

## Mech 1971

### *Chapter 1971 The Life-Prolonging Race*

The two mech designers weren't in the mood to talk any further. Shortly after they exchanged their views on the war, Ves stood up and bid Tristan goodbye.

"I wish you good luck on developing your design philosophy. Gemstone exotics sound really powerful, and I haven't really heard a lot about their use in mech design."

"One of my goals with my specialty is to try and increase their practicality and decrease the costs involving their use. Their scarcity is one of the biggest impediments to widespread adoption. Not even Master Katzenberg developed more than a handful substitutes to the most common gemstone exotics. It's a completely different game to her and she can't devote too much research in this specific direction. I'm confident that I can fulfill this role!"

Ves was sure that if Master Katzenberg really wanted to, she could make incredible gains in gemstone exotics.

However, every Master had to contend with opportunity costs. Wasting valuable time on gemstone exotics would delay or hamper her efforts in pursuing her other goals.

This was also where direct disciples like Tristan came in. As long as they were raised correctly, direct disciples were able to provide more research gains to their Masters!

While it sounded exploitative, Ves considered it a fair contract. Direct disciples received some of the best resources and attention from one of the best mech designers in a star sector!

Almost every direct disciple was guaranteed success. Part of this was because Masters always selected their disciples carefully, but most of it was because of the insanely high quality of teaching they provided!

Therefore, direct disciples were generally expected to maintain close, cooperative relationships with their Masters throughout their lifetimes!

Besides, due to their excellent foundation and fantastic circumstances, direct disciples all possessed a good chance of advancing to Master themselves!

What this essentially meant was that a young Journeyman like Tristan might become a very formidable Master in a century or two! Ves would be a fool to burn his bridges with someone who possessed a small but very realistic shot at becoming an authority in his own field one day!

The fact that Tristan decided to specialize in gemstone exotics of all choices made Ves even more invested in maintaining his relations with him. Fridayman or not, Tristan Wesseling might be key to unlocking the secrets and potential of Lucky gems!

Ves even contemplated shipping one of Lucky's gems to Tristan, but he quickly discarded that idea. There was too much chance that Tristan might discover some details that Ves would rather remain hidden.

Besides, right now Tristan was still an enemy. It was not wise to get too entangled with him while they still maintained a hostile relationship on paper.

Before he left the winehouse, Ves asked one more question.

"You seem to have arrived here before me. Do you have any tips on how to make a lot of MTA merits quickly?"

The Green Golem avatar looked at the Apollo Radiant avatar in amusement. "You're a smart person, Ves. I think you should already know by now that the MTA never gives out its merits easily. The Rim Guardians are just as frugal. The difference between the two is that the Rim Guardians are a bit more keen on developing relationships with promising and powerful individuals. This is why they differentiate associates by level, and offer an increasingly more attractive discount rate for the more valuable talents."

"Do the Rim Guardians truly offer a 45 percent discount for level 10 associates?"

"Level 10 associates are almost universally Master Mech Designers, Ves. You can forget about reaching this height within a century. Even if you work day and night in fulfilling the missions from the merit hall, you'll still be around level 7 or so! To be honest, I don't exactly know how higher-leveled associates can progress any further, but it's certainly not just through fulfilling missions. Still, to many mech designers, the investment pays off. It might take a very long time for them to reach a high level, but at their ages, this discount can literally save their lives!"

"Because it's easier to afford life-prolonging treatment, is that right?"

Tristan's avatar nodded. "The first round of life-prolonging treatment is easy enough to obtain. Any decent Journeyman in the Friday Coalition is able to earn it over time. The second round.. is not that easy. Plenty of decent mech designers in our state have fallen short. They were able to earn a decent amount of merits in their two centuries of life, but.."

"It costs too many MTA merits."

"A lot of mech designers are forced to splurge their merits on improving the lives of their descendants and leave behind an enduring legacy. They failed to stay in the race. It's

quite tragic, if you think about it. Every mech designer is able to live for five centuries or longer. However, only a fraction of the mech industry manages to make it to the end."

Ves nodded gravely. "Mech designers can't stagnate in their progression. Not if they want to live longer."

"The first round of life-prolonging treatment is doable for Journeyman, but out of reach for Apprentices." Tristan noted. "The second round of life-prolonging treatment is doable for talented Seniors, but too prohibitive for Journeymen. The third round of life-prolonging treatment is still within reach to Masters, but Seniors will drop before they reach the finish line. The fourth round of life-prolonging treatment... well, I heard that you can't even exchange it with MTA merits anymore."

The life-prolonging race became increasingly more punishing. Not only mech designers, but also other people had to work their entire lifetimes in order to prolong their stay in the material realm!

Ves heard a lot of stories about mech designers becoming so obsessed with obtaining the latest round of life-prolonging treatments that they were even willing to outlive their children and grandchildren!

Of course, there were also a lot of other mech designers who decided to quit the brutal race and instead spend their merits on prolonging the lives of their favored children.

Life was precious. Life was scarce. While healthy humans could look forward to enjoying 130 years free of charge, this was just a trial period! In order to gain more years, the 'customers' of life had to pay up an increasingly more expensive subscription fee!

Prolonging someone's life was very hard. If that was not so, then an oligopoly on life-prolonging treatments wouldn't have remained in place for so long.

Right now, the only parties who were capable of offering these treatments were the first-rate superstates and the Big Two. The Five Scrolls Compact definitely mastered these treatments as well, since the secretive cult had probably invented them in the first place!

Yet instead of competing against each other to capture the immensely lucrative market for life-prolonging treatments, they instead colluded with each other to keep prices high and keep the best treatments for themselves!

Ves' avatar frowned deeper and deeper. What would it be like if the technology behind life-prolonging treatments no longer remained exclusive to these powerful actors? What if Dr. Ranya became capable of synthesizing the crucial serum in her labs?

Prices would probably drop and a lot more people would be able to remain in the material realm by droves!

Depending on the scarcity of ingredients required to synthesize the serum, the entire fabric of human society might undergo an enormous shift! With many more grandparents and ancestors able to cling to life, the younger generation would feel increasingly more stifled by all of the geezers who refused to let their descendants inherit their accumulated wealth and endowments!

Maybe it was for the best that the oligopoly reserved its life-prolonging treatments to those who truly deserved an extension of their lives.

"You haven't answered my question." Ves returned his attention to Tristan. "I know that merits aren't easy to get, but do you have any suggestions?"

"Hmm.. aside from completing certain missions offered by the merit hall, you could look to attract the attention of an internal mech designer of the MTA. Some of the associates of the Rim Guardians managed to attract their attention and earn their approval. As long as they earn the trust of their patron, they can contribute to design projects and earn merits in exchange."

That sounded like a decent idea, but Ves was far too busy with his own priorities. Besides, Tristan's suggestion immediately evoked his memory of Master Moira Willix.

He would rather let Gloriana lick his face than become Master Willix's servant!

Tristan mentioned another option.

"The Rim Exchange offers many other possibilities where you can earn more merits if you know where to look. Most of them are only accessible to Seniors, Masters and higher-leveled associates, though. Perhaps one of the few activities that you can participate in are design competitions."

"Design competitions? They hold those here?"

"Of course!" The Green Golem's crystalline lips curled into a grin. "Whenever a lot of mech designers gather in a single place, a lot of egos always clash against each other. To give them a way to prove who is the better mech designer, the Rim Guardians and a number of very powerful societies often hold various design contests where they can showcase their design prowess. These contests come in various formats and forms. The most important criteria is who will pilot your work if a practical demonstration is called for. In some contests, you have to bring your own mech pilot, while in other contests the Rim Guardians will provide their own mech pilots. Other contests are concluded quickly by testing the mechs with AI pilots."

That sounded very lively to Ves. He missed the times when he took part in design competitions and put his skills to the test against other mech designers.

At his level of fame, there was no need for him to burnish his credentials by taking part in a public competition.

However, if the competitions organized by the Rim Guardians also rewarded its participants with a considerable sum of merits, then he would eagerly take part!

"How much merits can you win if you take part?"

"The prize pools are all over the place." Tristan shrugged. "Most Journeyman-level competitions don't reward very much, though. They're mostly treated as opportunities to advertise your strength and attract follow-up opportunities. If you want to want a chance at winning the jackpot, then you have to take part in the competitions that are open to Seniors as well as Journeymen! While the competition is a lot harsher, as long as you score high enough, you can still earn hundreds of thousands of merits in a week as long as you get tenth place or something."

While that sounded like a great deal, Ves would still have to defeat scores of Seniors who possessed a much deeper foundation in mech design than himself!

Though Ves accumulated a decent amount of Senior-level skills, he had no illusion that he could realistically outperform a genuine Senior!

However.. If the competition format allowed for collaborations, and if the format also depended on human mech pilots to test the competition mechs in combat, then Ves might be able to gain an advantage!

He nodded gratefully at Tristan. "Thank you. Your tip is very helpful to me. Is there anything you'd like to ask in return?"

"Yes." The Fridayman's avatar bent its crystalline head in thought. "I've always been wondering about something. Do you still respect your former Master?"

Ves frowned. "That's an unexpected question."

"Just answer, please. I am truly curious what you think."

"Master Olson has always treated me earnestly and with respect. Even though she didn't pay that much attention to me, I still owe a considerable debt to her. I'm genuinely grateful at the assistance and protection she provided to me in my formative years as an Apprentice Mech Designer."

"Thank you, Ves. That's all I wanted to hear. I'm very satisfied with your answer. I think Master Olson would be very pleased to hear that you still hold her in high regard. Remember, even if we are on opposite sides, we aren't enemies."

"I'll be sure to turn my pistol aside if I have you in my sights."

Tristan chuckled. "We're mech designers. We leave the shooting to the actual soldiers."

"I wish that were so."

### *Chapter 1972 Spiritual Beacon*

When Ves logged out of the Rim Exchange, a considerable amount of time had passed. The design teams had already left the lab at the end of the shift. Even Gloriana had left.

"Meow."

Lucky immediately noticed that Ves had pulled himself out of the virtual immersion.

"Haha, I wasn't gone for long."

"Meow meow."

Ves stroked Lucky's back. "Yes, yes, I'll be sure to feed you a batch of Breyer alloy. That reminds me of something. I should check up on our resident mummy."

After Lucky got his fill of petting, he jumped from Ves' lap and floated in the air. Ves stood up and stretched his body before looking around.

Not a lot of people were left in the design lab. Only Nitaa and a handful of nameless Avatar bodyguards still remained on duty.

"Nitaa, you can continue to accompany me. As for the rest, you can wait for my return. I'll only be gone for a little while."

While his Avatar bodyguards didn't like his orders, it wasn't as if there were any acute threats on his own ship.

After shaking off the bulk of his bodyguards, Ves took Lucky and Nitaa to a secretive passage nearby that led straight to a reinforced checkpoint.

The guards that manned the defensive position didn't consist of Avatars. While Ves trusted his Avatars, they were not infallible.

For this reason, Ves decided to assign Kinners to man this checkpoint! Various Kinners also manned some of the other critical sections of the Scarlet Rose.

While Ves still considered their unflinching loyalty to be rather fishy, he didn't have many other options.

"Mr. Larkinson." They greeted him in a filtered voice behind their closed helmets. "Please stand still and allow us to scan you and your guests."

"Please proceed."

The Kinner guards received strict orders to inspect anyone who wished to enter Compartment G-13. No one was excepted from this rule, not even Ves himself!

The search was both thorough and invasive. The guards politely but very firmly demanded Ves and Nitaa to strip and enter a sophisticated scanning booth.

In fact, the scanning booth was more than capable enough of scanning through most of Ves' body through his clothes, but his Synthra Umbra underwear and pockets were obvious exceptions!

If Ves could fool the scanners with Synthra Umbra, then anyone else could do so as well! To be absolutely sure, Ves instituted the rule that everyone had to strip in order to pass the security inspection.

Just as Ves anticipated, the initial scans missed the implant in his head. However, finer scans focused specifically on his head finally detected the space occupied by his Archimedes Rubal implant.

The security guards didn't suspect him at all. They already carried a scan of the exact shape and position of his implant in his brain.

Of course, Lucky presented a bit of a problem as well, but because his cat was so unique, the guards easily verified his identity.

"Meow!"

"Hey, don't complain! I have to strip naked in order to verify my identity, while you are already naked to begin with! It's good to be a cat."

