, the target bots were really making Joshua sweat!

Not only had the distance stretched to the limits of the effective range of the Executor rifle, the final test also simulated the conditions of its intended use.

Around a hundred targets bots buzzed and flew in a facsimile of a sandman swarm. Ves had secretly installed a colored bomb inside one of the bots. Once the bot was hit, the bomb would explode in scarlet fury.

Ves installed this bomb extremely well, taking out a couple of superfluous components to keep its mass and sensor signature the same.

To be honest, he didn't even know which of the bots in the swarm carried the bomb. This would ensure absolute fairness in the test, as not even Ylvaine's spiritual fragment would be able to cheat by accessing his mind!

"It seems like Joshua's compatibility with the Deliverer is not good enough." He whispered.

Joshua managed to hit three drones in the distant swarm. This was an amazing feat of accuracy considering that the bots were much smaller than the typical sandman drone.

Unfortunately, none of the three unlucky drones contained the priority target that the Deliverer was meant to destroy.

"Alright, let's end the testing session here. Joshua, come back to the carrier."

"Yes, sir."

The mech pilot obviously sounded glum due to his failure in hitting his assigned target.

In fact, Ves actually didn't expect Joshua to be able to accomplish another impossible feat.

Once the Deliverer returned, a crew of mech technicians refilled its energy and ammunition reserves. They also inspected the mech for any obvious faults.

The prototype was still in close to optimal state. The next tests could proceed without any major issue. In fact, continuous testing was not a bad idea as they could test whether the mech could cope with back-to-back sorties.

Finally, a real Ylvainan mech pilot entered the Deliverer's cockpit for the first time.

Lieutenant Dominic Kronon had the pleasure of piloting the mech after Joshua's turn. The experienced marksman mech pilot quickly got the hang of the prototype's basic operation and flew it out into space.

As the Deliverer started to make the same basic movements at the start of each deployment, Ves and Gloriana closely observed the telemetry related to the mech pilot's integration with the mech.

"It's better than with Joshua, that's for sure." Gloriana concluded.

"If Joshua is a guest in Ylvaine's home, then Dominic Kronon must be a resident!"

Just looking at the feed displaying the interior of the cockpit hinted at this difference. The mech lieutenant's face was practically rapturous as he came closer to the source of his faith than ever!

Ves actually underestimated the impact on Ylvainan mech pilots when they came in touch with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment!

Dominic's entire body and mind resonated powerfully with his closest beliefs! A vast, supreme existence touched his entire being.

This being tested his faith and found nothing wanting!

As soon as Dominic passed this test of faith, the mech beckoned him deeper, encouraging him to immerse himself further until he practically embodied the machine!

For a time, Dominic was the Deliverer, and the Deliverer was Dominic!

This sublime moment changed his entire life, but only happened for a relatively short period. Once he got back to the testing session, his fluency in piloting the prototype constantly increased!

He had long passed Joshua's scores and went a step further!

As a devout Ylvainan, he already possessed a high degree of compatibility with the Deliver.

As a marksman mech specialist, he easily became accustomed to the Deliverer's operation.

Many marksman mechs were slow and lightly armored, but this was the first time the mech lieutenant piloted a mech so deficient in these aspects.

Nonetheless, his close connection with his mech did not allow him to show any doubt towards the Deliverer's configuration.

If the Great Prophet himself had blessed this mech, then who was he to doubt its viability in combat?

At the very least, the offensive might of the mech was not in question!

As soon as the testing session proceeded to shooting down target bots, Dominic finally showcased his considerable skill in marksmanship!

Despite firing as fast as the gauss rifle could cycle, he managed to sustain a near-perfect hit rate at close to medium range!

He even managed to hit slow-moving targets at longer ranges with a high degree of accuracy!

It was only when the target bots started to whizz and accelerate as fast as actual sandman drones that the lieutenant encountered difficulties.

It was simply too difficult to hit the tiny bots when they moved so fast. His impeccable aim and prediction ability could no longer keep up with the situation.

When a hundred target bots simulated a sandman swarm, Dominic only managed to hit a couple of mundane targets.

He failed to take out the primary objective!

"This won't do." Ves frowned.

Was Ylvaine's spiritual fragment being lazy or something? Where was the Guided Aim ability that Ves placed his entire hopes upon?!

He gritted his teeth. Just as he was starting concentrate his mind in order to get in touch with the inscrutable fragment, the situation suddenly changed!

A distinctly red explosion enveloped one of the target bots!

In the backdrop of space, the explosion was like a bloody flower that bloomed amidst the starry seas!

The sight astounded Ves and Gloriana. Both of them knew what it represented.

"The lieutenant already took out three ordinary drones. That means that there was a one-in-ninety-seven chance for him to take out the primary objective!"

Those were miniscule odds! For the prototype to hit the correct target should hardly be a coincidence!

Nonetheless, Ves couldn't rule out this possibility. He needed to repeat the same scenario again and again in order to verify that the Deliverer actually received assistance!

"This test is not conclusive yet! Let's do it again!"

Chapter 1697 The Prophet's Dignity

In the subsequent testing sessions, Ves and Gloriana divided their work.

Ves mainly paid attention to the integration between mech and mech pilot and also kept an eye on any spiritual interactions.

Meanwhile, Gloriana busied herself by observing the prototype's technical performance.

"The Deliverer is performing exactly as expected in this regard." She noted as Sergeant Jezebel Kronon was having the time of her life with the Ylvainan mech. "Our prototype excels in offense but is poor in everything else."

"We haven't stress-tested its weaknesses yet."