It took fifty minutes for the Kinner guards to complete the entire procedure. While this was very troublesome, the security measures were more than warranted considering the incredible amount of value locked within the compartment behind the armored blast doors.

Once the blast doors opened, Ves, Lucky and Nitaa entered a compartment that used to house the Scarlet Rose's escape pods.

There weren't any escape pods in the compartment anymore. All of the launch tubes that used to hold the cylindrical pods had long been shut and filled with a lot of Breyer alloy.

In fact, the entire compartment was lined with a very thick layer of Breyer alloy along with some other advanced alloys meant to block or interfere with as many scanning measures as possible!

Optical scanning, temperature scanning, vibration scanning, gravitic scanning and countless more scanning measures would never be able to figure out what went on inside this compartment!

Though Ves wasn't sure if all of the measures were enough to defeat a deep scan from an MTA or CFA vessel, as long as the Scarlet Rose didn't attract suspicion, it shouldn't attract any deep scans.

"I still have to find a better solution, though." He whispered to himself.

There was very little free space in the compartment. Most of the volume was taken up by the specialized forging machine and various add-ons.

Right now, the chamber of the forging machine was just reaching its hottest level!

At this temperature, the mummified body of Cassandra Breyer should have already turned to ashes by now. Shortly afterwards, the escape pod itself should be melting down.

Ves spent some time to inspect the process while Lucky cheekily floated to a pallet of metal bars and began to chew into one of them as if he was a kid in a candy store!

Though he hadn't been able to visit Compartment G-13 when the Scarlet Rose was still in refit, he designed its entire layout. So far, Ves was very pleased with the continuous Breyer alloy harvesting operation. The forging machine and everything else operated autonomously without the need for human operators.

As Ves continued to inspect every single element of the production loop, an escape pod suddenly appeared in the only available launch tube. Antigrav projectors immediately grabbed hold of it and lifted it inside the chute of the still-hot forging machine.

The entire process didn't last more than a couple of seconds. The escape pod practically flung into the port of the forging machine like it was a missile!

Ves didn't want to take any chances. The Longer the escape pod remained whole, the greater the chance that Cassandra managed to regain her wits and get up to mischief!

He specifically engaged his spiritual senses and began to see whether there was any spiritual activity outside of Cassandra's escape pod.

"Nothing."

So far, Cassandra remained obedient. Ves chalked it up to the minimal amount of time the production loop kept her escape pod intact.

As Ves kept scanning with his spiritual senses, he finally noticed an anomaly.

A bit of spiritual energy radiated from the forging machine.

His face began to scowl. This didn't happen before!

"What are you doing?"

Was she transmitting a spiritual signal? Was she calling for help? Whatever she was doing, Ves doubted it was good.

He attempted to stop the energy, but even though it was faint, Cassandra was far too strong for him to contend! Even a miniscule amount of her spiritual energy was enough to defeat his efforts at containing them! Ves didn't even stand a chance!

"Goddammit!"

No matter what Ves tried, he failed to stop this process. Ves was completely helpless and could only settle on letting Cassandra do her thing.

What kind of consequences would her actions lead to? He felt a bit powerless as he wasn't able to do anything to halt her latest scheme.

"I haven't forgotten about your meddling while I was operating on Silent William." He said.

That was another latent concern that worried Ves from time to time. He had no idea how much Silent William inherited from Cassandra. Hopefully, the influence was only marginal and Silent William didn't become her champion or something.

"Let's go, Lucky. I've seen enough."

"Meow!"

"I said let's go! You can eat these bars any time you want aboard this ship! You don't have to chew through my entire stash!"

"MEEEEOW!"

After manhandling Lucky out of Compartment G-13, Ves returned to the stateroom he shared with Gloriana. His girlfriend was already waiting for him inside. She had already changed into a more casual dress.

"You missed dinner."

"Sorry. The Rim Exchange was really interesting. One of their AI's forced me to go on a tour. I also met some interesting people there. I'm actually regretful that you aren't able

to join me. There is a lot of interesting activities that we could do, not just for fun, but also to earn more merits."

"It's okay, Ves. Now, come sit over here. We need to talk."

Ves approached the loveseat and sat down next to his girlfriend. Both of them smiled at each other as they began to cuddle up and share their body warmth.

"Have you found any good opportunities to earn merits?"

"Not really. You can probably guess that mech designers like me have to work extremely hard or take a lot of risks to earn a sum that is greater than pocket money. Every associate is talented or capable. The Rim Guardians tailor their missions to the best of what the local star sectors are able to raise. It's very difficult to keep up with the competition."

"That sounds about right." Gloriana said while leaning her head against his shoulder. "Let's not worry too much about merits right now. We don't have the time to fulfill a mission anyway. Designing the striker mech project and fulfilling DIVA's commission takes priority. In fact, I want to talk about the latter right now. Enough time has passed for us to come up with some ideas. Now, what mech do you want to design?"

"Can we not talk about the commission?"

Gloriana scrunched her face. "Absolutely not! I've given you enough time to grow comfortable with the commission. Remember, DIVA is just about to rescue your captured relatives. The least you can do is to repay the favor and contribute a mech to our war effort!"

"I thought the rescue would have happened by now. Hasn't the CRC dispatched a ship to transfer them to Coalition space?"

"The rescue will happen. DIVA won't renege on this deal. Just be patient. Don't change the subject, Ves. I want to hear a mech concept instead of an excuse!"

"Jeez." Ves sighed. "Okay, okay. So I've been thinking about the mechs that male Hexers are limited to piloting. After studying these so-called 'support mechs', I have a good idea on what I need to design. However, before I make any other choice, I needed to determine what objective I need to pursue."

"DIVA wants a mech that takes advantage of your glow to gain an advantage on the battlefield."

"I know. I've been thinking about this a lot and I've concluded that it's best to go for a supportive glow rather than a suppressive glow. The latter is what I've already used in

most of my mech designs, while the latter is something that will be unveiled with my striker mech design."

"What glow do you envision using?"

"That's the big question. If the mech is meant to be piloted for women, then the answer is obvious. However, since my mech is only reserved for 'boys', I had to be very thoughtful about my choice."

"Is the glow you've decided upon directed towards boys or women?"

"One thing I've noticed is that the morale of both male and female Hexer mech pilots are high. All of the battle footage you've provided to me show that you Hexers are very willing to go all-in. Even so, there are slight differences between boys and women."

Gloriana smiled in satisfaction. "We Hexers take our duties and responsibilities very seriously. We are fighting for more than just our lives. We are fighting for our ideals and our state. The fate of all womenkind rests upon our shoulders! If the Fridaymen win the war, our cause will collapse!"

That didn't sound that bad to Ves, but he kept that to himself.

"The loyalty and conviction of your mech pilots are not quite right, though. From what I can gather, it's a bit different from the loyalty and courage exhibited by our Larkinson mech pilots. You Hexer pilots are just doing whatever your state has spoonfed to your minds without entirely thinking everything through."

"Are you calling us stupid or gullible?!"

"No!" Ves quickly raised his hands in innocence. "Not at all! It's just.. there's something empty about how boys and women are thrown into battle without a healthy mindset. This shows when the mech pilots encounter difficult circumstances. They tend to break and go crazy. Casualties are incredibly high once this happens."

"That.. does happen from time to time, but it's not as bad as you claim!"

"Look, once the Fridaymen face a difficult situation, they don't show any qualms about retreating in good order. In contrast, you Hexers seem upset at the prospect of defeat and continue to double down on a losing battle! I think the Fridaymen are even starting to exploit this character flaw!"

"That.. that's outrageous! The Hex Army is the strongest military in this star sector! The scattered Fridaymen stand no chance in the long term!"

Ves wanted to palm his face. Gloriana suffered from the same problem afflicting the Hexer mech pilots!

### *Chapter 1973 Overconfidence*

What little material Gloriana and Calabast provided to him had given him a shallow but very informative glimpse of how the Komodo War was being fought.

The two women didn't provide him with the doctored and heavily-edited propaganda footage that the two states tended to leak onto the galactic net.

For the first time, Ves obtained reliable snippets of raw footage where he could see what was actually going on at the frontlines.

Contrary to his expectations, the Komodo War was fought just as hard on land as in space.

Securing space supremacy was the most essential step to conquering a star system. As long as enemy forces kept entering the star system to harass the occupying elements, it was still considered to be in contention.

This was no different from how the Bright-Vesia Wars were fought.

However, different from the wars familiar to him, land battles gained a lot more importance when fought at a higher level.

This was because of the existence of specialized artillery mechs capable of shooting down elements in orbit!

No matter if it was a mech or a ship, as long as the atmospheric conditions weren't too bad when they were floating in orbit, they could be targeted at any moment from any point on the planet!

It was bad enough when artillery mechs fired at the orbital elements on the surface. It was worse when they fired from a fortified bunker or a hidden underground tunnel!

Though the mechs in orbit were often capable of retaliating at the offending shooter within seconds, the damage was already done by the time they aimed their weapons in the right direction!

What was truly menacing to orbital elements were the aquatic mechs hiding in large bodies of water!

Even to the second-rate states, it was very difficult to damage a mech hiding under a lot of water.

Aquatic artillery mechs were larger than their landbound variants. Part of it was because the aquatic environment made them more manageable. Another part of it was because they needed to be big in order to handle all of the water pressure when they dove deep.

Regardless, their immense volume provided them with a lot of capacity, which meant they mounted some of the heaviest and most formidable cannons that could be mounted on a mech!

Though the effectiveness of these artillery mechs varied, their threat level against orbital assets often made it untenable for invaders to retain orbital supremacy.

Without sufficient control over a planet, the population could just bunker down and survive indefinitely! The less important planets in the Coalition and the Hegemony often featured fortified underground tunnels and fortifications that could house the populations in a pinch.

More sophisticated planets featured entire underground cities that were almost as good as the cities on the surface! With all of the technology and wealth at their disposal, the Fridaymen and Hexers invested heavily in building up the underground societies of their planets.

The border systems were especially rife with underground fortifications!

It was not very viable for spaceborn forces to defeat all of these fortifications. In order to gain true control of a planet, the invaders had to transfer a lot of boots on the ground.

The battles for control of a planet therefore proceeded especially bloody. Sure, this didn't sound that much different from the battles of the Bright-Vesia Wars, but in the Komodo War the defenders possessed an overwhelming defensive advantage.

The centuries-long accumulation combined with the neutralization of orbital supremacy meant that the attacking force had to dispatch an enormous amount of landbound forces to the surface in order to wrest control from the fortified defenders.

These battles potentially lasted for months or even years as the defenders continually made the attackers pay for every patch of ground! Mechs continually fell and mech pilots were always forced to fight with just a minimal amount of rest. The attrition that took place during these battles was exceptionally brutal!

In these circumstances, the Fridaymen and Hexers still fought as if their lives depended on it! Ves truly admired their discipline and willingness to fight for their cause.

Yet... as much as the Hexers on the ground tried to maintain their spirits, there were eventually times when the pressure got the better of them. While the Hex Soldiers all received excellent training, they still possessed a lot of human frailties!

When the Hexers reached their limits, they often lost their marbles.

"This isn't normal." Ves insisted to Gloriana. "I may not be a mech pilot, but I've been through war. I even experienced situations where everything was falling apart. While I

don't mean to equate my own limited experiences to the horrors your soldiers are going through, there is still a flaw in the way you train your soldiers."

Gloriana separated from Ves and crossed her arms. She was not happy with his criticism!

"The Hex Army is our finest military force! A long line of revered matriarchs and generals has shaped it into a war machine that is capable of fighting head-on against all of the partners of the Friday Coalition and come out ahead! I sincerely doubt that your limited experience is superior to all of the accumulated wisdom of our professional military leaders!"

Even the smartest people were stupid. Not everyone was all-knowing. The Hexers never fought an actual war after the founding of their state. They spent centuries in relative peace as they stared across the border at the Fridaymen while they were constantly theorizing how the war between their states would proceed!

As extensively as they planned out their war, the Hexers inevitably made a lot of assumptions when they outlined their war plans and formulated their doctrines.

If there was one good thing Ves could say about the Bright Republic, it was that his state learned to cope with frequent wars the hard way!

"Look, just hear me out, Gloriana. You Hexers fight well when the battles are in your favor. You Hexers fight valiantly when the battles are even. It's when your Hex Soldiers are in a disadvantage that the problems arise! Whenever I watch the uncensored footage, I can't help but compare the conduct of Hexers to Fridaymen under pressure. The differences become very clear."

The Fridaymen seemed to possess a much more sober outlook on the war. They accepted their losses with grace and always sought to retreat in good order.

Retreat was not a shame to the Fridaymen. Perhaps this was because of the history of its founding. The Friday Coalition essentially formed after the original nine partners had been beaten black and blue by the predecessors of the Hexers.

Forming their second-rate state out of a coalition of partners was a desperation move. Fortunately for them, they succeeded in blocking the relentless Hexer aggression.

With this history in mind, the Fridaymen were much more tolerant when it came to suffering a loss. The founders of their state had all adopted a loser's mentality.

Though much of their lack of confidence had faded over the centuries, the Fridaymen still treated the Hexers as a very powerful existential threat!

In contrast, the female supremacists continued to cling on the winner's mentality they acquired after they founded their state. The Hexers all thought that the only reason they failed to defeat the Friday Coalition was because the partners cheated and ganged up on them. If not for this course of events, the Hexers would have long dominated the Komodo Star Sector!

"I think the fatal flaw you Hexers suffer from is overconfidence." Ves stated. Though Gloriana reacted badly to his remark, he was not deterred! "Everytime I hear you or other Hexers talk about the war, you people seem to think the Komodo War is as good as done! However, can you really describe the current state of the war as a walk in the park?"

His girlfriend directed a puzzled look at him. "But the Fridaymen are weaker than us. Their society is flawed, their partners are fractured, their leaders are corrupt and their soldiers don't have any ideals!"

Ves was speechless. He didn't know what to say. He thought his girlfriend was clever enough to realize that the Hexers were in for a brutal war where the winner was anything but certain.

Instead, she talked as if the Hexers would surely be able to overrun the Friday Coalition

He decided to gloss past her insanely unrealistic assumptions.

"Let me tell you about the glow I have in mind for you Hexers. What you Hexers need is a pillar of support. It's not enough to fight for some abstract ideals. It's not enough to fight for their fellow Hexers. Your Hex Soldiers need a more immediate but aspirational reason to fight for. When the laser beams are whizzing past your head and the artillery bombardment is about to land on your position, almost everything apart from what is ingrained in your body disappears. The Hex Soldiers are only left with their training, their instincts and their primal emotions."

Gloriana grew impatient. "Get to the point, Ves. What is the glow that you think will supposedly cure us of our supposed flaws?"

Ves activated his comm and projected an image.

"Hexism revolves around respecting the phases of life, death, godhood, damnation, dust and women, right?"

She nodded. "At least you remember your lessons."

"It's hard to forget the details now that I have my Archimedes Rubal implant." Ves joked. "Anyway, I've been thinking a bit. Even though it's not a universally-accepted faith in your state, it's still familiar to every Hexer. I think I can find a way to adapt the core belief of hexism in a mech. It would be like a moving altar of hexism that provides

emotional succor and support in a time when the Hex Soldiers most need them. I'm not sure whether I'll be able to prevent them from breaking under the pressure, but I think that offering a light in the midst of darkness can make a very significant impact during the battles that matter."

Gloriana no longer looked angry or confused. As she took in his words, she began to think how such a mech might impact a battle.

"I... think this is quite intriguing. While I can't say I support it, I'm willing to give you a chance." She said as if her approval was absolutely mandatory for Ves to proceed! "I'm concerned about leaving you in charge of forming the proto-god. Do you realize what you are doing? If anything, I should be the one who forms the proto-god!"

"You know that's not possible, Gloriana."

"Then find a way!"

That was easier said than done! Ves could do nothing else but nod, because he knew she would never budge on this matter!

Privately, Ves didn't think he had any hope to succeed. Gloriana simply didn't possess the aptitude to manipulate spirituality at his level.

"What mech type have you chosen, Ves?" Gloriana asked next. "A mech like this sounds very useful, but the Hex Army doesn't accept ornamental mechs. It has to possess more than just a helpful glow."

"This is my first true second-class mech. Considering the overall intent behind my design, I think a knight mech is the most fitting vessel of this glow. Although I often like to be adventurous, I think it's best for me to stick with what I'm best at in order to gain the approval of your fellow Hexers. I just know that you women will scrutinize every single aspect of my design in order to find some excuse to disqualify it or put it down."

Gloriana grinned. "You know us too well, Ves. We're very strict about our mechs for a reason, Ves. It's a bit unfortunate that mechs designed by males are so rare in the Hegemony. Even if our work is reserved for DIVA, You can't avoid a lot of scrutiny. That just means we'll have to do our best to design the most perfect mech possible, isn't that right? Hihhi!"

#### *Chapter 1974 Hollow Conviction*

What were the Hexers fighting for, exactly?

"Hexers fight for victory. Hexers fight for glory. Hexers fight to win the war that was robbed from their predecessors."

What about the Fridaymen?

"Fridaymen fight for survival. Fridaymen fight to preserve their way of life. Fridaymen have prepared for centuries to defend themselves and their loved ones against the tyranny of their greatest rival."

The mentality difference was stark.

It reminded Ves of the centuries-old dynamic between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom.

The latter always wanted to rob Bentheim from the former. The Vesians, used to being in the superior position, had developed a superiority complex of sorts.

Each generation, the nobles at the top of their society constantly pumped the commoners up and hyped up all of the glory and rewards they could earn if they fought against the supposedly weak and cowardly Brighters.

It worked to an extent. The opening moves of the Vesians always put the Bright Republic on the backfoot. Their incredibly high morale and boundless optimism always overpowered the Brighters in the initial stages of a war.

However, the Bright Republic wasn't weak. It knew to an extent that its rival was swelling with a lot of confidence. So much so that it always seemed to warp their follow-up strategies as the Vesian nobles grew greedy for more achievements!

The more the Vesians penetrated the Bright Republic, the greater the resistance.

The patriotic Brighters fighting in the frontlines knew from the start that they had a very difficult fight on their hands. The Bright Republic was particularly good in educating its soldiers and citizens what was at stake should the Vesians have their way.

Not only would losing Bentheim mean losing their state's prosperity, but the fall of their main economic lifeline would certainly lead to the fall of the rest of the Republic!

What would happen after that? The Brighters would all turn into Vesian commoners, and spend the rest of their lives working themselves to death for their noble overlords!

This should never happen!

To preserve the torch that lit up the darkness, the Brighters all steeled themselves for a bitter struggle and employed any kind of delaying tactics as they could as they sought to preserve their fighting strength.

Victory may be out of reach in some battles, but the war had to go on! There were times when they had to stand their ground and there were times where accepting defeat was the only realistic choice!

As the latter stages of every Bright-Vesia War attested, this stubborn mindset eventually held out better over the long term.

When the Vesian invaders inevitably ran out of steam and started to accumulate progressively more casualties, both their commoners and their noble leaders started to balk.

In most cases, the Vesians eventually lost the heart to push forward and throw themselves at the incredibly resolute Brighter defenders!

This was in effect a deliberate strategy on the part of the Bright Republic. Its goal in every war had never been to pursue a quick victory. The Brighters always aimed to hang on survive as much as possible.

In contrast, the Vesians drove themselves entirely on victory. That was fine in the earlier stages, but as the attrition and increasingly more arduous struggles began to grind their confidence down, the illusion of inevitable victory evaporated.

What was left once the Vesians no longer gained any easy wins?

They lost their primary driving factor for waging war!

This was why their noble leaders quit at that point. The lower morale and diminishing returns meant that the few intact forces they possessed would begin to bleed more than they could ever possibly gain. Why continue a war that only led to greater losses?

A key difference between the Bright-Vesia Wars and the Komodo Wars was the stakes.

Neither side set out to fight a war for profit or a couple of star systems. The Fridaymen and Hexers went all in on this war!

Unlike the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom, the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony never fought a major war after their founding.

All this time allowed both second-rate states to accumulate an incredible amount of reserves. Neither states would run out of funds and resources anytime soon!

Yet what was even more pivotal was the incredible amount of fortifications they constructed. Whether in space or beneath the ground, the defensive works may not be enough to repel an invasion force, but they were definitely able to stall and bleed any attacking force!

Right now, Ves wasn't sure which side was doing most of the attacking, but he figured the Hexers might be a little bit more eager than the Fridaymen. Their overconfidence likely translated to excessive aggression, causing them to underestimate the resolve of their opponents!

Therefore, even if Ves lacked a complete picture on the state of the Komodo War, from the few clues he managed to deduce, his confidence in the Hexers started to sink.

"Their mindset is too frail. It's only good in fair-weather conditions. The moment they encounter a storm, their baseless confidence will fade like the wind!"

It was a bit of a stretch for Ves to believe the Komodo War would swing against the Hexers due to this reasoning.

However, Ves had a hunch that the oh so wise Hexer matriarchs weren't aware of this looming issue.

Though conventionally the older Hexers ought to be the wisest of their people, Ves wasn't so sure about that. In the context of their society, the matriarchs were indeed wise.

Yet outside of their highly-distorted cultural bubble, Ves believed they weren't as smart and wise as they were cracked out to be! This was because Ves guessed that the matriarchs were in fact the most committed believers of Hexer superiority!

"It's the nature of their promotion. Biases against the Fridaymen are constantly encouraged while more honest assessments of the true strength of their adversaries will likely be dismissed as defeatism!"

What happened when one Hexer woman expressed confidence in the war against the Hexers and another Hexer woman tried to tell others that the Fridaymen were actually very formidable?

Their people would probably elevate the former to matriarch and relentlessly ostracize the latter!

"If I can think about it, the Fridaymen can surely do so as well!"

Since Ves was a Brighter, and the Bright Republic had long been stuck in a similar position to the Friday Coalition, he had a much better idea of what the Fridaymen were thinking about.

What if their strategy was to lead the bull by the horns? What if they held some of their strength back in order to allow the Hexers to crash their horns against the myriad of defensive works the Fridaymen set up? What if the Fridaymen were waiting to pounce once their foes expended much more strength than they anticipated?

"Who am I to question the wisdom of the matriarchs in charge?"

It could all be an illusion. Perhaps the Hexers were aware of the difficulty of achieving a quick victory. Perhaps the matriarchs truly knew that the Fridaymen weren't pushovers.

Yet if this was part of a deep, multilayered plan to deceive the Fridaymen into thinking they deceived the Hexers, Ves wasn't so sure the matriarchs truly thought that far ahead!

Ves didn't really care how the Hegemony was being run. However, the last thing he wanted to see was the Friday Coalition winning the war!

If Ves wanted to accomplish his revenge on the state, he had to find a way to assist the Hexers in increasing their chances of gaining an advantage in this war.

Right now, the best way he could contribute to their war effort was by designing a mech that addressed this possible vulnerability.

Besides, if the Hexers truly managed to gain the upper hand by themselves, then his mech would just be able to make them win even harder!

After Ves announced that he wanted to design a landbound knight mech that would be based around the six phases of existence, Gloriana seemed quite intrigued at his suggestion.

For a time, she paused and turned away in order to consider his ambitious suggestion. Even to her, designing a mech that revolved around the six phases sounded extreme even to her! For once, she was reluctant to agree with mech concept. It was simply too close to her heart!

While Gloriana tried to resolve her inner struggle, Ves projected a document and tried to expand his original premise.

It wasn't difficult to state that he intended to incorporate the six phases into the mech, but how exactly would he be able to do so in practice? What would its glow possibly feel like?

"It will have to be a multifaceted glow."

Ves supposed he could also opt to create six different glows, but the cost of doing so was prohibitive. Ves simply couldn't afford to do something so wasteful. He still had nightmares about sacrifices five gems at once to create a single masterwork!

As for the composition of the glows, Ves wasn't sure how to proceed.

Unlike the Ylvainan Faith, hexism lacked a concrete human figure. Ves faced the difficult task of trying to interpret abstract phases into something more relatable.

He reviewed his understanding of the six phases and wrote down the probably feel that each phase could provide.

[Life: cautious optimism

Death: minimize losses

Godhood: overwhelming confidence

Damnation: punish the wicked

Dust: worthy sacrifice

Woman: assurance of superiority]

After drafting this list, Ves gained a much better idea on how to translate these concepts into a glow.

The simplest solution was to design a design spirit that encompassed all of these facets. Ves began to envision a spiritual entity that encapsulated all six aspects of hexisms. The design spirit would possess the ability to activate one glow at a time that was most appropriate to the situation at hand.