"It doesn't matter. I can already see it. The armor of our mech is so poor that a simple Desolate Soldier can defeat with ease. It's acceleration is so weak that it is poor in dogfights, skirmishing and any other form of maneuver warfare."

As the mech designer responsible for making these design choices, Ves was fully aware of these shortcomings.

However, planning for them was one thing, seeing the mech perform so poorly in reality was another thing!

If the Deliverer failed to live up its promises, then Ves doomed a lot of customers!

"Well, its special features aren't as reliable as I thought." He murmured.

The prototype failed in trying to dodge weak practice rounds launched by tiny bots. The second special feature of the mech designed to rely on prediction to dodge incoming attacks did not seem very useful.

Perhaps it already activated a few times, but with how the test was put together, Ves couldn't distinguish external assistance to the judgement and instincts of the mech pilot.

It seemed that making Prescient Movement one of the selling points of his mechs was not a good idea.

As for the Guided Aim ability, each Kronon mech pilot managed to display it once, hitting the primary objective after firing just a few shots.

This was definitely not a coincidence anymore. Ylvaine's spiritual fragment truly intervened and directed the mech pilot to aim at a specific target bot!

The only issue was that subsequent attempts to snipe down the bot designated as the sandman admiral failed.

Certainly, Dominic, Edward and Jezebel became increasingly proficient in their marksmanship as they grew accustomed to piloting the Deliverer. Yet this growth was just an ordinary progression that took place with every mech pilot's introduction to a new mech model.

While the control room gathered plenty of precise and useful data about the Deliverer's regular operation, Ves did not really find it all that interesting.

He knew how the mech performed in ordinary times. When it came down to it, the performance exhibited by the prototype did not differ too much from its performance in the simulations.

Ves already anticipated this result long ago. For all of its extremes, the Deliverer was not a complex mech design. Its frame did not incorporate a lot of systems and most of its available internal capacity was filled with energy cells and ammunition containers.

The most complex part about the mech was its Executor rifle, but even then it was just a mech-sized weapon. Such weapons were always simpler than the mechs that wielded them in battle.

Even so, simulating the operation of a gauss rifle was pretty easy as long as it did not contain any abstruse effects. Though Gloriana worked on it for some time, the optimizations she made did not reach the point where modelling became skewed.

Therefore, the physical tests mostly served to affirm the Deliverer's theoretical performance parameters.

Only the special features couldn't be tested in simulated tests. There was no 'human' mech pilot to bond with the design spirit. Ylvaine's spiritual fragment could not develop a connection with an entity that was neither alive nor sentient.

Ves had hoped that the testing sessions today showcased the promise of the Deliverer's Guided Aim ability.

His hopes only partially came true. Demonstrating this capability just once per mech pilot was too stingy!

Perhaps he should go directly to the source for answers.

He stood still as he concentrated his mind and centered his thoughts on the design of the Deliverer.

Soon enough, he made contact with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment.

He mentally conveyed his doubts towards it. Why did it offer its assistance so infrequently?

The fragment already transmitted its answers.

"You are.. not a dispenser to be drawn upon as someone wishes. You.. must pay a price to affect the material realm. Is that what you're trying to say?" He mentally conveyed.

The spiritual fragment seemed rather proud, Ves. It did not wish to be turned into a slave to the mechs it was supposed to be watching over. The Great Prophet was a great man in the past who stood far above everyone's heads. Its spiritual fragment was just as conceited, if not more!

Ves was unsure whether the spiritual fragment accurately represented its origin's attitude. He found it to be a little bit too arrogant for his liking.

However, the impressions conveyed by the fragment were not ungrounded.

It demeaned the prophet if his spiritual remnant was used too much in tests. The fragment only complied once because Ves would have beaten it up if it withheld its powers entirely!

"What's the deal here?"

The fragment conveyed a series of impressions that clarified its stance.

If Ves was interpreting them correctly, then Ylvaine's spiritual fragment did not wish to extend its powers too frequently and arbitrarily. It only intended to come to a mech pilot's assistance if he truly needed it and if helping him truly benefited the Ylvainan people and faith!

"This sounds.. reasonable." He muttered in a mixed tone.

Obviously, Ves was less than enthused. He could hardly convince others that the Deliverers were able to save the Bright Republic if the mechs only demonstrated their Guided Aim ability when it truly mattered!

The severe reduction in reliability was a major hit to the value proposition of the mech. While Ves had taken this possibility into account, having it come true left a sour taste in his mouth.

"Nothing comes for free." He reminded himself.

Very likely, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment only agreed to extend some help at all because its own flock was under threat. The Ylvaine Protectorate might fall if the fragment did not assist its defenders at crucial moments!

In every other case, the spiritual fragment was highly disinclined to lend its strength. Ves was unsure how much it cost the spiritual fragment to influence a mech pilot. He had the feeling he was being hoodwinked on this front.

"You just want to keep your distance and appear inviolable." He accused.

The spiritual fragment did not respond to his suspicions. It merely conveyed its intentions, nothing more. It was up to Ves to decide what he should do with what he learned.

Perhaps Ylvaine's spiritual fragment already predicted it, but Ves decided it was not worth it to put his relationship with it under strain.

Therefore, he accepted its conditions and hoped that the fragment would still activate the Guided Aim ability in the defense of the Ylvaine Protectorate and the Bright Republic.

"Remember. If the Bright Republic falls, so will the state founded by your people. Make sure to defend my state just as well as yours!"

The two formed an unspoken pact. So long as both of them helped each other out, they would both get what they wanted!