For example, in the event of an even battle, a dose of confidence from the phase of life might give the Hexers a mental edge! However, the phase of life also emphasized the preservation of life, so they shouldn't act too recklessly.

In the event of a losing battle, the phases of death and dust would definitely be able to show their value.

If retreat was possible, then the phase of death would be able to do much to keep the Hexers focused on what was necessary.

If retreat was blocked or a sacrifice had to be necessary, then the phase of dust would help keep the doomed Hexers calm in order to do whatever they could to make the Fridaymen bleed!

"If possible, these glows should also come with a suppressive element!"

Certain phases were more helpful in suppressing the Fridaymen than supporting the Hexers. The phase of godhood mainly served to empower the Hexers while the phase of woman would be very helpful in making the Fridaymen feel as weak in front of the superior side!

His ambition for his Hexer mech grew as Ves fleshed out his vision more and more. While he started off with a modest support mech, Ves soon began to let his imagination go wild as he envisioned a full-blown aura mech!

If he could realize this vision, then it was definitely possible for his Hexer mech to swing the Komodo War in the same fashion as his Desolate Soldiers affected the Sand War!

Yet.. as Ves considered how he could possibly create a design spirit that encompassed all of these functions, his confidence faltered to a degree.

It was not so easy to create such a powerful design spirit!

Ves did not have much confidence that he would be able to create such a spiritual product.

"I need the right ingredients."

He thought back how he created Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. Back then, he obtained a spiritual remnant from the Great Prophet and managed to amplify it into something greater. The fragment fully embodied an aspect of Prophet Ylvaine to a degree that Ves could never replicate with his imagination!

With his limited and highly-flawed understanding of hexism, Ves was not qualified to create a hexism design spirit!

The only viable solution therefore was to derive the necessary faith and spiritual ingredients from an existing hexism relic.

Ves turned to Gloriana with a pleading expression. "Can I borrow one of your altars?"

#### *Chapter 1975 No Taboo*

The six-sided miniature altar floated in front of Ves' face in a wavy fashion. It slowly rotated around its axis, allowing Ves a good glimpse of every side.

Though it looked extraordinarily exquisite, Ves puzzled at the symbolism of its deep and meaningful imagery.

The phase of women was the most resplendent side of the altar. The victorious woman spreading out her arms in exaltation was the ultimate confidence booster to every female Hexer.

The phase of life on the other hand was the most modest side. A young, infantile boy meekly looked out while looking as scared as a rabbit.

If female Hexers equated every male to this young and innocent depiction, then it was no wonder they treated boys so poorly!

After fifteen minutes of inspecting the miniature altar, he pushed it away.

The altar not only failed to enlighten him of the meaning of the six phases, it also contained no spirituality worth noting.

Though Gloriana possessed a decent amount of spiritual strength, her sincere faith was not enough to bestow the altar with a noticeable imprint. It lacked the volume of worshippers and years and accumulation of Ylvaine's nutrient pack wrapper.

He pushed it away, causing it to float back to Gloriana's side.

"Is it enough?" Gloriana asked.

"No." Ves shook his head. "I doubt that any altar in the fleet can meet my needs. I need at least something to work with in order to create a suitable spiritual product to represent your faith. Right now, I see two possible options to accomplish my goal."

He stretched a finger. "First, I take a spiritual fragment from your mind. This is obviously unacceptable. I don't want you to harm you in any way. I'm still not sure what the repercussions actually are for doing this. In addition, I need you at your full strength to contribute to our two design spirits."

She nodded. She already experienced what it was like to lose a part of her spirit. It was not very pleasant to say the least. Unlike Ves, her mentality was much less resilient, and she recovered far slower from a loss than Ves, who could easily replenish his losses with the help of his Grand Dynamo.

"What's the other option?" His girlfriend asked.

He raised another finger. "The second option is to resort to the same solution I used to create Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. I take the spiritual remnant of a major relic of hexism and convert it into a complete spiritual product! The result is far superior to what I can create from my imagination or draw from your mind because it is the collective representation of the beliefs of billions or trillions of Hexers!"

As Ves finished speaking, he carefully studied his girlfriend's reaction.

She didn't greet his suggestion as eagerly as he hoped.

"Are you crazy?"

"It makes complete sense, Gloriana! It worked with Ylvaine! Look at how strong he is now! Wouldn't it be nice to do the same for your people?"

"You don't know what you are talking about! Just the thought of desecrating one of our most valuable altars or artifacts is unthinkable! My fellow Hexers have venerated the six phase of existence through relics for centuries! It is a great disservice to rob any of them of their divine strength just to further our goals!"

Ves crossed his arms. "Logically, I think it makes sense. Just think. What would you rather like to see. The Hegemony losing the war while maintaining the integrity of all of its cultural relics, or the Hexers winning the war at the cost of losing something that's invisible and unnoticeable to them? To me, the choice is clear! As long as I can obtain what I want, no one will notice the difference!"

"THAT'S NOT THE POINT, VES!" Gloriana shouted in his face. "MY FAITH IS NOT A CONVENIENCE STORE THAT YOU CAN ENTER AND TAKE SOMETHING AWAY AS YOU WISH!"

"I didn't mean any disrespect! I just think that the Hegemony might benefit if they sacrificed something marginal in order to gain something massive!"

"NO!"

Gloriana stormed away from the design lab in a fit of fury. Ves looked perplexed.

"What's the big deal?"

"Miaow!"

Clixie hissed at Ves before she sauntered after her owner.

"Meow!"

Lucky followed after the furry feline, completely leaving Ves behind.

Ves glowered at his mechanical cat. "Where do you think you're going?!"

After the abrupt end of this meeting, Ves felt a bit unsure. Was his suggestion wrong? He didn't think so. He didn't possess any inherent taboos about messing with a Hexer religious relic in order to accomplish his objective.

Yet Gloriana didn't see it that way. Her faith in hexism was truly sincere! This caused Ves to inadvertently touch her nerves with his suggestion!

"Damnit."

How could he fix this? Should he fall back to one of the other solutions?

Perhaps the most viable alternative was to construct a spiritual product the conventional method.

His usual method was to harvest a spiritual fragment from Nyxie and process it in order to remove as many unpleasant attributes as possible. Once he purified the fragment, he began the spiritual restoration process by breaking it along with his spiritually-empowered images before merging it all together to form a new spiritual entity.

There were several flaws associated with this method.

First, even if he did everything to purify the original spiritual fragment, aspects of Nyxie still suffused it. Ves lacked the ability to neutralize every influence that Nyxie possessed over an aspect of himself!

Second, the ultimate outcome depended heavily on Ves. As a foreigner, Ves did not possess a deep understanding of hexism and Hexer society. Even if he read a lot of books about hexism, he doubted he would be able to tolerate all of the biases and ridiculous assumptions the Hexers adopted to justify their gender policies.

Learning about a culture or religion from a bunch of books was incomparable to living and breathing it for your entire childhood and adolescence!

Ves would never be able to catch up to Gloriana in her understanding of hexism. Whatever Ves might think about the faith and philosophy would inevitably be out of sync with what real Hexers believed.

If he was desperate enough, he might decide to fall back on this solution anyway. While it wasn't ideal by any means, if Ves abandoned his desire to create an accurate representation of hexism, then what was the harm of spreading his own interpretation?

"Maybe this isn't as bad as it sounds." Ves abruptly realized.

Why should he copy the poisonous faith verbatim? Was it truly necessary to strive for an accurate and faithful representation of hexism when he himself disagreed with its tenets?

He felt a bit conflicted.

As a commissioned mech designer, it wasn't proper for him to distort or misinterpret the wishes of his client.

If his client was anything like Gloriana, then proceeding with this course of action would surely amount to a violation to one of his principles!

Though Ves did not necessarily have a problem with abandoning his principles, he didn't want to resort to it when other options were available.

"If Gloriana doesn't want to play ball, then I'll just turn to another Hexer."

Some time later, Ves sat alone in an office. He activated the terminal and called the leader of the Black Cats.

Calabast's face projected in front of his face.

"Hello Ves. It's rare for you to get in touch with me. Did you miss me or something?"

"Stop with the jokes, Calabast. I need something from you. It's related to DIVA's commission."

The spy became a lot more attentive. "Do tell."

Because Calabast resided on another ship and the fleet was travelling through FTL, he was aware that the connection wasn't completely secure. Ves had to assume that other spy agencies might be listening in on their conversation.

He therefore started to remind her of an incident that happened in the past.

"Remember my Transcendent Messenger design?" He asked. "What if I wanted to design something similar that is based around hexism rather than the Ylvainan Faith."

Calabast was a smart woman. It didn't take long for her thoughts to turn to some very unpleasant memories.

Ves had been arrested by the Ylvainan Inquisition due to how extreme he behaved in order to accomplish his goal! Though it somehow worked out in the end, Calabast was anything but happy with the tumultuous and hair-raising incident!

Now that Ves hinted that he wanted to do it again, Calabast immediately regarded him with suspicion!

"Don't tell me you are thinking of something stupid again."

"It's not stupid! It's just a little controversial, but I don't think there is any harm in letting me do what I want! I don't want to talk too much over our comm channel, but I think you know what I need in order to design the best support mech for the Hexers as possible. I NEED this critical element. I don't have to destroy it or mar it in any way that is noticeable to other people, so don't worry about losing something once you hand it over to me. Just give me half an hour and I'll return what you've lent to me right away!"

To her credit, Calabast didn't blow up in the same fashion as Gloriana. She still began to frown, though.

"No wonder why you aren't on good terms with Gloriana right now. While I'm not a follower of hexism, what you just suggested was very insensitive."

"I.. kind of understand, but it is really no big deal! Surely you'd be able to see that, right?"

"I do. On paper, the tradeoff you implied makes sense. It's just that it will be difficult to convince DIVA to accept it. Even if there is a large amount of Hexers who don't ascribe to hexism, we still respect it and those who follow its tenets. What you are trying to suggest will anger the entire Hegemon once they find out your plan!"

"Couldn't you ask DIVA to obtain what I need? They can probably do it quietly if they aren't able to get what I want through official channels."

"If it was up to me, I would give your proposal a lot of consideration." Calabast answered after a pause. "I'm not sure how DIVA will react. It's a diverse group that consists of women from many parts of the Hegemony."

"Will you do it, though? This is important."

"I truly can't say for sure, Ves. This is an incredibly delicate issue. Even if I manage to secure what you need, shipping it to your fleet is another risky operation."

"I can manage without it for a few months. Until my mech design is ready, there is plenty of time to send out my request."

After a bit of chatting where they glossed over some details, Calabast finally nodded.

"I understand what you need. It's not easy to obtain a good one."

"The stronger, the better! The more people involved, the better! The more significant it is, the greater the power of my upcoming Hexer mech!"

"I see." She said. "I believe you. I'll be sure to strive for the best specimen that we can obtain for you, but I won't make any promises. I need to go over this idea and find the best way to bring up your proposal without provoking a massive argument."

"Just do what you can. Please tell me quickly whether something is being done to meet my requirements. If every Hexer disapproves, then I'll just come up with something on my own. I don't think you'll like it, though."

"You don't need to warn me again. You are an authority when it comes to your own design philosophy."

Soon, Calabast ended the call. She was eager to explore what she could do to fulfill Ves' request.

Not just any mediocre relic would do. Designing the Hexer mech was his first attempt at designing a proper second-class mech. Ves wanted to do everything possible to deliver the best mech design possible in order to prove to everyone that he was fully capable of catching up and surpassing his second-class rivals!

#### *Chapter 1976 Education Conundrums*

After issuing his request, he left this project aside until he received an update from Calabast. It was relatively pointless for him to work on a mech project that was still subject to massive changes.

A tense day went by as the relationship between Ves and Gloriana grew a little cold.

They still slept in the same stateroom and on the same bed, but a very wide gap had formed in the middle!

"Meow."

"Miaow."

With all of that open space, their cats made their home in this valley. The organic and mechanical cats comfortably napped and groomed each other in the night while their owners slept at the edges of the bed.

The awkward state didn't last for long, though. This wasn't their first bump in their relationship. Both of them were very much accustomed to ignoring source of friction.

While their argument hadn't been resolved, Ves and Gloriana simply decided not to talk about it. Instead, they turned their attention to something more innocent.

"We've selected the components of our striker mech." Gloriana said over breakfast. She briefly paused in partaking her pancake to project a draft that included the components. "From what I think, our striker mech can be quite a decent performer, especially with the little surprise I plan to incorporate. What do you think?"

Ves studied the supplemented draft design with an experienced eye. He noticed that Gloriana had already fleshed out the draft in some portions. All of this work gave him a greater idea on how the end product might look like at the end of the four-month project.

As a mech that was supposed to revolve around Zeigra as its design spirit, the offensive power of the mech was crucially important.

Ves was glad that the current state of the draft design reflected its offensive focus. Though the quality of its armor system was rather lackluster and its mobility was as bad as any mech that lugged around so much mass, the mech devoted ample capacity to sustaining its powerful flamethrower.

It was no problem for this striker mech to engulf an entire region of space with hot and corrosive flames! No light mech would easily dare to cross the vast and immense sea of flames that the striker mech was able to project!

The 34F Enison Spreader model also made for a decent close-ranged finisher. Its focused channeling mode was so potent that it could even overwhelm the defenses and heat capacity of a space knight after a dozen seconds of pummeling!

Its endurance in combat was rather average and depended heavily on the frugality of the mech pilot. A skilled and knowledgeable striker mech pilot would be able to make much more efficient use of the flamethrower. They could easily last twice or thrice as long as a mech pilot who wasn't specialized in piloting this mech type!

Therefore, Ves didn't worry too much about the mech's endurance and capacity.

Of course, that was not enough to make the mech stand out from the competition. Ever since the MTA unveiled the new generation, a lot of mech designers had already flooded the market with their own interpretations of striker mechs.

Ves didn't have to spend more than a couple of seconds on the galactic net to know that tons of mech designers had already designed a mech with the same configuration.

Even if the components possessed slightly divergent properties and even if the individual designs looked different, their performance was probably similar!

The only way to differentiate their products from the competition was to rely on his own inherent advantages. Gloriana had to pitch in as well.

Fortunately, Ves had a much easier time in distinguishing his products than other mech designers. His design philosophy was practically a free ticket to success as long as Ves put in enough effort.

That was no reason to grow complacent, though. Leaning on his specialty to do all of the heavy lifting while ignoring his foundation would only lead to ruin in the long term.

In addition, just as Ves relied on his glows to give his mechs some extra oomph, other mech designers possessed their own tricks to elevate the performance of their products!

Therefore, it was never a given that his mechs would succeed! There was too much uncertainty when it came to the mech market. Ves left the predictions to the experts.

"We can proceed with this draft." Ves issued his verdict. "I have high hopes for our striker mech. Despite the capacity problems, it's not a very complicated mech to design."

Gloriana cautiously nodded. "The problems we'll be facing is of a different nature than the problems we encountered when we designed the Bright Warrior. In fact, I kind of prefer the latter. Back when we designed our modular mech platform, the potential of our product was incredibly high because we had a lot of options at our disposal. The challenge was figuring out the most optimal solutions."

"In contrast, our striker mech is so simple in nature that it is actually limiting our options. There is no easy way to engineer ourselves out of the fundamental problems related to capacity."

Without access to dimensional technology and miniaturized components, Ves and Gloriana would have to work very hard just to free up a small amount of capacity.

It was impossible to fill up a single cup with two cups worth of liquid. Sure, you could resort to tricks such as compressing the liquid or manipulating the temperature, but that was the equivalent of resorting to high technology in mech design.

Neither of them looked forward to tackling these problems over the course of their work. "Let's head to the design lab."

"Okay."

They finished their breakfast and brought their cats to the design lab. Their two design teams had already arrived a few minutes before.

After handing out some assignments, Ves did not immediately begin with fleshing out the draft design.

Instead, Ves addressed an issue that he had been ignoring for a time.

The four Larkinson seeds had grown a little taller and older the last time he had seen them. Due to all of the excitement that took place in recent months, Ves and Gloriana hadn't been able to guide them that much.

"It's been rough the past few months. How have you been faring?" Ves asked.

Maikel, Maisie Ann, Rennie and Zanthar Larkinson all looked at each other.

Eventually, Zanthar Larkinson spoke first. "We miss school."

That opened the floodgates.

"It sucks now that we are forced to attend school remotely."

"I miss my friends."

"I don't like living on this ship! I don't like any of the other ships! None of them feel like home!"

The Larkinsons were still children in a way. Ves patiently let the teenagers vent before he raised his hands.

"I understand your difficulties. Our situation is anything but ideal. We all uprooted you from your familiar lives and have been forced to live and study on ships that were never meant to be treated as homes."

"We didn't mean to complain about how we are forced to live on ships, sir."

Ves smiled. "It's okay. Your complaints are all valid. I believe that many more Larkinsons and other personnel are likely chafing about their sudden transition to spacer life. I believe that your schooling is too important to be left as is. While I didn't attend the best mech university in the star sector, the lessons I learned and the values and principles my teachers instilled in me can only be acquired by attending a proper institution in person. I've been thinking a lot about how to address your schooling issues. All of you are nearing the age where you are ready to start studying mech design in earnest. As someone who has been in your position more than a decade ago, I know how crucial it is to your future development to attend the best school possible."

The Larkinson seeds all looked eager at what Ves was about to say.

"Since I plan to travel throughout the star cluster for the next couple of years, it is quite inconvenient for all of us to drop you off at a mech design university and pick you up when you graduate. I'll have to reserve passage for you on the fastest passenger liner I'm able to afford to bring you back to our fleet. If you are willing to go through this ordeal, then there are several excellent mech design universities in this star sector that I can recommend to you. Maisie, you once asked if you could attend a Hexer mech design university, right?"

"I still want to attend one if possible." She said, to the shock of her fellow seeds!

"I've talked to Gloriana about this and she can recommend any of you to one of the Hegemony's many mid-ranked institutions. Since you aren't Hexers or second-class citizens, it's not possible to get you in the best mech design universities, but that doesn't mean the ones that rank below them are awful. They're already ten times better than my own alma mater!"

Maisie looked hopeful. "Does that mean I can start studying at a Hexer university soon?"

"It's not that simple." Ves shook his head. "If you or Rennie want to attend a Hexer university, then Gloriana and I will have to step up your tutoring in order to allow you to catch up with your future Hexer classmates. They're already learning twice or thrice as

much as you in their high school years! The disparity between third and second-class citizens already begins at birth, so it will be very tough for the two of you to make up for that disparity. Fortunately for you girls, we have many means to allow you to catch up. I'm willing to let Dr. Ranya and the other specialists in my employ augment you with implants and gene boosts so that you won't be falling behind when you begin your first semester."

"Really? Yay!"

The young Larkinsons had all looked forward to augmenting themselves for years! They had heard many stories of how average students suddenly turned into geniuses after their parents paid for their upgrades!

Ves inwardly shook his head at their reactions. Even though they already augmented their genes once, they still underestimated risks and repercussions of augmenting their genes and cognitive functions. It wasn't all roses and sunshine.

"So are the two of you truly willing to accept these conditions in order to attend a Hexer university?"

"We are!"

Rennie came around quickly to the idea once she thought about it. Attending a second-rate university had been one of her greatest dreams!

"There is an extra caveat, though. Right now, the Hexadric Hegemony is in the middle of a war. Once the Komodo War swings in favor of the Fridaymen, you'll have to flee the state in a hurry. This will doubtlessly interrupt your studies and deny you your diploma for at least a year. Are you still willing to embrace this plan?"

The two girls hesitated, but they eventually nodded. "We believe in you, sir."

"Haha. I hope your faith is not misplaced."

"Uhm, sir, what about us?" Zanthar asked.

Ves stared at the young Larkinson. "Do you want to attend a Hexer university with Masie and Rennie?"

"Uhh.. no."

"I thought so. Even if you said yes, I would have vetoed your decision anyway. As far as I'm concerned, no male member of our clan is allowed to undergo Hexer indoctrination! I have a different set of solutions for you and Maikel. The first option is to attend Rawlings University. It's a top university of the Sentinel Kingdom and produces bright and promising mech designers like Mayer Torto who I've recently hired on. Rawlings is not

as good as a Hexer school, though, so you'll have to accept falling behind Maisie and Rennie."

Neither boys looked pleased with that. "Is there another solution, sir?"

"Yes, but it is the most uncertain and risky solution of all. It can either work out better than what I've arranged for the girls, or it can all crash and burn."

Ves took a deep breath. He didn't feel very comfortable about this solution either, but he owed it to the boys to offer them a more promising option than dumping them at Rawlings.

"You study directly under me and Gloriana. In essence, you'll become our apprentices of a sort. While we aren't able to provide you with a traditional diploma, you'll be receiving our personal guidance to a much greater degree than before. Just because you are my clansmen doesn't mean I'll be any less strict than the Hexer universities!"

The boys only exchanged a single look with each other before turning back to Ves and nodding their heads.

"We accept!"

"Are you sure? You'll be missing out on a lot of essential experiences that define an orthodox mech designer."

"We are sure! We believe in you!"

#### *Chapter 1977 The Battle for Bentheim*

The Bentheim System. Usually bustling with trade ships and passenger ships of all shapes and sizes, in recent days civilian traffic practically dropped to nil.

No more resources were being supplied to the factories on the ground.

No tourists came to experience the hustle and bustle of the Bright Republic's liveliest planet.

No mechs and other manufactured goods were being shipped to other locations.

The star system turned into the opposite of what a prosperous port system should look like.

Part of the decrease in traffic was due to the destruction of a lot of border states.

Without a lot of secure and established trade routes, how could the bounty of the frontier and the border states be shipped towards the center of the star sector?

The loss of so many trading partners already hurt Bentheim and the Bright Republic considerably.

Yet the more important reason why commercial ships avoided Bentheim like the plague was the imminent arrival of the greatest threat the Bright Republic had ever faced!

Captain Rosa Orfan of the Flagrant Vandals sat in a waiting room next to the mech hangar of the Wolf Mother.

The huge and expanded factory ship groaned frequently even in rest. Due to the nature of her numerous additions, the ship never flew as smoothly as ships that were built to this scale from the start.

The Flagrant Vandals were still scraping by after the last Bright-Vesia War. Though the Vandals managed to build up a reputation due to their exploits in the conflict against the Vesians, the sandman invasion quickly sucked up all of the attention.

Funding started to decrease as the Bright Republic became increasingly more preoccupied with pumping as many starfighters as possible.

Due to the great losses the Vandals suffered, the mech regiment never managed to replenish its ranks to its old levels. Other mech regiments needed to replenish their ranks as well, and the higher ups began to disregard the Flagrant Vandals yet again.

Captain Orfan wasn't happy. She had already grown a little bit disillusioned with the leadership of her state, and recent events just soured her feelings even further.

"Why am I even here?" She sighed.

She looked at the empty bottle in her hand and threw it over her shoulder. It clattered against the deck of the waiting room before rolling against the bulkhead.

A cleaning bot soon arrived to take the bottle away and bring it to recycling.

"I know. The Republic I knew is gone."

She activated her comm and checked the overall state of her customized Novabreaker.

As a melee mech specialist, and a landbound one at that, she was not very pleased with her currently-assigned mech.

It was too bad that her opponent consisted of an alien race which possessed absolute superiority up close.

"I'd rather fight the Fridaymen rather than the sandmen! At least you managed to tear down some of their expensive mechs! What I wouldn't give to be a part of that fight!"

The only melee mechs allowed to fight the sandmen were expert mechs. Many expert pilots such as Ark Larkinson already proved that they could keep themselves safe while simultaneously dealing serious against their monoliths!

Captain Orfan wasn't an expert pilot, though. She was just an expert candidate, and the exact circumstances of her advancement were highly unusual.

Expert candidates hardly possessed the extraordinary might of fully-fledged expert pilots.

The only advantage that Captain Orfan truly possessed was that she broke through her human limits. This enabled her to improve at a rapid rate and learn how to pilot spaceborn mechs and ranged mechs remarkably easily.

During the height of the Sand War, Captain Orfan enjoyed so much target practice that she had become quite a decent shot these days!

"It's not the same. Ranged mechs are so cowardly. I can easily crush a dozen mechs by the time my pitiful ranged mech with its pitiful peashooter can barely defeat a single machine!"

The Sand War and the Komodo War both weighed on her shoulders despite her desire to have nothing to do with them. She was tired. She had gone through a traumatic mission in the frontier and still hadn't recovered from all of the friends and comrades she lost.