Ylvaine's spiritual fragment simply wanted to pay the lowest possible price to uphold his end of the deal. The Deliverer was a mech that should only be employed in great need. It should not be relied upon in low-level conflicts between two squabbling outfits.

"How is it, Ves?" Gloriana approached his side at the end of the testing for the day. "Is the Deliverer up to your expectations?"

"Hmm. The prototype revealed much during the testing sessions. The special features I placed my hopes upon turn out to be akin to blessings. They are granted to the mech pilots of my Deliverers by a stuffy god who is too stuck up for his own good."

"I see. Isn't that what is supposed to happen?"

"I was expecting more."

"Oh, Ves." She patted his shoulder. "Gods like to pretend they're inviolable and dignified. If you want them to do more than act on their self-interest, you have to show that you are greater than them! Are you in control or not?"

Ves grimaced. "I'm not. I am dealing with forces that surpass my strength. This gives my products a powerful advantage. The downside is that they won't exactly do what I want, especially if they are wiser and more mature."

In general, his spiritual products were pretty obedient to him. Ves was one of their parents, so they were highly cooperative towards him whenever he issued an instruction.

Other spiritual entities such as Ylvaine's spiritual fragment were generally more powerful and asserted themselves more. When they grew powerful, they were willing to push their own agenda above his own.

This made working with them a diplomatic challenge. Ves had to make sure to maintain friendly relations with them. This meant that it was unwise for him to force them to do something they disagreed with or went against their principles.

Ves knew that the primary reason why the Ylvainans adored him was because he designed mechs that brought them closer to their faiths. The Transcendent Messenger, Holy Soldier and Deliverer designs all enshrined Ylvaine's spiritual fragment as their design spirits or a contributor at the very least!

He could not afford to lose the fragment's support, especially in these uncertain times where wars had engulfed the star sector.

For this reason, he refrained himself from teaching it a lesson.

Besides, at its current spiritual strength, Ves would have to borrow the strength of the F-stone to win a confrontation, which was highly wasteful.

The offensive charge of the F-stone should not be squandered!

"Let's go meet with the pilots and receive their feedback." He suggested.

"Very well."

After wrapping up their business at the control room, they left the compartment and went down the halls until they reached a ready room.

Four of the six mech pilots who tested the Deliverer awaited their arrival.

Joshua immediately stood out. Whereas the other three mech pilots wore Kronon Dynasty uniforms, the Cloudy Curtainer was the only one who wore a golden Avatar uniform!

"At ease." Ves casually waved his hand.

Upon his entry into the ready room, all four pilots had immediately jumped to their feet and saluted him with a frenzy that he had scarcely witnessed elsewhere!

"Sir! It is a great honor to pilot the Deliverer!" Jezebel spoke out of an overflowing sense of devoutness. Her bloodshot eyes bore into Ves as if he was the second coming of the Great Prophet! "Regardless of my orders and prior commitments, I would like to dedicate myself to your service! Let me be the first Ylvainan to fight on your behalf as an Avatar!"

"Sergeant Jezebel Kronon!" Lieutenant Dominic Kronon immediately clapped her back. "Please go through the proper formalities before you make such a declaration! The Kronon Dynasty still requires our service!"

"Hah! As if you don't intend to do the same, sir! You just want to do it properly, that's all!"

"Think of your family!"

"The Kronon Dynasty won't do anything to them, sir! Serving the Bright Martyr is a worthy cause."

"AHEM!" Ves forcibly interrupted the Kronons. "While my Avatars are open to recruiting any capable mech pilot, I am not here to poach you from the Kronon Dynasty. I have work to do, so let's get on with this feedback session. Mr. King, let's start with you, since you appear to be the most clear-headed at the moment. What is your impression of my new mech?"

Joshua thrust out his chest forward as if he was just as honored as the Ylvainans!

"Your mech is sublime! It is a great mech that is like a refreshing cup of the purest spring water drawn from an unsoiled terrestrial planet! It is like a gap has opened up in the cloud cover of our home planet and allowed warm sunlight to shine directly onto my body!"

What kind of answer was this? Ves hardly gained anything useful out of this prattle!

Chapter 1698 Spirit Key

The testing of the prototype intensified in the next few days. With several test pilots, the Deliverer continuously deployed into space as soon as it finished resupplying.

Though the continuous deployments quickly started to wear out the more vulnerable parts of the mech, this was exactly what Ves and Gloriana wanted. They needed to see how well the machine fared when put to constant use with only a minimal amount of servicing between deployments.

"While the pace of deployments is slower in Bentheim, most mechs are still forced to sortie once or twice a day." Gloriana commented. "Most mechs, especially commercial ones, aren't rigorous enough to endure continuous high-intensity combat. They're designed to be as cheap as possible while still offering an adequate level of performance in a couple of battles or a drawn out engagement."

Such mechs were designed to receive extensive servicing after a major engagement. In normal circumstances, this was often the case.

It was just that the sandmen race was too perverse. They attacked the Komodo Star Sector in continuous waves regardless of the amount of losses they suffered!

While this form of attrition warfare was extremely wasteful and would surely exhaust the sandmen in time, hardly any opponent could endure the constant pressure as long as it persisted!

Therefore, the requirements of every mech designed to participate in the Sand War had been raised. They needed to be enduring enough to match the rigor of military mechs!

Fortunately, most capable mech designers from the Bright Republic were already used to designing mechs that could take part in the Bright-Vesia Wars. They just needed to pay more attention to the endurance and integrity of their mechs in order to increase their longevity when put to constant use.