Fighting the sandmen might have been cathartic to a point, but the stupid sand-like aliens were no better than punching bags. There wasn't any fun or satisfaction in beating them up, especially when another sandman fleet arrived the next day.

As Captain Orfan continued to talk to the air, an alarm finally sounded in the waiting room.

[RED ALERT! OUR SENSOR NETWORK HAS JUST DETECTED A HUGE WAVE OF GRAVITIC DISTURBANCE!]

"The sandman planet!" Captain Orfan gasped.

It was finally time for her to move into action.

While it would probably take hours before Orfan gained a chance to test her mettle against aliens, she still stood up and exited the waiting room.

After she entered the large and cavernous mech hangar, she passed by lots of mech technicians as they ran around to ready the mechs for their impending deployments.

"Orfan."

"Captain!"

"Carry on, techs. We're depending on you all! I don't want a single mech of ours to malfunction today!"

"Don't worry, captain. We've been tuning these mechs for weeks. They're running as smooth as silk!"

The woman eventually reached the site where her Novabreaker stood ready for activation. The mech technicians had already finished prepping it for battle.

"Chief Carmon." Orphan gruffly greeted the chief technician. "How's my mech?"

The middle-aged woman in overalls nodded towards the expert candidate while chewing a stimulant.

"We couldn't implement all of your requests. There's only so much we can do to enhance the firepower of the Sandbreaker rifle. It's a weapon designed for the mass market. There is hardly any room for performance enhancements. The best we could do was to tweak its ammunition and reinforce a couple of portions of the rifle."

The chief technician also implemented some other tweaks. The Novabreaker was an excellent design. Five Ansel Seniors pooled their strengths to design the award-winning Dawnbreaker mech that had become the preferred model in the Sand War.

Though the Desolate Soldier designed by Ves had an even greater effect on the war, its inherent fragility meant that the casualty rate of its mech pilots was several times greater than the mech pilots of the Dawnbreaker!

The Novabreaker was the militarized variant of the Dawnbreaker. Its performance in almost every aspect surpassed the base model. Though the costs had risen as well, the excellent protection it offered to its mech pilots was incredibly valuable!

After the techs completed their final checks, Captain Orfan entered the cockpit and waited in the darkness.

Nothing except a large projection of a map of the star system lit up the interior.

Right now, a lot of dots of light were interspersed through the Bentheim System.

Most of them represented the mechs and ships of the various mech regiments of the Mech Corps. The bulk of them oriented themselves towards the direction of the former Coman Federation.

Everyone anticipated the sandman behemoth to enter the star system from this direction.

Of course, just to cover their bases, the Mech Corps also stationed plenty of elements in other directions. Even if it was just a low-probability event, the military couldn't afford to get caught with its pants down!

Captain Orfan noted keenly that the Flagrant Vandals were stationed at one of these flanking positions.

Unlike the premier mech regiments, the Vandals didn't have the honor of meeting the foe at the start where all of the recorders would catch them at a good angle.

However, Orphan didn't think the premier mech regiments would have a chance to fire their weapons at all. To many Brighters, the biggest threat in the star system wasn't the sandmen.

It was the MTA.

Though not as formidable as the CFA warfleet that ravaged the sandman empire, the MTA task force with its highly-advanced fleet carriers, formidable-looking cruisers and destroyers and exceptionally nimble combat carriers made for a very impressive sight.

The MTA task force already demonstrated its prowess several times when it deployed its famed first-class multipurpose mechs in leisurely practice runs.

Situated very close to the estimated emergence point of the sandman planet, the MTA carriers were already starting to deploy its mechs.

Captain Orfan patched into a feed transmitted by a nearby scout ship in order to observe the mechs that launched from the carriers.

The multipurpose mechs were bigger and tougher than any of the mechs she was used to dealing with. Many of them were laden with weapons and modules, only a fraction of which were visible from the naked eye.

As a mech pilot who had entered a derelict CFA battleship and looted it of some of its valuables, Orphan didn't regard the mechs with the same degree of envy as her fellow comrades.

Though the CFA and MTA often acted as if they were invincible, Captain Orfan knew very well that they just happened to be the biggest bullies in the galaxy.

She even suspected that the main reason the MTA dispatched its task force to Bentheim was to make a show of force!

The gravitic disturbance grew even greater. Though her Novabreakers didn't possess the sensors to detect more than a fraction of the fluctuations, the ships of the Flagrant Vandals and the network of listening posts and other assets strewn throughout the star system all transmitted very worrying telemetry.

The fluctuations were so large that they covered the entire star system! They reached such strong levels that no one wasn't sure anymore where the sandman planet would emerge!

The Mech Corps waited with bated breath. The mercenary mech pilots who had come to take part in a historic battle also froze. The sensor readings had already exceeded anything they witnessed in their lives!

"They're coming! Wait! They haven't arrived at the front! They're knocking on our rear door!"

A surprisingly small sandman amalgamation emerged at the opposite side of the star system!

Everyone was stunned!

"This is impossible! FTL isn't supposed to work that way! All of the scout ships were sure the sandman planet traveled straight to Bentheim from Sydney Superior!"

"Wait! That's not a sandman planet! It's mass and volume are way too small! It's.. it's just a monolith!"

The fluctuations hadn't ended though. A few seconds later, a dozen different signals spiked from various edges of the star system.

More sandman monoliths emerged in a direction away from where everyone expected the sandman planet to arrive!

"There's more!"

Hundreds of signals spikes. Thousands of signals spiked. Tens of thousands of signals spiked!

Sandman monolith after sandman monolith kept entering the edge of the Bentheim System from every angle! In a matter of minutes, a huge and dispersed ring of sandman monoliths finished their transition back to reality!

A sense of horror dawn on everyone's mind.

"The sandmen fooled us! They never intended to attack the Bentheim System as a single, massive planet! They split up their planet at the final leg of the journey and dispersed back into countless smaller units!"

Even Captain Orfan lost her confidence. Before the sandman race halted its invasion, it had been doing an excellent job pressuring thousands of star systems at a time.

All of those sandmen fleets had overrun dozens of border states and put another dozen states under an incredible amount of pressure!

Now, the sandmen seemed to have eschewed its strategy of dispersing its strength. Instead, it pooled its sandman fleets together to attack a single star system, but not in the method every human anticipated!

Even the MTA appeared stumped at this new development. Even though its powerful task force was capable of deploying hundreds or thousands of first-class mechs, it was impossible for this force to cover each and every direction!

"Looks like this won't be a walk in the park after all!" Captain Orfan concluded.

As soon as the sandman monoliths returned to realspace, they all accelerated forward as an indomitable swarm!

#### *Chapter 1978 Level Up*

Battle ensued quickly. The Mech Corps stationed a lot of mech regiments at the flanks. The generals did so not just to cover every direction, but also keep the forces in reserve.

Now, the Flagrant Vandals and the other mech regiments stationed in flanks were suddenly forced to sortie sooner than anticipated because the sandmen defied their expectations yet again!

"Where is their sandman planet? Why have they broken themselves up again?!"

"Shut up! Just shoot them! This monolith isn't going down as easily as before!"

"What the hell?! Is that an energy shield?! Since when were the sandmen capable of projecting shields!?"

"Where do they get all of the technology from? Did they engulf an MTA mech or CFA warship?"

"Ahh! That's not a laser beam! That's a positron beam!"

The opening stages of the Battle for Bentheim started off explosively as the dispersed elements of the Mech Corps started to clash against the nearest sandman monoliths!

Soon, they discovered that their enemies weren't as exploitable as before. Somehow, their opponents had level up! Each and every monolith began to exhibit a lot of tricks the defenders had never encountered before!

In many cases, these surprises proved fatal as the upgraded sandman monoliths exterminated the mechs dispatched to halt their advance!

"Where are the starfighters?! We need their help! The monoliths are firing too many energy beams!"

"They're on their way! Hold on!"

"What?! You're only sending a single starfighter regiment? That's not enough? We've already lost a quarter of our mechs to take down a single monolith, and there's another one following right behind!"

The might and numbers that allowed the sandmen to pressure a huge amount of star systems at the same time finally converged on a single star system!

Not only that, but their upgraded monoliths immediately resulted in thousands of casualties in the opening minute as the defending mechs and starfighters were completely caught off guard!

Their enemy had evolved, but the human forces hardly changed!

The worst part about it was that both the Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps spread out their regiments at the flanks. They still devoted over half of their best units at the suspected front in anticipating the arrival of a sandman planet that would come!

"Fall back! Don't fight the monoliths head-on! They're too deadly and accurate at closer ranges!"

"Damnit! What is the MTA doing?! We need the help of their multipurpose mechs right away!"

The MTA attempted to disperse some of its ships and mechs. A handful of destroyers started generating portals that led to different parts of the Bentheim System in order to rapidly relocate squads of multipurpose mechs in order to ease the pressure on the beleaguered flanks!

The arrival of the first-class mechs instantly turned the tide of the battle! Many of the mechs brought their energy weapons to bear. As soon as they aimed their weapons at a

sandman monolith, the muzzles spat out bright blue bolts that instantly penetrated the energy shields carved off huge chunks of sand from the monoliths!

As powerful as the sandman monoliths appeared, they still weren't a match against even a single multipurpose mech!

Unlike the Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps, the first-class mechs eschewed physical damage weapons in favor of energy weapons with a peculiar disruptive effect.

Each time their crackling blue energy bolts impacted the surface of a monolith, they discharged a lot of energy, some of which were completely unfamiliar to the Mech Corps!

Regardless how it worked, the disruption caused by these impacts immediately disturbed the bonds that held the individual sandman particles together!

As much as the MTA reinforcements provided some much-needed relief, they couldn't be everywhere! While monolith after monolith succumbed to the superior mechs of the MTA, more sandman monoliths pushed through the initial opposition without breaking their energy shields!

On the surface of Bentheim, billions of locals watched the footage with an increasing amount of dread.

Panic had already sparked as the citizens saw that the Mech Corps, Starfighter Corps and even the MTA failed to stem the tide!

"There are too many sandmen!"

"We're all doomed!"

"Why couldn't I get passage off an evacuation ship?!"

In the last couple of months, the Bright Republic attempted to evacuate many citizens from Bentheim. However, Bentheim was the most populous planet in the Republic.

Even with so much time, over a half of the population was still stuck on the surface!

In truth, the government could have evacuated more people. However, it was difficult to divert additional ships to address this need.

In addition, a large majority of Brighters expected the MTA to wipe out the sandmen with each, thereby making an evacuation moot!

This misplaced confidence in the MTA along with the fear that Bentheim's powerful economic engine would shut down forever caused many leaders to put the brakes on the evacuation effort!

Now, billions of Brighters started to lose their confidence as they saw mechs and starfighters dropping like flies in front of the relentless barrage of positron beams punching straight through their flimsy, low-quality armor!

Seeing as the broadcasts were doing more harm than good, the Mech Corps immediately deactivated its feeds. The local government also shut down all of the local communication networks in order to prevent any chances of the locals to patch into another channel that displayed the massacre up close!

Far from stemming panic, the communications blackout instead fanned the flames! The doom and gloom continued to fester without limit as the Brighters let their imaginations run wild!

Unlike before, no more Peaceful Soldiers patrolled the streets. No more Proudful Soldiers kept the rabble rousers in line. No more Desolate Soldiers were in place to instill duty in the minds of the frail!

Ever since Ves turned into an enemy of the state, the Bright Republic forcibly confiscated every LMC mech.

Now, this decision bit them back in the worst possible way!

Panic and mass hysteria soon erupted in Dorum, Haston, Ansel and other densely-populated cities! Due to all of the preparations for the current battle, the local Planetary Guard forces were woefully insufficient to suppress the panic!

Though the existing order on the planet quickly started to break down, none of the senior leaders were paying attention to the events on the ground.

The critical issue remained defeating the sandmen before they reached the planet! Right now, they were doing an excellent job at it as their upgraded monoliths steamrolled through various mech regiments and starfighter regiments alike!

"This shield just doesn't go down! How many times do I have to fire my rifle before I can breach this shield?!"

"AAHHH! We just sacrificed two mech companies to take down this shield. How come the monolith restored its shield so quickly?!"

"Die sandmen, die!"

Tons of sand and broken wrecks floated throughout space as the scale of the fighting had reached an unimaginable level!