This was one of the strong points of the Bright Republic's mech industry. The needs of the state and market demand had already primed mech designers to cope with this requirement.

This was especially the case for higher-ranking mech designers affiliated with the Mech Corps.

Even Ves possessed an abundant amount of experience in this style of mech design. In addition to working a lot with the mechs of the Flagrant Vandals, he also designed a couple of mechs for the military.

The Desolate Soldier had already been designed to be rigorous enough to fare decently well in the Sand War. He applied the lessons he learned since then into increasing the robustness of the Deliverer.

While its armor was still paper-thin, its internals were extremely well put together and would not wear out so easily.

At the very least, the critical parts shouldn't be prone to breaking at random moments!

The mech was still going strong even as it lost a leg and suffered a lot of damage to its torso!

Of course, to make his mechs so robust, Ves had to make a lot of tradeoffs. By opting for sturdier parts, he had to expend more of his budget, preventing him from splurging more money on tougher armor or a more powerful flight system.

The stronger parts also increased the mass of the mech, making it an even more sluggish machine to pilot.

Nonetheless, Ves believed that he made the right choice. Seeing the Deliverer hold up well after thirty continuous deployments made him feel very satisfied with his work.

This was especially impressive as the testers started performing stress tests. The prototype endured constant beatings as practice bots continued to pelt it with lasers and other projectiles.

Even when the attacks breached its armor and started to damage the internals, the mech still maintained some battle effectiveness.

"This is something I've never paid any attention to." Gloriana admitted as she admired the valiance of the Deliverer. "In the Hegemony, most battles are sporadic, but when they erupt, they're very terrifying. Mechs have to unleash as much strength as possible when it really matters. After that, it's fine if they can't return to their peak in a short amount of time, because the decisive battle has already been fought. Only in wartime situations do we need to adopt a different paradigm. I think that most mech designers at home don't get it yet and will be slow to prioritize rigor."

"Ves looked surprised. "I thought you Hexer mech designers are all smart. You have all of those fancy implants and gene treatments, after all."

She smiled. "Our needs are very much different. For so long, we were one of the apex powers in the Komodo Star Sector. No one dares to offend us casually, so our mech designs cater to different needs. After designing mechs for low-intensity skirmishes and duels for several centuries, I fear that my fellow Hexers will be slow to adjust."

"What about you?"

"I've learned a lot from you." She smiled and gave him a quick hug. "While I'm not a fan of third-class mechs, I do have to admit that they have their own charm."

At the end of the testing session, Ves and Gloriana obtained a very clear idea on the strengths of weaknesses of their designs.

If all of the spiritual elements were taken out of the equation, then the Deliverer was already good enough to stand on its own. Gloriana especially elevated its degree of optimization to a height that Ves could scarcely reach on his own. The prototype therefore exposed very few flaws, and the ones that did emerge could easily be fixed with a couple of tweaks.

However, a good mech in itself did not mean it was a guaranteed success. Many mech designers released new mech models onto the market all the time, but only a fraction of them enjoyed commercial success.

"There are already many different competing marksman mech models on the market." Gloriana noted after she performed a quick search on the galactic net. "While most of them are lastgen models released prior to the Sand War, they still offer roughly comparable performance to our Deliverer."

There were differences, of course. For one, the Deliverer was considerably more potent in offense compared to similar mech models in the same price range. This also made it a lot worse in independent combat and non-ideal circumstances.

Most outfits would probably opt for a more self-sufficient model than a mech that was too dependent on other elements.

Even in the Sand War, the Deliverer still failed to match prevailing demand. The mechs that sold the most were mechs capable of outputting a high volume of fire without expending too much money and resources.

This was why the Soldier product line and the Dawnbreaker product line sold so well.

Marksmen mechs that offered accurate long-ranged support were practically useless. This was because they were more expensive to procure and operate, while the damage they inflicted was not that much better than a budget mech armed with a Sandbreaker rifle.

It would be a different case if the sandmen exposed their hierarchy, but no one had ever managed to assassinate the sandman admirals on a consistent basis.

Monoliths and other configurations were too massive to punch through in a short amount of time while the sandman swarms were too chaotic to identify high-value targets in their midst.

For this reason, it simply didn't make any sense for a mech designer to introduce a marksman mech to the market.

"The only reason why we have the confidence to do so is because of our unique advantages." Gloriana proudly stated. "With your specialty, we can transform trash into treasure! No one else can equal what we can do! Our Deliverer will certainly astound the regional mech market!"

Ves tapped the desk with his finger. "Most mech pilots can't exert the full strength of the Deliverer, though. This is a mech that is destined to be valued by Ylvainans and no one else. People like Joshua may be an exception, but I doubt the rest of the Bright Republic can imitate his feat."

"With your status and reputation among the Ylvainan people, any mech you design will sell well with those people. You can even design a genuine trash mech and still sell tens of thousands of copies."

"I'd ruin my reputation and my goodwill with the Ylvainans if I did that. I'm realistic enough to recognize that the only reason the Ylvainans value me so much is because I design mechs that bring them closer to their faith."

"That won't be a problem with our mech design."

If he wanted to retain this advantage, he needed to reciprocate the trust the Ylvainans put in him. The glow of the Deliverer ought to be more than enough to make them pleased!

In fact, Ves didn't have to work so hard to achieve this. He remembered the amount of trouble and suffering he went through to design the Transcendent Messenger.

However, now that he formed Ylvaine's spiritual fragment, he could continue to milk it over and over again without going through all of that prior effort!