Captain Rosa Orfan was in the thick of one of those battles. She weaved her Novabreaker in various directions in order to remain mobile.

The Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps learned early on that no amount of armor their assets possessed were strong enough to withstand more than a couple of positron beams! Many of them even succumbed after suffering just a glancing hit!

The sandman monoliths discharged so much energy at a time. It was as if the sandmen emptied out all of its energy savings in order to spread as much pain as possible as sandman race made its existence felt for the final time!

Her Novabreaker whizzed to the left just as a small but deceptively powerful beam missed the mech by a couple of meters!

The Sandbreaker rifle wielded by her mech kept pumping round after round against the monolith. However, despite her skill as an expert candidate, her contribution was no better than that of the starfighter pilots as their basic machines packed just as much punch against a large and relative massive target!

"These sandmen went all in on monoliths!" She gritted her teeth. "It's as if they knew we didn't have the firepower to grind them down!"

Their only hope lay in the first-class multipurpose mechs deployed by the MTA.

Yet as powerful as they performed, the sandmen weren't allowing their monoliths to get beat up for free!

As soon as a multipurpose mech flew in range, the monoliths immediately ignored the pesky starfighters and the mechs of the Mech Corps in favor of unleashing all of their might against the Mech Corps!

Instead of firing hundreds of dispersed positron beams, the monoliths instead concentrated their power and unleashed a single, devastating beam that blasted an entire zone around the multipurpose mech!

No matter how fast the MTA mechs attempted to dodge, they were all struck with remarkably few exceptions!

The monoliths unleashed enough power to blast apart numerous asteroids and more!

Soon after they discharged their entire power reserve, the hot monoliths silently broke apart as the sandmen that consisted of the amalgamation had sacrificed everything to launch this sacrificial attack!

It wasn't enough. Humanity's most powerful mechs were tougher than that! The megabeams not only left a single scratch on the MTA mechs, but also failed to breach their energy shields!

"Watch out! More of them are launching their attacks!

The first monolith only bought time for several more monoliths to get into range! Three of them charged their positron beams at the same time.

Perhaps smelling trouble, the multipurpose mech assigned to guard this zone immediately started to engage its powerful flight systems to rapidly build up a lot of distance!

Boosters and certain warping technology came online to accelerate its sunlight flight to ridiculous speeds!

Yet as much as the multipurpose mech attempted to gain some distance, the monoliths finished charging up their attacks too quickly!

Three bright-blue megabeams of charged particles slammed into the fleeing multipurpose mech with unerring accuracy! No matter how sophisticated their ECM systems threw off targeting systems, the sandmen appeared strangely immune to the interference.

It was as if the sandmen had transitioned from a third-class space pest into a first-class menace!

Though the three monoliths shattered and broke apart after expending their power, they managed to do their jobs.

They successfully felled the multipurpose mech!

As soon as the first MTA mech succumbed against the sandmen, the hearts of every mech pilot stilled.

Though there were many instances where the multipurpose mechs managed to destroy the monoliths, the problem was that there were way too many sandman monoliths!

The MTA task force quickly began to feel the strain as their individual mechs had to contend against half-a-dozen sandman monoliths at a time!

In order to prevent its precious mechs from getting mobbed, the MTA ordered the mechs to team up and cover each other's backs.

As the MTA mechs consolidated together, they no longer succumbed to the sandman monoliths.

However, concentrating these powerful mechs also caused a lot of sandman monoliths to slip through the gaps!

"The MTA is getting overwhelmed! Not even its warships are able to hold back the onslaught!"

Even though the sandmen dispersed their fleets in every direction, most of their elements still arrived at the front.

Though the premier mech regiments of the Mech Corps put up a good resistance, the sandmen didn't pay much attention to them. Instead, they poured their full firepower against the mechs and warships of the MTA!

Their large cruisers and formidable destroyers attracted most of their attention. The awesome firepower of their large caliber weapons broke through the shields of the sandman monoliths far too easily to be left alone!

Though sandman monoliths initially started falling in droves, they soon presented their answer to the might of the MTA warships.

They merged together!

The sandman monoliths organically melted into each other, forming larger and larger amalgamations.

Though that made them bigger targets, the shields they were able to project became increasingly more capable of withstanding the bombardment of positron beams, plasma bolts, fusion rounds and even more exotic attacks such as localized singularities and nanite storms!

#### *Chapter 1979 Taking The Step*

As the Bright Republic faced its bleakest hour, many people throughout the star sector watched the battle with intense interest.

The Larkinson Clan and Ves dropped everything in order to tune in to the available broadcasts of the disaster unfolding in the Bentheim System.

Though the Mech Corps and the government no longer transmitted any footage onto the galactic net, plenty of private outfits and other third parties still kept their individual feeds open for a time.

As MTA mechs started getting overwhelmed by numerous sandman monoliths and as the warships of the MTA started to experience some strain, all of the feeds suddenly shut off. Not a single quantum communication node in the Bentheim System transmitted any data to the rest of the galaxy!

For a moment, Ves and many other people were stunned. Why did the broadcasts stop?

It didn't take too long for Ves to guess the answer.

"The Comm Consortium shut everything down! Those bastards!" He shouted.

Gloriana placed her hand on his arm. "The Comm Consortium is operated by the Big Two to begin with. It's not that difficult to predict the CC would choose to shut off the feeds to avoid embarrassment."

No one knew what was going on in the Bentheim System right now. The overwhelming number of upgraded sandman monoliths were so powerful that they were even giving the MTA task force a hard time!

While Ves wasn't ready to count the MTA forces out, there was no doubt that the Battle of Bentheim was far more contentious than everyone initially realized.

"The MTA is too arrogant!" Ves vented. "It was a mistake to underestimate the sandmen! If the MTA dispatched even a single battleship, the sandmen would have never been able to pressure its forces to this extent!"

Gloriana didn't care about the Bentheim System. She found it curious that for all of his claims, Ves still cared about his old home.

Perhaps he was more of a Brighter than he admitted. He still possessed at least some attachment to the state that had birthed him and shaped him in the mech designer he was today.

"Urgh! What am I supposed to do? My relatives and many of my workers must be fretting as we speak!"

"You'll need to fill in the void, Ves." Gloriana suggested. "Since the Comm Consortium refuses to reveal what is happening in the Bentheim System, your people need reassurance more than ever. Go step up and address the fleet. I'm sure your Larkinsons need you at this time."

Ves sighed. "You're right. In a way, I'm glad the Bright Republic persecuted my relatives. At least they're not a part of this ongoing catastrophe."

As Ves prepared to address his subordinates, elsewhere a secret base went on high alert for a different reason!

At the start of the Battle of Bentheim, many guards and administrators started to watch the broadcasts. Even though they were all supposed to be focused on the job while they

were on duty, the security arrangements of the secret base were so secure that hardly any incidents had taken place in the last couple of decades!

Some complacency couldn't be avoided. Compared to their boring jobs of watching over a bunch of defenseless prisoners, the fate of Bentheim and the rest of the Republic was far more important!

Though the lower ranks were still expected to perform their duties, the prison warden and the senior administrators took advantage of their expanded privileges to tap into the broadcasts of the pivotal battle.

At this time, DIVA finally made a move!

With the alertness level of the people base at an all-time low, numerous disguised female agents started to hack into databases, assassinate key personnel and activate their prior sabotage measures!

No explosions wracked the base. No alarms filled the corridors. No guards were hunting down intruders.

In the weeks that DIVA managed to infiltrate the secret base, its agents utilized superior technology to affect sabotage at a much greater level than the base builders had anticipated!

As diligently as Spotlight tried to keep its bases secure, it was incomparable to DIVA. The sheer tech and talent disparity was so vast that only a handful of DIVA agents were enough to cripple the base!

Even though the disguised women were more than confident enough to overwhelm the base in a matter of minutes, they opted for a slower and quieter approach.

Different sections of the secret base were surreptitiously being isolated from each other. Spoofed data transmissions took the place of authentic data transmissions. No matter what kind of chaos took place, only a small section of the base were aware of the danger!

As a pair of female guards in uniform approached the cells holding Melinda Larkinson and other prisoners, the doors authorized their entry even though it wasn't their shift.

The two men on guard regarded their colleagues with confusion.

"Wendy? Why are you here?"

The other guard wasn't fooled though. He immediately brought his rifle to bear against the women!

"You idiot! Remember the protocols!"

"Oh, damn, you're right!"

Even though the two guards had a friendly relationship with their supposed colleagues, the guards employed by Spotlight were trained to react quickly under various circumstances.

In a case like this, it was better to shoot first and ask questions later!

The two guards unfolded their helmets from their combat armor. Immediately afterwards, they fired their rifles, aiming squarely at the heads and hearts of the approaching women!

BANG!

FTZZZT!

A ballistic round and a laser beam struck each of the targets. Yet instead of seeing the women turn into a pile of burned or exploded flesh, two energy shields came to life, protecting the DIVA agents from the small arms fire of the loyal guards!

"Boys." The left female smirked. "They're so quick to attack. We haven't even said a single word."

The woman on the right shook her head. "What can you expect from boys? These Brighters think they're better than anyone else, but they're just as flawed as any people who treat boys as equals. Let us correct their assumptions, shall we?"

The two women withdrew compact laser pistols from their belts. They calmly drew their weapons at the armed and armored guards and fired a single strong beam.

Moments later, two half-burned hunks of metal and carbonated flesh dropped to the dock.

The women no longer paid attention to the fallen boys and directed their attention to the cells.

They hacked into the individual control systems of each cell, causing the energy screens that blocked the entrances to fall.

The DIVA agents were very careful about unlocking the right cells. The dissidents, rebels and other scumbags begged the agents to free them, but the women turned a deaf ear against their pleas!

Melinda Larkinson rose up from her cot as the energy screen in front of her cell fizzled out.

"Who are you two? Wait a minute.. this smell.."

As a former planetary guard officer, she recognized the faint scent in the air even though the ventilation system was doing its best to carry all of the unpleasant smells away!

"There are bodies in the corridor!"

"Smart."

"As expected of a woman."

"You.. you're Hexers!"

Both DIVA agents smiled. "Correct again. We've come to rescue you and your relatives. The Bright Republic doesn't deserve you anymore. Come with me and you'll be able to reunite with the Larkinsons that managed to slip the net."

"I'm not so sure about this.."

"It's either that, or rot in this cell. We don't have the time to coddle you to safety. You're a woman. Act like it. We'll be freeing your other relatives."

The two DIVA agents exited the cell and began to hack into the other cells. Melinda faced the open entrance with a sliver of doubt.

In truth, she didn't expect this would happen. She never imagined that someone would be able to infiltrate Spotlight's base with such ease.

From what she had seen so far, the female infiltrators were truly Hexers! Their arrogance simply couldn't be faked, and the ease in which they hacked into the cells definitely suggested that they were in the possession of advanced equipment!

Melinda slowly stood up and approached the open entrance. She halted before she stepped into the corridor.

She knew that if she took this step, she would be crossing a point of no return. Any hope of reconciling with the Bright Republic and returning to her old job would be gone.

She loved her job. She loved her career. She felt that she had found her calling in life when she marched out of lockstep with the other Larkinsons and joined the Planetary Guard as opposed to the Mech Corps.

Now, she was at the point where she would be throwing all of that away. She could kiss her career, her colleagues and friends goodbye the moment she took part in this escape attempt.

"Well, it's not as if the government values me as much as I value the Republic." She grimly muttered.

Through reasons outside of her control, her stable and steady life came to a very abrupt end.

It wasn't her fault. A part of her she still resented Ves for provoking all of this trouble.

However, different from many other Larkinsons, she possessed a good relationship with him. She knew Ves in person and was aware that he was too sweet and innocent to be at fault!

"He's just a mech designer. What can he possibly do? I shouldn't blame him for all of our misfortunes!"

In contrast, the Bright Republic revealed its ugly nature. Any remaining goodwill she harbored to her state was bleeding out by the second ever since Spotlight stuffed her in this cell.

As much as she wanted to hold on to her identity as a loyal Brighter, even she had her limits.

She made her decision. "Ves is right. I don't owe anything to the Bright Republic anymore. I can't regain what I've lost, but I can at least move forward and build a new life."

She took a step forward and exited her cell.

Many Larkinsons made a similar choice. As for the ones who were too stubborn to abandon the state they dedicated their entire lives to, the DIVA agents just left them in their cells.