In other words, as long as he succeeded in his initial investment, he was in the position to constantly recycle and reuse his existing design spirits without paying a single credit!

This was why Ves found it so important to build up a catalog of design spirits. As long as he collected and created hundreds of them, he could continue to sit back and reap the benefits of his prior investments for centuries!

Right now, Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was enough to secure him a supreme position in the Protectorate's mech market!

"It's a lot easier to tailor a mech design for a specific culture."

Ylvaine's spiritual fragment was special because it essentially formed a key which Ves could use to gain an immense amount of respect of the Ylvainan people!

A light suddenly shined in his head!

What if he obtained other 'keys' that could unlock the hearts of other states and cultures?

This solution worked best for states which possessed a strong, unified culture that was distinct from general society.

Religious societies worked best for this purpose.

His enthusiasm subsided a bit as he realized that this wasn't a viable solution for the Bright Republic. Its society was highly secular and its values were so general and commonplace that a single design spirit would never command total respect.

The same probably applied to other secular states such as the Friday Coalition. Even though its partners possessed their own cultural identities, none of them were easily susceptible to a single design spirit!

He made an oblique glance towards Gloriana, who happily hummed as she marked out a couple of areas on the design that they needed to revise.

The Friday Coalition may be impossible to unify with a single design spirit, but what about the Hexadric Hegemony?

It possessed a few similarities to the Ylvaine Protectorate. Not only did they develop a strong and distinctive culture that was outside the norm, they were also a lot more religious.

While hexism wasn't universal in the Hegemony, there was no doubt that every Hexer believed that women were superior.

As long as he formed a design spirit that coincided with Hexer beliefs, he could probably gain entry to their notoriously insular society!

However.. the mere thought of forming a spiritual entity that looked down on his own gender made him feel very uneasy.

Would he be creating his own doom by forming such a ridiculously man-hating design spirit?!

Ves immediately shelved this idea for now. He wasn't in a position to take part in the Hegemony's mech industry at the moment, so he had plenty of time to consider his options.

If he had a choice, he would rather find some other second-rate state to appeal towards. Perhaps he should consider moving to the Vicious Mountain or Majestic Teal Star Sector in the coming years.

He glanced at Gloriana again. He wasn't sure if she would agree to that. She might figure out that he was attempting to evade her home state.

"Hey, are you paying attention, Ves? Come help me with planning our improvements!"

"Okay!"

Chapter 1699 Government Response

After testing the prototype, Ves and Gloriana swiftly returned to the design lab in order to make use of the data they gathered.

No mech ever came out flawlessly after completing their initial design. Even Gloriana, who excelled in spotting and correcting flaws, could achieve this level of perfection.

While they managed to spot flaws easily when the mech was in a pristine state, as long as its condition deteriorated, all kinds of unexpected shortcomings emerged.

Due to time, manpower and budget limitations, the LMC could not afford to test hundreds of prototypes in order to unveil every possible malfunction that could occur as a result of damage or wear and tear.

The LMC did not actually need to go that far. Most of those possible shortcomings were rare, and could only be fixed by making tradeoffs, which would likely introduce new flaws in the design.

If the LMC was a trans-galactic enterprise that spanned the entirety of human space, then Ves would definitely be willing to go through thousands of prototypes to tease out every possibility.

As it was, he had to make do with two at most.

"The sandmen are continuing to gain ground. The third line of defense is constantly losing strength." He reasoned. "For this reason, speed is of the essence. We can't afford to delay the release of the Deliverer for too long."

The updates he received painted an increasingly grimmer picture. The biggest factor was the loss of infrastructure and the complete cessation of cross-border trade.

Hardly any foreign traders dared to ship any goods to Bentheim at this time! Its outer system was infested with sandmen and the defenders were too stretched to wipe them out immediately.

Too many trade vessels had already become sandman food during these past few weeks!

Only the government and the biggest domestic shipping companies managed to sustain the flow of goods in and out of Bentheim. Their rates had skyrocketed as a response as demand for shipping was far too high.

The government commandeered more and more infrastructure and institutions to keep their war engines going. As a consequence, monthly inflation already surpassed a hundred percent and did not seem to slow anytime soon!

Any normal economic activity would soon be a thing of the past. A lot of commercial development at Cloudy Curtain had ceased or scaled as a response.

Under these dire circumstances, even Gloriana had to admit that she needed to lower her standards this time. If she insisted on delaying the release to refine the Deliverer even further, the Bright Republic might be gone by the time the mechs could come into action!

Though Ves estimated that his state could still hold on for a couple of months, he had to take into account the delay between the Deliverer's release and its eventual use in other states.

The Ylvaine Protectorate would definitely use the Deliverers to save their own state first!

Even if the Kronons were willing to make a deal with other states and dispatch Kronon marksman mech pilots to assist its neighbors, it would still take at least a month or more to reach Bentheim from Protectorate space!

Ves thought back on the three Kronons who had been assigned to him. They were probably the only mech pilots in the Bentheim region who could make full use of the Deliverer!

Once he realized this, he began to view them in a different light.

In the current circumstances, Lieutenant Dominic Kronon and his fellow Ylvainans were definitely worth their weight in high-grade exotics!

"They can immediately head to Bentheim in order to assist in the defense!"

Of course, he wouldn't offer to do so at this point. While the LMC did not hide the testing of the prototype from other observers, it was nothing more than a peculiar-looking marksman mech at this point. It had not yet demonstrated the capacity to snipe sandman admirals.

The defense of Bentheim was firmly under the control of the military. The Mech Corps and Starfighter Corps subordinated every other force in order to maximize coordination and minimize confusion.

This way, the military unified the scattered strength of Bentheim's many influences. However, the military also looked down on external forces as a result.

In the view of the government, the military would definitely play the leading role in defeating the sandmen! There was no way Ves could convince the higher ups to put their faith in a commercial mech model, especially an Ylvainan one!

"Only the Ylvainans are willing to believe my claims." He sighed.

This wasn't a guess. Lieutenant Dominic Kronon had not only been sent to Ves in order to offer assistance, he also acted as a liaison.

Through the help of Crindon, Ves found out that the mech lieutenant frequently contacted the Kronon Dynasty.

Since the lieutenant made use of military encryption, Crindon hadn't been able to crack the transmissions.

It didn't matter. The point was that Dominic doubtlessly informed the Protectorate of the potential of his Deliverer!

Ves had already given him permission to do so. He had nothing to hide anyway.

When Dominic met with him again, he conveyed his government's response.

"The three leading dynasties are willing to provide full support to produce your Deliverers." He told Ves. "Soon, some representatives will approach the LMC to hash out the details. This won't be simple because both of our currencies have become unstable."

Ves dismissively waved his hand. "We can talk about remuneration later. The most important thing is to roll out enough Deliverers to turn the tide of the war."

"I understand, Mr. Larkinson. I will convey your intentions to my superiors."

In truth, the Ylvaine Protectorate was probably doing better than the Bright Republic at this point. The latter needed the Deliverers more, but Ves had no choice but to work with the most receptive client first.

Aside from communication from the government of the Ylvaine Protectorate, Ves also received an important notice from Miles Tovar.

"Senator Tovar wishes for me to inform you that he has managed to achieve a compromise regarding your.. tenuous security situation."

"Oh?" Ves leaned back against the terminal of the design lab. "Will the government finally get off my back?"

"Not quite." Miles shook his head. "The Light Hounds have completed their mission. I think. They will soon depart the Cloudy Curtain System. Instead, a smaller detachment from the Mech Corps will arrive to reinforce our star system."

"How many mechs?"

"I'm not sure. Two to six mech companies maybe, all military. They'll be permanently assigned to Cloudy Curtain to defend the planet against any encroaching sandmen."

"Is that even needed? Aside from the abnormal sandman fleet that intruded in our star system a few weeks ago, no further incursions took place."

"The government isn't relieved with that. Your life is important, Ves, more so now that your Deliverer mechs have the potential to achieve the impossible!"

Perhaps most Brighters would respond with skepticism towards his new mech design, but five Tovar mech designers personally took part in its design. They knew more about what Ves intended to design and the recent prototype testing sessions also proved that its Guided Aim ability was not purely fantasy!

"Does Senator Tovar believe in the Deliverer?" Ves pointed asked.

"I... can't really say." Miles admitted. "I think he is keeping an open mind. He has purposefully advocated on your behalf. The compromise he forged is quite controversial. While Bentheim isn't safe anymore, other strategic star systems such as Rittersberg and New Foundation are still secure. You would definitely be safe if you shelter at those locations."

"No. Absolutely not. This is my home and I won't abandon it easily."

Of course, this was just an excuse to Ves. While he did care about his home planet and all of the infrastructure he built on it, he cared about his own life and freedom even more!

Whether Senator Tovar was aware of his true intentions, Ves couldn't guess.

"So which mech regiment is reinforcing our star system?"

"That is still under discussion, from what I know. The Mech Corps really can't spare too much mechs from their existing assignments. They have to make a considerable sacrifice in order to placate you. I've even heard that they're attempting to prepare a unit led by a Larkinson that you can get along with. I hope you appreciate the military's efforts, Mr. Larkinson."

That last detail came as a welcome surprise to Ves. "Ah, I would appreciate that. Any Larkinson is welcome at Cloudy Curtain."

With his considerable influence in the Larkinson Family, Ves would definitely be able to exert some influence on the Larkinson in the military.

If that wasn't possible, then any of the other older generation Larkinsons on Cloudy Curtain would certainly put in a good word on his behalf!

Ves would not have to be afraid of developing friction with his protectors if that was the case.

As for whether this reassignment might inadvertently lead to the fall of Bentheim, Ves did not dare to think any further in this direction. He was already culpable for the deaths of trillions of humans in the Komodo Star Sector for unwittingly releasing Sigrund from his cage.

In any case, the good news from two separate governments lifted up his mood and made him even more enthusiastic about finishing the Deliverer.

Only a few days went by as Ves and Gloriana rapidly addressed the shortcomings they identified. With the help of their design team, they ran millions of simulations that tested the second iteration for any new flaws.

Because of the data they already collected beforehand, the second testing was a lot more targeted and purposeful. The simulations revealed a number of tiny flaws that weren't very complicated to fix.

Ves and Gloriana completed the second iteration of the design very quickly!

While they unavoidably rushed this phase, they really couldn't help it. Ves seemed to sense a clock hanging over everyone's head. It was constantly ticking down as he was continuing to waste time on fixing minor flaws that did not impact the quality of mech in a significant fashion!

Sure, if Ves published his mech design at this current state, it would probably be 95 percent as good as if he spent half a year to optimize it further.

Yet did the Bright Republic really need a product that reached 100 percent of its potential?

Let alone 95 percent, a design that only exhibited 80 percent of its potential was already enough to fulfill its essential function!

Of course, Ves had to be very mindful of Gloriana about this. To her, 95 percent was already egregious enough. Releasing a mech that was only 80 percent 'complete' would absolutely drive her mad!