There was little point in taking these Larkinsons away. Since they were so determined to stay aboard a sinking ship, then they wouldn't be of much use anyway to the Larkinson Clan.

As various DIVA agents stationed throughout the secret base dismantled the systems of the base one by one, the former prisoners were slowly being corralled to the docks.

There, a prisoner transport vessel that was ordinarily operated by Spotlight had been taken over by another crew of DIVA agents.

"Head inside and stay out of the way! We're leaving as soon as possible before the local garrison manages to get their act together! Women at the left and men at the right! Don't question our orders or you'll be shot and dumped outside the airlock!"

The escaping Larkinsons hardly knew what was going on. Though they were disturbed that they were being rescued by Hexers of all people, Melinda and the more level-headed Larkinsons knew that this was not the time to ask any questions!

"Come on, grandpa! Let's head inside the ship! We can ask them later whether Ves has anything to do with this operation!"

Hundreds of Larkinsons of all ages hurriedly walked up the entry ramp and followed the instructions of the crews. The prisoner transport ship didn't offer too much space, as it was mainly built for stealth and speed.

The moment the Larkinsons who were willing to escape had all entered the vessel, the DIVA agents boarded last. The agents retracted the ramp and closed the hatch.

Minutes later, the vessel emerged out of the asteroid base and slipped past the blind and inactive security perimeter before blending in with the asteroids.

#### *Chapter 1980 Positron-Electron Annihilation*

The Battle of Bentheim stretched on for hours, then days. The sandman monoliths kept advancing to the critical planet which the aliens seemed hellbent on reaching!

Over the course of the battle, the Mech Corps, the Starfighter Corps and the myriad of domestic and foreign outfightes learned one brutal lesson.

They were wholly outmatched.

The sandmen previously posed a considerable challenge to these forces. The general consensus that humans settled on was that the sandmen were individually weak, but extremely numerous and very willing to go all out to achieve their objectives!

Against weak and numerous enemies, the Bright Republic thought it was enough to bring numbers of their own in order to reduce the quantity disparity. For this reason, the government didn't hesitate to station over half of the entire Mech Corps and Starfighter Corps in the Bentheim System!

The military should have brought more mech divisions and starfighter divisions.

"Where did these hellspawn obtain such good shielding technology?! Where are they getting all of the power needed to sustain these shields? It's as if we are attacking CFA warships instead of weak sandman monoliths!"

Before the Battle of Bentheim, no one thought too highly of sandman monoliths. While they were big and formidable damage sponges, their lack of mobility and huge size meant that it was trivially easy to bombard it with a multitude of rounds and missiles!

The conventional strategy to defeat them was to deploy a large number of mechs and starfighters and shower the approaching threat with ordnance while flying backwards. This was where all of the footage and images of the so-called 'Stripes of Humanity' came about.

No such heroic sights occurred today. Part of it was because the many clashes had grown too chaotic and hectic to allow mechs to fight the upgraded sandman monoliths in orderly formations.

Another reason was that the Bright Republic had mostly phased out the Soldier product line!

This decision was mostly motivated by politics. Now that the Bright Republic aligned itself more closely to the Friday Coalition, the LMC's products had suddenly become poisonous.

Despite their incredible value, the government simply couldn't justify the continued use of mechs such as the Desolate Soldier, Prideful Soldier and Peaceful Soldier when their patron hated the designer to the core!

"It's as egregious as piloting a mech designed by a Hexer!"

Through various excuses, the government forced the military, the Planetary Guard organizations and the private sector to trade in their LMC mechs for recycling and reprocessing.

In exchange, the Bright Republic offered these forces replacement mechs that performed mildly to substantially better.

This trade scheme wasn't just a way to get rid of all of the LMC mechs circulating in the Bright Republic. It was also a way of upgrading the comprehensive strength of the defenders of Bentheim!

Initially, protests were fairly muted. Though the mech pilots of the LMC mechs had become very attached to their machines, the mech commanders and owners of the various outfits came around faster due to the easy profit they gained.

Yet now that mechs were falling left and right due to the multitude of positron beams raining down in their direction, morale throughout the entire system quickly dropped like a rock!

"Ahhhh! Jimmy! Why did they take you?!"

"Help! Help! My escape pod is leaking air! Please rescue me! I can still pilot a spare mech!"

"Our ship! It's gone! Our home is gone!"

An incredible amount of debris started to fling into space as mech after mech got wrecked in an instant after being struck by a powerful positron beam!

Positron beams weren't as fast as laser beams, but in these circumstances, the differences might as well be negligible!

Unlike ordinary laser beams which most mechs and starfighters could resist a couple of times as long as they didn't land on the spot, positron beams were completely different in terms of lethality!

Considered the evil goatee-wearing counterparts of electrons, these tiny antiparticles were incredibly light and possessed no other remarkable properties aside from their positive charge.

It was only after they collided with electrons that they started to reveal their amazing destructive potential!

In a material realm where negatively-charged electrons were predominant, antiparticles such as positrons were extremely deadly!

This was because of the phenomenon known as annihilation. Electrons and positrons both canceled each other out when they bumped into each other. The particles and antiparticles disappeared from the material realm, but due to the law of conservation of mass and energy, a lot of energy took their place!

In truth, a single electron and positron didn't release that much energy. Just someone lifting an arm in the air took more energy than the output of a single electron-positron annihilation reaction!

Yet the positron beams didn't just contain a single positron. It was packed with an uncountable amount of antiparticles, all accelerated towards their targets at relativistic or near-relativistic speeds!

No third-class mech could withstand a blow. Hardly any second-class mech escaped unscathed. Even first-class mechs encountered significant difficulties when subjected to sustained attacks!

The sandman monoliths recklessly discharged a humongous amount of energy at their targets! By now, the energies they unleashed was more than enough to destroy the planet of Bentheim dozens of times over!

Though the targeting systems of the monoliths hadn't been upgraded as well as their weapon systems, the alien dreadnoughts still managed to kill scores of mechs and starfighters before each of them could be overwhelmed!

"We're bleeding assets at a rapid rate!"

"Hardly any mech or starfighter pilot is able to eject after being hit! The sandman positron beams are too lethal!"

"It's as if we are being attacked by the Fridaymen or Hexers!"

In the first couple of hours, the forces that met the sandman monoliths in combat lost over half of their numbers!

This was a devastating loss! The savaged mech regiments and outfits were forced to keep their distance and attack the sandman monoliths at a far greater distance to reduce the effectiveness of their targeting somewhat. Through heavy jamming and several other methods, the positron beams failed to harvest as much lives as before.

However, the increased range also reduced the effectiveness and intensity of the attacks directed towards the monoliths, allowing the aliens greater room to advance!

"What is the MTA doing?!"

"They're busy hunkering down while they attract the bulk of the sandman monoliths!"

The sandman seemed to reserve most of their ire towards the stricken and heavily-outnumbered MTA task force! With their ships being raked by positron beam after positron beam, their mechs were finding it a lot harder to achieve success!

"No! Save the Wolf Mother! Don't let her die!"

"It's too late, captain! Her engineering is gone! Colonel Lowenfield has ordered the crew to abandon ship!"

The great factory ship had no place on the battlefield. Expecting a much lower-intensity conflict, the Flagrant Vandals and many other mech regiments had made a huge mistake in bringing their logistical vessels along!

Now, the giant, venerable ship that had produced or repaired much of the mechs of the Vandals was rolling chaotically along her axis. Her entire propulsion system and engineering section had disappeared when a sandman monolith targeted the slow-moving ship and kept attacking her. Even though a swarm of angry Vandal mechs finally overwhelmed its energy shield and destroyed it shortly afterwards, the damage was done!

Without her main means of sublight propulsion, the Wolf Mother turned into a sitting duck! Floating along a very predictable ballistic trajectory in space, anyone could hit the ship with ease!

The sandmen may not always be the brightest lifeforms around, but they were still smart enough to pounce on the opportunity!

The Wolf Mother had never been designed to withstand attacks. Though her huge structure and bulk offered her a form of protection in itself, in the end it only gave the sandmen more stuff to destroy!

"Ahhh! Stop it you darned aliens!"

Plenty of Vandals lost their emotions at the loss of so many comrades. Now that their biggest pillar of support was bleeding oxygen, energy and escape pods, many of them had started to snap!

Captain Orfan had briefly joined them in her grief, but she quickly sobered up when someone told her something important!

"Major Verle said Colonel Lowenfield is out of contact! We can't find her escape pod among the ones that escaped the derelict Wolf Mother!" A communications officer hollered in the channel.

"Who's in command and what are my orders?!"

"For now, Major Verle has assumed command of the Vandals, ma'am! Your orders are to rally the remnants of the mech companies and led them back to our surviving combat carriers!"

"We can't retreat! There are too many monoliths we need to kill! Tell Verle we need reinforcements!"

"There are no reinforcements, captain! Our starfighter screen has almost disappeared and most of the other reserve forces are already confronting the sandmen elsewhere! According to the tactical situation, we don't have the numbers to stop the dozens of monoliths barreling their way forward!"

"But Bentheim!"

"Our sacrifice won't mean anything! We need to retract our lines and regroup!"

Her fist slammed against the armrest of her piloting seat!

"Damnit!"

Though she tried her best to block it out, she couldn't forget about the names and faces of the fallen. Too many of her fellow Vandals had succumbed against the sandmen!

No matter how tough their Novabreaker or other mechs were designed to resist laser beams, none of them fared well when positron beams struck them head-on! In many cases, all of those layers of armor turned out to be completely useless!

Ironically, the light mechs with the thinnest armor fared best against the sandman monoliths! Their exceptional mobility allowed them to dodge and weave through most positron beam attacks! Their lack of armor didn't matter since getting hit even once already spelled the doom of a mech unless it belonged to a higher class!

Over the course of the running battle, high command eventually ordered a general retreat. The human forces needed to concentrate their surviving forces!

However, many saw these actions as futile because shrinking the defensive circle also allowed the sandman monoliths to tighten their envelopment!

Not everyone was willing to fight on behalf of Bentheim and the Bright Republic.

"Where are you going?! We paid you to fight!"

"You cowards! I'll make sure to shame you to death by posting your flight on the galactic net!"

"Hahaha! The Comm Consortium already blocked us out! There's no way you can stop us from leaving! Sorry Brighters, but we have done enough! We're outta here!"

Without the glows of the Desolate Soldiers, the private outfits crumbled exceptionally quickly.

None of them signed up to fight a pitched battle, let alone an overwhelming struggle against an immensely powerful doomsday armada!

The soldiers of the Mech Corps and the Starfighter Corps watched with despair as the various private outfits reneged on their contracts and fled the battlefield by heading upwards or downwards from the ecliptic plane!

The sandman monoliths mostly arrived in the Bentheim System in a flat circle. While this made it unwise to go through them, there was nothing blocking the way of the mercenaries as long as they flew straight up or straight downwards!

The longer the slaughter proceeded, the greater the attraction of these obvious escape routes!

Even the soldiers in the service of the Bright Republic started to lose heart in the battle.

Why were they fighting so hard?

Had the sacrifices of their comrades accomplished anything?

Was there a point to continuing to resist the alien advance?

Their morale, which hadn't been the steadiest before the start of the battle, started to become more turbulent as the general retreat struck a huge blow to their confidence.

With the MTA task force in dire straits, the doom throughout the star system spread like wildfire!

Was this the end of Bentheim? Would the Bright Republic become a crippled state after this day?

"Watch out! There's a huge portal emerging next to the planet!"

"It's the MTA! They finally came to reinforce us! We're saved!"

An MTA destroyer in high orbit slowly began to form a portal. Its circumference much larger than anything the Brighters had ever seen before!

The portal stretched across many kilometers, providing more than enough space for a battleship to fly through!

Yet before the portal had just finished stabilizing, the sandman monoliths instantly reacted. A considerable amount of gravitic energy emanated from their giant forms, forming a cage of gravitic waves that enveloped the entire star system!

"The portal!"

The portal formed by the destroyer suddenly shook and started to destabilize! Many Brighters stifled their hopes when the portal quickly warped beyond recognition before exploding in a shower of light!

"No!"

"Our reinforcements!"

Without the ability to generate a portal, the most convenient means the MTA possessed to rapidly reinforce Bentheim had become invalid!

The sandmen succeeded in forming a blockade around the star system!