"I'm not happy about this at all, Ves, but you're the boss of this design project. This is your decision and therefore your responsibility. I'm just a helper."

"Even so, this still takes a lot out of you."

"It's not that bad." She tilted her head. "I've already recovered from my mental exhaustion. I think I've even grown a little stronger as a result. I feel I can tolerate more things now."

Both of them hugged at each other as they supervised the Tovar mech designers fabricating the second prototype of the Deliverer.

Different from last time, the Tovars had already learned their lessons. They adjusted their mindset towards the project and tried to show at least some respect towards the design.

It helped that the first prototype already vindicated the design. No matter how much skepticism the design team held, it had no choice but to accept the evidence!

Soon enough, the second prototype was complete, and another round of testing ensued.

Ves and Gloriana did not have to supervise this process in person. They remained on the surface and began to discuss and plan their next steps.

What mech should they design next? What steps should they take to prepare for the possible fall of Bentheim? Many things had to be discussed. Completing the Deliverer design was not the end of their troubles!

Chapter 1700 Reinforcements

"The Deliverer design is almost complete." Ves announced.

The data gathered during the testing of the second prototype revealed no major flaws or setbacks. While plenty of minor issues had popped up, Ves did not think they were significant enough to go back to the drawing board to design a third iteration.

The time wasted on designing and testing a third iteration was not worth delaying the release of the Deliverer design!

"What will we do next?"

Ves shrugged. "I'm not sure yet. I haven't made up my mind on what to design next. The mech markets are still in flux. Any semblance of normality is gone. There is no way we can sell mechs normally in the stricken states."

Normal commercial activity no longer took place in the Bright Republic. The LMC had long ended production at the Mech Nursery. In Bentheim, the new plants that went up were mostly relegated to producing Desolate Soldiers and Proudful Soldiers to replenish the losses of the local defenders.

The situation wasn't much better in the Vesia Kingdom, Reinald Republic and elsewhere. Only the Ylvaine Protectorate treated the LMC as an independent commercial entity!

Clearly, the three leading dynasties changed their stance towards Ves. The higher-ups became increasingly willing to acknowledge him as the Bright Martyr, especially when they received news on the Deliverer design!

"This new mech design will deliver us from the evil of the soulless sandmen! It's right there in its name!"

The Transcendent Messenger and Holy Soldier already proved Ves' chops as a mech designer who aided the Ylvainan Faith and people. Even if he was a Brighter, he had become the most prominent mech designer in their state! Not even their local Seniors could match his prestige amongst their people at this point!

Ves found this very strange when he found out about this. He had worked so hard to form a footing in the Bright Republic's mech industry and expand his scope step-by-step. He even planned to reduce the LMC's operations after the Sand War in order to avoid encroaching on the turf of more established competitors.

Yet if Ves wanted to, he could immediately head to the Ylvaine Protectorate and become a hegemon in its mech industry!

"What a farce!" He lamented.

While it sounded as if he was set for life if he took root in the Protectorate, Ves knew that it would not be good to become known as an 'Ylvainan' mech designer.

Sure, he'd enjoy guaranteed success in the Protectorate, but what about elsewhere? Ylvainan mech designers never enjoyed much success in foreign markets. Even their Seniors were unable to match up against Seniors from other states!

The weakness of the Ylvainan mech industry due to centuries of isolation could not be solved in a short amount of time. Ves would only be dragging himself down to their level if he embraced their customs.

However, that did not mean that Ves intended to neglect this market. It was still a bastion of support that Ves could always count upon as long as the Ylvainans acknowledged him as the Bright Martyr.

As for the immediate future, Ves had no answer to what mech he should design next.

"With the halt of commercial activity, there is no point in designing another mech for the market." He stated. "I think the Sand War is starting to reach a turning point soon."

Whatever mech that needed to be designed has already been done by other mech designers."

Gloriana reluctantly agreed. "It's difficult to come up with another mech that can fulfill a need that isn't being met. Mech models such as the Dawnbreaker are already meeting the needs of most customers."

They both sat at the empty design lab and stared in each other's faces as if they expected the other to come up with a solution.

It was almost impossible to come up with an innovative new mech concept that could swing the Sand War in humanity's favor.

In addition, even if the Sand War ended in victory for their side, the regional mech markets would still be in flux for some time. The states spent a lot of money to the point where they were knee-deep in debt while grappling with hyperinflation. The economies of devastated states would probably take years or even decades to recover!

Certainly, some mech activity would quickly resume as many forces would definitely try to fight over the spoils the sandmen left behind, but this was not enough to return the mech market to its most flourishing state!

"You know, you've already designed plenty of mechs for others." She eventually spoke. "Why not design something for yourself?"

"I'm not a mech pilot, Gloriana." He frowned.

"Of course I didn't mean that! What I really meant was designing a mech for your Avatars!"

A mech exclusive to the Avatars? Ves became intrigued by this suggestion.

"I'm not opposed to that, but... such a mech design would only be relevant for a couple of years. Don't forget that I intend to cultivate my Avatars into second-class mech pilots."

"Then you can just dump the mechs to the Living Sentinels."

"Hmm, that's true, though it's hardly needed."

He wasn't really enthusiastic about this course of action. Ves still wanted to design mechs for actual customers instead of himself. This was his instinct as an independent mech designer.

"We could move elsewhere." She suggested. "The Sentinel Kingdom, perhaps? There's always demand for mechs there, since the state is constantly resisting the pirates of the Nyxian Gap."

Ves shook his head. "It's too dangerous there, and I'm not sure if the Sentinel Kingdom will even welcome our presence."

He really did not wish to mix up with the Sentinel Kingdom's murky undercurrents. The state was way too intertwined with Nyxian pirates.

Not only that, the Nyxian Gap was also home to a hidden base of the Five Scrolls Compact!

If any Compact agents left the Nyxian Gap, they would surely pass through Sentinel on their way to their destinations! In fact, Ves highly suspected that the Compact maintained a thorough presence in the state!

After exchanging a few more ideas, neither of them managed to come up with an idea for the future.

Ves eventually gave up. "We don't have to maintain active design projects at all times. Sometimes, it's not a bad idea to take a breather and take care of some other affairs in our lull time."

She nodded. "I've neglected some priorities lately."

They agreed to spend their time on other matters and wait until they came up with a new design project.

In the following days, the second prototype soon completed testing. As expected, the issues that occurred were too trivial for Ves to bother with, so he simply finalized the current design and published it without any further delay!

He did not bother with arranging any publicity or high-profile reveal events. His target audience was already aware of the significance of the Deliverer.

Through Lieutenant Dominic Kronon, Ves came to an informal accord with the three leading dynasties.

Though their lawyers still had to draft some formal contracts and other documents, Ves simply allowed the Ylvainans to produce the Deliverers ahead of time!

The Deliverer design hadn't even been validated by the MTA at this point!

Even if Ves waited for the MTA to issue its judgement, he didn't expect much good. The MTA would certainly employ their own people as test pilots. Since the Deliverer rejected non-believers, those test pilots would definitely have a very bad time!

If not for securing the rights of the Deliverer design, Ves wouldn't even bother with submitting its design to the MTA.

Naturally, Ves and Gloriana needed to build some Deliverers as well. The Avatars currently hosted three Kronon marksman mech pilots. It would be a waste to neglect their capabilities!

Ves and his girlfriend personally fabricated three Deliverers within a week. Unfortunately, no special circumstances occurred and none of the mechs approached the masterwork threshold.

Though Ves was still very passionate about the Deliverer, rushing its design didn't do him any favors.

If he took some more time to perfect and optimize the design, he might have come closer to producing a masterwork mech.

He didn't share his suspicions with Gloriana. It was better to keep her in the dark about this missed opportunity.

The three Kronon mech pilots became ecstatic when Ves assigned them their new mechs!

"These are gold label Deliverer mechs!"

All of them were aware of the significance of the gold label. Ves had personally built these mechs by hand!

Their quality was incomparable to silver label mechs and they were much more spiritually in tune. There was no question that the three gold label Deliverers surpassed any Deliverer produced in the Ylvaine Protectorate!

Ves left the Avatars to take care of the rest. The Kronons had already become accustomed to the Deliverers after test piloting its prototypes, but they still needed some time to gain full proficiency.

Several other developments took place at this time.

Perhaps the most important was the departure of the second detachment of Avatars and Sentinels.

Commander Magdalena Larkinson presided over hundreds of mechs and enough light carriers to hold them all!

Ves decided to add one of the Deliverer mechs to the group as well. None of the Kronons objected to being sent to the front. They were eager to prove the Deliverer in actual combat!

"I only need one of you to accompany the second group." Ves said when he saw that all three Kronons volunteered.

Eventually, Lieutenant Dominic made a careful judgement and decided to send out Jezebel.

As the most fanatic believer among the three, the female Kronon developed the closest bond with her mech.

She would definitely be able to turn a lot of heads on the battlefield!

"Thank you, Bright Martyr!" She bowed to him. "I will show these unbelievers the salvation that you have so generously offered to them! The Bright Republic will come to know your magnificence!"

"Uhh.. okay." Ves haltingly spoke. "Just don't go overboard, okay?"

Due to the increasingly gloomy mood settling over the Bright Republic, the LMC did not hold an elaborate ceremony to send the second group off. The Sentinel Commander along with Joshua, the Ingvar siblings and many other Avatars and Sentinels departed Cloudy Curtain without much fanfare.

In the meantime, another development took place.

Raymond entered Ves' office. "The replacements of the Light Hounds will soon arrive in our star system. We won't have to worry about our security once they have settled in. With the departure of the second group, we're a lot more vulnerable than before."

"I'm eager to plug this gap as well." Ves smiled. "Do you know which mech regiment the reinforcements hail from? It's rather strange that the Mech Corps has been mum."

"That's because the reinforcements actually consist of several intact remnants of broken units. That's all I can tell you for now. We'll have to find out who we are dealing with once they arrive."

The new unit arrived scarcely a day later. A small fleet of three military combat carriers, which was less than Ves expected, arrived in the system and steadily approached the planet.

The LMC attempted to communicate with them, but the captain of the flagship refused to talk to civilians. The new arrivals only communicated with the Equinox Stingers.

Ves found this to be a little weird. Weren't the reinforcements supposed to include a Larkinson to ease communications?

As time passed and the incoming combat carriers were about to reach orbit, Raymond suddenly barged into his office!

"Ves! This is bad!"

"What's the matter!?"

"There is a huge issue with the reinforcements!"

"What is it?!"

"We have just received an ultimatum from the new arrivals! They aren't here to reinforce the defense force or protect you against the sandmen!"

"What are they doing here, then?!"

"They're here to take you into custody!"

"What?!" Ves slammed his fists against his desk! "Who do they think they are?! I thought we had a deal! On whose orders are they allowed to take me away?!"

"It gets worse! The person who issued this threat is Ghanso Larkinson! He's on the flagship!"